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Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Diagnostic Waiting Times Quarter Ending December 2020

Reader Information

Purpose: This statistical release presents information on waiting times and reporting times for diagnostic services in Northern Ireland and reports on the performance of the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts against the draft 2020/21 Ministerial waiting time target and the draft 2020/21 Ministerial diagnostic reporting turnaround target:

“By March 2021, 75% of patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, with no patient waiting longer than 26 weeks”.

“By March 2021, all urgent diagnostic tests should be reported on within two days of the test being undertaken”.

This statistical release details information on waiting times and reporting times for diagnostic services in HSC Trusts at 31st December 2020. Data are presented by HSC Trust, diagnostic category, diagnostic test, and time band. Further information on routine diagnostic reporting times is available in the accompanying CSV file.

Statistical Quality: The ‘*Diagnostic Waiting Times Publication – Supporting Documentation*’ booklet details the technical guidance and definitions used, as well as notes on how to use the data contained within this statistical release. This booklet is available to view or download from:
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/diagnostic-waiting-times-supporting-documentation>

Due to the redeployment of resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data contained within this publication may not have been subject to the usual level of quality assurance. Users should also be aware that the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the functions of hospitals during the current reporting period and should exercise caution when using these data, given that hospital records may not be fully updated at this time.

Internet: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/diagnostic-waiting-times>

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Target audience: Department of Health (DoH), Chief Executives of the HSC Board and Trusts in Northern Ireland, healthcare professionals, academics, and Health & Social Care stakeholders, the media and general public.

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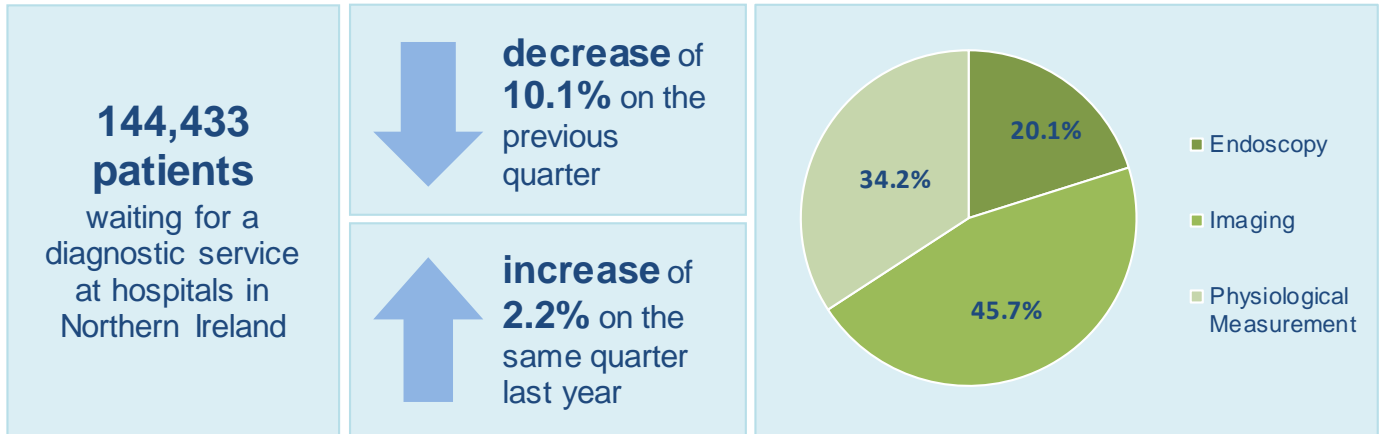
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By March 2021, 75% of patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, with no patient waiting longer than 26 weeks.

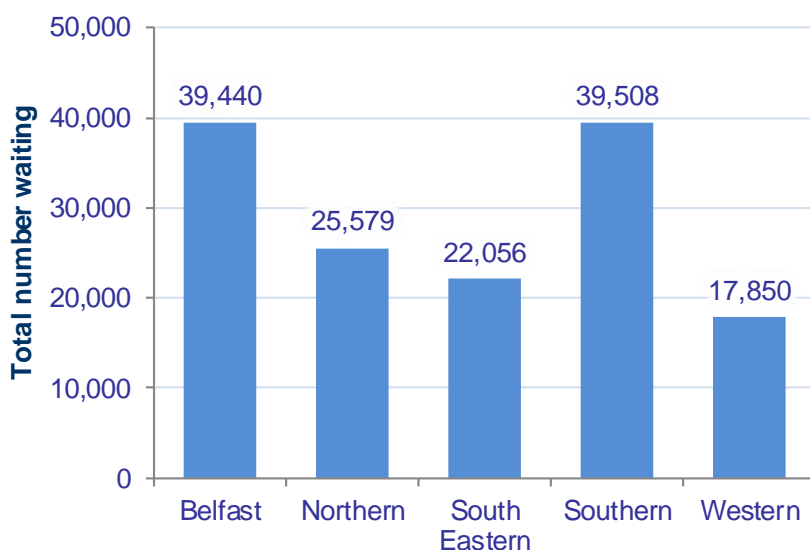
Total number of patients waiting at 31st December 2020



Source: SDR1

At 31st December 2020, a total of 144,433 patients were waiting for a diagnostic test, 10.1% (16,230) fewer than at 30th September 2020 (160,663), and 2.2% (3,159) more than at 31st December 2019 (141,274) (Table 1).

A number of diagnostic services may not be provided at all of the five HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland. In this situation, patients from one HSC Trust area will be waiting to be seen at a service provided at another HSC Trust. Data users should therefore be cautious in how they use these data (see explanatory note 10).



More than a quarter of patients were waiting for diagnostic tests in the Southern (27.4%) and Belfast HSC Trusts (27.3%), with a further 17.7% in the Northern HSC Trust, 15.3% in the South Eastern HSC Trust and 12.4% in the Western HSC Trust (Table 2).

Source: SDR1

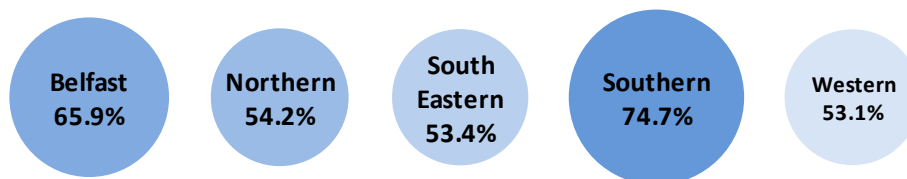
Around three fifths (60.4%, 87,283) of the 144,433 patients were waiting for a diagnostic test within one of the following seven diagnostic services: Non-obstetric Ultrasound; Echocardiography; Magnetic Resonance Imaging; DEXA Scans; Gastroscopy; Peripheral Neurophysiology and Plain Film X-Rays. (Table 3).

Patients waiting more than 9 weeks at 31st December 2020

Achievement of the 9 week target requires that less than 25% of patients should be waiting over 9 weeks for a diagnostic test.

This element was **not achieved** by Northern Ireland as a whole

62.8%
of patients were waiting longer than 9 weeks



Percentage waiting over 9 weeks

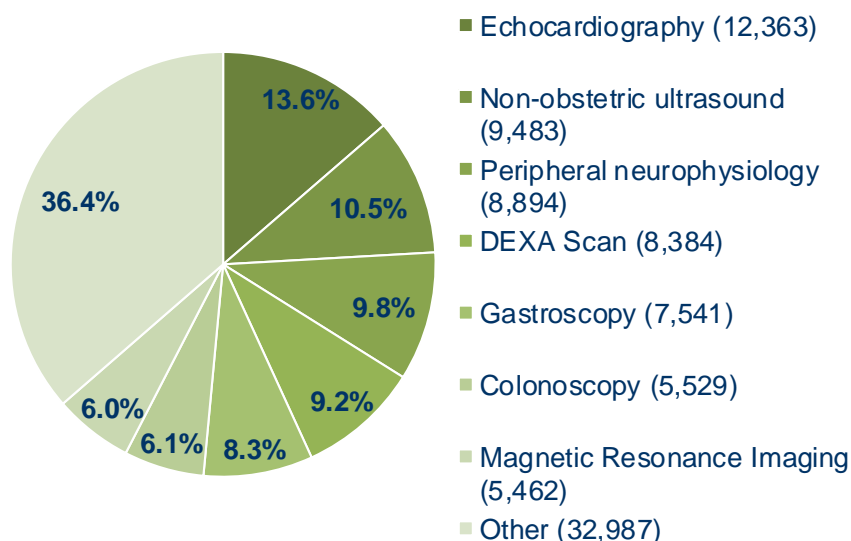
Source: SRD1

At 31st December 2020, 62.8% (90,643) of patients were waiting more than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, compared with 65.4% (105,085) at 30th September 2020 and 57.5% (81,286) at 31st December 2019 (Table 1).

The 9 week element of the target was not achieved by Northern Ireland as a whole, or by any individual HSC Trust. Data users should be aware that not all diagnostic services are provided at every HSC Trust (see explanatory note 10).

In the Southern HSC Trust, three-quarters (74.7%, 29,526) of patients were waiting longer than 9 weeks, 70.5% (30,735) in the Belfast HSC Trust, 62.4% (15,401) in the South Eastern HSC Trust, 57.4% (19,054) in the Northern HSC Trust and more than half (51.9%, 9,951) in the Western HSC Trust (Table 2).

Patients waiting over 9 weeks by diagnostic service



Of the 90,643 patients waiting more than 9 weeks, more than three fifths (63.6%, 57,656) were waiting for one of the following diagnostic tests: Echocardiography; Non-Obstetric Ultrasound; Peripheral Neurophysiology; DEXA Scan; Gastroscopy; Colonoscopy and Magnetic Resonance Imaging. (Table 3).

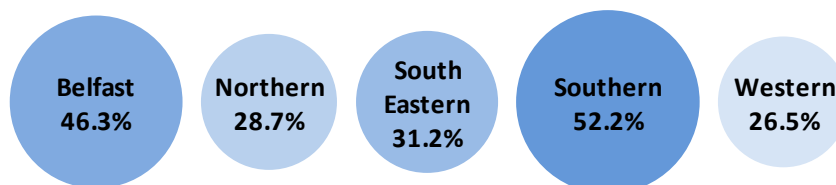
Source: SDR1

Patients waiting more than 26 weeks at 31st December 2020

Achievement of the 26 week target requires that no patient should be waiting over 26 weeks for a diagnostic test.

This element was **not achieved** by Northern Ireland as a whole

40.0%
of patients were waiting longer than 26 weeks



Percentage waiting over 26 weeks

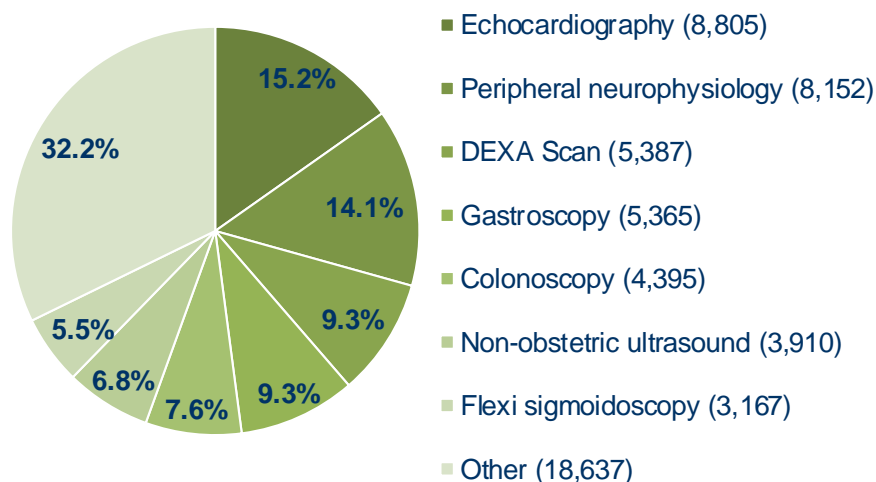
Source: SDR1

At 31st December 2020, 40.0% (57,818) of patients were waiting more than 26 weeks for a diagnostic test compared with 44.8% (71,968) at 30th September 2020 and 30.4% (42,895) at 31st December 2019 (Table 1).

The 26 week element of the target was not achieved by Northern Ireland as a whole or by any individual HSC Trust (Table 2). Data users should be aware that not all diagnostic services are provided at every HSC Trust (see explanatory note 10).

Of patients waiting in the Southern HSC Trust, more than half (52.2%, 20,620) were waiting longer than 26 weeks, 46.3% (18,243) in the Belfast HSC Trust, 31.2% (6,892) in the South Eastern HSC Trust, 28.7% (7,330) in the Northern HSC Trust and 26.5% (4,733) in the Western HSC Trust (Table 2).

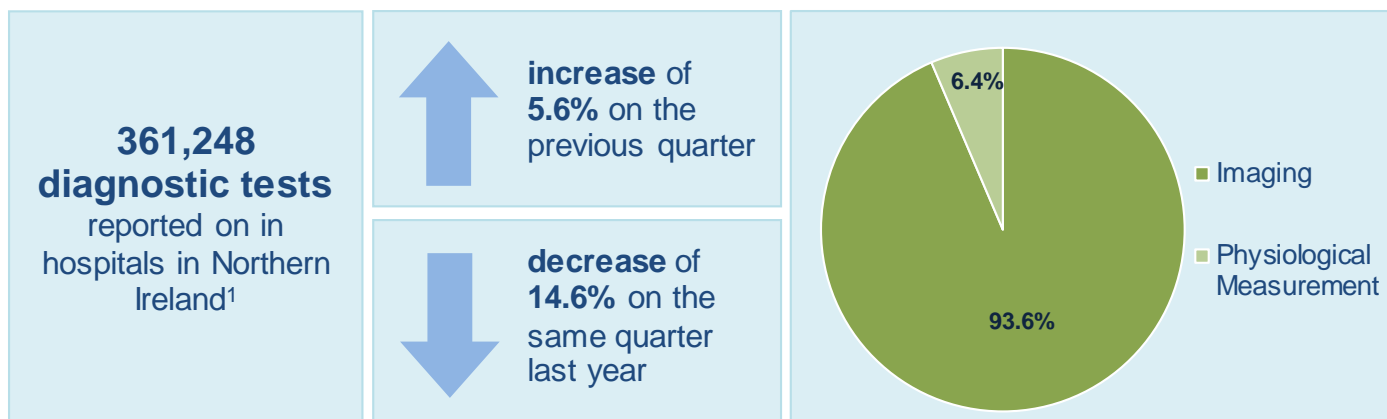
Patients waiting over 26 weeks by diagnostic service



Around two-thirds (67.8%, 39,181) of the 57,818 patients waiting more than 26 weeks were waiting for one of the following diagnostic tests: Echocardiography; Peripheral Neurophysiology; DEXA Scan; Gastroscopy; Colonoscopy; Non-Obstetric Ultrasound and Flexi Sigmoidoscopy. (Table 3).

Source: SDR1

Total number of diagnostic tests reported on during quarter ending December 2020

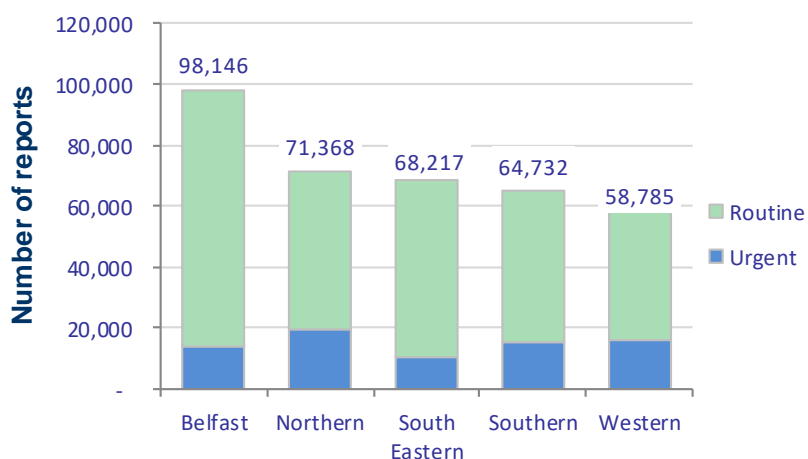


Source: DRTT Return

A total of 361,248 diagnostic tests were reported on and dispatched to the referring clinician at hospitals in Northern Ireland during the quarter ending December 2020, 5.6% (19,314) more than the quarter ending September 2020 (341,934), and 14.6% (61,735) fewer than the quarter ending December 2019 (422,983) (Table 4).

Of the 361,248 reported diagnostic tests, 93.6% (338,040) were reporting on an Imaging test and 6.4% (23,208) were reporting on a Physiological Measurement test (Table 4).

Approximately a fifth (20.9%, 75,437) of the diagnostic tests reported on during quarter ending December 2020 were urgent diagnostic tests, with the remaining 79.1% (285,811) being routine diagnostic tests¹ (Table 4).



More than a quarter (27.2%) of diagnostic tests were reported and dispatched in the Belfast HSC Trust, with a further 19.8% in the Northern HSC Trust, 18.9% in the South Eastern HSC Trust, 17.9% in the Southern HSC Trust and 16.3% in the Western HSC Trust.²

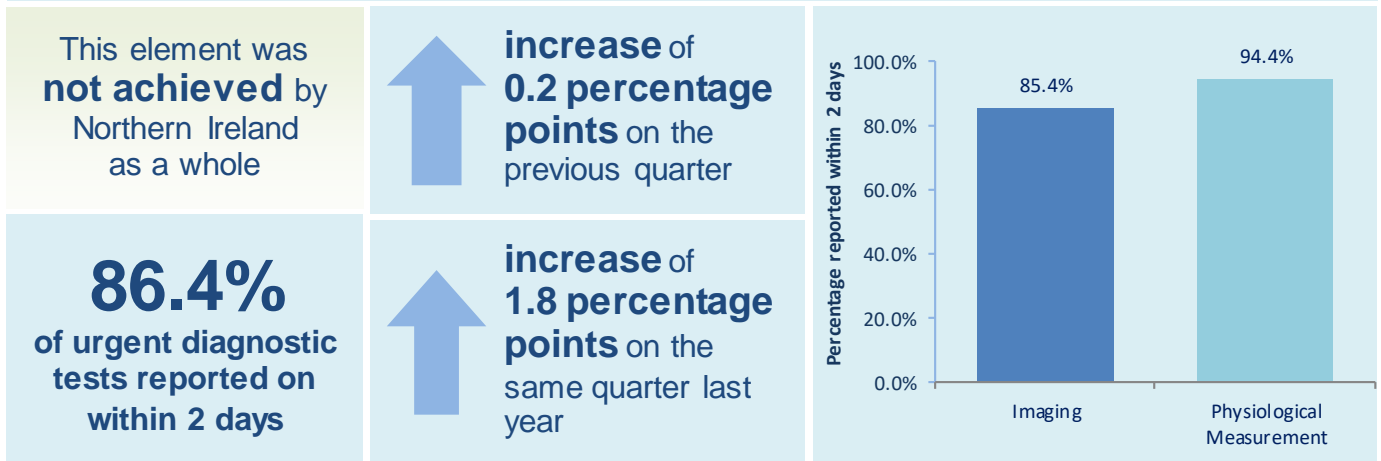
Source: DRTT Return

¹ Reporting times of routine diagnostic tests are available in the accompanying CSV file.

² Diagnostic reporting turnaround times relate only to a selected subset of Imaging and Physiological Measurement tests. Day case endoscopies are reported on the day of the test and as such are not included.

Urgent diagnostic tests reported on within 2 days during quarter ending December 2020

By March 2021, all urgent diagnostic tests should be reported on within 2 days of the test being undertaken.

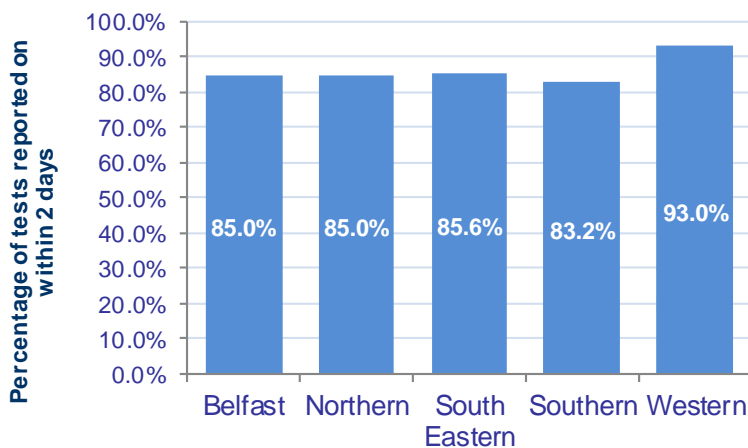


Source: DRTT Return

Achievement of the diagnostic reporting turnaround time target requires that all urgent diagnostic tests should be reported and dispatched within 2 days.

Of the 75,437 urgent diagnostic tests reported on during quarter ending December 2020, 86.4% (65,172) were reported on within 2 days, compared with 86.2% (59,577) during the quarter ending September 2020 and 84.6% (54,328) during the quarter ending December 2019 (Table 5).

Of the 75,437 urgent diagnostic tests, 66,795 were imaging reports and 8,642 were physiological measurement reports. A total of 85.4% of urgent imaging tests were reported on within 2 days compared with 94.4% of urgent physiological measurement tests (Table 6).



During the quarter ending December 2020, the 2 day target was not achieved by any HSC Trust, although the Western Trust reported on 93.0% of urgent diagnostic tests within two days (Table 7).

Source: DRTT Return

Appendix 1: Tables

Table 1: Number of patients waiting for a diagnostic service by diagnostic category – 31st December 2020¹

Diagnostic Category		Current Quarter (December 2020)	Previous Quarter (September 2020)	Same Quarter Last Year (December 2019)
Imaging	Total Patients Waiting	65,979	79,847	70,436
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	30,828	42,686	35,456
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	46.7%	53.5%	50.3%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	15,302	24,943	16,969
Physiological Measurement	Total Patients Waiting	49,371	53,304	48,368
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	37,522	41,330	32,304
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	76.0%	77.5%	66.8%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	25,451	30,116	18,731
Endoscopy	Total Patients Waiting	29,083	27,512	22,470
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	22,293	21,069	13,526
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	76.7%	76.6%	60.2%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	17,065	16,909	7,195
Total	Total Patients Waiting	144,433	160,663	141,274
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	90,643	105,085	81,286
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	62.8%	65.4%	57.5%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	57,818	71,968	42,895

Source: SDR1

¹Refer to Explanatory Notes 1–15 & 22-25

Table 2: Number of patients waiting for a diagnostic service, by HSC Trust – 31st December 2020¹

HSC Trust	Patients Waiting for Diagnostic Service by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0 - 6	>6 - 9	>9 - 13	>13 - 21	>21-26	>26	
Belfast	10,424	3,013	2,803	3,433	1,524	18,243	39,440
Northern	9,470	2,249	2,605	2,602	1,323	7,330	25,579
South Eastern	8,582	1,703	1,851	2,202	826	6,892	22,056
Southern	7,378	2,604	2,729	4,213	1,964	20,620	39,508
Western	6,613	1,754	1,642	2,190	918	4,733	17,850
Total	42,467	11,323	11,630	14,640	6,555	57,818	144,433

Source: SDR1

¹Refer to Explanatory Notes 1–15 & 22-25

Table 3: Number of patients waiting for a diagnostic service by type of service and weeks waiting – 31st December 2020¹

Diagnostic Test	Patients Waiting for Diagnostic Service by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0 - 6	>6 - 9	>9 - 13	>13 - 21	>21-26	>26	
Non-obstetric ultrasound	9,182	1,803	1,865	2,531	1,177	3,910	20,468
Echocardiography	1,966	821	970	1,589	999	8,805	15,150
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	5,187	1,706	1,545	1,489	493	1,935	12,355
DEXA Scan	1,551	849	1,042	1,368	587	5,387	10,784
Gastroscopy	1,934	682	707	1,045	424	5,365	10,157
Peripheral neurophysiology	331	175	190	330	222	8,152	9,400
Plain Film Xrays	7,189	813	734	214	7	12	8,969
Computerised Tomography	4,131	800	469	510	192	1,325	7,427
Colonoscopy	1,513	353	356	535	243	4,395	7,395
Pure tone audiometry	1,341	677	945	1,362	569	2,028	6,922
Flexi sigmoidoscopy	483	209	238	435	225	3,167	4,757
Ambulatory ECG monitoring (24 hr holter)	1,103	377	323	379	171	2,150	4,503
Magnetic Resonance Imaging - Cardiac	224	105	152	258	147	1,564	2,450
Cystoscopy	772	216	159	183	68	849	2,247
Barium Studies/Fluoroscopy	488	155	160	215	89	953	2,060
Spirometry inc.flow volume curves	623	188	230	354	152	280	1,827
Sleep studies	586	158	161	145	48	441	1,539
Arthroscopy	59	19	36	52	27	1,315	1,508
Transfer Factor	492	143	176	249	123	190	1,373
Other	3,312	1,074	1,172	1,397	592	5,595	13,142
All diagnostic tests	42,467	11,323	11,630	14,640	6,555	57,818	144,433

Source: SDR1

¹Refer to Explanatory Notes 1–15 & 22-25

Table 4: Number of diagnostic tests reported and dispatched by priority of report – QE December 2020²

Priority of Report	Diagnostic Category	Current Quarter (Dec 2020)	Previous Quarter (Sep 2020)	Same Quarter Last Year (Dec 2019)
Urgent	Imaging	66,795	61,465	57,656
	Physiological Measurement	8,642	7,669	6,540
Routine	Imaging	271,245	262,379	337,372
	Physiological Measurement	14,566	10,421	21,415
Total	Imaging	338,040	323,844	395,028
	Physiological Measurement	23,208	18,090	27,955

Source: DRTT Return

²Refer to Explanatory Notes 1-3, 5 & 16–25

Table 5: Number of urgent diagnostic tests reported and dispatched – QE December 2020²

Urgent Diagnostic Tests	Current Quarter (Dec 2020)	Previous Quarter (Sep 2020)	Same Quarter Last Year (Dec 2019)
Total reported	75,437	69,134	64,196
Number reported within 2 days	65,172	59,577	54,328
<i>% reported on within 2 days</i>	86.4%	86.2%	84.6%

Source: DRTT Return

²Refer to Explanatory Notes 1-3, 5 & 16–25

Table 6: Number of urgent diagnostic tests reported and dispatched by diagnostic category and time in days– QE December 2020²

Diagnostic Category	Length of time reporting in days				Total Reported
	0 - 2 days	>2 - 14 days	>14 - 28 days	>28 days	
Imaging	57,015	8,971	509	300	66,795
Physiological Measurement	8,157	375	42	68	8,642
Total	65,172	9,346	551	368	75,437

Source: DRTT Return

²Refer to Explanatory Notes 1-3, 5 & 16–25

Table 7: Number of urgent diagnostic tests reported and dispatched by HSC Trust and time in days – QE December 2020²

HSC Trust	Length of time reporting in days				Total Reported
	0 - 2 days	>2 - 14 days	>14 - 28 days	>28 days	
Belfast	12,132	1,712	195	234	14,273
Northern	16,694	2,854	76	22	19,646
South Eastern	8,932	1,433	57	8	10,430
Southern	12,738	2,304	190	81	15,313
Western	14,676	1,043	33	23	15,775
Total	65,172	9,346	551	368	75,437

Source: DRTT Return

²Refer to Explanatory Notes 1-3, 5 & 16–25

Appendix 2: Explanatory Notes

1. The sources for the data contained in this release are the quarterly Departmental Returns SDR1 and the DRTT Return. Note that, prior to September 2018, diagnostic waiting time data was provided separately for 16 selected diagnostic services in the SDR1 Part 1, with all other diagnostic services provided by the HSCB on the SDR1 Part 2 return. The diagnostic reporting turnaround time information is provided by the HSCB on the DRTT return.
2. The 'Diagnostic Waiting Times Publication – Supporting Documentation' booklet details the technical guidance and definitions used, as well as notes on how to use the data contained within this statistical release. This booklet is available to view or download from: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/diagnostic-waiting-times>.
3. All of the data contained in the tables can be supplied by individual diagnostic service or HSC Trust if this level of detail is required. In addition, quarterly data relating to diagnostic waiting times and diagnostic reporting turnaround times has also been published in spreadsheet format (CSV), split by HSC Trust and diagnostic service, in order to aid secondary analysis. These data are available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-waiting-time-statistics-diagnostic-waiting-times-December-2020>
4. From September 2018, the CSV file has a number of changes. Barium Studies and Fluoroscopy diagnostic waits have been combined together and Computerised Tomography has been split into General, Colonoscopy and Cardiac waits. In addition, all patients waiting >26 weeks have now been split into the following timebands >26-36, >36-52, >52-65, >65-78 and >78.
5. The diagnostic waiting times and diagnostic reporting turnaround times returns (SDR1 Parts 1 and 2, DRTT) include patients living outside Northern Ireland and privately funded patients waiting for diagnostic services in Health Service hospitals in Northern Ireland.
6. HSC Trusts use the Northern Ireland Picture Archive and Communications System (NIPACS) as the mechanism for managing imaging services. The HSC Board has carried out a validation exercise with Trusts to address any data quality issues. The quality of imaging waiting times and reporting times has improved in recent years.
7. A **diagnostic service** provides an examination, test, or procedure used to identify a person's disease or condition and which allows a medical diagnosis to be made. There are three categories of diagnostic test: Imaging test; Physiological Measurement test; and Day Case Endoscopy.

8. The **diagnostic waiting time** relates to all tests with a diagnostic element. Included are tests that are part diagnostic and subsequently part therapeutic. A therapeutic procedure is defined as a procedure which involves actual treatment of a person's disease, condition or injury. Purely therapeutic procedures are excluded from the diagnostic waiting times target. Patients currently admitted to a hospital bed and waiting for an emergency procedure, patients waiting for a planned procedure and patients waiting for procedures as part of screening programmes are also excluded from the waiting times target.
9. The waiting time for a diagnostic service commences on the date on which the referral for the service is received by the Health Care provider and stops on the date on which the test is performed. Patients who cannot attend (CNA) have their waiting time adjusted to commence on the date they informed the HSC Trust that they could not attend, while patients who do not attend (DNA) have their waiting time adjusted to commence on the date of the DNA.
10. A number of diagnostic services may not be provided at all of the five HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland. In this situation, patients from one HSC Trust area will be waiting to be seen at a service provided at another HSC Trust. Users should therefore be cautious in how they use these data. For example, they should not be used to calculate the total number of patients waiting per head of the population residing within each HSC Trust area. Neither should the actual number of patients waiting longer than the recommended waiting time be used as indicator of poor performance within an individual HSC Trust. Users who require an indication of the latter are advised to refer to the commentary section of the publication which provides an indication of the percentage of total waiters that have been waiting over the maximum recommended waiting times, within each HSC Trust.
11. A number of the diagnostic services, particularly endoscopies, reported on the SDR 1 (Part 1 & 2) returns are managed as an admission: either an inpatient admission or a day case. As such, they will be included in both the inpatient and day case waiting time and diagnostic waiting time figures. Due to the risk of multiple counting, these two sets of data should not be combined to give an estimate of the total number of patients waiting for admission or a diagnostic service.
12. Some people will be waiting on more than one waiting list or be on the same waiting list for more than one outpatient appointment/admission/diagnostic test at the same time due to having more than one condition.
13. The draft 2020/21 Ministerial diagnostic waiting time target, states that, by March 2021, 75% of patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, with no patient waiting longer than 26 weeks.

14. For Tables 2 and 3, each diagnostic waiting time band relates to the number of completed weeks a patient has been waiting for a diagnostic service. For example, a patient waiting exactly 6 weeks would be included in the 0-6 week time band and a patient waiting 6 weeks and 1 day would be included in the >6-9 week (greater than 6 weeks but waiting no longer than 9 weeks) time band.
15. Patients waiting 'longer than 9 weeks' for a diagnostic service includes all patients in the >9 - 13, >13 - 21, >21-26, >26-36, >36-52, >52-65, >65-78 and >78 week time bands. All patients waiting 'over 26 weeks' includes everyone in the >26-36, >36-52, >52-65, >65-78 and >78 week time bands.
16. The diagnostic reporting turnaround time is the time interval between the completion of the diagnostic test and the results of that test being verified or dispatched to the referring clinician in Northern Ireland, whichever is applicable.
17. Diagnostic reporting times apply to a selected subset of imaging and physiological measurement diagnostic services. These services are: Magnetic Resonance Imaging; Computerised Tomography; Non-Obstetric Ultrasound; Barium Studies; DEXA Scan; Radio-Nuclide Imaging; Pure Tone Audiometry; Echocardiography; Perfusion Studies; Peripheral Neurophysiology; Sleep Studies; and Urodynamics Pressures and Flows and Plain Film X-rays.
18. Data for Plain Film X-rays is only available from April 2015 onwards, as such DRTT figures should not be compared prior to this date.
19. The draft 2020/21 Ministerial diagnostic reporting turnaround target, states that, by March 2021, all urgent diagnostic tests should be reported on within two days of the test being undertaken.
20. Further information on routine diagnostic reporting times are available in the accompanying CSV file at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-waiting-time-statistics-diagnostic-waiting-times-December-2020>
21. The information on diagnostic and reporting times contained within this publication is currently under review. The Department is looking at how this information is sourced and the validation procedures that are carried out with a view to improving the quality. All quality issues identified as part of this review are being addressed on an ongoing basis.

22. Resubmissions for Quarter Ending September 18 were received from Belfast and Northern HSC Trusts for the SDR1 return and from Northern HSC Trust for the DRTT return. These amendments have been reflected in this publication.
23. The Department of Health's policy is to publish revised figures with subsequent statistical releases unless it is decided that the magnitude of the change merits earlier notification.
24. The information contained within this publication is not National Statistics.
25. Figures relating to diagnostic waiting times and diagnostic reporting turnaround times for the quarter ending 31st March 2020 will be released on Thursday 27th May 2021.

Further information on Diagnostic Waiting Times in Northern Ireland is available from:

Hospital Information Branch
Information & Analysis Directorate
Department of Health
Stormont Estate
Belfast, BT4 3SQ

✉ Email: statistics@health-ni.gov.uk

This Statistical bulletin and others published by Hospital Information Branch are available to download from the DoH Internet site at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/statisticalreports>