

# Referral-to-treatment waiting times and forecasts

## Summary

### The effect of changes in waiting time policy

- Since the current waiting time policy was introduced in June 2015, the **rate** of growth in waiting times and the total number of people waiting has notably increased.

### Current and recent performance

- Currently, fewer than 90% of patients begin their treatment within 18 weeks of referral. This contrasts with 94.5% in April 2013.
- In April 2013, the total number of people waiting was 2.75 million compared to over 3.61 million in Jan 2017: an increase of over 870,000 people (32%).

### Forecasts

If current trends continue, then by May 2020 we can expect:

- Between 84% and 87% of patients beginning treatment within 18 weeks, compared to a national standard that requires 92%.
- The number of people waiting for treatment to begin in May 2020 will be between 4.5 million and 4.95 million: potentially an increase of over 1.3 million (37%) compared to today's levels, and an increase of 1.9 million since May 2015 (63%).
- The number of people waiting for longer than 18 weeks (currently over 364,000) will rise to between 584,000 (a 60% increase compared to today – 87.0% of a total of 4.5 million waiting) to over 809,000 (a 122% increase compared to today – 83.7% of a total of 4.95 million waiting)
- The 5% of NHS patients waiting the longest will begin their treatment after 24.6 weeks compared to the current 19.7 weeks.
- The number of people waiting for over 12 months before treatment begins will be between 1,980 and 2,782. This compares to 1,433 in January 2017, so suggests an increase of between 38% and 94%.

## Current waiting times, policy changes and assumptions

Incomplete RTT data has been published for several years<sup>1</sup>. We have extracted data since April 2013 to map current trends and forecast possible future directions. We chose the starting point because all the data produced by NHS England follows the same format from that date, and it also includes independent providers so there is a complete picture of waiting time for all organisations treating NHS patients.

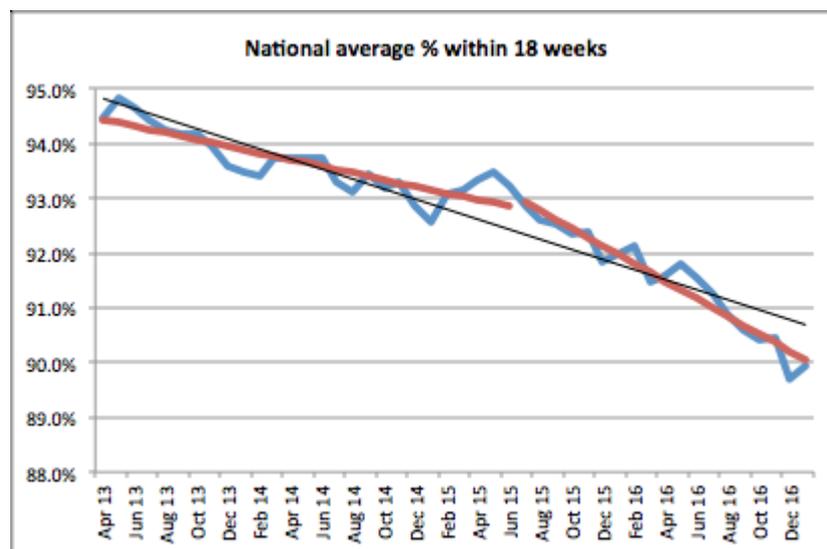
The only organisations not included in the data are those that refuse to submit data, contrary to NHS England and Department of Health policy. This is a relatively small number of organisations.

## Waiting time policy changes in June 2015

In June 2015, there was a significant policy change which no longer required NHS organisations to meet standards relating to admitted patients and non-admitted patients<sup>2</sup>. Instead, NHS England required organisations to focus on the incomplete waiting standard. This relates to patients who are currently waiting for their treatment to begin.

The rationale for this policy was to focus organisations' attention on patients who were still waiting rather than people who had passed key thresholds such as the 18-week limit.

Following that policy change, the trajectory of waiting times, as shown below has changed:



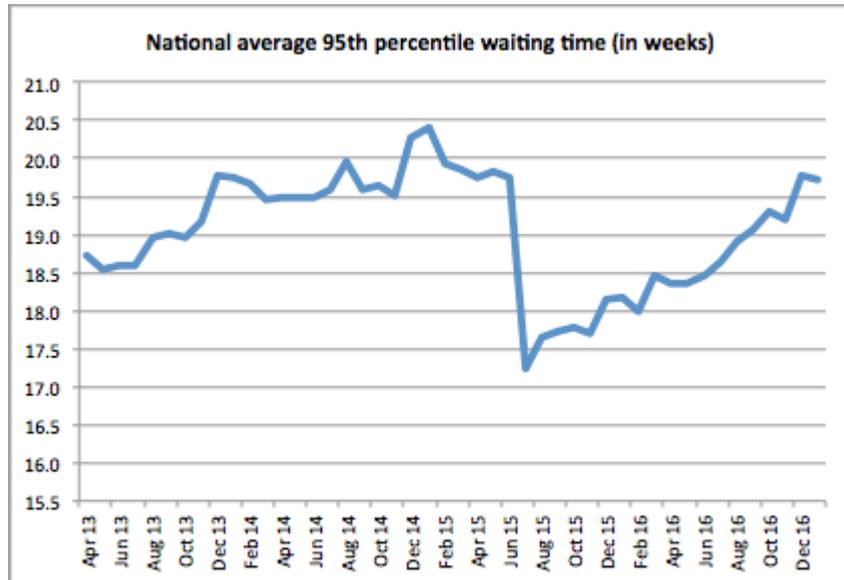
The black trendline shows the overall trend since April 2013, and the red trendlines show the change in trajectory before and after the requirement to consider admitted and non-admitted times waiting times was dropped.

The policy objective behind the change was to focus attention on those waiting the longest. The data suggests this did have some short-term improvement as shown by the graph

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/rtt-waiting-times/>

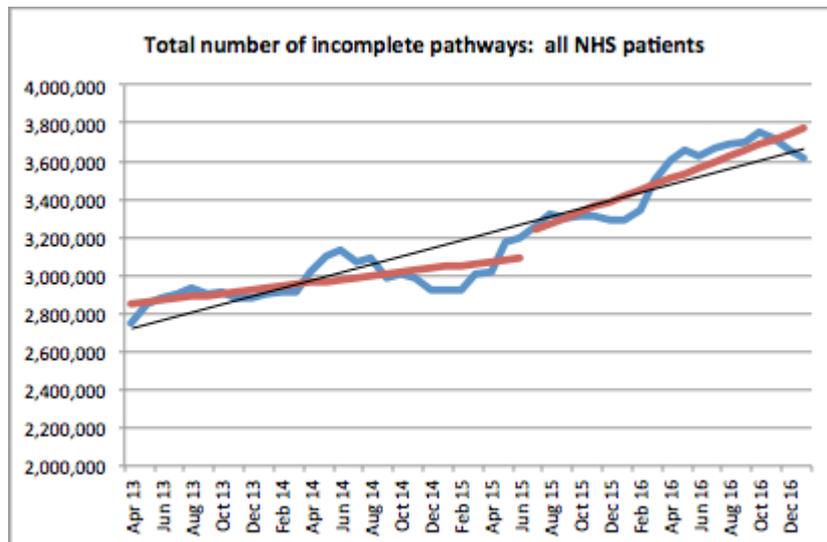
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/letter-waiting-time-standards-sbk.pdf>

below. However, the average 95<sup>th</sup> percentile waiting time is now at similar levels to before the policy change:



### Number of people waiting

The number of people waiting has steadily increased since April 2013. In April 2013, the total number of people waiting was 2.75 million compared to over 3.61 million in Jan 2017: an increase of over 870,000 people (32%). Consistent with the trends noted above, the rate of growth in the number of people waiting changed following the introduction of the current wait time policy:

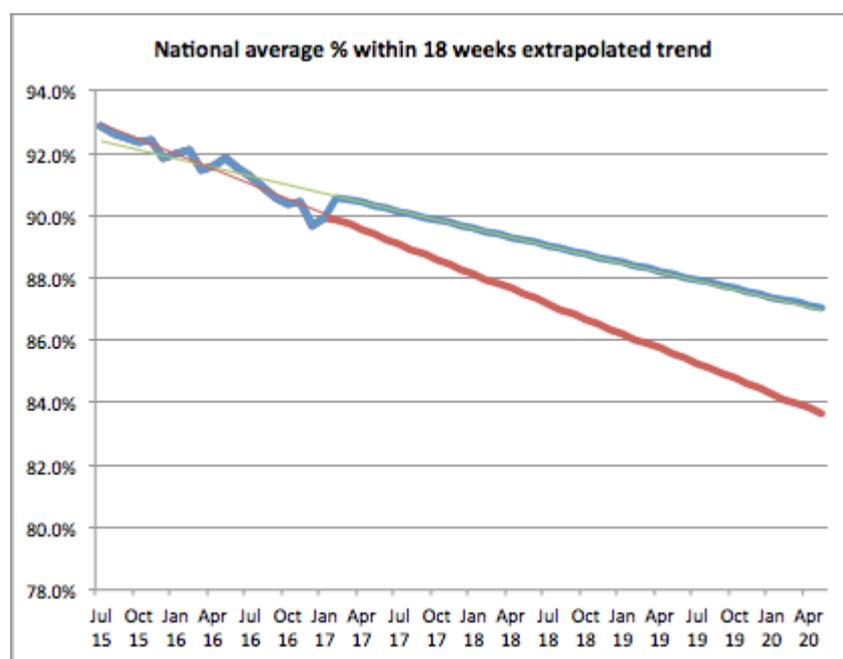


## Forecasts

The below forecasts rely on the assumption that the current trajectories will continue unchanged. As noted above, policy interventions do affect waiting time, so it is important to stress that any deterioration in performance may prompt policy changes that in turn could affect the forecast trajectories.

To calculate the likely future rate, we have extended the trendlines since the current waiting time policy was introduced in June 2015 until May 2020.

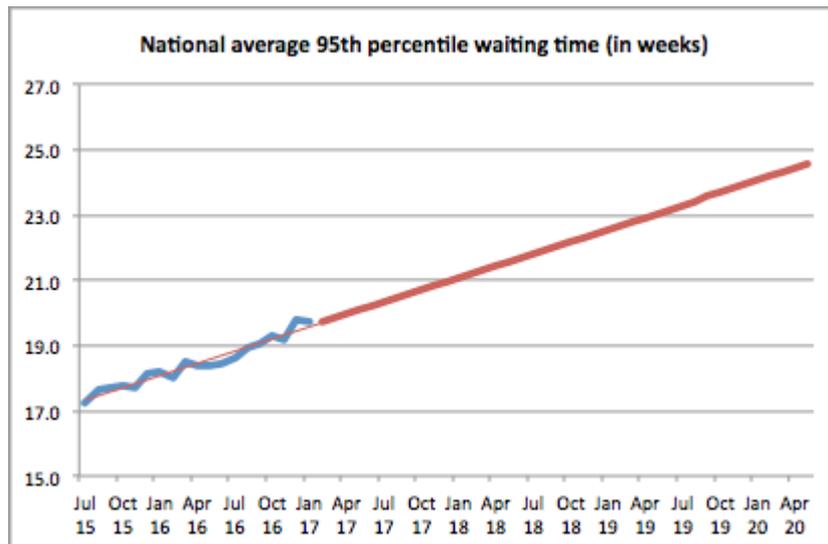
Percentage of patients beginning treatment within 18 weeks



The graph above shows two trendlines:

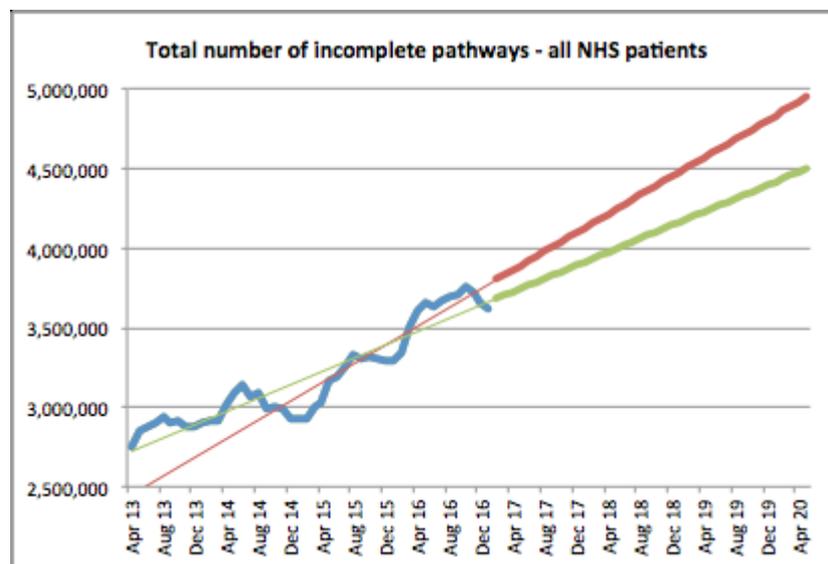
- the red line shows the trajectory since the current waiting time policy was introduced. This suggests that if trends are continue, fewer than 84% of patients will begin treatment within 18 weeks by May 2020.
- if trends follow the average trajectory since April 2013 (i.e. before the current policy was introduced), the percentage of patients beginning treatment within 18 weeks by May 2020 will be 87.0%.

### National average 95<sup>th</sup> percentile waiting time



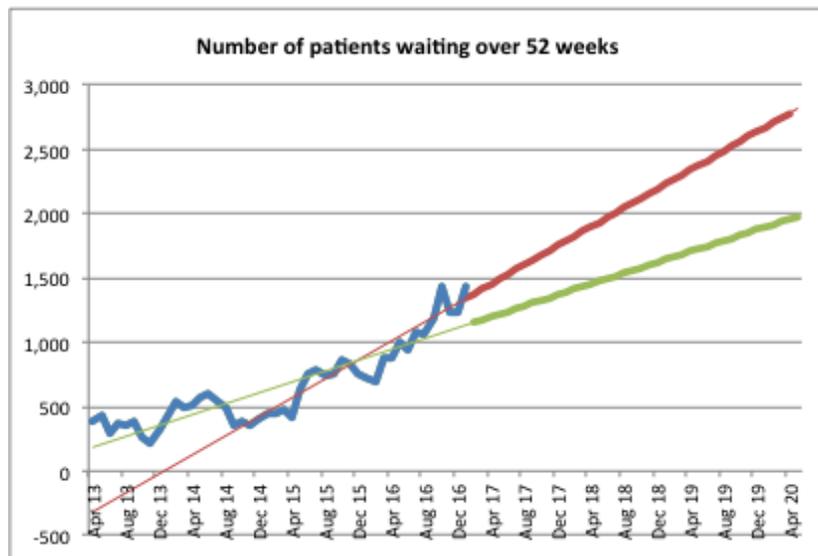
The above graph is based on the trajectory since the introduction of the current waiting time policy. It suggests that by May 2020, 5% of NHS patients will wait for longer than 24.6 weeks before beginning treatment compared to 19.7 weeks in January 2017. Immediately before the introduction of the current policy, the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile waiting time was 19.8 weeks (June 2015), which fell sharply in the next month in response to the new policy to 17.2 weeks.

### Total number of patients waiting (incomplete pathways)



The above graph shows how the number of patients waiting for treatment to begin may grow over the period to May 2020. The green line is the trend since April 2013 and the red line shows the trend since the introduction of the current waiting time policy. Based on these trajectories, the number of people waiting for treatment to begin in May 2020 will be between 4.5 million and 4.95 million.

Total number of people waiting over 52 weeks before treatment begins



The red line shows the trajectory since the current waiting time policy was introduced in June 2015, and the green line shows the trend since April 2013. If these trends continue, by May 2020, the number of people waiting for over 12 months before treatment begins will be between 1,980 and 2,782. This compares to 1,433 in January 2017.