

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

September 2024 Monthly Report

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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 progress should be made towards a threshold of at least 5% 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 <u>collection guidance</u> <u>documentation</u>.

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 Accredited Official Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as Accredited Official Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Accredited 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 Accredited Official Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.

2 September 2024 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of September 2024 was 359,900. This was 22.7% 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 September 2023 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 56,000 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.6 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 20.8% (February 2024) and 26.8% (December 2023).
- At the end of September 2024, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was CT with 9.8%. The test with the highest proportion was Audiology Assessments, with 46.3% 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 2.7 weeks at the end of September 2024.
- There were 1,587,000 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of September 2024. This is an increase of 3,400 from September 2023.
- A total of 2,369,700 diagnostic tests were undertaken in September 2024. This is an increase of 170,100 from September 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 September 2024 there was a decrease of 13,200 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

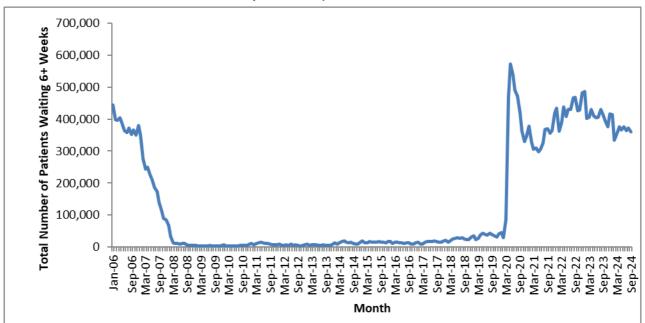


Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to September 2024

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 20.8% (February 2024) and 26.8% (December 2023). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

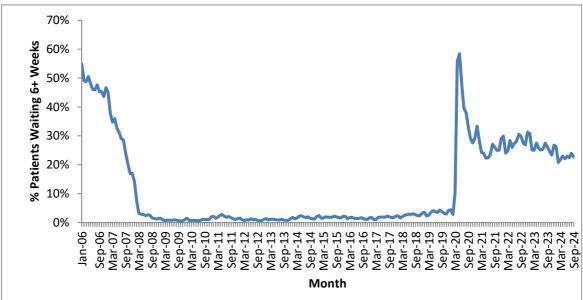
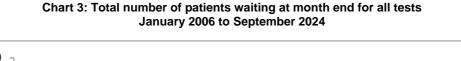
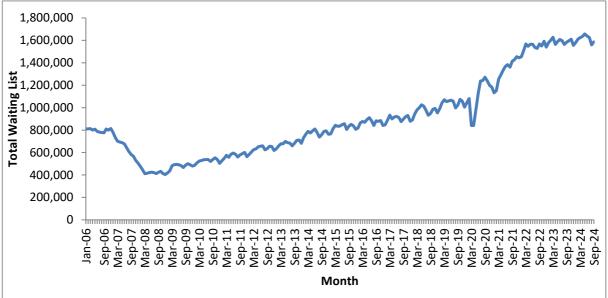


Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to September 2024

3.2 Total Waiting List

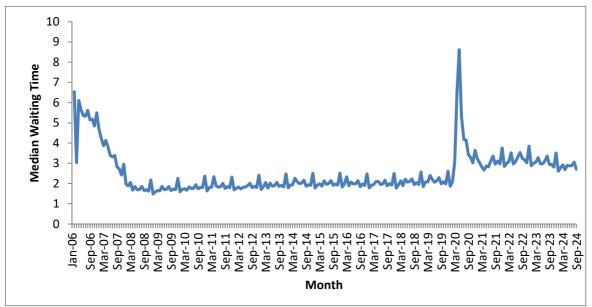
3.2.1. As with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more, the total number of patients waiting at the month end fell between January 2007 and the 6-week milestone in March 2008 (Chart 3). Following a period with a stable total waiting list between March 2008 and January 2009, the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





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) and a low of 2.6 weeks (January 2024). The median waiting time in September 2024 was 2.7 weeks.





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.

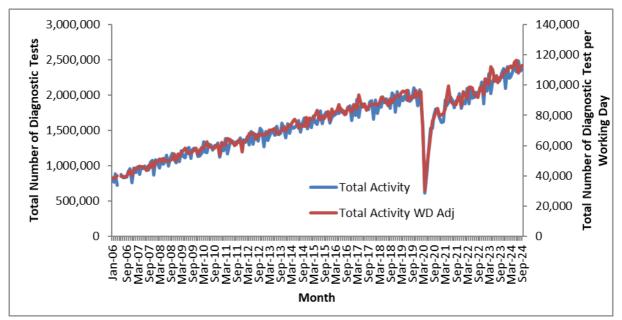


Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to September 2024

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 proportional increase in activity was Electrophysiology, where September 2024 activity was 3.1% higher per month than September 2023. (Table 1).

	Sep-23	Sep-24	Average monthly growth
MRI	355,643	391,998	0.8%
СТ	674,098	713,758	0.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	684,629	724,549	0.5%
Barium Enema	3,052	3,821	1.9%
Dexa Scan	43,111	48,342	1.0%
Audiology Assessments	90,965	112,453	1.8%
Echocardiography	148,932	162,646	0.7%
Electrophysiology	595	863	3.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,685	21,837	0.9%
Sleep Studies	14,825	18,340	1.8%
Urodynamics	5,397	6,031	0.9%
Colonoscopy	54,591	55,730	0.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,766	16,084	-0.3%
Cystoscopy	27,419	29,413	0.6%
Gastroscopy	59,844	63,834	0.5%
All Tests	2,199,552	2,369,699	0.6%

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

4 September 2024 Data

This section analyses the September 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 September 2024, there were a total of 359,900 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 22.7% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with September 2023, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 56,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.6 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with September 2023, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Peripheral Neurophysiology, which increased by 9.1 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Dexa Scan, which decreased by 15.1 percentage points (Table 2).

	Sep-23	Sep-24	Difference (%age points)
MRI	19.1%	18.3%	-0.8
СТ	16.1%	9.8%	-6.3
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	22.5%	18.4%	-4.1
Barium Enema	9.8%	12.4%	2.6
Dexa Scan	33.6%	18.5%	-15.1
Audiology Assessments	38.3%	46.3%	8.0
Echocardiography	38.1%	33.7%	-4.4
Electrophysiology	35.9%	30.2%	-5.7
Peripheral Neurophysiology	28.1%	37.2%	9.1
Sleep Studies	41.4%	35.8%	-5.7
Urodynamics	47.5%	42.9%	-4.6
Colonoscopy	38.5%	26.6%	-11.9
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	42.9%	29.7%	-13.2
Cystoscopy	33.2%	28.6%	-4.6
Gastroscopy	32.9%	24.7%	-8.3
All Tests	26.3%	22.7%	-3.6

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

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with September 2023, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement with an increase of 1 percentage points. Imaging decreased by 4.1 percentage points, while Endoscopy decreased by 10 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

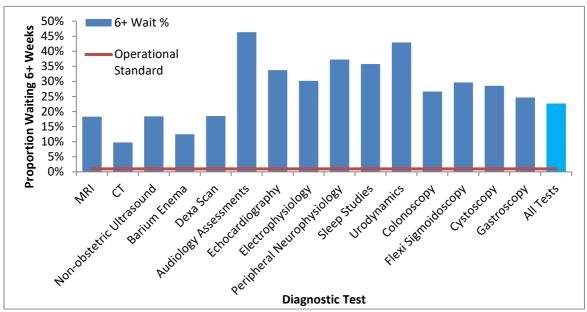
	Sep-23	Sep-24	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	21.2%	17.1%	-4.1
Physiological Measurement	37.7%	38.7%	1.0
Endoscopy	36.6%	26.6%	-10.0
Total	26.3%	22.7%	-3.6

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

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 CT (9.8%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Audiology Assessments (46.3%) (Chart 6).





- 4.1.6. 129 of the 134 acute trusts that submitted data for September 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 17.4% (Northwest region) and 34.1% (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.

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	55,599	19.5%	285,070	395,067	2.6
South West	34,290	23.1%	148,182	227,539	2.7
South East	47,853	21.6%	221,173	356,771	2.5
Midlands	78,921	24.9%	316,604	439,437	2.9
East of England	70,454	34.1%	206,837	269,289	3.6
North West	32,761	17.4%	188,372	316,467	2.3
North East and Yorkshire	39,463	18.3%	215,819	355,991	2.4
England	359,888	22.7%	1,586,986	2,360,561	2.7

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

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of September 2024 there were a total of 1,587,000 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is a decrease of 3,400 (0.2%) from September 2023.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.5% of the total waiting list, or 562,700 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.03% of the total waiting list, or 500 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test -	- September 2023 and September 2024
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	Sep-23	Sep-24	Growth (%age)
MRI	280,785	297,152	5.8%
СТ	177,542	164,233	-7.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	561,433	562,702	0.2%
Barium Enema	2,187	3,166	44.8%
Dexa Scan	62,037	56,366	-9.1%
Audiology Assessments	89,497	113,377	26.7%
Echocardiography	155,224	152,911	-1.5%
Electrophysiology	546	457	-16.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	31,580	35,777	13.3%
Sleep Studies	26,618	28,571	7.3%
Urodynamics	8,371	9,028	7.8%
Colonoscopy	73,853	60,904	-17.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,371	20,716	-21.4%
Cystoscopy	25,489	22,175	-13.0%
Gastroscopy	62,065	59,451	-4.2%
All Tests	1,583,598	1,586,986	0.2%

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 Barium Enema where the reported waiting list grew by 44.8% compared with September 2023.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of September 2024, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.7 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.1 the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.6 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Audiology Assessments at 5.1 weeks (Chart 7).

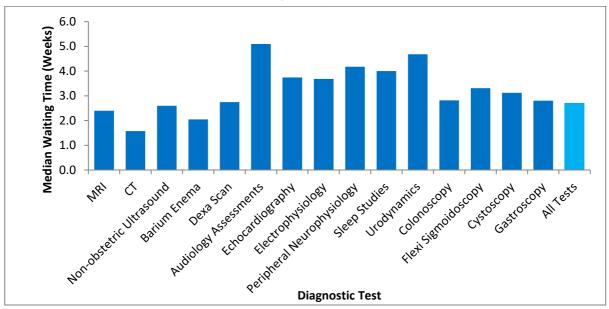


Chart 7: Median waiting time by test - September 2024

4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 2,369,700 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during September 2024. This is an increase of 170,100 (7.7%) from September 2023, with the same number of working days (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non Obstetric Ultrasound with 724,500 tests taking place. This accounted for 30.6% of all activity in September 2024. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 900 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.04% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 8.3% from the same period last year, and remains 7.9% when adjusted for working days.

 Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – September 2023 and September 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.

	Sep-24	Sep-23	YTD 24/25	YTD 23/24	Growth Sep 24 vs Sep 23	Growth YTD 24/25 vs YTD 23/24	Adjusted Growth Sep 24 vs Sep 23	Adjusted Growth YTD 24/25 vs YTD 23/24
MRI	391,998	355,643	2,351,192	2,137,803	10.2%	10.0%	10.2%	7.4%
СТ	713,758	674,098	4,328,776	4,016,705	5.9%	7.8%	5.9%	5.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	724,549	684,629	4,347,422	4,065,705	5.8%	6.9%	5.8%	4.4%
Barium Enema	3,821	3,052	23,515	18,956	25.2%	24.1%	25.2%	21.1%
Dexa Scan	48,342	43,111	293,060	267,713	12.1%	9.5%	12.1%	6.9%
Audiology Assessments	112,453	90,965	667,874	550,170	23.6%	21.4%	23.6%	18.5%
Echocardiography	162,646	148,932	977,512	887,305	9.2%	10.2%	9.2%	7.6%
Electrophysiology	863	595	4,236	3,561	45.0%	19.0%	45.0%	16.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,837	19,685	127,337	118,443	10.9%	7.5%	10.9%	5.0%
Sleep Studies	18,340	14,825	110,808	84,768	23.7%	30.7%	23.7%	27.6%
Urodynamics	6,031	5,397	37,718	32,270	11.7%	16.9%	11.7%	14.1%
Colonoscopy	55,730	54,591	332,563	327,781	2.1%	1.5%	2.1%	-0.9%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,084	16,766	98,756	101,638	-4.1%	-2.8%	-4.1%	-5.1%
Cystoscopy	29,413	27,419	183,792	163,218	7.3%	12.6%	7.3%	9.9%
Gastroscopy	63,834	59,844	387,448	362,263	6.7%	7.0%	6.7%	4.4%
All Tests	2,369,699	2,199,552	14,272,009	13,138,299	7.7%	8.6%	7.7%	6.1%

5 Community Diagnostic Centre September 2024 Data

This section analyses the September 2024 activity data for Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) and includes comparisons with the main September 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 September 2024, CDCs performed 247,700 diagnostic tests, 10.5% of the total. The most common were imaging tests and the highest percentage of imaging tests by CDCs was for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (15.5%), see Table 7.

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	391,998	60,765	15.5%
Computed Tomography	713,758	77,260	10.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	724,549	75,907	10.5%
Barium Enema	3,821	20	0.5%
DEXA Scan	48,342	5,857	12.1%
Audiology - Audiology Assessments	112,453	2,119	1.9%
Cardiology - Echocardiography	162,646	14,526	8.9%
Cardiology - Electrophysiology	863	553	64.1%
Neurophysiology - Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,837	306	1.4%
Respiratory physiology - Sleep Studies	18,340	2,029	11.1%
Urodynamics - Pressures & Flows	6,031	338	5.6%
Colonoscopy	55,730	3,577	6.4%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,084	839	5.2%
Cystoscopy	29,413	463	1.6%
Gastroscopy	63,834	3,124	4.9%
All tests	2,369,699	247,683	10.5%

CDC Electrophysiology activity erroneously includes other physiology test types

5.1.2. In September 2024, the region with the highest diagnostic activity in CDCs was the Midlands, with 50,800 tests (11.6% of their total). The region with the highest percentage of tests by CDCs, was the South West, with 31,000 tests (13.6% of their total), see Table 8.

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
London	395,067	34,676	8.8%
South West	227,539	31,006	13.6%
South East	356,771	44,484	12.5%
Midlands	439,437	50,824	11.6%
East of England	269,289	22,566	8.4%
North West	316,467	33,200	10.5%
North East and Yorkshire	355,991	29,994	8.4%
England	2,369,699	247,683	10.5%

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

5.2 CDC data completeness

5.2.1. In September 2024, 162 CDC sites (including spoke sites now counted separately) were invited to submit activity data and 159 are included in the activity counts (98% response rate). The activity is CDC-funded and should 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 <u>NHSE Collection Guidance</u>.

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 <u>SDCS Revisions Policy Document</u>. Revisions were last published in September 2023 for the months January 2022 through to April 2023.

6.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. <u>A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.</u>

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 April 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 <u>england.nhsdata@nhs.net</u>

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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