

NHS Wales Waiting times – termly monitoring report

Y Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol | 8 Tachwedd 2023
Health and Social Care Committee | 8 November 2023

Introduction

This is the Committee's **fourth monitoring report** of NHS Wales planned care recovery targets, which were set in April 2022.

On 14 June 2023, the Committee considered the March 2023 waiting times data, released in May 2023, against the planned care recovery targets. The data showed that **the Welsh Government missed its first two recovery targets** related to reducing outpatient waits to below 52 weeks by end of December 2022, and to eliminate two year waits in most specialties by March 2023. An **interim recovery target** agreed by the Welsh Government's Planned Care Improvement and Recovery team in relation to cancer services (to meet the single cancer pathway within 62 days for 70% of people by March 2023) was also missed.

Due to this, Members of the Senedd's Health and Social Care Committee agreed to discuss these issues with the Minister for Health and Social Services ('the Minister'). **The public evidence session is scheduled for 8 November.** Members requested a written response from the Minister, which she provided on 15 August. All seven health boards also provided written evidence regarding NHS waiting times. The Committee held an evidence session with



the Welsh NHS Confederation and health board representatives on 12 July 2023.

Further information:

- 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](#).
- A link to [Ministerial summit reports](#) relating to orthopaedics, ophthalmology, ENT and cancer are published on [the Welsh Government website](#).
- Digital Health and Care Wales (DHCW) now publishes a [secondary care dashboard](#) which provides data on outpatients appointments, inpatient admissions and day case activity undertaken in Wales.

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 August, when there were about 760,300 open patient pathways, there were about 593,000 individual patients on treatment waiting lists in Wales.

1. Overview

In August 2023, **the number of patient pathways waiting to start treatment increased from around 748,400 in May 2023 to around 760,300.** This is the sixth consecutive increase and the highest figure on record.

The number of patient pathways waiting to start treatment in August 2023 was **64.1% higher** than at the start of the pandemic in February 2020. Adjusted by population, Cardiff and Vale UHB had the highest number of pathways waiting (27,576 per 100,000). Aneurin Bevan UHB had the lowest numbers waiting overall (22,806).

The latest data (published on 19 October) shows that for August 2023:

- There were around 52,600 patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) for their first outpatient appointment in August 2023. Whilst this is 48.7% less than the peak in August 2022, the number of patient pathways waiting increased from previous months. **The planned care recovery target was to eliminate these waits by the end of 2022 but this was not achieved.** The revised target is for this to be met by December 2023.
- Over 27,000 patient pathways were waiting over 105 weeks (more than two years) for treatment. This is 61.6% lower than the peak in March 2022 and is continuing to fall month on month. **The planned care recovery target was to eliminate two year waits in most specialties by March 2023 but this was not achieved.** The revised target is for this to be met by March 2024.
- For diagnostic services, patient pathways waiting increased to around 119,900 in August 2023, **the highest on record.** The number waiting longer than 8 weeks (the target maximum wait) increased to around 50,000.
- In terms of therapies, patient pathways waiting decreased to just under 69,900 in August. However, **the number waiting longer than 14 weeks (the target maximum wait) increased** to just under 9,700.
- For cancer patients, performance increased against the 62 day target (to start their first definitive treatment within 62 days of first being suspected of cancer) in August to 57.3%. **This is the best performance since March 2023 but still well below the target.**

- The average (median) time patient pathways had been waiting for treatment at the end of August was **19.7 weeks** (almost 5 months).

2. Progress against the five recovery targets

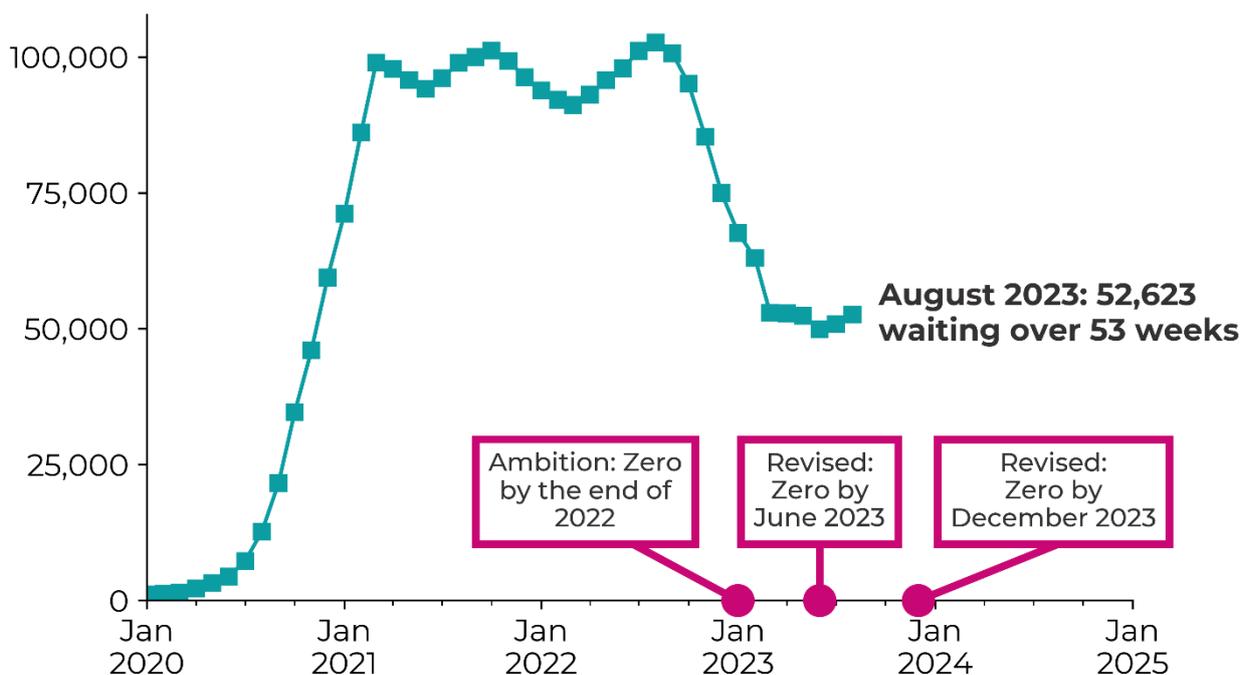
The graphs and analysis in this paper show progress against the Welsh Government’s five recovery targets established in the planned care recovery plan.

2.1 Number of patients waiting for their first outpatient appointment

The Welsh Government’s recovery target to reduce outpatient waits to below 52 weeks by December 2022 **was not achieved**. The revised target is for this to be met by December 2023.

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



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

The Welsh Government missed its first recovery target to reduce outpatient waits to below 52 weeks by December 2022 and its revised target by June 2023. The Welsh Government has now said **health boards need to achieve the target by December 2023**.

Outpatient waits refer to the **amount of time a patient has to wait for medical services or appointments that do not require them to stay overnight in a healthcare facility**. These can include appointments with specialists, diagnostic tests, day surgery and other medical services provided on an outpatient basis. The term 'outpatient wait' typically refers to the time between when a referral is made (i.e. referral from a GP or other medical practitioner) and when the patient actually receives the appointment. [The most recent data shows](#) that the number of outpatient referrals had been fluctuating with an upwards trend but referrals have steadily risen back to pre-pandemic levels. This could suggest the surge in referrals from primary care is levelling-off.

If outpatient referrals remain steady but waiting times for outpatient appointments are increasing, it typically indicates a problem in the healthcare system. Several reasons can contribute to these longer wait times. For example, a **shortage of healthcare professionals** such as specialists, nurses and support staff can lead to delays in scheduling and delivering outpatient services.

In August 2023, there were around **52,600 patient pathways** waiting longer than 53 weeks (more than one year) for their first outpatient appointment. The data suggests the healthcare system is overwhelmed, leading to **delays in non-urgent outpatient care**. Some cases, for example, urgent suspected cancer cases (which require early detection and immediate treatment) are prioritised over others based on medical urgency, leading to delays for less urgent cases.

Among the Local Health Boards, the highest number of patient pathways waiting more than one year per 100,000 of the population was in Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB (2,929) and the lowest in Swansea Bay UHB (165). There are notable disparities in waiting times across health boards.

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

Pre-pandemic, monthly waiting time statistics were published **on referral to treatment times (RTT)**, with targets that 95% of patients should wait less than 26 weeks for treatment from referral, and no patient should wait more than 36 weeks for treatment from referral. The Welsh Government **still reports on these RTT targets**.

Given the backlog in planned care treatment caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the planned care recovery plan established **recovery targets** to eliminate two year waits in most specialties by March 2023, and for no patients to wait longer than one year in most specialties by Spring 2025. The number of patients waiting longer than one-year and two-years both saw a significant rise following the Covid-19 pandemic, but numbers are now falling.

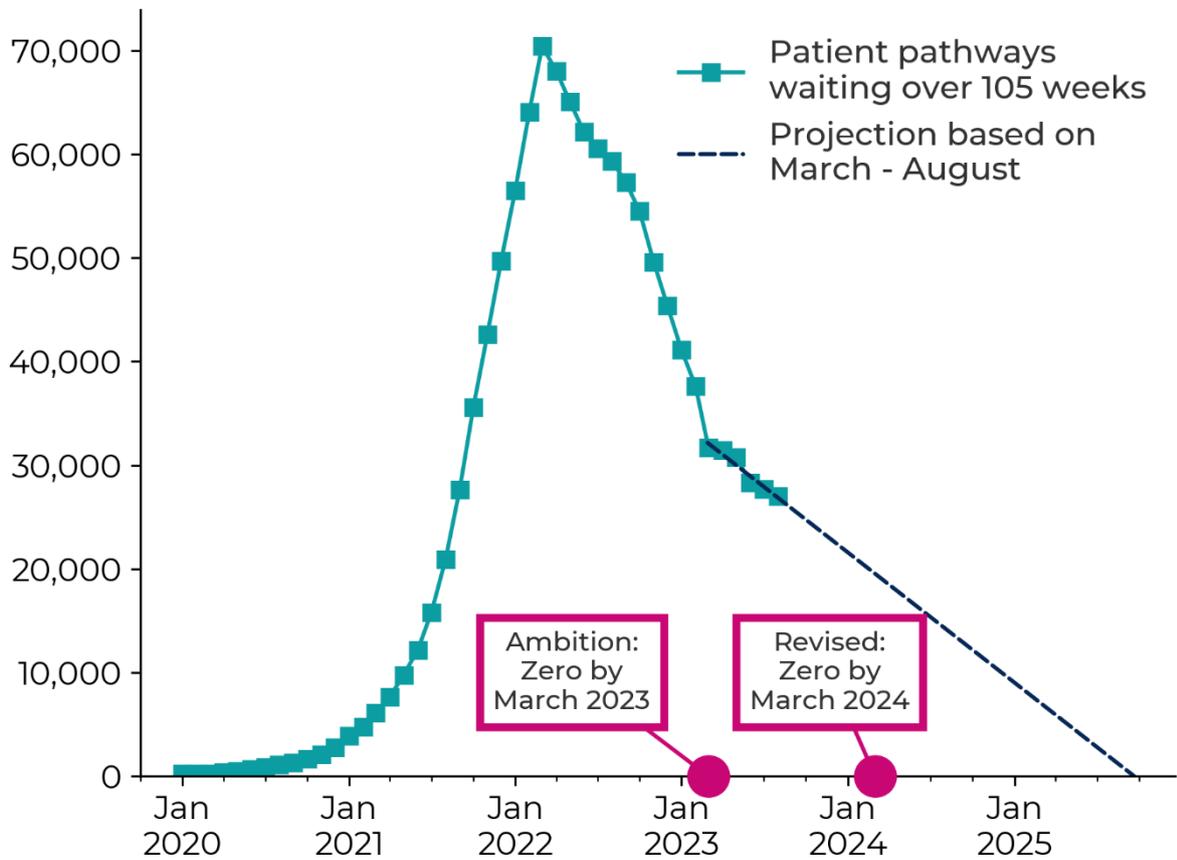
For two-year waits, the numbers are falling but the pace of recovery is slower than expected. The total number of patient pathways waiting over two years continues to decrease each month and is 61.6% lower than the peak in March 2022. However, the numbers remain stubbornly high and the Welsh Government's recovery target to eliminate long waits in most specialties by March 2023 was not achieved. **The target was still not achieved in August 2023.**

In August 2023:

- **Around 27,000 patient pathways were waiting more than two years to start treatment in most specialties.** This is assessed on the basis that 'most' refers to all specialties excluding seven recognised as 'exceptionally challenging'. Adjusted by population, the highest number of patients waiting more than two years for treatment was in Swansea Bay UHB (1,292).

A projection using data from March to August 2023 shows that at the current rate of progress (i.e. if the rate of progress since March 2023 is sustained), the recovery target to eliminate two years waits in most specialties **will not be fulfilled until around September 2025.** The revised target is for health boards to achieve this by March 2024.

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



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

Exceptionally challenging specialties

In the recovery targets, ‘most’ refers to all specialties excluding seven recognised as **exceptionally challenging**. These are Dermatology, General Surgery, Ophthalmology, Urology, Gynaecology, Orthopaedics and Ear, Nose and Throat.

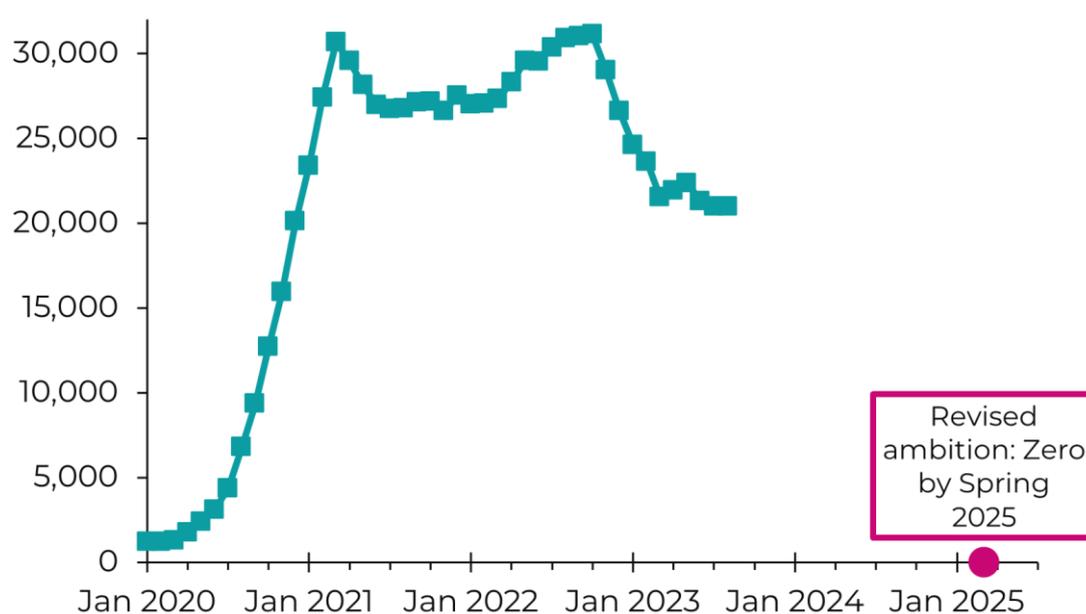
2.3 Number of patients waiting to start NHS Treatment within one year

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

Of the total 760,300 patient pathways about **134,400 were waiting more than one year to start treatment across all specialities in August**. This number was higher than the previous two months. Adjusted by population, Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB had the most patient pathways waiting over one year and Aneurin Bevan UHB had the fewest.

It remains the case that a significant number of people are still waiting a really long time to start NHS treatment, and while **earlier figures pointed to some stabilisation in waiting time performance**, the number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks has risen for the last two consecutive months. This demonstrates how significant the challenge of tackling the backlog accumulated during the Covid-19 pandemic is.

Figure 3: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment in most specialties (excluding the seven recognised as exceptionally challenging)



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

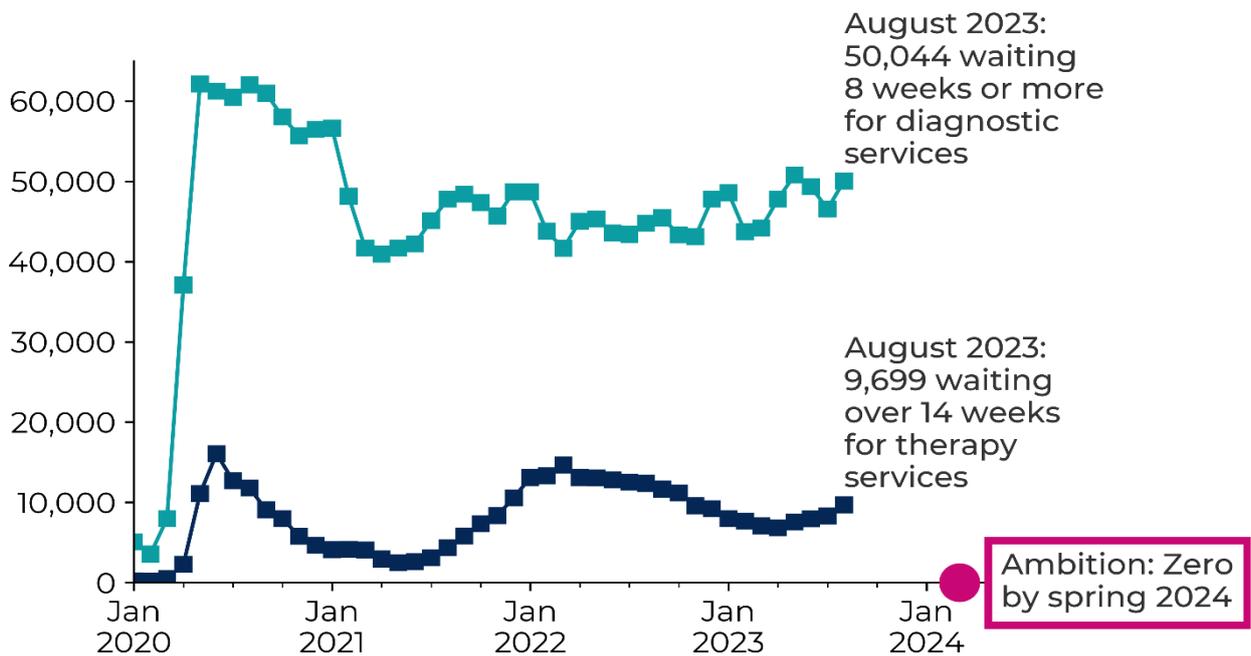
2.4 Diagnostics and therapy

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

Neither diagnostics or therapies are close to pre-pandemic levels. All health boards have patient pathways waiting more than the target time for diagnostics and therapies.

There was a huge increase in patients waiting longer than 8 weeks for diagnostic services at the start of the pandemic, before falling throughout 2020 and **fluctuating** since. The number of patient pathways waiting longer than 14 weeks for therapy services was the highest in June 2020 and March 2022, but **has fallen** since.

Figure 4: 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](#)

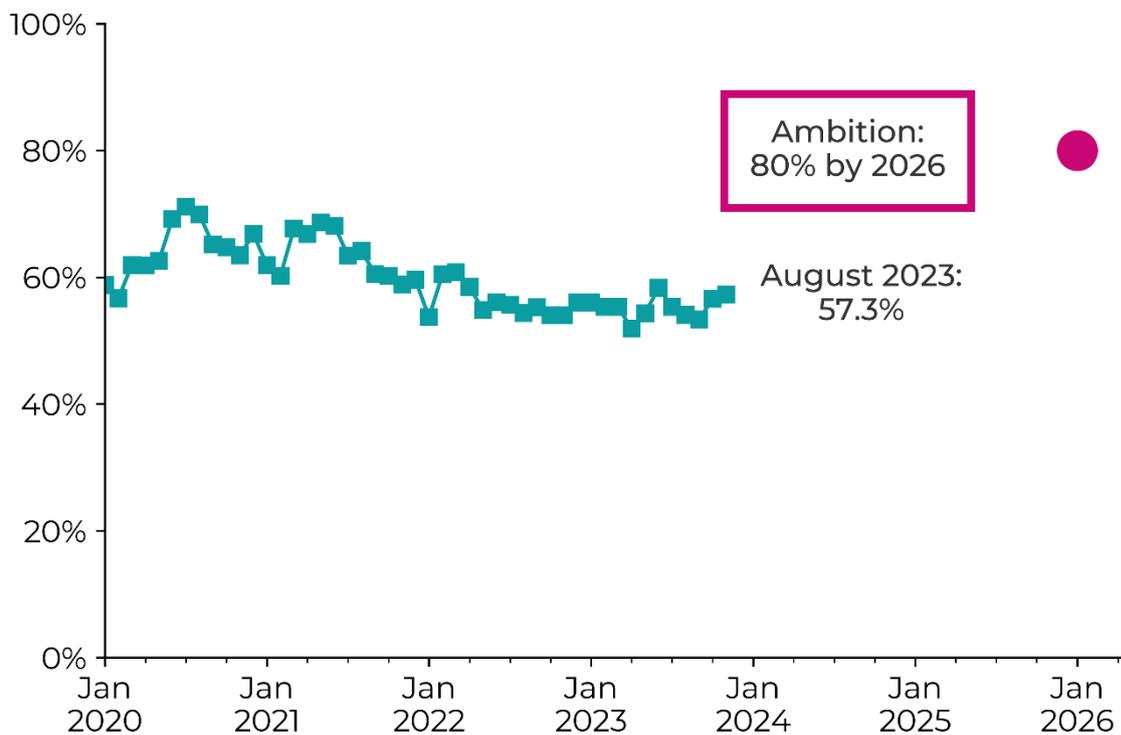
In August, there was an **7.5% increase** (compared to the previous month) in patient pathways waiting longer than the target time for diagnostics and an **increase of 16.6%** (compared to the previous month) waiting longer than the target time for therapies.

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 (SCP) (i.e. diagnosis and treatment will be undertaken within 62 days) from 75% to 80% by **March 2026**. The Health Minister made cancer services one of her six priorities for NHS organisations in [the NHS Planning Framework for 2023/24](#).

Figure 5: 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](#)

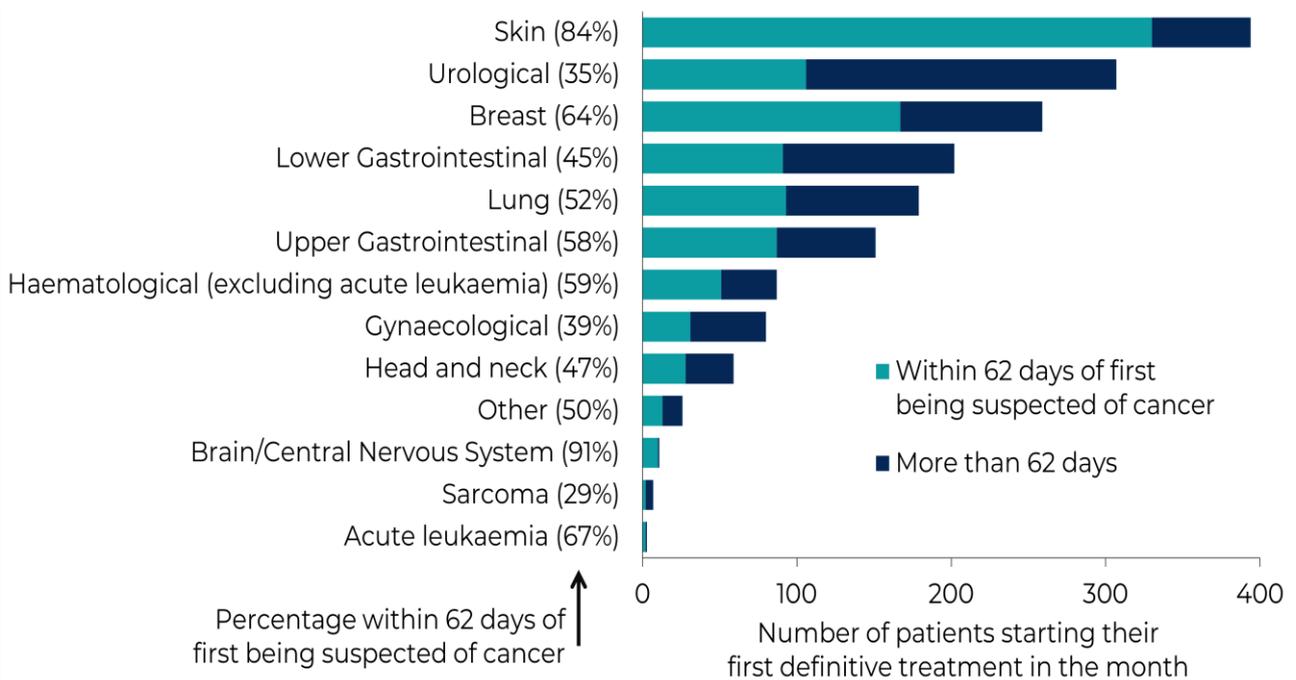
The SCP target **measures timely diagnosis and treatment**. It aims to ensure that patients with symptoms or suspected cancer receive prompt assessment. They should be seen by a specialist or undergo diagnostic tests within 2 weeks. Once a

cancer diagnosis has been confirmed, the focus of the target turns to the time taken to start appropriate treatment.

Performance against the 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. A **milestone target** was agreed with health boards of 70% compliance by March 2023, but this was missed. In August 2023, **only 57.3% of patient pathways** complied with the SCP target. Cancer waiting times in Wales are currently amongst the worst they have ever been.

Statistics are available by **cancer tumour site**. The August 2023 data shows that sarcoma, urological, gynaecological, lower gastrointestinal, and head and neck have the smallest proportion of patient pathways starting their first treatment within 62 days.

Figure 6 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

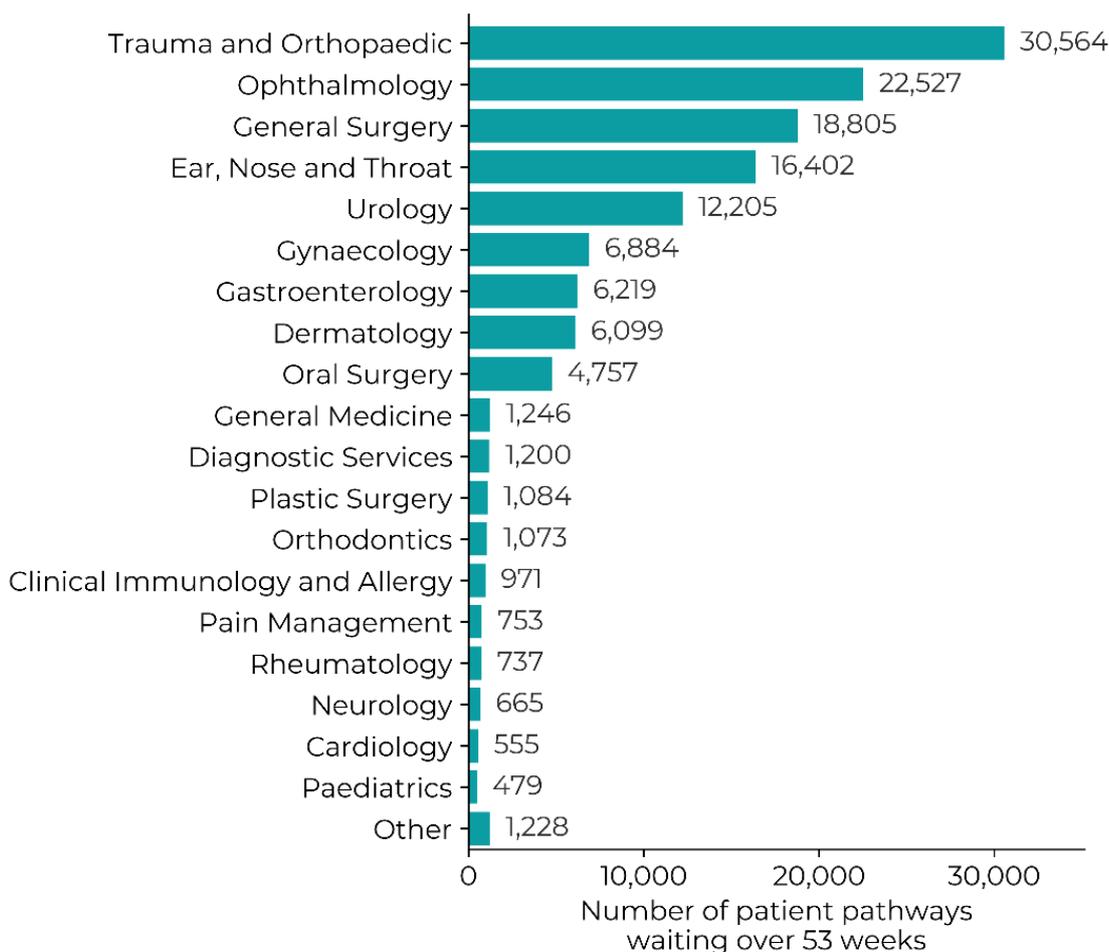
A national cancer intervention has been introduced (by the NHS Wales Executive and Welsh Government), which is focused on the three worst performing

tumour sites: gynaecological cancers, urology and lower gastrointestinal (lower GI).

3. Recovery of different specialties

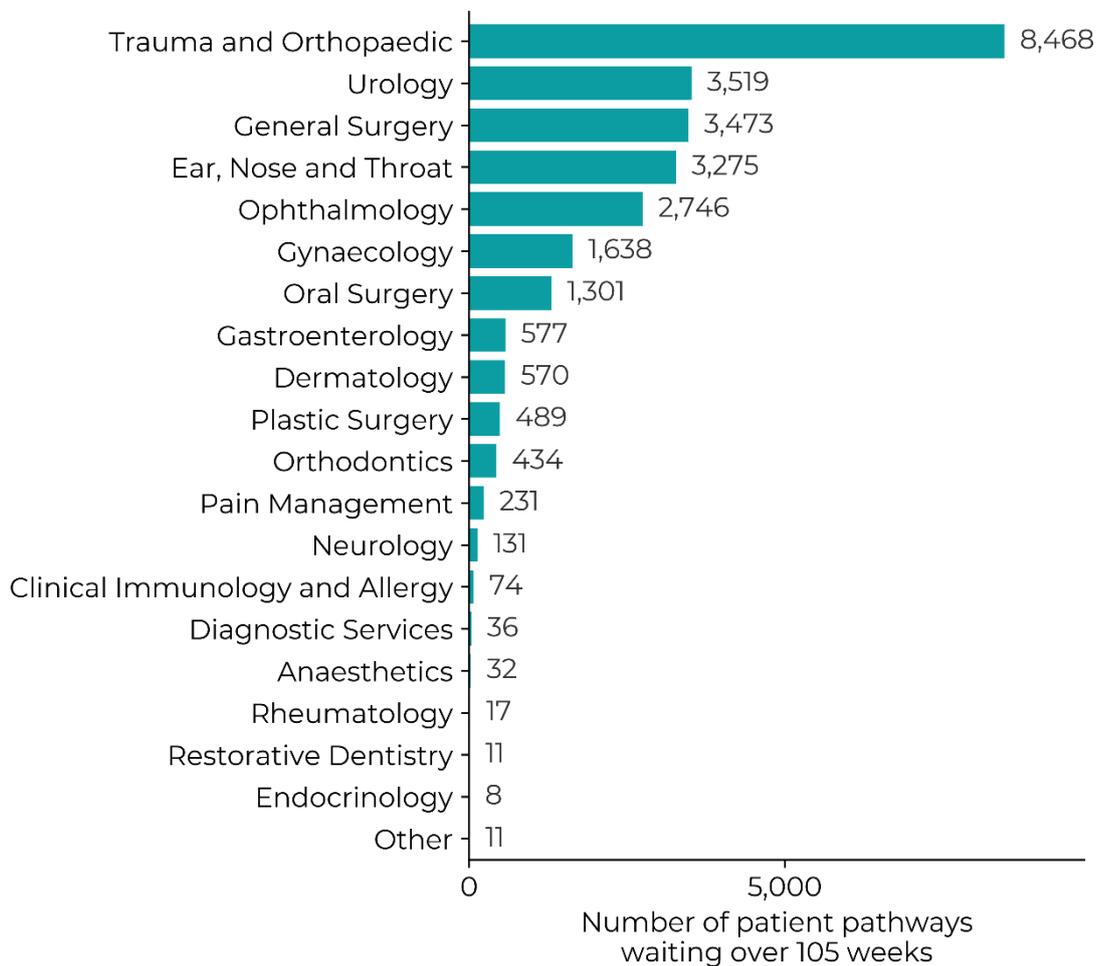
There are several specialties where waiting times are particularly long. The Health Minister has said ‘challenging specialties’ will be prioritised for action this year. She has identified **seven specialties** including: trauma and orthopaedics, ear, nose and throat (ENT), ophthalmology, general surgery, urology, gynaecology and oral surgery. These specialties remain part of published monthly official statistics. However, the Minister says achievement in some of these specialties will be “a significant challenge”.

Figure 7: 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 8: 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](#)

There has been some improvement in driving down waits in the seven ‘exceptionally challenging’ planned care specialities in terms of one year and two-year waits but there’s still a long way to go.