

INFORMATION
ANALYSIS
DIRECTORATE



Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Diagnostic Waiting Times Quarter Ending March 2021

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 March 2021. 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.
- Price:** Free

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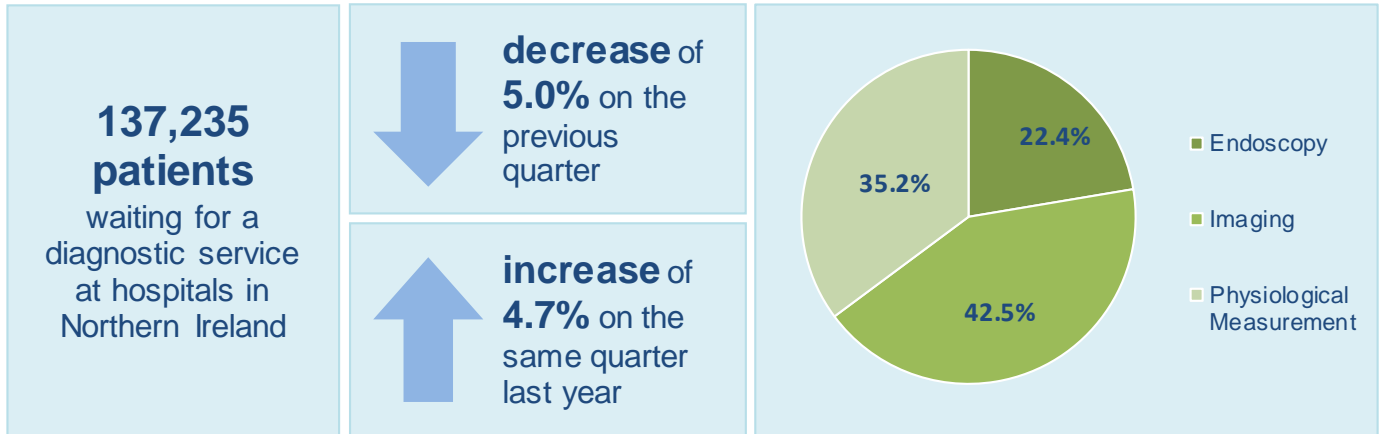
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By March 2021, 75% of patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, with no patient waiting longer than 26 weeks.

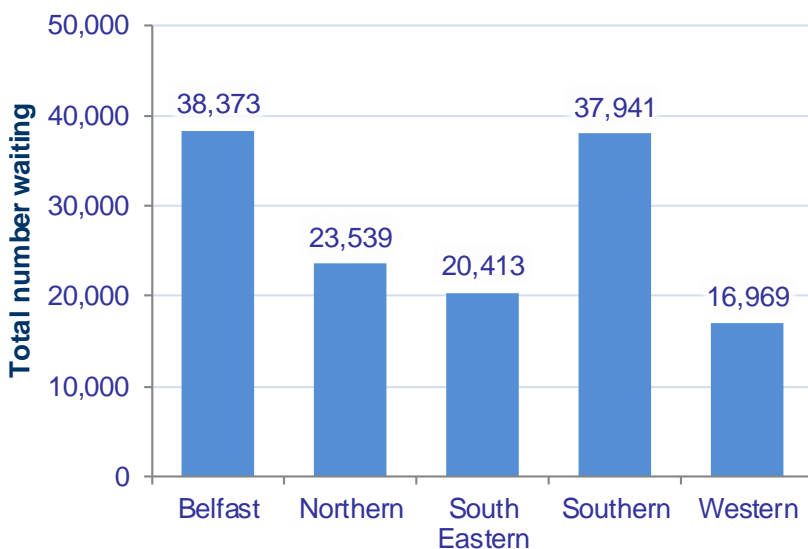
Total number of patients waiting at 31st March 2021



Source: SDR1

At 31st March 2021, a total of 137,235 patients were waiting for a diagnostic test, 5.0% (7,198) fewer than at 31st December 2020 (144,433), and 4.7% (6,195) more than at 31st March 2020 (131,040) (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 Belfast (28.0%) and Southern (27.6%) HSC Trusts, with a further 17.2% in the Northern HSC Trust, 14.9% in the South Eastern HSC Trust and 12.4% in the Western HSC Trust (Table 2).

Source: SDR1

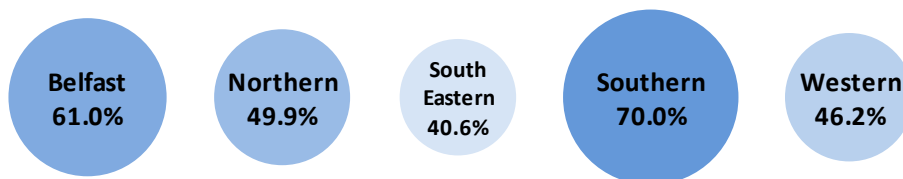
Around three fifths (58.7%, 80,540) of the 137,235 patients were waiting for a diagnostic test within one of the following seven diagnostic services: Non-Obstetric Ultrasound; Echocardiography; Magnetic Resonance Imaging; Gastroscopy; DEXA Scan; Plain Film X-Rays And Peripheral Neurophysiology. (Table 3).

Patients waiting more than 9 weeks at 31st March 2021

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

56.7%
of patients were waiting longer than 9 weeks



Percentage waiting over 9 weeks

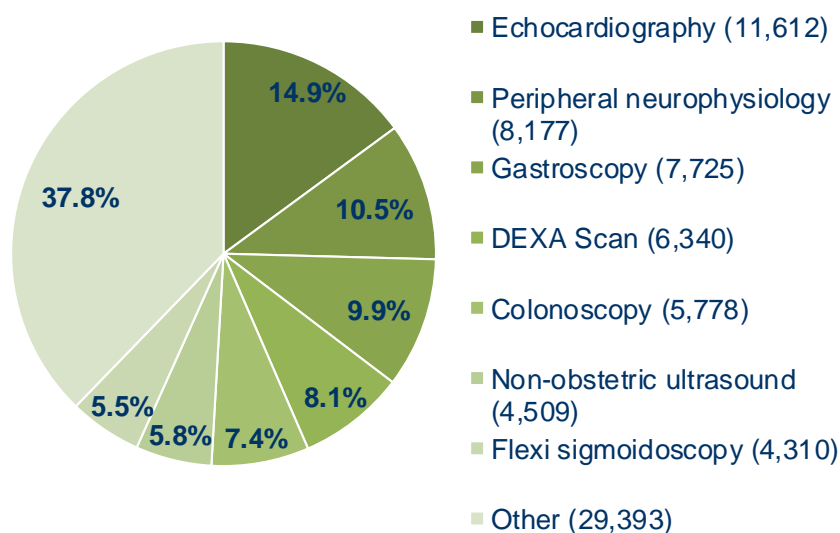
Source: SRD1

At 31st March 2021, 56.7% (77,844) of patients were waiting more than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test, compared with 62.8% (90,643) at 31st December 2020 and 55.1% (72,248) at 31st March 2020 (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, almost three-quarters (70.0%, 26,570) of patients were waiting longer than 9 weeks, 61.0% (23,407) in the Belfast HSC Trust, 49.9% (11,739) in the Northern HSC Trust, 46.2% (7,844) in the Western HSC Trust and 40.6% (8,284) in the South Eastern HSC Trust (Table 2).

Patients waiting over 9 weeks by diagnostic service



Of the 77,844 patients waiting over 9 weeks, more than three fifths (62.2%, 48,451) were waiting for one of the following diagnostic tests: Echocardiography; Peripheral Neurophysiology; Gastroscopy; DEXA Scan; Colonoscopy; Non-Obstetric Ultrasound and Flexi Sigmoidoscopy. (Table 3).

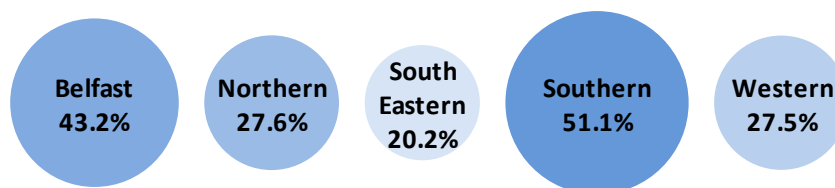
Source: SDR1

Patients waiting more than 26 weeks at 31st March 2021

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

37.4%
of patients were waiting longer than 26 weeks



Percentage waiting over 26 weeks

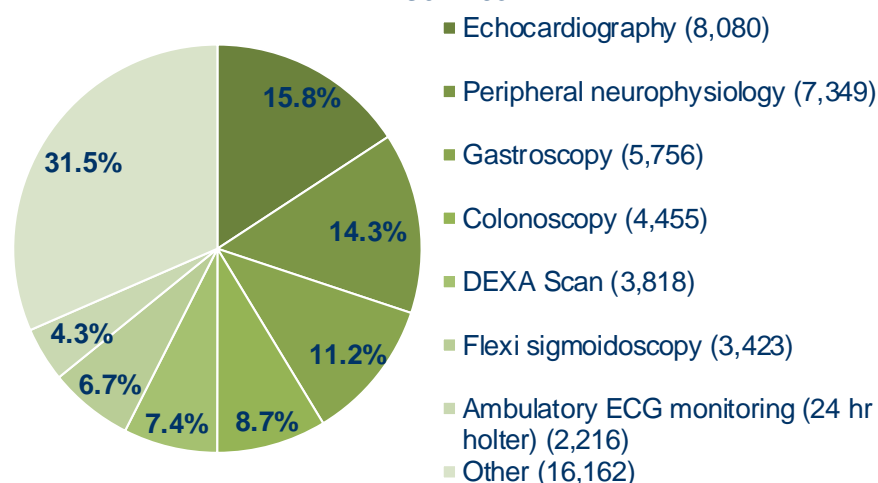
Source: SDR1

At 31st March 2021, 37.4% (51,259) of patients were waiting more than 26 weeks for a diagnostic test compared with 40.0% (57,818) at 31st December 2020 and 27.3% (35,784) at 31st March 2020 (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 (51.1%, 19,388) were waiting longer than 26 weeks, 43.2% (16,591) in the Belfast HSC Trust, 27.6% (6,500) in the Northern HSC Trust, 27.5% (4,660) in the Western HSC Trust and 20.2% (4,120) in the South Eastern HSC Trust (Table 2).

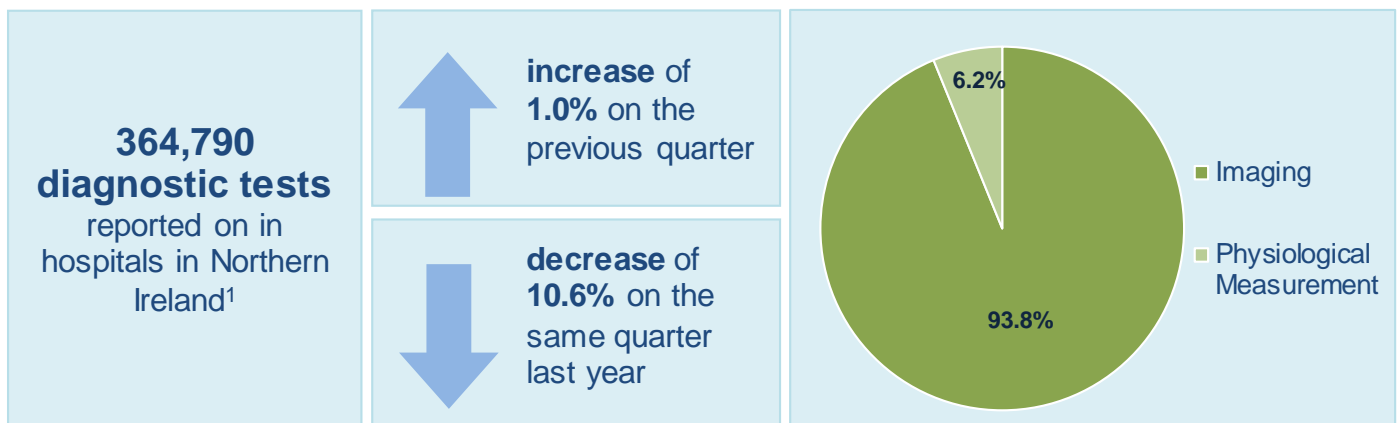
Patients waiting over 26 weeks by diagnostic service



Around two-thirds (68.5%, 35,097) of the 51,259 patients waiting more than 26 weeks were waiting for one of the following diagnostic tests: Echocardiography; Peripheral Neurophysiology; Gastroscopy; Colonoscopy; DEXA Scan; Flexi Sigmoidoscopy and Ambulatory ECG Monitoring (24 Hr Holter).. (Table 3).

Source: SDR1

Total number of diagnostic tests reported on during quarter ending March 2021

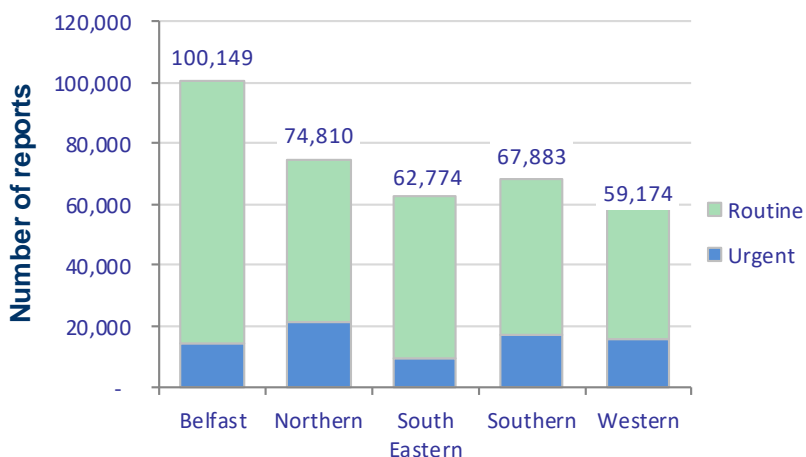


Source: DRTT Return

A total of 364,790 diagnostic tests were reported on and dispatched to the referring clinician at hospitals in Northern Ireland during the quarter ending March 2021, 1.0% (3,542) more than the quarter ending December 2020 (361,248), and 10.6% (43,222) fewer than the quarter ending March 2020 (408,012) (Table 4).

Of the 364,790 reported diagnostic tests, 93.8% (342,306) were reporting on an Imaging test and 6.2% (22,484) were reporting on a Physiological Measurement test (Table 4).

Approximately one fifth (21.3%, 77,636) of the diagnostic tests reported on during quarter ending March 2021 were urgent diagnostic tests, with the remaining 78.7% (287,154) being routine diagnostic tests¹ (Table 4).



Source: DRTT Return

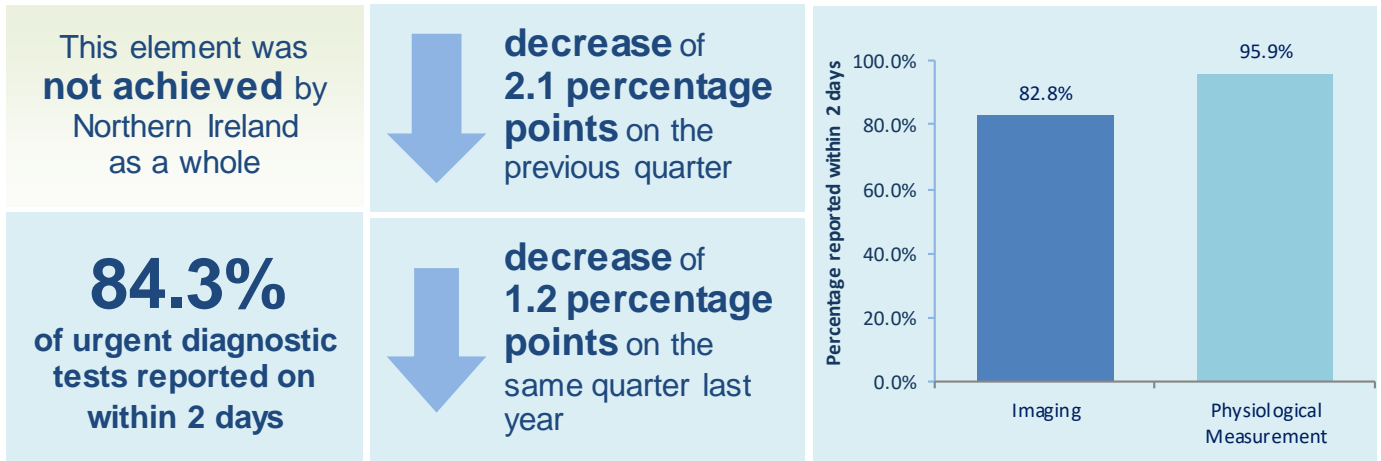
More than a quarter (27.5%) of diagnostic tests were reported and dispatched in the Belfast HSC Trust, with a further 20.5% in the Northern HSC Trust, 18.6% in the Southern HSC Trust, 17.2% in the South Eastern HSC Trust and 16.2% in the Western HSC Trust.²

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 March 2021

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

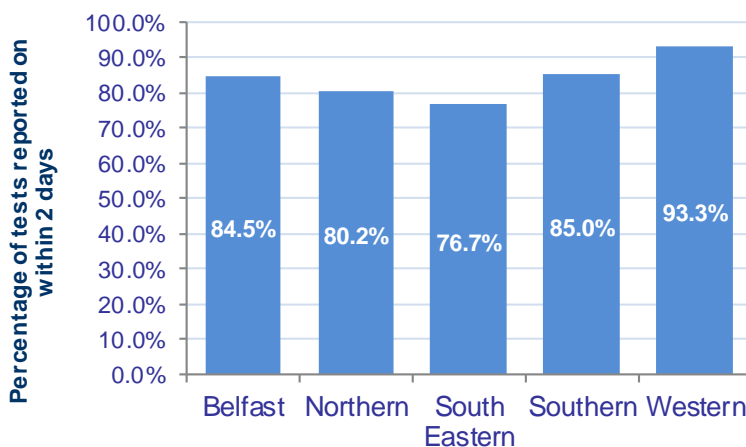


Source: DRTT Return

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

Of the 77,636 urgent diagnostic tests reported on during quarter ending March 2021, 84.3% (65,413) were reported on within 2 days, compared with 86.4% (65,172) during the quarter ending December 2020 and 85.4% (53,797) during the quarter ending March 2020 (Table 5).

Of the 77,636 urgent diagnostic tests, 68,875 were imaging reports and 8,761 were physiological measurement reports. A total of 82.8% of urgent imaging tests were reported on within 2 days compared with 95.9% of urgent physiological measurement tests (Table 6).



During the quarter ending March 2021, the 2 day target was not achieved by any HSC Trust, although the Western Trust reported on 93.3% 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 March 2021¹

Diagnostic Category		Current Quarter (March 2021)	Previous Quarter (December 2020)	Same Quarter Last Year (March 2020)
Imaging	Total Patients Waiting	58,294	65,979	61,154
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	20,353	30,828	27,867
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	34.9%	46.7%	45.6%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	10,011	15,302	10,252
Physiological Measurement	Total Patients Waiting	48,265	49,371	46,403
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	33,897	37,522	29,608
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	70.2%	76.0%	63.8%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	23,223	25,451	17,122
Endoscopy	Total Patients Waiting	30,676	29,083	23,483
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	23,594	22,293	14,773
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	76.9%	76.7%	62.9%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	18,025	17,065	8,410
Total	Total Patients Waiting	137,235	144,433	131,040
	Number waiting over 9 weeks	77,844	90,643	72,248
	<i>Percentage waiting over 9 weeks</i>	56.7%	62.8%	55.1%
	Number waiting over 26 weeks	51,259	57,818	35,784

Source: SDR1

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

Table 2: Number of patients waiting for a diagnostic service, by HSC Trust – 31st March 2021¹

HSC Trust	Patients Waiting for Diagnostic Service by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0 - 6	>6 - 9	>9 - 13	>13 - 21	>21-26	>26	
Belfast	12,102	2,864	2,528	2,960	1,328	16,591	38,373
Northern	10,150	1,650	1,759	2,343	1,137	6,500	23,539
South Eastern	10,400	1,729	1,343	2,010	811	4,120	20,413
Southern	9,243	2,128	1,730	3,473	1,979	19,388	37,941
Western	7,801	1,324	955	1,541	688	4,660	16,969
Total	49,696	9,695	8,315	12,327	5,943	51,259	137,235

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 March 2021¹

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	10,723	1,778	1,238	1,547	521	1,203	17,010
Echocardiography	2,898	774	931	1,593	1,008	8,080	15,284
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	5,772	1,349	1,200	1,002	372	1,544	11,239
Gastroscopy	1,964	623	512	942	515	5,756	10,312
DEXA Scan	1,800	822	695	1,233	594	3,818	8,962
Plain Film Xrays	8,627	275	26	9	5	2	8,944
Peripheral neurophysiology	441	171	201	387	240	7,349	8,789
Colonoscopy	1,604	330	349	660	314	4,455	7,712
Computerised Tomography	4,309	369	256	266	105	688	5,993
Pure tone audiometry	1,674	655	688	1,066	552	658	5,293
Flexi sigmoidoscopy	590	188	182	433	272	3,423	5,088
Ambulatory ECG monitoring (24 hr holter)	1,326	352	326	434	109	2,216	4,763
Cystoscopy	793	295	192	377	132	950	2,739
Magnetic Resonance Imaging - Cardiac	325	109	134	263	175	1,656	2,662
Spirometry inc.flow volume curves	935	180	123	191	99	830	2,358
Barium Studies/Fluoroscopy	535	160	135	210	130	942	2,112
Transfer Factor	731	141	96	148	79	463	1,658
Arthroscopy	55	29	54	76	40	1,347	1,601
Sleep studies	543	98	95	105	36	308	1,185
Other	4,051	997	882	1,385	645	5,571	13,531
All diagnostic tests	49,696	9,695	8,315	12,327	5,943	51,259	137,235

Source: SDR1

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

Table 4: Number of diagnostic tests reported and dispatched by priority of report – QE March 2021²

Priority of Report	Diagnostic Category	Current Quarter (Mar 2021)	Previous Quarter (Dec 2020)	Same Quarter Last Year (Mar 2020)
Urgent	Imaging	68,875	66,795	56,755
	Physiological Measurement	8,761	8,642	6,215
Routine	Imaging	273,431	271,245	324,417
	Physiological Measurement	13,723	14,566	20,625
Total	Imaging	342,306	338,040	381,172
	Physiological Measurement	22,484	23,208	26,840

Source: DRTT Return

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

Table 5: Number of urgent diagnostic tests reported and dispatched – QE March 2021²

Urgent Diagnostic Tests	Current Quarter (Mar 2021)	Previous Quarter (Dec 2020)	Same Quarter Last Year (Mar 2020)
Total reported	77,636	75,437	62,970
Number reported within 2 days	65,413	65,172	53,797
<i>% reported on within 2 days</i>	84.3%	86.4%	85.4%

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 March 2021²

Diagnostic Category	Length of time reporting in days				Total Reported
	0 - 2 days	>2 - 14 days	>14 - 28 days	>28 days	
Imaging	57,015	10,781	816	263	68,875
Physiological Measurement	8,398	284	45	34	8,761
Total	65,413	11,065	861	297	77,636

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 March 2021²

HSC Trust	Length of time reporting in days				Total Reported
	0 - 2 days	>2 - 14 days	>14 - 28 days	>28 days	
Belfast	12,220	1,804	250	184	14,458
Northern	16,913	3,805	355	12	21,085
South Eastern	7,314	2,117	82	23	9,536
Southern	14,531	2,390	126	44	17,091
Western	14,435	949	48	34	15,466
Total	65,413	11,065	861	297	77,636

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-March-2021>
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-March-2021>
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. 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.

23. The information contained within this publication is not National Statistics.

24. Figures relating to diagnostic waiting times and diagnostic reporting turnaround times for the quarter ending 30th June 2020 will be released on Thursday 26th August 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>