

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

January 2024 Monthly Report

Version number: 1.0

First published: 14th March 2024

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NHS England

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1 Executive summary

This report presents a monthly summary of diagnostic waiting times and activity across the NHS in England. This monthly report is part of a routine series of publications produced by NHS England.

The data presented in this report measures the current waiting times of patients still waiting for any of 15 key diagnostic tests or procedures at the month end. This data is split by number of weeks waiting and by test. The waiting times reported are for those patients who have been referred for a test, but whose test had not taken place by the end of the reporting period. Referrals may be from a variety of sources including GPs.

One of the main measurements covered in this report is the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test, from time of referral.

This six-week diagnostic wait was initially introduced as a 'milestone' from March 2008 towards achieving the standard Referral to Treatment wait of 18 weeks by December 2008, but diagnostic waiting times now form part of the NHS Constitution. This gives patients the legal right to treatment within 18 weeks of referral (18 week RTT) and as part of this, pledges that patients should not be required to wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test.

The NHS Standard Contract 2022/23 states that there is a standard threshold of 1% for this pledge. NHS England's planning guidance for 2023/24 requests that a threshold of at least 5% should be met by March 2025.

The 15 key diagnostic tests included in this report are:

Imaging

- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Computerised Tomography (CT)
- Non-obstetric Ultrasound
- Barium Enema
- Dual-Energy X-Ray Absorptiometry (DEXA) Scan

Physiological Measurements

- Audiology Assessments
- Echocardiography
- Electrophysiology
- Neurophysiology – Peripheral Neurophysiology
- Respiratory Physiology – Sleep Studies
- Urodynamics – Pressures & Flows

Endoscopy

- Gastroscopy
- Colonoscopy
- Flexible Sigmoidoscopy
- Cystoscopy

For detailed descriptions of each diagnostic test please see the [collection guidance documentation](#).

Some of the key terms used throughout this report are outlined below:

- **6+ Week Waits**
A count of the number of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test at month end from referral.
- **Activity**
A count of the number of diagnostic tests undertaken during the month.
- **Diagnostic Test**
A test or procedure of which the primary function is to identify a patient's disease or condition to allow a medical diagnosis to be made.
- **Waiting List**
A count of the number of patients that are waiting for a diagnostic test at the end of the month.

A more comprehensive glossary is available in the Annex.

All England figures quoted are commissioner based. Commissioner based returns reflect data for patients for whom English commissioners are responsible.

1.1 National Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs;
- are well explained and readily accessible;
- are produced according to sound methods; and
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.

2 January 2024 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to affect the current reporting period and comparisons with previous years.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of January 2024 was 414,400. This was 26.2% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with January 2023 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 71,600 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 4.5 percentage points.
- In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 23.3% (November 2023) and 27.6% (April 2023).
- At the end of January 2024, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 9.7%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 45.5% of patients waiting six weeks or more.
- An alternative measure of diagnostic waiting times is the average (median) waiting time. The estimated average time that a patient had been waiting for a diagnostic test was 2.6 weeks at the end of January 2024.
- There were 1,579,300 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of January 2024. This is a decrease of 800 from January 2023.
- A total of 2,338,500 diagnostic tests were undertaken in January 2024. This is an increase of 156,500 from January 2023.

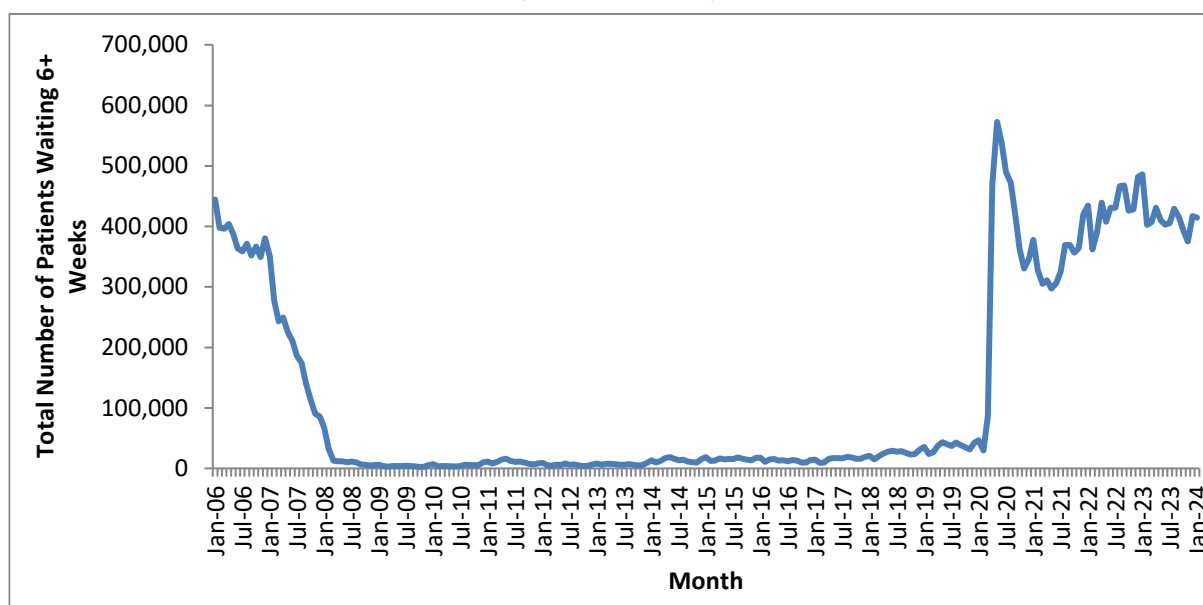
3 National Trends

This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

3.1 6+ Week Waits

- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between December 2013 and May 2014.
- 3.1.2. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In January 2024 there was a decrease of 2,500 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

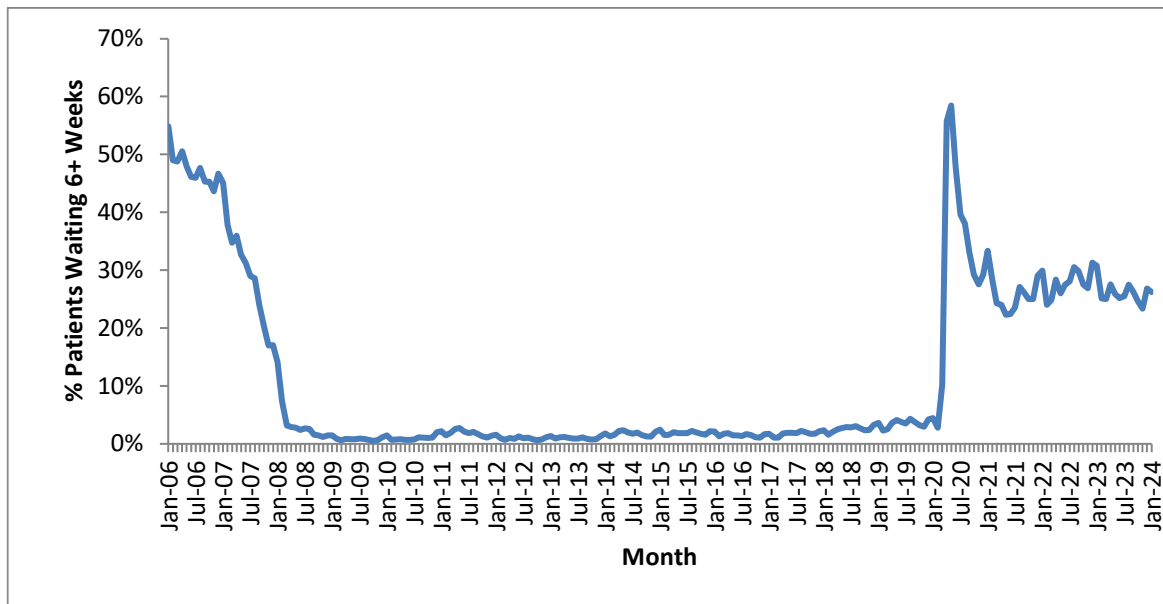
Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to January 2024



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more shows a similar pattern (Chart 2). In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 23.3% (November 2023) and 27.6% (April 2023). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

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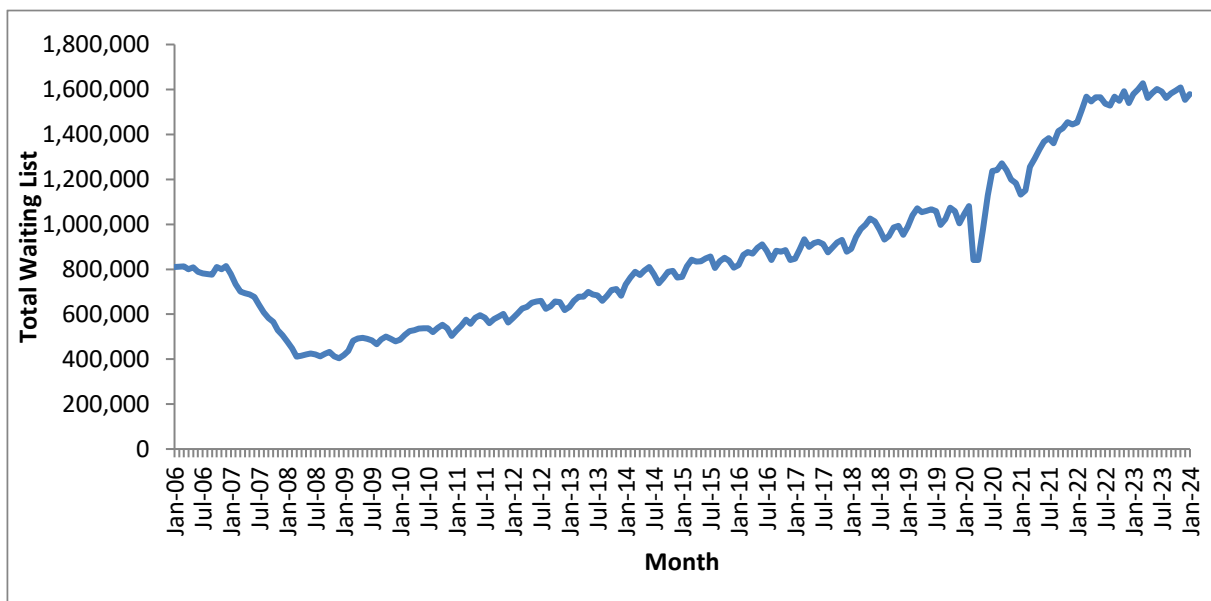
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2024**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more, the total number of patients waiting at the month end fell between January 2007 and the 6-week milestone in March 2008 (Chart 3). Following a period with a stable total waiting list between March 2008 and January 2009, the underlying trend showed a steady increase before dropping sharply in March 2020 and subsequently rising due to the impact of COVID-19.

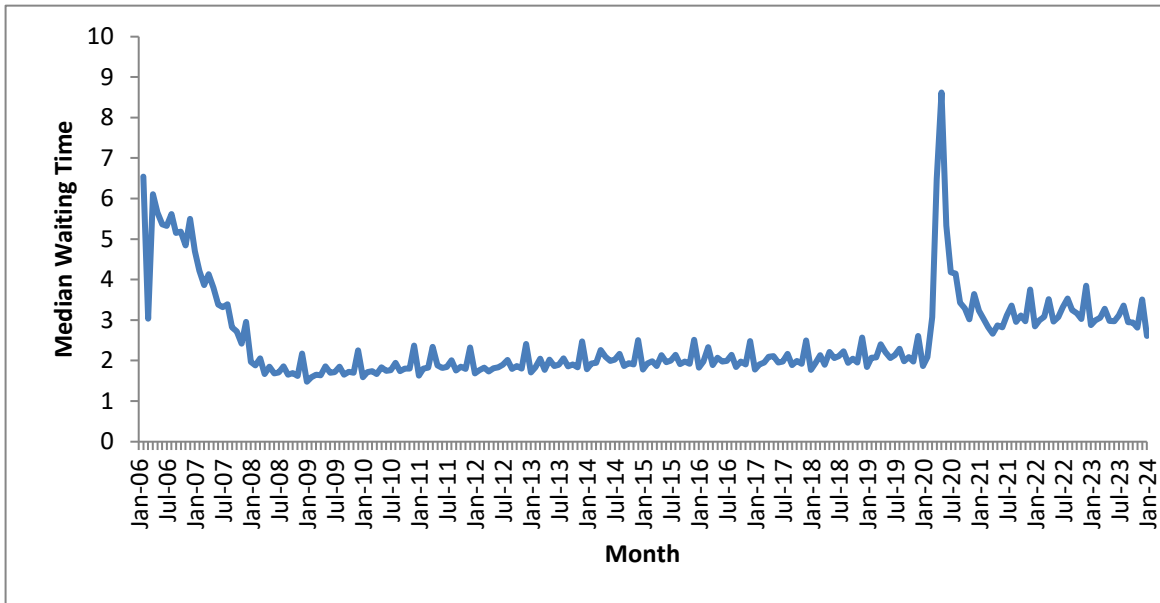
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2024**



3.3 Median Waiting Time

3.3.1. The average (median) waiting time displays a similar trend to the total waiting list and 6 weeks or more waits. After a rapid decrease in the two years leading to the 6-week milestone, the median waiting time remained stable until the COVID-19 period (Chart 4). The data shows significant increases during December every year as a result of the higher number of bank holidays and resulting lower activity. In the last 12 months, the median waiting time had a high of 3.5 weeks (December 2023). The median waiting time in January 2024 was 2.6 weeks, which was the lowest in the last 12 months.

Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to January 2024

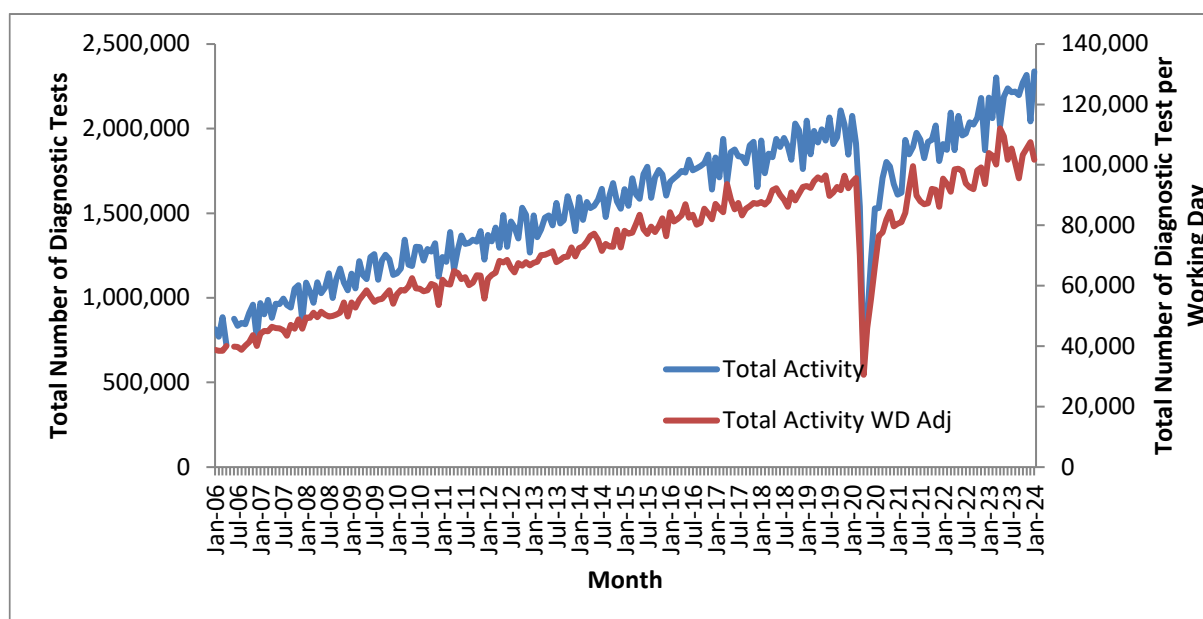


3.4 Total Activity

- 3.4.1. The monthly activity figure can significantly fluctuate month to month, with particularly notable decreases in December due to the bank holidays. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. The underlying trend showed an increase from January 2006 to the COVID-19 period when total activity in April 2020 fell by 68% compared to April 2019. Monthly activity subsequently started to rise again, with some further setbacks, and recover to pre-pandemic levels.

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**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to January 2024**



Note: Activity data was not collected in May 2006 and all activity time series graphs will show missing values for that month

3.4.3. In the previous 12 months, individual tests have shown differing changes in activity. The test with the largest increase in activity was Electrophysiology, where January 2024 activity was 5.2% higher per month than January 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – January 2023 and January 2024

	Jan-23	Jan-24	Average monthly growth
MRI	346,835	369,414	0.5%
CT	666,535	711,662	0.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	677,239	728,182	0.6%
Barium Enema	3,381	3,820	1.0%
Dexa Scan	44,488	46,439	0.4%
Audiology Assessments	93,326	112,289	1.6%
Echocardiography	150,102	159,108	0.5%
Electrophysiology	351	648	5.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,114	20,962	0.3%
Sleep Studies	12,808	16,447	2.1%
Urodynamics	5,570	6,017	0.6%
Colonoscopy	55,641	55,653	0.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,012	16,958	-0.5%
Cystoscopy	26,997	29,617	0.8%
Gastroscopy	60,580	61,304	0.1%
All Tests	2,181,979	2,338,520	0.6%

4 January 2024 Data

This section analyses the January 2024 diagnostic waiting times and activity data and includes comparisons between tests, regions, providers and commissioners.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of January 2024, there were a total of 414,400 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 26.2% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with January 2023, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 71,600, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 4.5 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with January 2023, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Peripheral Neurophysiology, which increased by 9.7 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Colonoscopy, which decreased by 9.0 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2023 and January 2024

	Jan-23	Jan-24	Difference (%age points)
MRI	26.1%	21.9%	-4.2
CT	16.8%	16.1%	-0.7
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	28.0%	21.3%	-6.7
Barium Enema	4.0%	9.7%	5.7
Dexa Scan	37.1%	30.5%	-6.6
Audiology Assessments	36.5%	41.1%	4.7
Echocardiography	44.2%	36.8%	-7.4
Electrophysiology	29.0%	36.5%	7.5
Peripheral Neurophysiology	25.3%	35.1%	9.7
Sleep Studies	41.4%	41.9%	0.6
Urodynamics	46.7%	45.5%	-1.2
Colonoscopy	44.3%	35.4%	-9.0
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	44.6%	40.4%	-4.2
Cystoscopy	39.1%	34.6%	-4.6
Gastrosocopy	37.8%	31.0%	-6.8
All Tests	30.8%	26.2%	-4.5

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with January 2023, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement with a decrease of 1.7 percentage points. Imaging decreased by 5.0 percentage points, while Endoscopy decreased by 7.1 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

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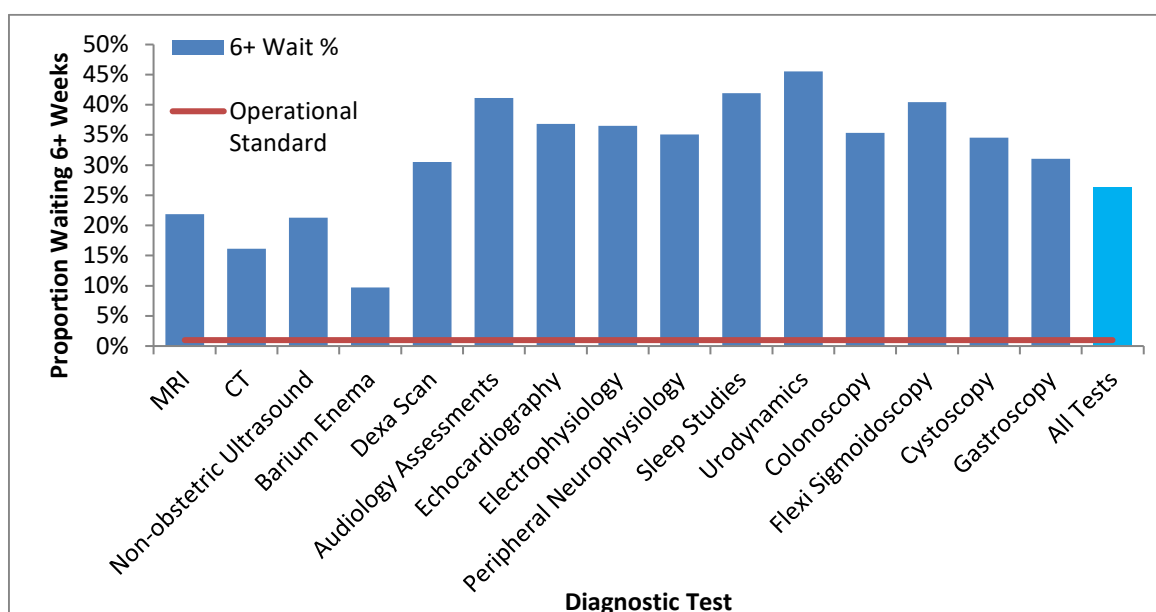
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – January 2023 and January 2024

	Jan-23	Jan-24	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	26.1%	21.0%	-5.0
Physiological Measurement	40.3%	38.7%	-1.7
Endoscopy	41.5%	34.4%	-7.1
Total	30.8%	26.2%	-4.5

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait six weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met in none of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema (9.7%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (45.5%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2024



- 4.1.6. 142 of the 156 acute trusts that submitted data for January 2024 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.7. All 42 Commissioners (ICBs) failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.8. None of the seven NHS England Regions met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 20.4% (North East and Yorkshire) and 32.5% (East of England) (Table 4).
- 4.1.9. Feedback from NHS trusts has indicated that variations can exist between different regions due to a variety of reasons, from machines breaking down to staff shortages in trusts that usually only affect one region.

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Table 4: January 2024 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team*

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
London	54,768	21.1%	259,737	330,067	2.3
South West	40,475	26.7%	151,672	235,558	2.7
South East	64,914	27.2%	238,453	360,848	2.6
Midlands	94,459	30.2%	313,248	445,460	2.9
East of England	66,642	32.5%	204,768	264,469	3.1
North West	50,151	24.9%	201,023	327,927	2.5
North East and Yorkshire	42,297	20.4%	207,038	364,491	2.3
England	414,353	26.2%	1,579,324	2,338,520	2.6

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of January 2024 there were a total of 1,579,300 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is a decrease of 800 (0.05%) from January 2023.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 33.2% of the total waiting list, or 524,200 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.05% of the total waiting list, or 800 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – January 2023 and January 2024

	Jan-23	Jan-24	Growth (%age)
MRI	294,469	302,640	2.8%
CT	182,610	183,358	0.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	535,949	524,170	-2.2%
Barium Enema	1,864	2,424	30.0%
Dexa Scan	62,469	57,904	-7.3%
Audiology Assessments	81,964	103,567	26.4%
Echocardiography	164,825	156,601	-5.0%
Electrophysiology	620	753	21.5%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	26,088	31,920	22.4%
Sleep Studies	22,637	29,523	30.4%
Urodynamics	8,072	8,664	7.3%
Colonoscopy	79,926	66,260	-17.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	27,553	24,455	-11.2%
Cystoscopy	24,134	25,575	6.0%
Gastroscopy	66,985	61,510	-8.2%
All Tests	1,580,165	1,579,324	-0.1%

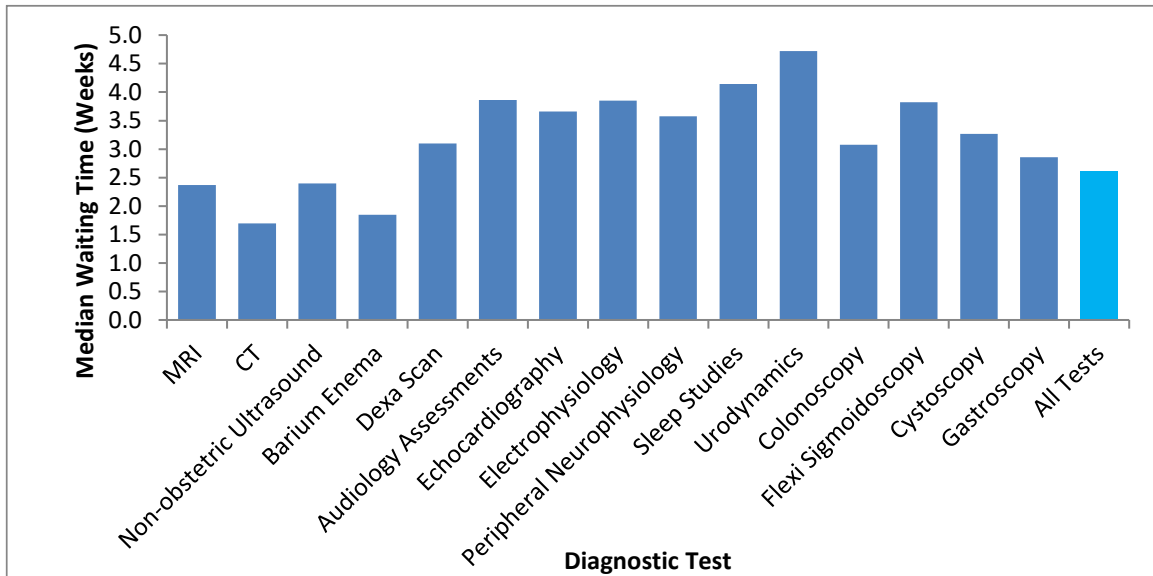
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Sleep Studies where the waiting list grew by 30.4% compared with January 2023.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of January 2024, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.6 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.5 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.7 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 4.7 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – January 2024



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 2,338,500 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during January 2024. This is an increase of 156,500 (7.2%, or 2.3% after adjusting for working days) from January 2023 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non obstetric ultrasound with 728,200 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.1% of all activity in January 2024. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 600 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.03% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 9.1% from the same period last year.

Classification: National Statistics

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – January 2023 and January 2024

Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

	Jan-24	Jan-23	YTD 23/24	YTD 22/23	Growth Jan 24 vs Jan 23	Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23	Adjusted Growth Jan 24 vs Jan 23	Adjusted Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23
MRI	369,414	346,835	3,574,733	3,254,224	6.5%	9.8%	1.7%	9.8%
CT	711,662	666,535	6,763,858	6,237,067	6.8%	8.4%	1.9%	8.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	728,182	677,239	6,808,041	6,200,804	7.5%	9.8%	2.6%	9.8%
Barium Enema	3,820	3,381	32,487	29,658	13.0%	9.5%	7.8%	9.5%
Dexa Scan	46,439	44,488	446,006	402,845	4.4%	10.7%	-0.4%	10.7%
Audiology Assessments	112,289	93,326	956,284	855,551	20.3%	11.8%	14.9%	11.8%
Echocardiography	159,108	150,102	1,482,226	1,374,860	6.0%	7.8%	1.2%	7.8%
Electrophysiology	648	351	5,980	6,289	84.6%	-4.9%	76.2%	-4.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,962	20,114	196,411	182,076	4.2%	7.9%	-0.5%	7.9%
Sleep Studies	16,447	12,808	143,503	114,301	28.4%	25.5%	22.6%	25.5%
Urodynamics	6,017	5,570	54,788	51,760	8.0%	5.9%	3.1%	5.9%
Colonoscopy	55,653	55,641	542,112	516,284	0.0%	5.0%	-4.5%	5.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,958	18,012	166,603	170,573	-5.9%	-2.3%	-10.1%	-2.3%
Cystoscopy	29,617	26,997	276,036	265,413	9.7%	4.0%	4.7%	4.0%
Gastroscopy	61,304	60,580	594,340	573,133	1.2%	3.7%	-3.4%	3.7%
All Tests	2,338,520	2,181,979	22,043,408	20,234,838	7.2%	8.9%	2.3%	8.9%

5 Community Diagnostic Centre January 2024 Data

This section analyses the January 2024 activity data for Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) and includes comparisons with the main January 2024 activity data. Activity data for CDCs includes all the activity they have performed in the month for 15 diagnostic tests (which comprise around half of the diagnostic tests they provide); no waiting list data is collected for CDCs. The CDC activity is also included in the main activity report, since that covers diagnostic tests in all settings, but is only identified as CDC activity in the separate tables.

5.1 CDC activity

5.1.1. In January 2024, CDCs performed 194,200 diagnostic tests, 8.3% of the total. The most common were imaging tests and the highest percentage of imaging tests by CDCs was for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (12.8%), see Table 7.

Table 7: Total and CDC activity, by test – January 2024

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	369,414	47,237	12.8%
Computed Tomography	711,662	61,229	8.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	728,182	63,370	8.7%
Barium Enema	3,820	25	0.7%
DEXA Scan	46,439	3,427	7.4%
Audiology - Audiology Assessments	112,289	1,509	1.3%
Cardiology - Echocardiography	159,108	9,936	6.2%
Cardiology - Electrophysiology	648	198	30.6%
Neurophysiology - Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,962	93	0.4%
Respiratory physiology - Sleep Studies	16,447	1,125	6.8%
Urodynamics - Pressures & Flows	6,017	178	3.0%
Colonoscopy	55,653	2,443	4.4%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,958	650	3.8%
Cystoscopy	29,617	637	2.2%
Gastroscopy	61,304	2,159	3.5%
All tests	2,338,520	194,216	8.3%

5.1.2. In January 2024, the region with the highest diagnostic activity in CDCs was South East, with 39,500 tests (10.9% of their total), this was also the region with the highest percentage of tests by CDCs, see Table 8.

Table 8: Total and CDC activity, by commissioning region – January 2024

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
London	330,067	24,690	7.5%
South West	235,558	19,562	8.3%
South East	360,848	39,457	10.9%
Midlands	445,460	39,301	8.8%
East of England	264,469	12,922	4.9%
North West	327,927	32,339	9.9%
North East and Yorkshire	364,491	25,156	6.9%
England	2,338,520	194,216	8.3%

5.2 CDC data completeness

5.2.1. In January 2024, 99 CDCs were invited to submit activity data and 92 are included in the activity counts (93% response rate). The activity is CDC-funded and should include all spoke sites and exclude services that have moved to the CDC from existing sites, making it additional activity.

6 Annex

6.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England compiles diagnostic waiting time and activity data through a central return. Data collected includes:

- The number of patients waiting at the month end, split by test and week.
- Total activity classified as either Waiting List tests (excluding planned), Planned tests, or Unscheduled tests.

5.1.2. Providers submit data to NHS England via SDCS where it is checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the SDCS system, please refer to the [NHSE Collection Guidance](#).

6.2 Data Revisions

5.2.1. Revisions to published figures are released on a six-monthly basis and in accordance with the NHS England’s revision policy. For more information on the revision policy please refer to the [SDCS Revisions Policy Document](#). Revisions were last published in September 2023 for the months January 2022 through to January 2023.

6.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.](#)

6.4 Glossary

Community Diagnostic Centre

Community diagnostic centres (CDCs) provide a broad range of elective diagnostics (including checks, scans and tests) away from acute facilities, so reducing pressure on hospitals, providing quicker access to tests and greater convenience to patients. The earliest CDCs were started in 2021 and the list of sites and their services continues to expand. CDCs may use a range of spoke sites and submit aggregated activity data for them. They are hosted by acute Trusts but may receive patients from other Trusts.

Endoscopy

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include: Colonoscopy; Flexi Sigmoidoscopy; Cystoscopy and Gastroscopy.

Imaging

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include: Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI); Computed Tomography (CT); Non-obstetric Ultrasound; Barium Enema and DEXA Scan.

Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Integrated care boards (ICBs) replaced clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in the NHS in England from 1 January 2023. ICBs oversee partnerships of organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care services.

Median Waiting Time

A measurement of the average time patients have been waiting for a diagnostic test. The median is the middle value when waiting times are put in numerical order. 50% of patients have been waiting less than the median. The median is the preferred measurement of average waiting time as it is less susceptible to extreme values than the mean.

Physiological Measurement

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include: Audiology Assessments; Echocardiology; Electrophysiology: Peripheral Neurophysiology; Sleep Studies and Urodynamics.

Provider

An organisation that provides NHS treatment or care, for example, an NHS Acute Trust, Mental Health Trust, Community provider, or an Independent Sector organisation.

Region

One of seven geographical areas of NHS England responsible for the quality, financial and operational performance of all NHS organisations in their region.

6.5 Feedback Welcomed

We welcome feedback on the content and presentation of statistics within this report and those published on the NHS England website.

If you have any comments on this, or any other issues regarding these statistics, then please email england.nhsdata@nhs.net

6.6 Consultation

Between 8 February 2018 and 5 April 2018, NHS England consulted on the future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns. The outcome document for the consultation was published 30 March 2020 and confirmed the decision to stop collecting the Quarterly Diagnostics Census on a permanent basis and to continue the monthly diagnostics waiting times and activity return (DM01) in its current form. Find out more at:

<https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

6.7 Additional Information

[Full details of diagnostics data for individual organisations are available here.](#)

For press enquiries please contact the NHS England media team on 0113 825 0958 or 0113 825 0959. Email enquiries should be directed to nhsengland.media@nhs.net

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