

Data Quality and Methods

Background

Cancer Waiting Times are part of the NHS Constitution, which sets out the principles and values of the NHS in England. It also defines the rights and pledges for patients and staff, as well as the responsibilities required to help the NHS function effectively. The current operational standards for Cancer Waiting Times are that:

- 75% of people told if they had cancer, or if cancer was definitively excluded within four weeks (28-days) of an urgent referral.
- 96% of people treated beginning first or subsequent treatment of cancer within 31 days of receiving a decision to treat/earliest clinically appropriate date.
- 85% of people treated began first definitive treatment of cancer within 62 days of an urgent suspected cancer referral, breast symptomatic referral, urgent screening referral or a consultant upgrade.

Completeness

Cancer Waiting Times (CWT) is a mandatory collection which all NHS Services¹ must submit to NHS England monthly via the Strategic Data Collection Service (SDCS). On the rare occasion that a provider submits either a partial return (less than 100% of data) or no return, this is highlighted in the provisional monthly release. For those who have missed or made a partial submission the stats team contact providers immediately to help them. Every six months, providers are able to submit revised data to cover any partial or missing returns or rectify any issue which could impact the final data. We publish the revised data covering the relevant half of the previous financial year as soon as is possible within our publication schedule².

¹ All NHS Providers delivering cancer outpatient, cancer screening or cancer treatment services and Contracted independent sector providers.

² [Statistics » 12 months statistics calendar](#)

³ [Cancer-Waiting-Times-Statistical-Release-July-2025-Provider-based-Provisional.pdf](#)

⁴ We also include the estimated impact on Urgent Suspected Cancer Referrals Seen at a First Outpatient Attendance and Urgent Breast Symptomatic Referrals Seen at a First



Each month, we publish a statistical release³ containing the headline figures for each of the three standards. Additionally, it contains details of those providers who have either: been identified as missing; making a partial submission or have notified us of an issue relating to the number of records submitted. We also provide an estimate of the impact of these data quality issues on the number of records included in the statistics for the operational standards⁴ were providers to choose to submit a revised return. We also include an estimate of the resulting average impact on performance across the 3 standards.

We have analysed the summaries from publications in 2024/25 and, on average each month, we highlighted less than 5 providers whose submission may contain an issue relating to the activity for one of the three standards. We estimated the resulting overall impact on performance to be minimal – up to 0.2%.

Coverage

It has been long recognised by producers of Cancer Statistics that around 80% of patients are included in both the National Disease Registration Service (NDRS)' Cancer DRS registration⁵ and NHS England's Cancer waiting time datasets. This has also been the subject of published journal articles by academics.

The cancer registration data captures a patient's complete journey from referral, diagnosis, treatment, outcomes, experience and survival. It does this through the collation, curation and combination of many differing data sources into a unified information resource.

In contrast, the Cancer Waiting Times (CWT) dataset focuses on the waiting times and pathway undertaken by patients referred with suspected cancer and subsequently told the outcome of their diagnosis, and treated for cancer. The dataset is used to monitor the performance of the NHS, and individual providers, against the 3 operational performance standards. The dataset only includes those whose pathway is, at least in part, NHS funded.

The CWT guidance⁶ provides detailed guidance on those who should be included and excluded from the collection. Given the complexity and wide range of tumours, inclusions and exclusions are detailed on a site-by-site basis and run to a chapter of around 20 pages. The guidance also includes detail on valid exclusions to the Faster Diagnosis Standard.

Mitigation of misreporting

There are several mitigations in place to minimise the likelihood of misreporting including:

⁵ [Cancer registration statistics - NDRS](#)

⁶ [NHS England » National cancer waiting times monitoring dataset guidance](#)

⁷ [cancer-waiting-times/cancer-waiting-timesvalidations-v2.1.2.pdf](#)

- Provider organisations having primary responsibility for ensuring the data they submit is accurate.
- The submitted data being drawn from a CWT record level dataset, which is based on data held in IT systems with their own standards and validations (such as Somerset Cancer Registry), collected as part of routine clinical practice, and are thus difficult to misreport on, and would likely involve breaking of ethical standards and clinical codes of practise.
- Commissioners being responsible for ensuring data submitted against them is accurate and would raise concerns with providers as needed.
- Applying a number of validation rules to the CWT collection⁷.
- Validating Inter-Provider Transfer (IPT) records between trusts. These are the cases where patients are transferred between trusts for specific diagnostic and treatment requirements.
- Analysts undertaking a 'pre-QA process', which involves comparing data submissions to data submitted over the past 6 months. Where data are outside their normal range, we will contact those responsible for submitting that data, using the details of who made the submissions, to confirm if the data is correct or there is a known error (e.g. missing submission, activity much lower/higher than average). Providers are then given a short window to confirm if they want a data quality note to be included in the statistical release and provider workbook that alerts users' to issues with their data.
- Following submission of provisional data, giving providers an opportunity to submit corrected figures where necessary to correct any data quality issues in data previously provided.

Methodology

NHS England compiles Cancer Waiting Times statistics on the 3 operational standards, and additional data on urgent referrals seen through a central monthly return, applicable to NHS services which includes:

- All NHS providers delivering cancer outpatient, cancer screening or cancer treatment services
- Contracted independent sector providers.

⁵ [Cancer registration statistics - NDRS](#)

⁶ [NHS England » National cancer waiting times monitoring dataset guidance](#)

⁷ [cancer-waiting-times/cancer-waiting-timesvalidations-v2.1.2.pdf](#)



Data are collected and submitted to NHS England on the Strategic Data Collection System (SDCS).

SDCS is a secure data collection system used by health and social care organisations to submit data. The collection is opened on the first working day of the following month, and closed at the end of the second working day. These submissions are quality checked by NHS England against the previous six submissions by the provider, and followed up should they be considered outside of their normal variation. Explanations are then requested from providers who then may agree to a data quality note prior to collating the publication files. At this time, we also remind them of the opportunity to submit revised data when the window opens. This highlights where we think there is an issue with the data, so expect that any issues will be corrected in time for the deadline for the final data.

Once final data have been submitted, the provider is confirming that all the data are correct as there is no further opportunity to change beyond this point.

The CWT guidance provides detailed information on how/when and where patients should be counted, and who should be included or excluded. The latest applicable guidance is available below, and previous versions exist on the national archives.

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/national-cancer-waiting-times-monitoring-dataset-guidance/>

Data availability

Cancer Waiting Times data are published to a pre-announced timetable, available here:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/12-months-statistics-calendar/>. Data are usually published on every second Thursday of the month. The data is published on the NHS England website here: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/cancer-waiting-times/>

Data comparability

Data has been published monthly at a provider level since October 2009. Prior to October 2009, data was published quarterly from 2001/02. Users should note that data before 31 December 2008 are not comparable due to a methodology change in January 2009.

The Cancer Waiting Times statistics between October 2009 and September 2023 measure standards (see here: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/01/Cancer-Waiting-Times-National-Time-Series-Oct-2009-Sep-2023-with-Revisions.xlsx>) that are different from those from October 2023 when the Clinical

⁵ [Cancer registration statistics - NDRS](#)

⁶ [NHS England » National cancer waiting times monitoring dataset guidance](#)

⁷ [cancer-waiting-times/cancer-waiting-timesvalidations-v2.1.2.pdf](#)



Review of Standards (CRS) was published. Data on CRS standard performance from July 2022 onwards was also made available to enable comparisons over time.

In March 2022, NHS England published the recommendations for consultation on changes to the cancer waiting times standards. The [consultation paper](#) set out the proposed new standards, the rationale for the changes, and the evidence collected in support of those proposals. Annex B of the [consultation paper](#) showed the expected impact of the changes to performance standards.

In August 2023, NHS England published a [consultation response report](#). Government then approved the implementation of the changes to the standards from 1 October 2023.

⁵ [Cancer registration statistics - NDRS](#)

⁶ [NHS England » National cancer waiting times monitoring dataset guidance](#)

⁷ [cancer-waiting-times/cancer-waiting-timesvalidations-v2.1.2.pdf](#)