

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and **Activity Data**

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NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

March 2024 Monthly Report

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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

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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 March 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 March 2024 was 354,900. This was 21.8% 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 March 2023 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 52,200 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.2 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 27.6% (April 2023).
- At the end of March 2024, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 6.2%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 41.7% 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 2.9 weeks at the end of March 2024.
- There were 1,624,600 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2024. This is a decrease of 3,700 from March 2023.
- A total of 2,253,700 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2024. This is a decrease of 48,600 from March 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 March 2024 there was an increase of 20,000 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

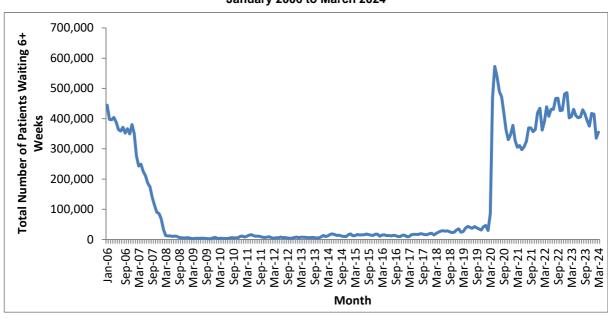


Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2024

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 27.6% (April 2023). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

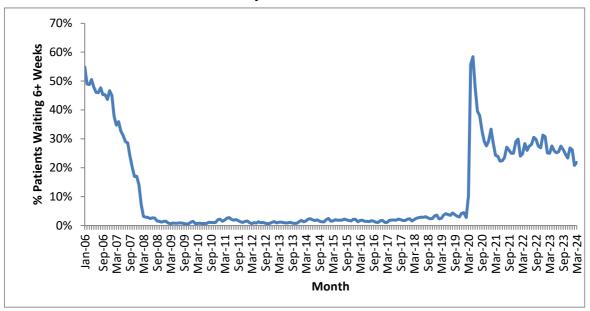


Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to March 2024

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 March 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) and a low of 2.6 weeks (January 2024). The median waiting time in March 2024 was 2.9 weeks.

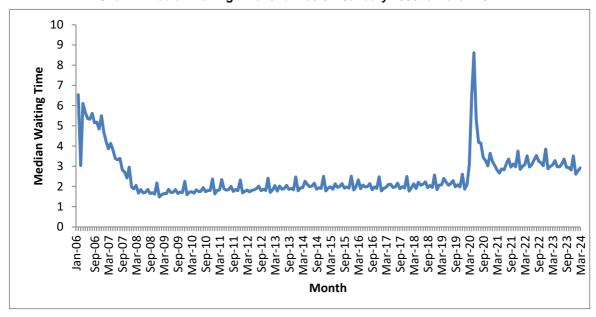


Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests - January 2006 to March 2024

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.

2,500,000 140,000 **Total Number of Diagnostic Tests** 120,000 2,000,000 **Fotal Number of Diagnostic** 100,000 1,500,000 80,000 60,000 1,000,000 40,000 Total Activity 500,000 20,000 Total Activity WD Adj 0 Month

Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests

January 2006 to March 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 Sleep Studies, where March 2024 activity was 1.2% higher per month than March 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test - March 2023 and March 2024

	Mar-23	Mar-24	Average monthly growth
MRI	370,621	375,196	0.1%
СТ	691,851	702,116	0.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	719,097	673,281	-0.5%
Barium Enema	3,559	3,247	-0.8%
Dexa Scan	47,764	43,995	-0.7%
Audiology Assessments	97,357	103,620	0.5%
Echocardiography	159,245	147,229	-0.7%
Electrophysiology	653	653	0.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,167	19,209	-0.8%
Sleep Studies	13,822	15,949	1.2%
Urodynamics	5,575	5,587	0.0%
Colonoscopy	59,446	55,667	-0.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,961	16,363	-1.2%
Cystoscopy	28,246	30,768	0.7%
Gastroscopy	64,986	60,869	-0.5%
All Tests	2,302,350	2,253,749	-0.2%

4 March 2024 Data

This section analyses the March 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 March 2024, there were a total of 354,900 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 21.8% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2023, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 52,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.2 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2023, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology, which increased by 24.9 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Colonoscopy, which decreased by 12.7 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Mar-23	Mar-24	Difference (%age points)
MRI	20.7%	18.5%	-2.2
СТ	13.7%	12.2%	-1.5
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	20.9%	17.2%	-3.7
Barium Enema	2.3%	6.2%	3.9
Dexa Scan	32.3%	24.6%	-7.7
Audiology Assessments	30.8%	37.8%	7.0
Echocardiography	37.7%	30.9%	-6.7
Electrophysiology	16.2%	41.0%	24.9
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20.5%	31.9%	11.4
Sleep Studies	34.4%	35.7%	1.3
Urodynamics	42.5%	41.7%	-0.7
Colonoscopy	40.1%	27.4%	-12.7
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	41.3%	34.2%	-7.0
Cystoscopy	35.5%	28.5%	-7.0
Gastroscopy	33.0%	27.0%	-6.0
All Tests	25.0%	21.8%	-3.2

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with March 2023, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement which was 34.0 percentage points in March 2023 and March 2024. Imaging decreased by 3.2 percentage points, while Endoscopy decreased by 8.9 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

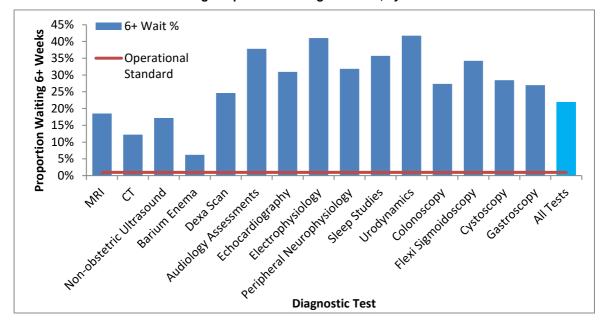
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type - March 2023 and March 2024

	Mar-23	Mar-24	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	20.3%	17.1%	-3.2
Physiological Measurement	34.0%	34.0%	0.0
Endoscopy	37.2%	28.3%	-8.9
Total	25.0%	21.8%	-3.2

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 (6.2%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (41.7%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test - March 2024



- 4.1.6. 147 of the 155 acute trusts that submitted data for March 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 16.9% (North East and Yorkshire) and 30.1% (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.

Table 4: March 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	55,111	19.2%	286,658	322,907	2.8
South West	31,334	20.5%	152,719	221,067	2.8
South East	49,140	20.9%	235,436	351,759	2.8
Midlands	83,560	25.9%	323,156	430,444	3.2
East of England	62,633	30.1%	207,969	257,433	3.5
North West	36,092	18.1%	198,925	315,474	2.7
North East and Yorkshire	36,523	16.9%	215,684	345,490	2.7
England	354,940	21.8%	1,624,628	2,253,749	2.9

^{*}Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of March 2024 there were a total of 1,624,600 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is a decrease of 3,700 (0.2%) from March 2023.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 34.4% of the total waiting list, or 559,300 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 - March 2023 and March 2024

	Mar-23	Mar-24	Growth (%age)
MRI	301,866	310,208	2.8%
СТ	181,662	180,133	-0.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	563,764	559,283	-0.8%
Barium Enema	2,228	2,647	18.8%
Dexa Scan	68,353	61,600	-9.9%
Audiology Assessments	92,236	110,192	19.5%
Echocardiography	159,874	155,649	-2.6%
Electrophysiology	458	819	78.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	27,169	35,030	28.9%
Sleep Studies	25,011	31,592	26.3%
Urodynamics	8,222	8,952	8.9%
Colonoscopy	77,809	60,217	-22.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	27,352	22,498	-17.7%
Cystoscopy	25,391	23,777	-6.4%
Gastroscopy	66,926	62,031	-7.3%
All Tests	1,628,321	1,624,628	-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 Electrophysiology where the reported waiting list grew by 78.8% compared with March 2023.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of March 2024, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.9 weeks from the time of referral, up from 2.8 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.9 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Electrophysiology at 4.9 weeks (Chart 7).

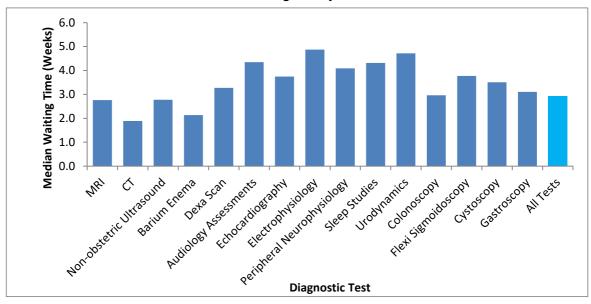


Chart 7: Median waiting time by test - March 2024

4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 2,253,700 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2024. This is a decrease of 48,600 (2.1%) from March 2023 but an increase of 12.6% when adjusted for working days (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was CT with 702,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.2% of all activity in March 2024. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 700 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 9.2% from the same period last year.

Classification: Accredited Official Statistics

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

	Mar-24	Mar-23	YTD 23/24	YTD 22/23	Growth Mar 24 vs Mar 23	Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23	Adjusted Growth Mar 24 vs Mar 23	Adjusted Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23
MRI	375,196	370,621	4,307,753	3,957,430	1.2%	8.9%	16.4%	10.2%
СТ	702,116	691,851	8,143,956	7,553,770	1.5%	7.8%	16.7%	9.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	673,281	719,097	8,169,854	7,558,142	-6.4%	8.1%	7.7%	9.4%
Barium Enema	3,247	3,559	39,166	36,292	-8.8%	7.9%	4.9%	9.2%
Dexa Scan	43,995	47,764	534,806	492,444	-7.9%	8.6%	5.9%	9.9%
Audiology Assessments	103,620	97,357	1,167,420	1,037,947	6.4%	12.5%	22.4%	13.8%
Echocardiography	147,229	159,245	1,781,434	1,677,455	-7.5%	6.2%	6.3%	7.5%
Electrophysiology	653	653	7,290	7,231	0.0%	0.8%	15.0%	2.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,209	21,167	235,429	222,009	-9.3%	6.0%	4.4%	7.3%
Sleep Studies	15,949	13,822	176,003	140,433	15.4%	25.3%	32.7%	26.8%
Urodynamics	5,587	5,575	66,472	62,580	0.2%	6.2%	15.2%	7.5%
Colonoscopy	55,667	59,446	652,585	629,337	-6.4%	3.7%	7.7%	4.9%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,363	18,961	199,784	207,432	-13.7%	-3.7%	-0.8%	-2.5%
Cystoscopy	30,768	28,246	336,320	318,751	8.9%	5.5%	25.3%	6.8%
Gastroscopy	60,869	64,986	715,009	696,789	-6.3%	2.6%	7.7%	3.9%
All Tests	2,253,749	2,302,350	26,533,281	24,598,042	-2.1%	7.9%	12.6%	9.2%

Community Diagnostic Centre March 2024 Data

This section analyses the March 2024 activity data for Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) and includes comparisons with the main March 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 March 2024, CDCs performed 204,200 diagnostic tests, 9.1% of the total. The most common were imaging tests and the highest percentage of imaging tests by CDCs was for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (13.3%), see Table 7.

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	375,196	50,069	13.3%
Computed Tomography	702,116	64,873	9.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	673,281	63,051	9.4%
Barium Enema	3,247	22	0.7%
DEXA Scan	43,995	4,083	9.3%
Audiology - Audiology Assessments	103,620	1,932	1.9%
Cardiology - Echocardiography	147,229	10,524	7.1%
Cardiology - Electrophysiology	653	616	94.3%
Neurophysiology - Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,209	194	1.0%
Respiratory physiology - Sleep Studies	15,949	1,596	10.0%
Urodynamics - Pressures & Flows	5,587	191	3.4%
Colonoscopy	55,667	3,109	5.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,363	596	3.6%
Cystoscopy	30,768	695	2.3%
Gastroscopy	60,869	2,624	4.3%
All tests	2,253,749	204,175	9.1%

5.1.2. In March 2024, the region with the highest diagnostic activity in CDCs was South East, with 41,600 tests (11.8% 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 - March 2024

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
London	322,907	28,816	8.9%
South West	221,067	21,811	9.9%
South East	351,759	41,581	11.8%
Midlands	430,444	40,288	9.4%
East of England	257,433	14,631	5.7%
North West	315,474	31,862	10.1%
North East and Yorkshire	345,490	24,420	7.1%
England	2,253,749	204,175	9.1%

5.2 CDC data completeness

5.2.1. In March 2024, 98 CDCs were invited to submit activity data and 95 are included in the activity counts (97% response rate). The activity is CDCfunded 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 March 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 March 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-timesactivity-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 nhs.net

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