

this unprecedentedly difficult start to the year, the immediate focus has now turned to how we restart elective activity and ensure that any time critical treatment that was delayed or otherwise impacted by the emergency response to the pandemic is rescheduled and carried out as quickly as possible. At this point we will also need to turn our attention to the growing backlog of patients waiting for assessment and treatment on our waiting lists.

#### WAITING TIMES PRE-PANDEMIC

Waiting times in Northern Ireland were at an unacceptable level before the pandemic and have been worsening steadily since 2014. Prior to the pandemic, waiting times for elective care were the worst in the UK and among the worst in Europe. Indeed, in March 2019 it was reported that a person in Northern Ireland is at least 48 times as likely as a person in Wales to wait more than a year for care. This is despite Wales being the worst performer otherwise in the UK. Covid-19 has exacerbated a situation that was already reaching a critical point.

This is not the first time that Northern Ireland has faced issues with waiting times. Prior to 2005, hospital waiting times here were the longest in the UK. By 2009, the situation had broadly stabilised and remained relatively stable until 2013. At this point, the wider national financial position led to a suspension of additional activity carried out within the HSC and in the independent sector. Since that time, the backlog of patients waiting longer than ministerial targets has continued to rise.

Waiting times are currently so long in Northern Ireland that Emergency Departments (EDs) and other urgent pathways have increasingly become the default entry point for patients requiring treatment, either due to patients waiting so long that their condition becomes urgent, or because EDs are seen as a faster way of accessing diagnosis and treatment. Fixing waiting times will therefore also help take some of the pressure away from EDs.

In 2017, the Department published an elective care plan setting out proposals for reform and transformation of elective care services. While there has been a great deal of good work carried out to improve how we provide elective care in Northern Ireland, there is still a significant gap between the demand for services and the

Direct comparison between waiting time statistics for Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK is not readily available because in the rest of the UK, waiting time data are no longer collected on separate outpatient and inpatient waits as is still the case in Northern Ireland. Other regions have moved to Referral to Treatment (RTT) time targets, which measure the total time the patient has to wait from referral to treatment. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health do not measure complete patient journey time from GP referral to start of treatment. Once a referral for a first outpatient appointment has been made, the waiting time 'clock' starts and then stops once they have been seen by a Consultant / specialist. A separate waiting time 'clock' starts if the patient requires inpatient treatment on either a hospital admission or daycase basis, or if they require a diagnostic test.

However, if we look at pre Covid-19 figures for example, in England (total population around 55 million) at the end of November 2019 only 1,398 people were waiting more than 52 weeks on the Referral to Treatment (RTT) pathway to start treatment, whereas in NI (total population around 1.9 million), at the end of September 2019, 108,582 people were waiting more than 52 weeks for their first outpatient appointment<sup>2</sup>.

As a relatively crude comparison, the Nuffield Trust has estimated that in March 2019, a person in Northern Ireland was at least 48 times as likely as a person in Wales to wait more than a year for care. This is despite Wales being the worst performer otherwise in the UK, and the Welsh method of measurement capturing more stages of the journey for patients who are admitted to hospital – effectively starting the clock slightly sooner<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [Waiting lists and waiting times for Elective Care in Northern Ireland: Taking stock - Research Matters \(assemblyresearchmatters.org\)](https://assemblyresearchmatters.org)

<sup>3</sup> [nuffield-trust-change-or-collapse-web-final.pdf](#)