

NHS Wales Waiting times – termly monitoring report

Y Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol | 14 Mehefin 2023
Health and Social Care Committee | 14 June 2023

Introduction

This is the Committee's **third monitoring report** of NHS Wales waiting times.

In February, the Committee considered its **second monitoring report** and **wrote to the Minister for Health and Social Services** ('the Health Minister') acknowledging that some progress had been made in tackling NHS waiting times. However, the letter raised serious concerns about **the pace of recovery**. The Committee warned that unless activity significantly increased, the Welsh Government would not achieve its recovery targets.

The latest data (published on 18 May) shows the Welsh Government has indeed missed its first two recovery targets:

- To reduce outpatient waits to below 52 weeks by end of December 2022.
- To eliminate two year waits in most specialties by March 2023.

This means that thousands of patients are still waiting for NHS treatment. An **interim recovery target** agreed by the Welsh Government's Planned Care Improvement and Recovery team in relation to cancer services has also been missed:

- Cancer diagnosis and treatment to be undertaken within 62 days for 70% of people by March 2023



The statistics in this report are for **March 2023** (the latest available data at the time of writing). In March:

- there were around 53,000 patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) for their first outpatient appointment.
- over 31,000 patient pathways waiting more than two years for treatment.
- Only 55.3% of patient pathways started their first definitive treatment within 62 days of first being suspected of cancer.

Waiting times data are published monthly on the [StatsWales website](#) with a two-month lag. Previous monitoring reports are available on the [Committee's website](#).

N.B. The number of patient pathways is not the same as the number of individual patients, because some people have multiple open pathways. More information is available in the [Welsh Government's Chief Statistician's blog](#). (The [Welsh Government's statistical update](#) reports that in March, when there were about 734,700 open patient pathways, there were about 576,000 individual patients on treatment waiting lists in Wales).

1. Overview

In March 2023, the number of patient pathways waiting to start treatment increased from around 731,000 to around 734,700, the first increase after falling for five consecutive months. Since the end of October 2022, there had been a monthly reduction in the total waiting list, but there was an increase of over 3,000 patient pathways from February 2023.

Winter pressures and industrial action taken by NHS Wales staff are likely to have impacted on the number of patients waiting for treatment, though the Minister hasn't been drawn on the detail (i.e. it isn't clear how many planned operations had to be cancelled as a result of strike action).

The number of patient pathways waiting to start treatment in March 2023 was 58.5% higher than at the start of the pandemic in February 2020. Despite this, the Welsh Government say that in excess of 320,000 patient pathways were removed from the waiting list last year (January to December 2022).

N.B. The Health Minister says the Welsh Government doesn't report closed pathway data based on what reason the patient pathway is closed.

Commencement of treatment is only one of the reasons. It's unclear therefore, how many patient pathways have been removed following waiting list validation exercises, and/or perhaps more significantly, how many patient pathways have been closed because patients have opted for private treatment instead.

Key statistics:

- The proportion of patient pathways waiting less than 26 weeks increased to 58.5% in March. This has been relatively stable for some time after falling significantly from pre-pandemic levels.
- The number of patient pathways waiting longer than 36 weeks decreased for the seventh consecutive month in March, to just under 228,000, the lowest since April 2021 but remaining high in historical context.
- Over 31,700 patient pathways were waiting more than two years, 55% lower than the peak and falling for a year after a consistent increase throughout 2021.
- The average (median) time patient pathways had been waiting for treatment at the end of March decreased on the previous month to 20.0 weeks.

2. Progress against the five recovery targets

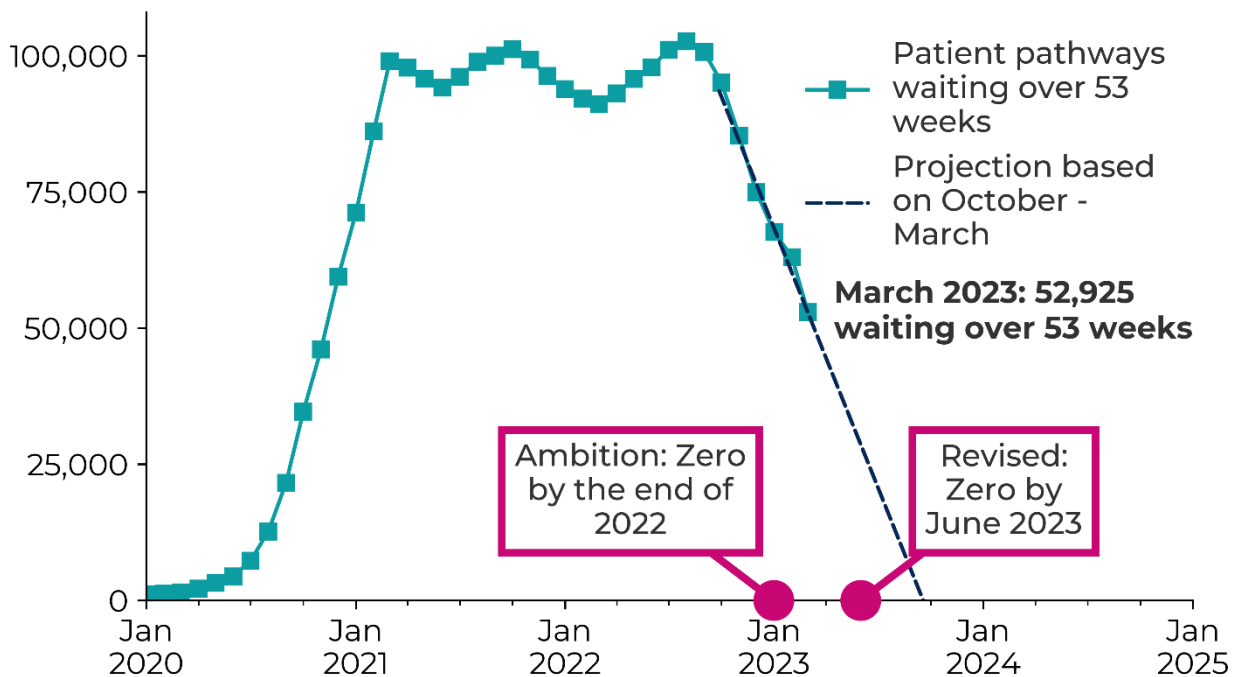
The graphs and analysis in this paper show progress against the Welsh Government’s five recovery targets established in the [planned care recovery plan](#).

2.1 Number of patients waiting for their first outpatient appointment

The December 2022 waiting times data showed that the Welsh Government’s recovery target to reduce outpatient waits to below 52 weeks was not achieved.

Recovery plan target 1: No patients to be waiting longer than a year for their first outpatient appointment by the end of 2022

Figure 1: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks for their first outpatient appointment – projection based on October 2022 to March 2023 data



Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and stage of pathway](#)

There has been a **reduction of 48%** in the number of patient pathways waiting longer than one year for their first outpatient appointment in March 2023 (from the peak reached in August 2022), but the recovery target was to eliminate all waits beyond 52 weeks.

In March 2023, there were 52,925 patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) for their first outpatient appointment. **The Welsh Government has set out a revised recovery target for this to be achieved by June 2023.**

2.2 Number of patients waiting to start NHS Treatment within two years

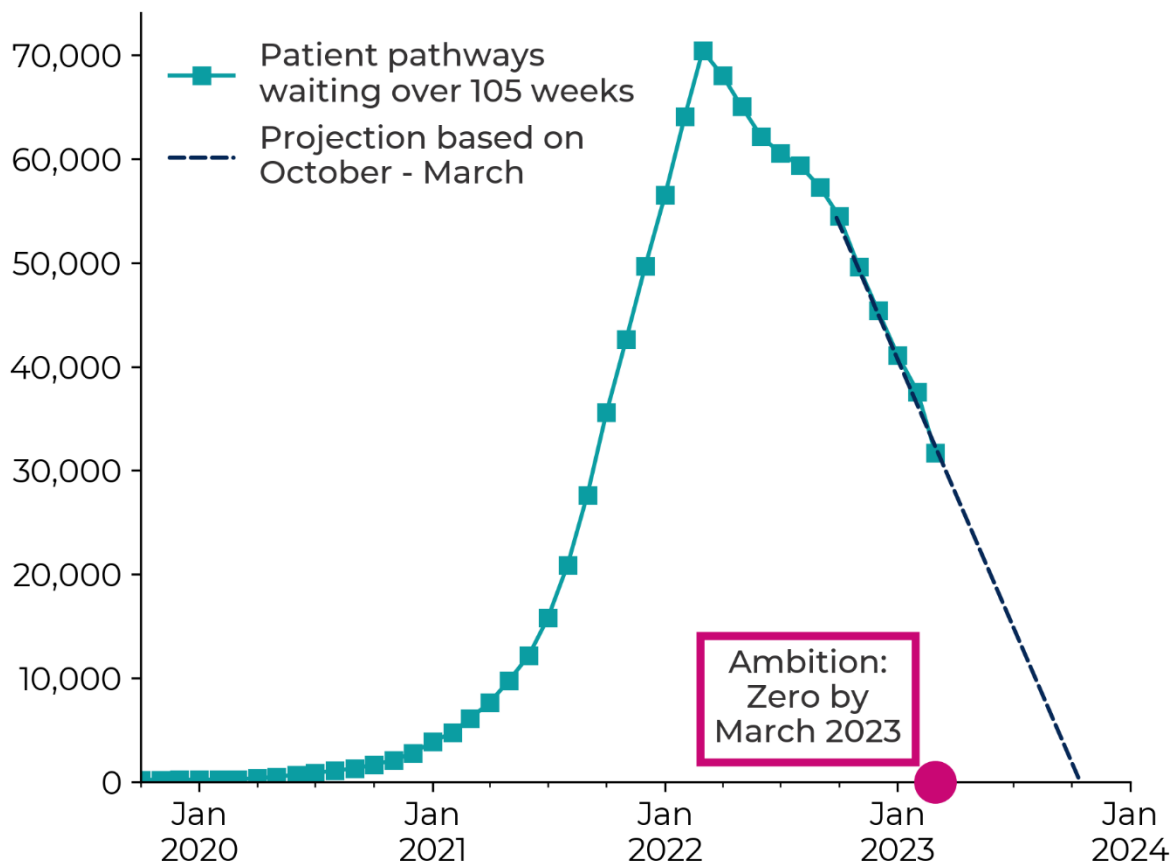
Recovery plan target 2: Eliminate the number of people waiting longer than two years to start treatment in most specialties by March 2023

In March 2023, around 31,700 patient pathways were waiting over 105 weeks (more than two years) to start treatment in most specialities. The numbers are starting to fall but **the pace of recovery** is slower than expected. The Welsh Government's recovery target to eliminate those waiting longer than two years to start treatment in most specialties **was not achieved**.

The March 2023 data shows **a twelfth consecutive monthly fall**. The number of patient pathways waiting is the lowest it's been since September 2021.

However, a projection using data from October 2022 to March 2023 shows that, at the current rate of progress (i.e. if the rate of progress since October 2022 is sustained), **the recovery target** to eliminate two years waits in most specialties **will not be fulfilled until around October 2023**. (The Welsh Government has set **a revised target date for June 2023**).

Figure 2: Number of patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment and projection based on October 2022 to March 2023



Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and stage of pathway](#)

It has recently become clear that the recovery target to eliminate two year waits in most specialties by March 2023 **doesn't include the seven specialties recognised as "exceptionally challenging"**. These are Dermatology, General Surgery, Ophthalmology, Urology, Gynaecology, Orthopaedics and Ear, Nose and Throat.

The [Welsh Government say](#) these specialties had large numbers waiting prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The seven specialties outside the scope of the target account for **27,400 (86%) patient pathways** waiting more than two years. On top of the seven 'exceptionally challenging' specialties, there were **a further 17 specialties** with patient pathways waiting more than two years in March. That accounts for 4,300 patient pathways.

Why hasn't the Welsh Government met its first two targets?

The Welsh Government reports on 35 specialties. Comparing the data from March 2022 to March 2023 shows that the Welsh Government achieved its ambition of eliminating two year waits in the specialties where numbers were small to start with (such as geriatric medicine, paediatric dentistry and paediatric surgery etc).

Of the 17 specialties with patient pathways waiting more than two years in March 2023 (not the exceptionally challenging specialties), the longest waits were for oral surgery (1,725), plastic surgery (570), gastroenterology (559), diagnostic services (320), orthodontics (279) and pain management (274).

In her letter to Committee, the Health Minister acknowledged that “industrial action and winter pressures have impacted on the number of patients waiting in excess of the milestone target”. However, the Minister says:

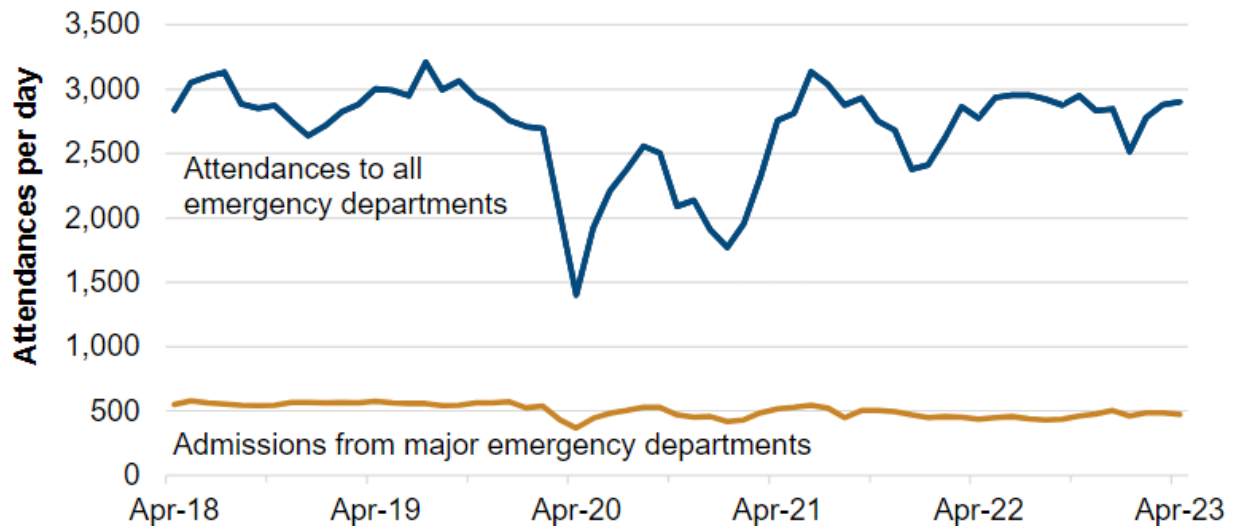
A more significant factor...relates to the differential in urgent and routine patients being seen by health boards pre and post pandemic.

She explains that there are thousands of patients being seen urgently by NHS Wales and insists:

It is the prioritisation of these urgent pathways that is reducing the available capacity to provide care to patients clinically prioritised as routine who then wait longer.

Average attendances per day to all emergency departments have increased over the last two years. Admissions from major emergency departments have remained static.

Figure 3: Average attendances in emergency departments, and admissions to hospital resulting from attendances at major emergency departments per day, April 2018 to April 2023



Source: [Emergency department data set](#), Digital Health and Care Wales

The Welsh Government has developed ‘six goals for urgent and emergency care’. It’s published [Right care, right place, first time: Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care – A policy handbook 2021-2026](#).

[The Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Wales wrote to health boards in 2022](#), which said patients waiting over 104 weeks should be placed in the same category as urgent patients when booking appointments.

In April 2023, the Welsh Government also published its [Diagnostic Recovery Transformation Plan for Wales 2023-2025](#), which sets out how the Welsh Government will use diagnostics to support the recovery of NHS services and prepare for future need.

2.3 Number of patients waiting to start NHS Treatment within one year

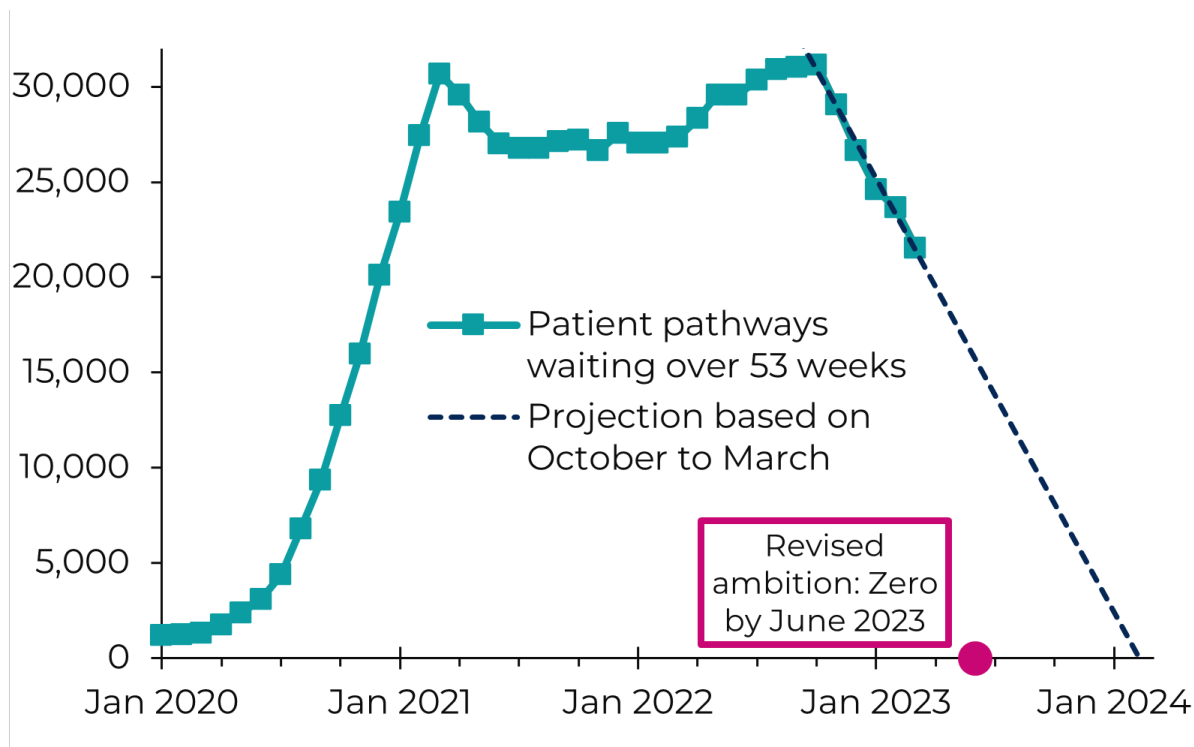
Recovery target 3: Eliminate the number of people waiting longer than one year to start treatment in most specialties by Spring 2025

In March 2023, 135,797 patient pathways were waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) to start treatment across all specialities. This is down 26% from the peak of 183,450 patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks in August 2022. However, it remains the case that a significant number of people are still waiting a really long time to start NHS treatment.

Is the Welsh Government on track to meet its target?

Projection using data from October 2022 to March 2023 shows that, at the current rate of progress (i.e. the rate of progress since October is sustained), the recovery target to eliminate one year waits in most specialties **will not be achieved until after January 2024** (the recovery target is by Spring 2025). On the basis that this recovery target will exclude the seven ‘exceptionally challenging’ specialties.

Figure 4: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment in most specialties (excluding the seven recognised as exceptionally challenging) and projection based on October 2022 to March 2023 data

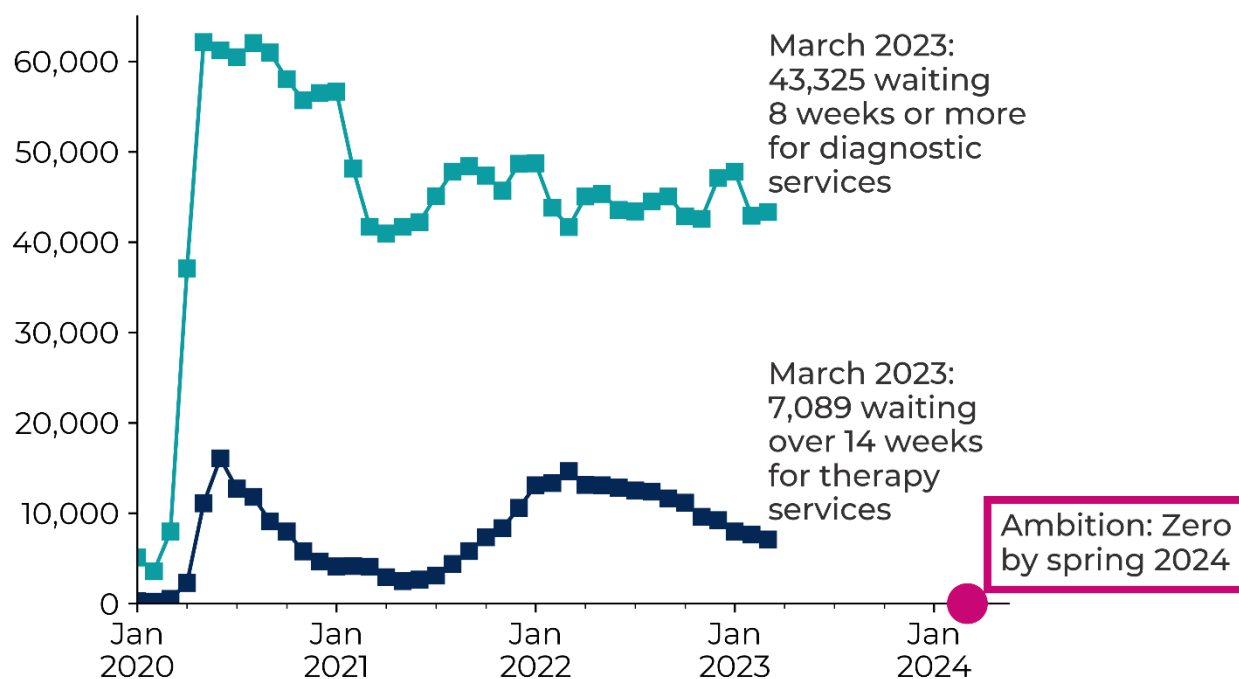


Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and stage of pathway](#)

2.4 Diagnostics and therapy

Ambition 4: Increase the speed of diagnostic testing and reporting to eight weeks and 14 weeks for therapy interventions by Spring 2024

Figure 5: Number of patient pathways waiting 8 weeks or more for diagnostic services and over 14 weeks for therapy services



Source: StatsWales, [Diagnostic and therapy services waiting times by month](#)

Diagnostic services

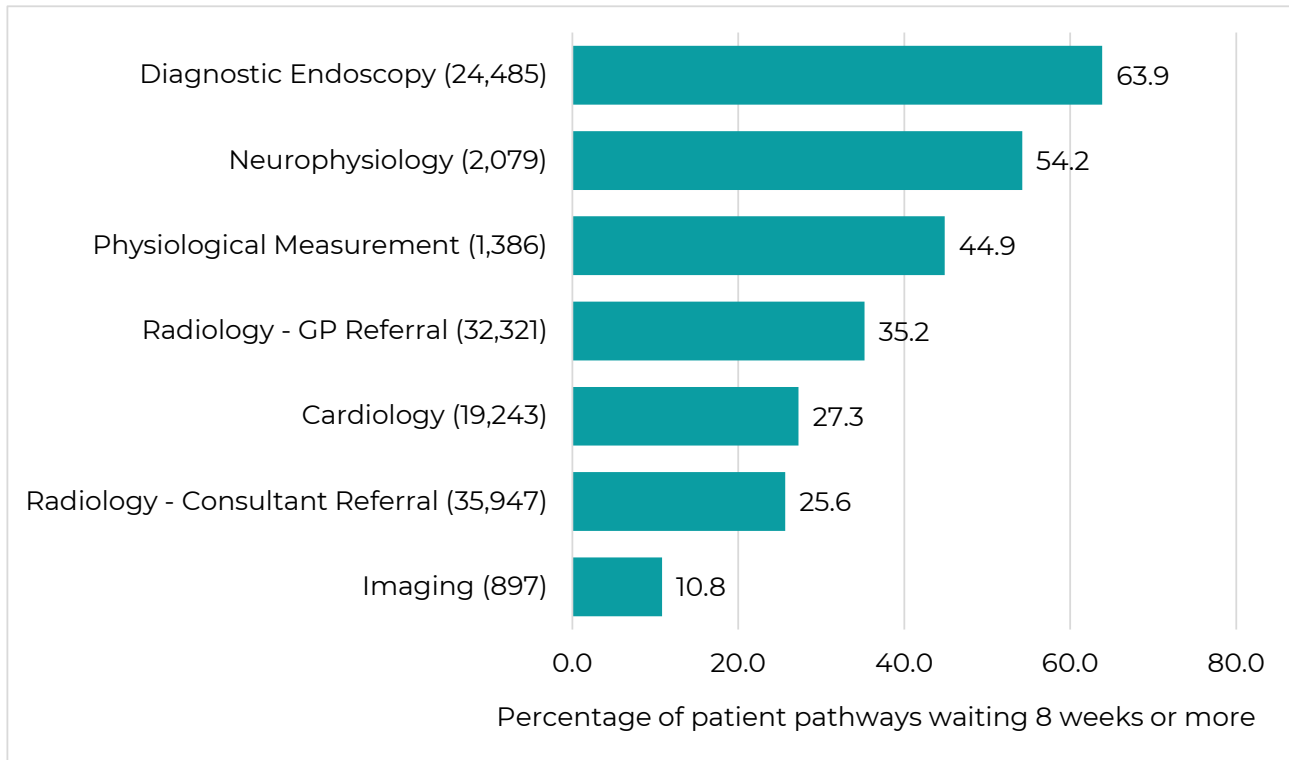
For diagnostic services, the number of patient pathways waiting **increased** to about 116,400 in March 2023. The number of patient pathways waiting longer than eight weeks (the target maximum wait) increased to around 43,300. Diagnostic services include endoscopy, imaging, radiology and cardiology etc.

The March 2023 data shows that endoscopy and neurophysiology have the highest percentage of patient pathways waiting over 8 weeks. Endoscopy has 24,485 patient pathways waiting which equates to 21% of all diagnostic pathways waiting. Radiology has 68,268 patient pathways waiting (combining the 2 radiology categories), which equates to 58.7% of all diagnostic pathways waiting.

The **longest waits** in March 2023 were for diagnostic endoscopy (median 15.2 weeks) and neurophysiology (median 10.0 weeks).

Figure 6 below shows that 63.9% of diagnostic endoscopy pathways are waiting more than 8 weeks compared to 10.8% of imaging pathways.

Figure 6: Percentage of patient pathways waiting 8 weeks or more for diagnostic services



Source: StatsWales, [Diagnostic and therapy services waiting times by month](#)

Therapy services

For therapies, the number of patient pathways waiting **increased** to just over 62,700 in March and remains high in historical context. The number waiting longer than fourteen weeks (the target maximum wait) decreased to just over 7,000, falling for a year and a 51.6% fall from the peak in March 2022. Therapy services include audiology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, podiatry and speech and language etc.

2.5 Cancer waiting times

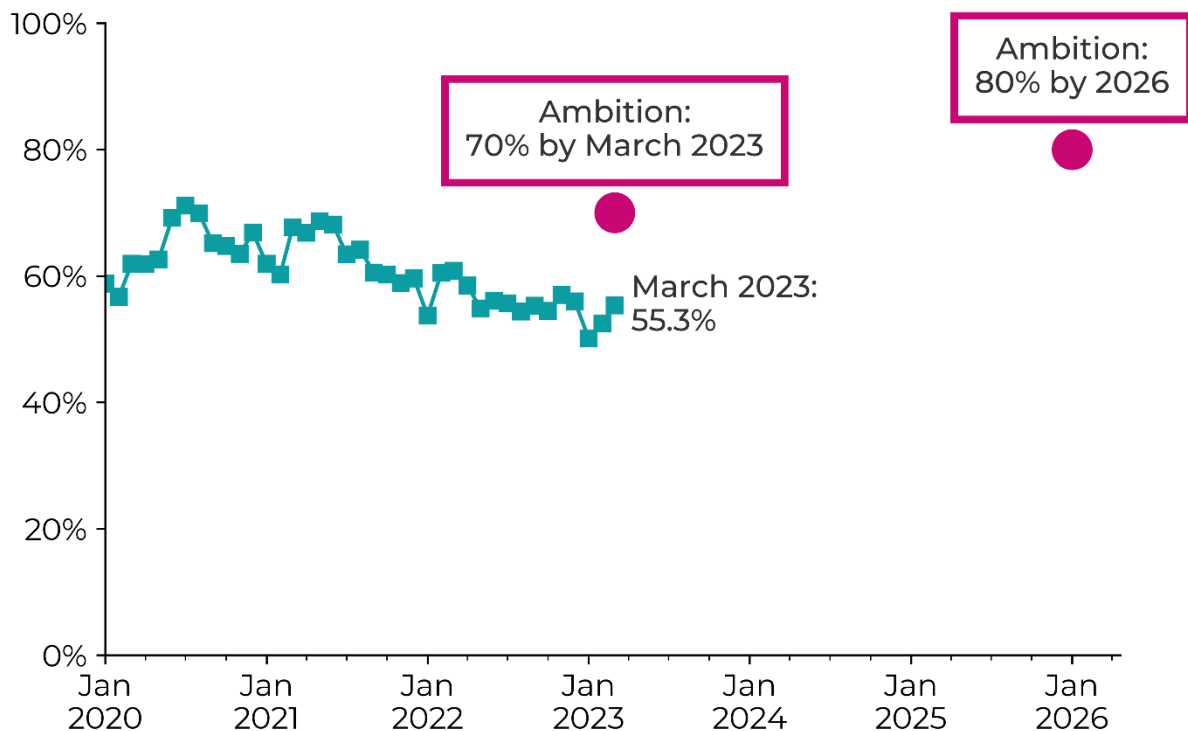
Ambition 5: Cancer diagnosis and treatment to be undertaken within 62 days for 80% of people by 2026

The Welsh Government's [recovery plan](#) includes a recovery target for cancer services, which increases compliance with the Single Cancer Pathway (i.e. diagnosis and treatment will be undertaken within 62-days) from 75% to 80% by 2026.

However, performance against the original SCP target (to achieve 75% with the 62-day target) has been and **continues to be poor**. No health board in Wales has met the target of 75% since July 2020. The [Wales Cancer Network's Cancer Improvement plan](#) states:

The Planned Care Improvement and Recovery Team has agreed a milestone with Health Boards and Trusts of 70% compliance by March 2023 and 80% by March 2026.

Figure 7: Percentage of people who received a cancer diagnosis and started their first definitive treatment within 62 days from the first point cancer was suspected.



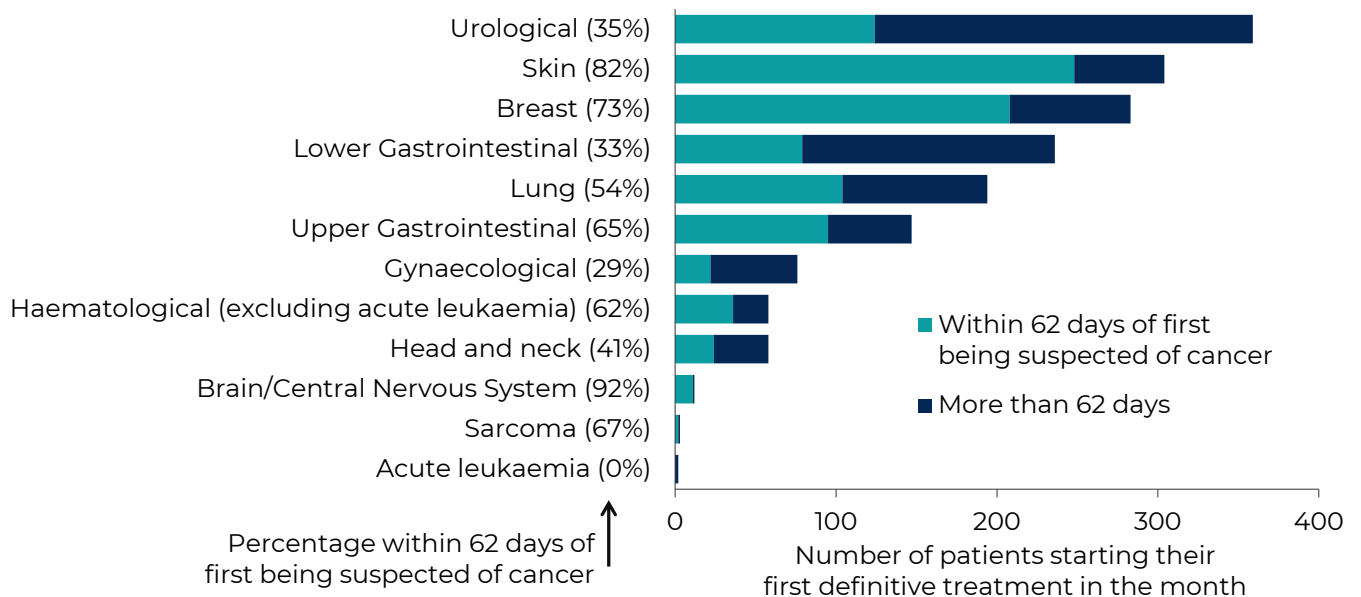
Source: StatsWales, Suspected cancer pathway (closed pathways): The number of pathways where the patient started their first definitive treatment and those informed they do not have cancer by local health board, tumour site, age group, sex, measure and month

Cancer waiting times in Wales are currently amongst the worst they have ever been. In March 2023 only **55.3% of patient pathways** (974 out of 1,761) started their first definitive treatment within 62 days of first being suspected of cancer. This was 2.8 percentage points higher than the previous month.

Performance increased in March, which means more people started their definitive treatment in March (1,761) than the previous month. But the waiting times remain high. The **interim target** agreed with the Planned Care Improvement and Recovery Team of **70% compliance by March 2023** has been missed.

There are statistics available by tumour site. The March 2023 data shows that gynaecological, lower gastrointestinal, urological, and head and neck have the smallest proportion starting their first treatment within 62 days.

Figure 8 Percentage of people who received a cancer diagnosis and started their first definitive treatment within 62 days from the first point cancer was suspected tumour site.



Source: StatsWales, Suspected cancer pathway (closed pathways): The number of pathways where the patient started their first definitive treatment and those informed they do not have cancer by local health board, tumour site, age group, sex, measure and month

2. Recovery of different specialties

There are several specialties where waiting times are particularly long. The Health Minister says ‘challenging specialties’ will be prioritised for action in 2023/24. She identifies **seven specialties** including trauma and orthopaedics, ear, nose and throat (ENT), ophthalmology, general surgery, urology, gynaecology and oral surgery. She says:

We are refocusing the national clinical groups in the planned care programme to provide leadership and challenge to share good practice and support the implementation of new ways of working to transform service delivery and drive down waits in these areas.

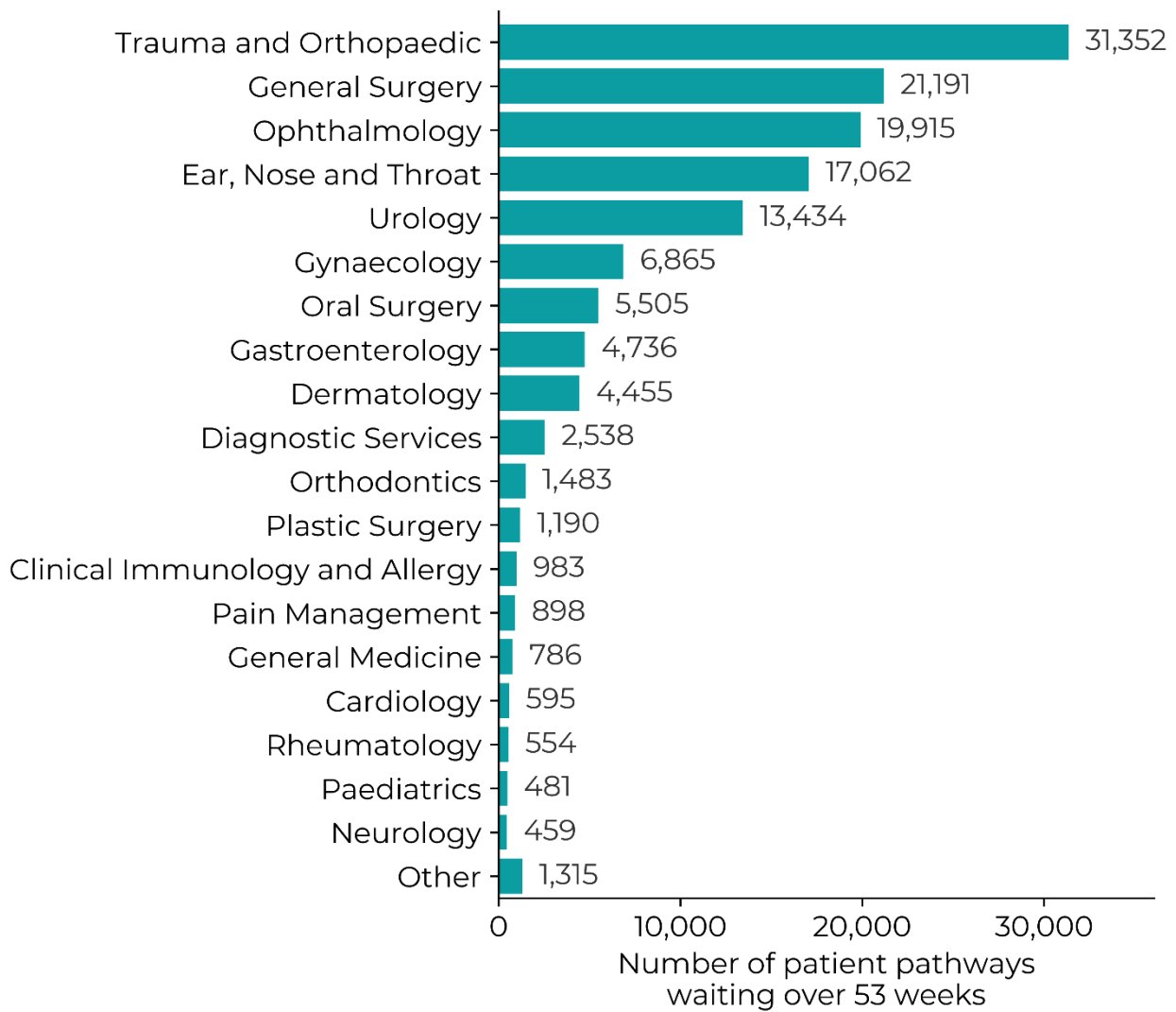
Our last termly monitoring report put a spotlight on trauma and orthopaedics ([see NHS Wales Waiting Times – termly monitoring report 2](#)). Trauma and orthopaedics now accounts for nearly a third (31.7%) of the total volume of patient pathways waiting more than two years for treatment.

The specialties with the longest waits tend to be surgical specialties.

Audit Wales published its report [Orthopaedic Services in Wales – Tackling the Waiting List Backlog](#) in March 2023.

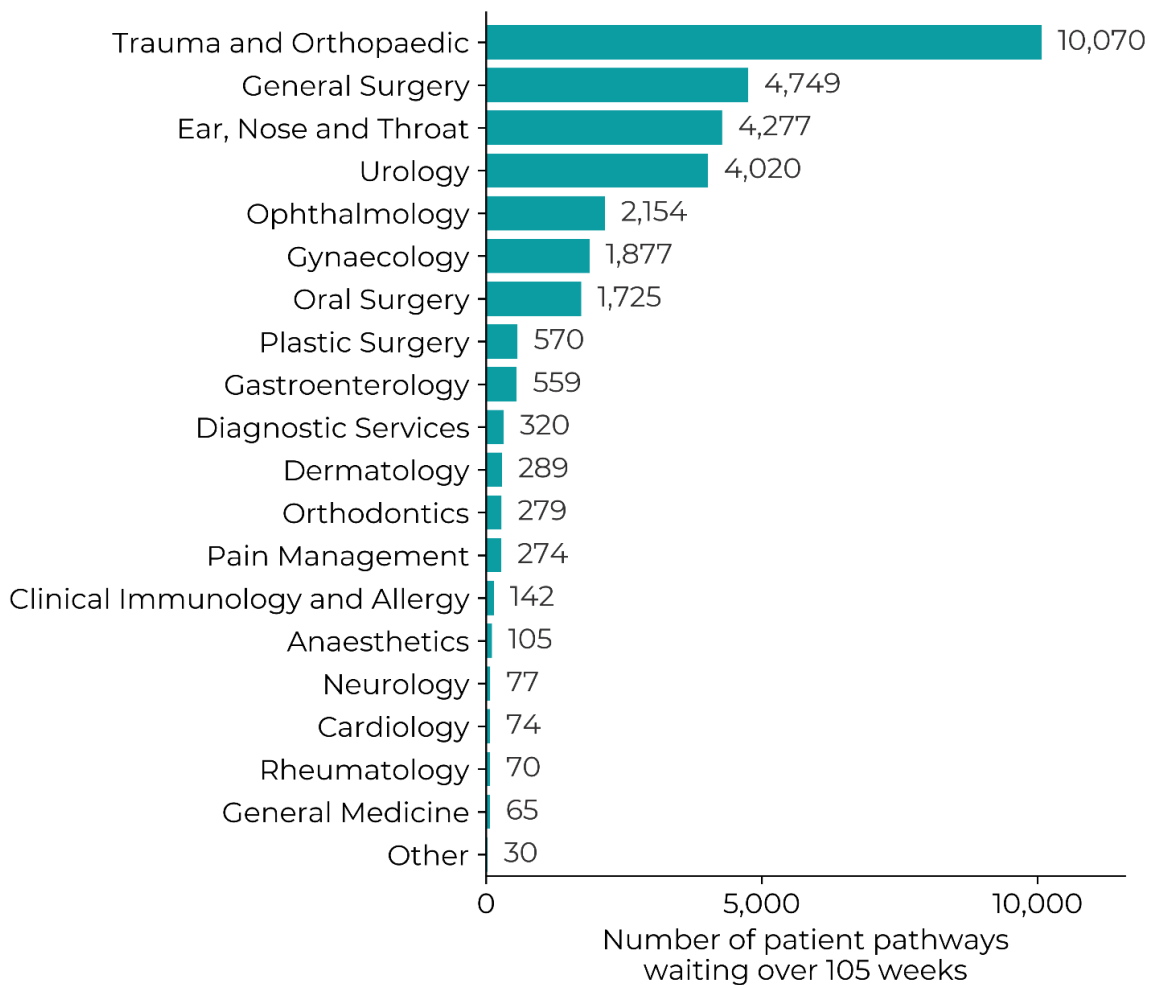
The Committee has also [received a letter](#) from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) concerning NHS waiting lists in relation to ophthalmology.

Figure 9: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment for the pathways with the longest waits (i.e. by treatment function)



Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and treatment function, January 2021 onwards](#)

Figure 10: Number of patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment for the pathways with the longest waits (i.e. by treatment function)



Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and treatment function, January 2021 onwards](#)

Ministerial Summits

It's worth noting that there have been a number of **Ministerial summits** that have taken place, including for orthopaedics, ophthalmology, emergency care and ENT to consider the challenges each service is facing. The need for **sustainable pathways** (in particular in ENT), and to **address workforce challenges** in ophthalmology and urology were identified.

The Health Minister has made a commitment to providing a **yearly progress report to the Senedd** on the progress being made in implementing the [national workforce plan](#) (published on 1 February 2023). The Minister hasn't agreed to publish the action plans requested by the Committee in relation to orthopaedics or cancer.

3. Variation across Health Boards

The Health Minister has also made a commitment to prioritise action to address **variation across health boards** in 2023/24. For example, the Health Minister points to a number of specialties which have significant numbers of people waiting over 52 weeks for NHS treatment which she says “**reflect service specific challenges in individual health boards rather than national areas of concern**”. No further details are provided but the Health Minister makes a more general point that:

Delivering things differently is key to addressing the growing imbalance between demand and capacity [...]

£50 Million of the recovery fund has been held back from individual issue to health boards to support the development of local and regional solutions. Particular areas being diagnostic and treatment capabilities. This resource will be allocated during 2023/24 to take forward schemes to increase capacity in line with the priorities identified in the recovery plan.

The tables below show the seven specialties with the highest percentage of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks and over 105 weeks by health board. Powys is not included as the number of patient pathways are very small.

Betsi Cadwaladr					
Patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks			Patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks		
	Number	%		Number	%
Orthodontics	854	58%	Orthodontics	279	19%
Oral Surgery	3,071	41%	Oral Surgery	1,424	19%
Trauma and Orthopaedic	6,071	34%	Trauma and Orthopaedic	2,178	12%
Dermatology	2,843	34%	Ear, Nose and Throat	1,298	9%
Urology	3,346	31%	General Surgery	1,935	8%
Ear, Nose and Throat	4,325	28%	Pain Management	182	8%
General Surgery	6,407	28%	Urology	860	8%

Hywel Dda					
Patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks			Patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks		
	Number	%		Number	%
Ear, Nose and Throat	2,277	32%	Trauma and Orthopaedic	1,385	13%
Trauma and Orthopaedic	3,338	31%	Urology	874	11%
Urology	2,041	26%	Pain Management	92	6%
Pain Management	375	25%	General Surgery	701	5%
General Surgery	2,758	21%	Ear, Nose and Throat	247	4%
Ophthalmology	1,533	15%	Gynaecology	101	2%
Gynaecology	531	10%	Ophthalmology	64	1%

Swansea Bay					
Patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks			Patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks		
	Number	%		Number	%
Trauma and Orthopaedic	6,090	41%	Trauma and Orthopaedic	2,526	17%
Orthodontics	476	33%	Plastic Surgery	570	13%
General Surgery	2,983	28%	Ear, Nose and Throat	698	11%
Plastic Surgery	1,189	28%	Gynaecology	675	10%
Ear, Nose and Throat	1,491	24%	General Surgery	895	9%
Gynaecology	1,559	24%	Oral Surgery	189	4%
Oral Surgery	1,114	22%	Urology	127	4%

Cwm Taf					
Patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks			Patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks		
	Number	%		Number	%
Urology	2,905	37%	Urology	1,090	14%
Ear, Nose and Throat	4,193	34%	Anaesthetics	105	9%
Restorative Dentistry	53	34%	Gynaecology	656	8%
Trauma and Orthopaedic	4,440	32%	Ear, Nose and Throat	949	8%
Ophthalmology	4,374	32%	Trauma and Orthopaedic	1,042	7%
General Surgery	4,443	31%	General Surgery	901	6%
Diagnostic Services	2,476	26%	Rheumatology	68	5%

Aneurin Bevan					
Patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks			Patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks		
	Number	%		Number	%
Ear, Nose and Throat	4,126	33%	Trauma and Orthopaedic	1,864	8%
Trauma and Orthopaedic	7,204	29%	Ear, Nose and Throat	866	7%
Ophthalmology	3,808	22%	Urology	233	3%
Urology	1,376	20%	General Surgery	59	0%
Orthodontics	140	18%	Oral Surgery	8	0%
Oral Surgery	469	12%			
Chemical Pathology	29	8%			
General Surgery	1,037	8%			

Cardiff & Vale					
Patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks			Patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks		
	Number	%		Number	%
Urology	3,183	44%	Urology	836	12%
Clinical Immunology and Allergy	983	43%	Trauma and Orthopaedic	1,075	8%
Ophthalmology	5,072	33%	Clinical Immunology and Allergy	142	6%
Trauma and Orthopaedic	4,206	30%	Ophthalmology	795	5%
General Surgery	3,562	23%	Ear, Nose and Throat	219	4%
Rheumatology	334	22%	Gynaecology	183	2%
Gynaecology	1,555	20%	Neurology	77	2%