

NHS Waiting times– termly monitoring report

Y Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol | 15 Chwefror 2023
Health and Social Care Committee | 15 February 2023

Reference: RS23/5035-1

Introduction

The Welsh Government published its [programme for transforming and modernising planned care and reducing waiting lists in Wales](#) in April 2022.

The Health Minister, Eluned Morgan MS [has said](#) “it will take a full Senedd term and a lot of hard work to recover from the impact of the pandemic”, stating that “this is now my priority and it is the health service’s priority”.

The Minister has set out her commitment to reducing waiting lists through **five key ambitions**. This paper looks at Welsh Government progress towards these ambitions and takes a more detailed look at the specialities that are waiting more than one year or two years.

Waiting times data are published monthly on the [StatsWales website](#) with a two month lag. Therefore the November 2022 data is the latest available at the time of writing.

N.B. Since 2009, Welsh Government has published monthly data on NHS Referral to Treatment Times (RTT), which measures the total waiting time from GP referral to treatment and this is now the main source of information on NHS waiting times. However, some specialities are not covered by RTT reporting. The waiting times data for these is published separately on [StatsWales](#), including for mental health hospital services, palliative care and inpatient/day care dentistry. Cardiology is also measured separately using a different methodology.



1. Overall patient pathways

Closed patient pathways

NHS Wales is seeing a significant number of patients. The number of patient pathways closed in November 2022 was 111,600, which is an average of 5,073 patient pathways closed per working day. This refers to the number of patients taken off the NHS waiting list. This is when they complete a care pathway - usually when definitive treatment starts, the patient declines treatment or there is a clinical decision that treatment is not needed.

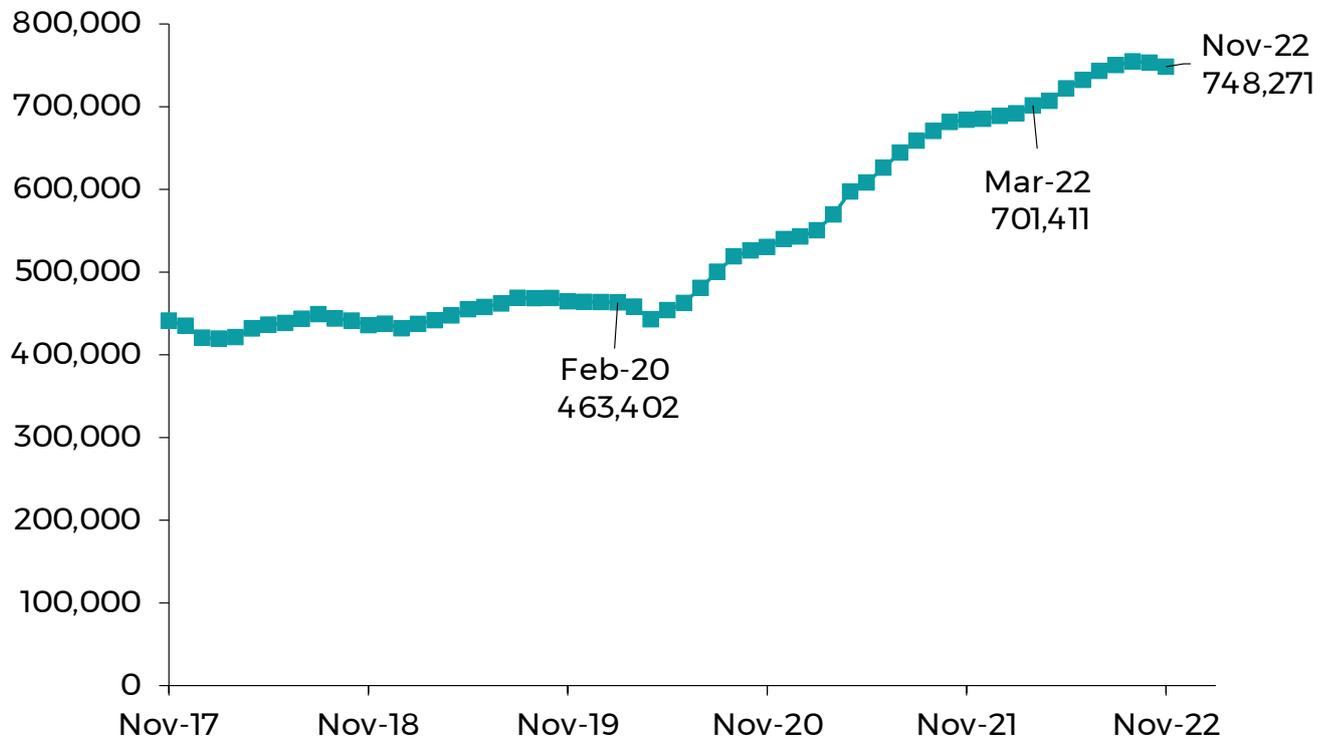
The number of patient pathways closed in November 2022 (111,600) was higher than the previous month (106,641.)

Open patient pathways

The total number of patient pathways waiting in Wales has grown since the start of the pandemic (February 2020), when it stood at 463,402 to 701,411 in March 2022. At the end of November 2022, that figure is 748,271.

Figure 1 below illustrates the open patient pathway data. It shows that since the COVID-19 pandemic the number of patient pathways have increased. Despite a slight fall in patient pathways waiting to start treatment in November 2022, this is still the fourth highest number on record and 61.5% higher than February 2020.

Figure 1. Number of patient pathways waiting to start treatment, November 2017 to November 2022



Source: StatsWales, Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and stage of pathway

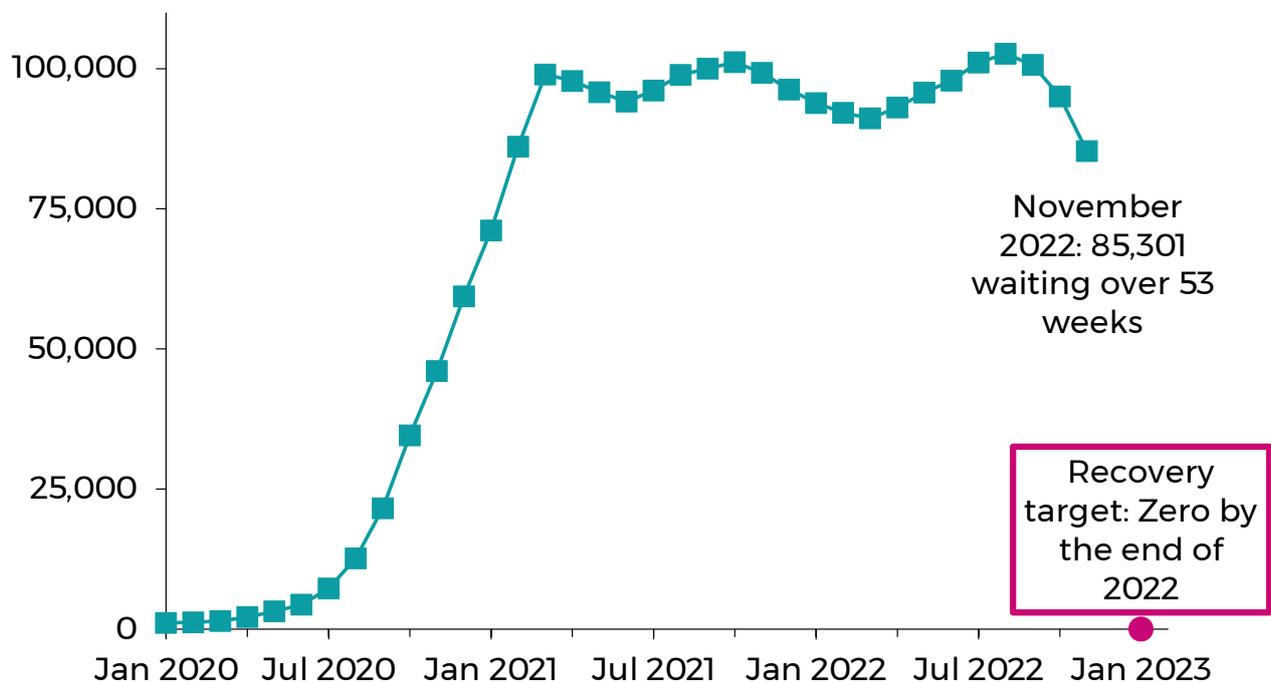
N.B. The number of patient pathways is not the same as the number of individual patients because some people have multiple open pathways. Welsh Government says that in November 2022, when there were 748,271 open patient pathways, there were about 586,000 individual patients on treatment waiting lists in Wales.

2. Progress against the five new targets

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

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

Figure 2: 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

In November 2022, 85,301 patient pathways were waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) for their first outpatient appointment. The Welsh Government **will not have met its first recovery target**, which was for no patients to be waiting longer than a year for their first outpatient appointment by the end of 2022. The December 2022 performance data will be published on 23 February 2023.

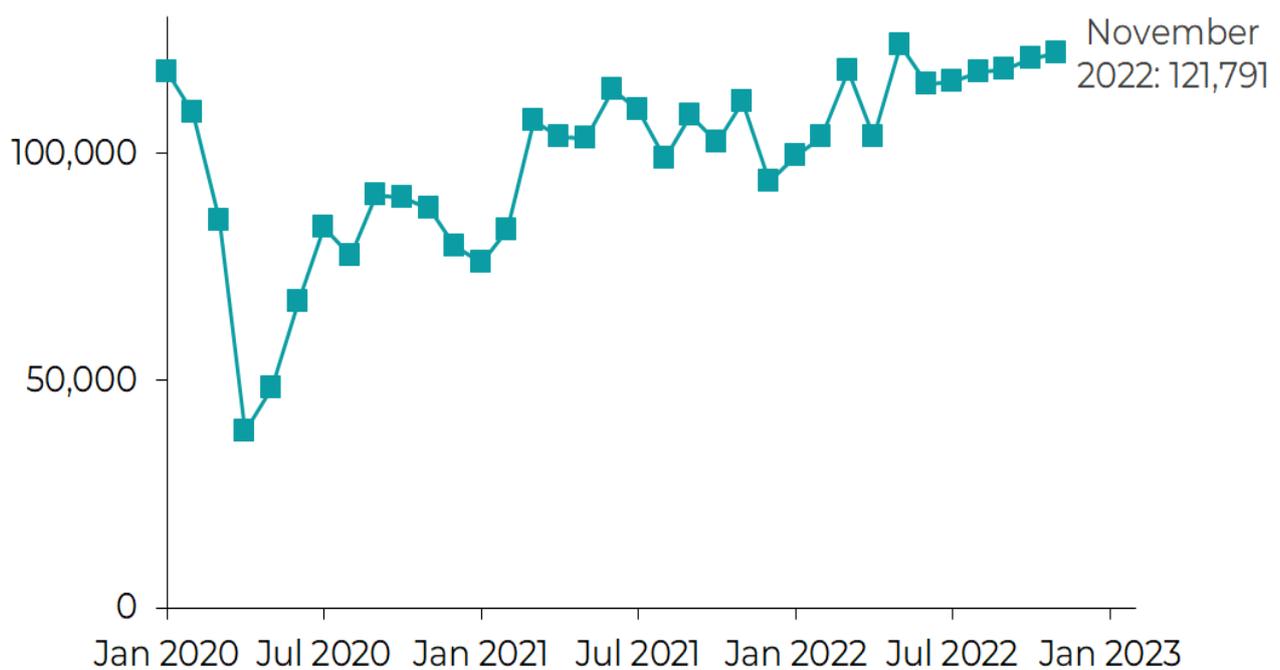
Whilst the Welsh Government has not achieved its first recovery target, there is a **notable decrease** – of 10.3% in patient pathways waiting more than 53 weeks for

their first outpatient appointment, compared to the previous month (when 95,074 patient pathways were waiting). The number hasn't been below 85,000 since January 2021.

Patients waiting longer than one year for a first outpatient appointment increased dramatically over the course of the pandemic. The Welsh Government report that **an average of 4,060 referrals for first outpatient appointment were made per day in November 2022**. This is an increase of 4.3% (166 more referrals per day on average) compared to October 2022 and **the highest on record**.

The Welsh Government will, no doubt, highlight the **continued demand** (i.e. high level of referrals) and present it as a factor in missing the recovery target. It is also currently unclear what **the impact of winter pressures and strike action** will be on NHS activity until the December 2022 figures are published.

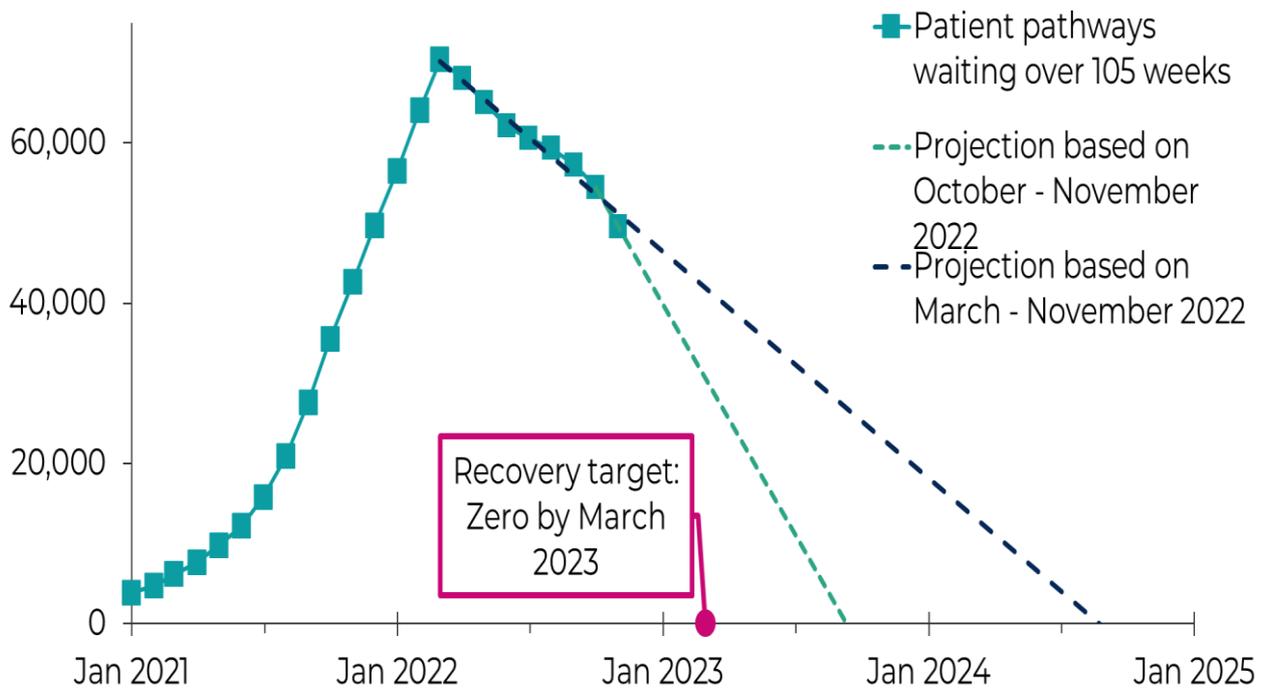
Figure 3: Total number of referrals



Source: StatsWales, [Referrals by local health board \(area of provider\) and month](#)

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

Figure 4: Number of patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment and projections based on different time periods



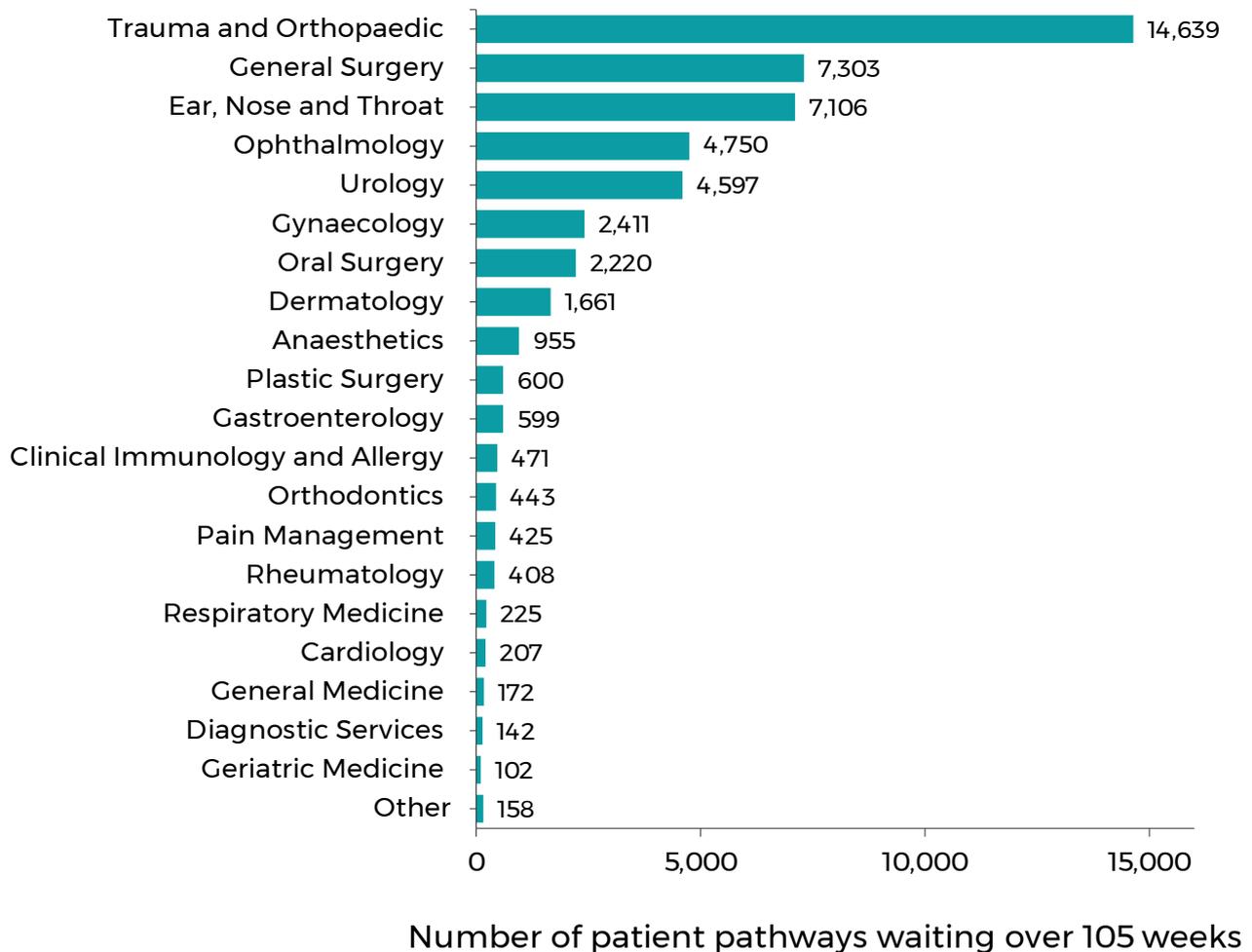
Source: StatsWales, COVID-19 recovery plan, ambitions for referral to treatment waiting times

In November 2022, 49,594 patient pathways were waiting over 105 weeks (more than two years) to start treatment across all specialities. The number of patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks **has decreased since March 2022**.

The November 2022 data shows **eight consecutive monthly falls** after a consistent increase over the previous year. However, a projection using data from March to November shows that, at the current rate of progress (i.e. the rate of progress since March is sustained), **the recovery target will not be fulfilled until the middle of 2024**. There was a sharper drop in patient pathways between October and November 2022. Sustaining this rate of progress would meet the target by the latter half of 2023.

Fulfilling the recovery target by March 2023 requires faster progress. At the current pace, it's unlikely that this recovery target will be achieved for all specialities.

Figure 5: Number of patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment by treatment function



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

The November data shows that 49,594 patient pathways were waiting over 105 weeks (more than two years). Around 30% of all patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment were waiting for trauma and orthopaedic treatments.

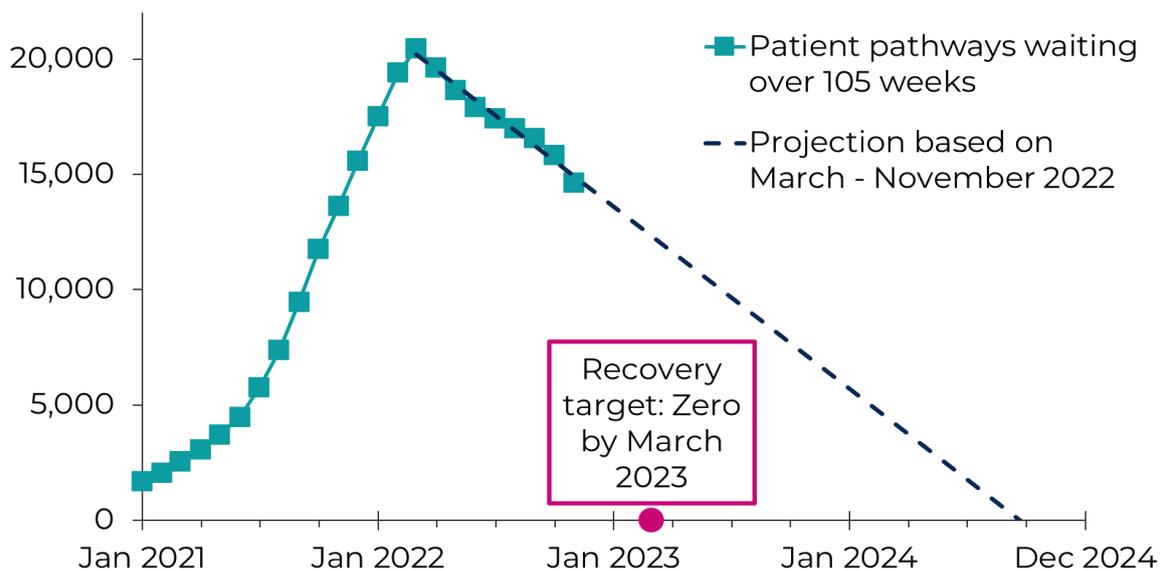
Other specialities with high numbers waiting over 105 weeks for treatment include **general surgery** (7,303 patient pathways), **ear, nose and throat treatments** (7,106) and **ophthalmology** (4,750). While the number of patient pathways waiting for treatment remains stubbornly high in these specialities, progress is being made, with the overall numbers waiting decreasing.

There are ten specialities that have seen an increase in patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment in November 2022 (compared to July 2022). These specialities include **clinical immunology and allergy** (471), **pain management**(425) and **respiratory medicine** (225). There are slight increases in urology (4,597) and anaesthetics (955).

A spotlight on trauma and orthopaedics

In November 2022, there were **14,639 patient pathways** waiting over 105 weeks for trauma and orthopaedic treatments. Whilst it remains high, the numbers waiting to start treatment have **decreased for 8 consecutive months**, from the peak of 20,445 in March 2022 to 14,639 in November 2022 (a 28.4% decrease). Activity levels have increased but it is currently unclear whether health boards have been able to maintain orthopaedic elective capacity over the winter months.

Figure 6: Number of patient pathways waiting over 105 weeks to start treatment in trauma and orthopaedics and projection based on March to November 2022 data

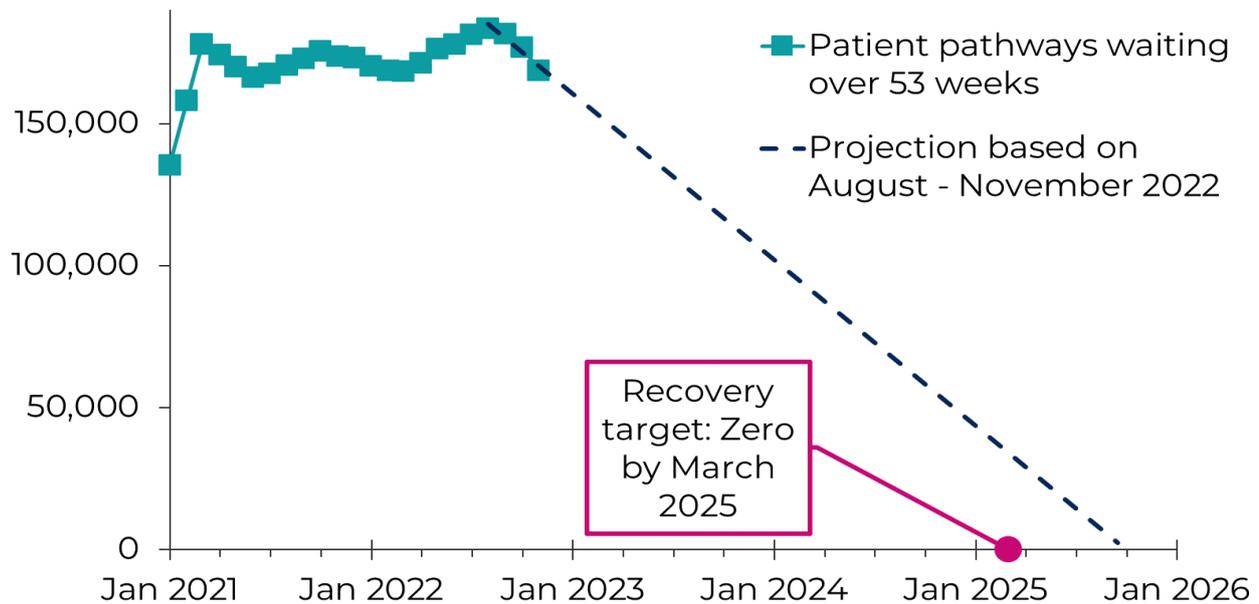


Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and treatment function, January 2021 onwards](#)

A Ministerial orthopaedic summit was held in August 2022.

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

Figure 7: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment and projection based on August to November 2022 data

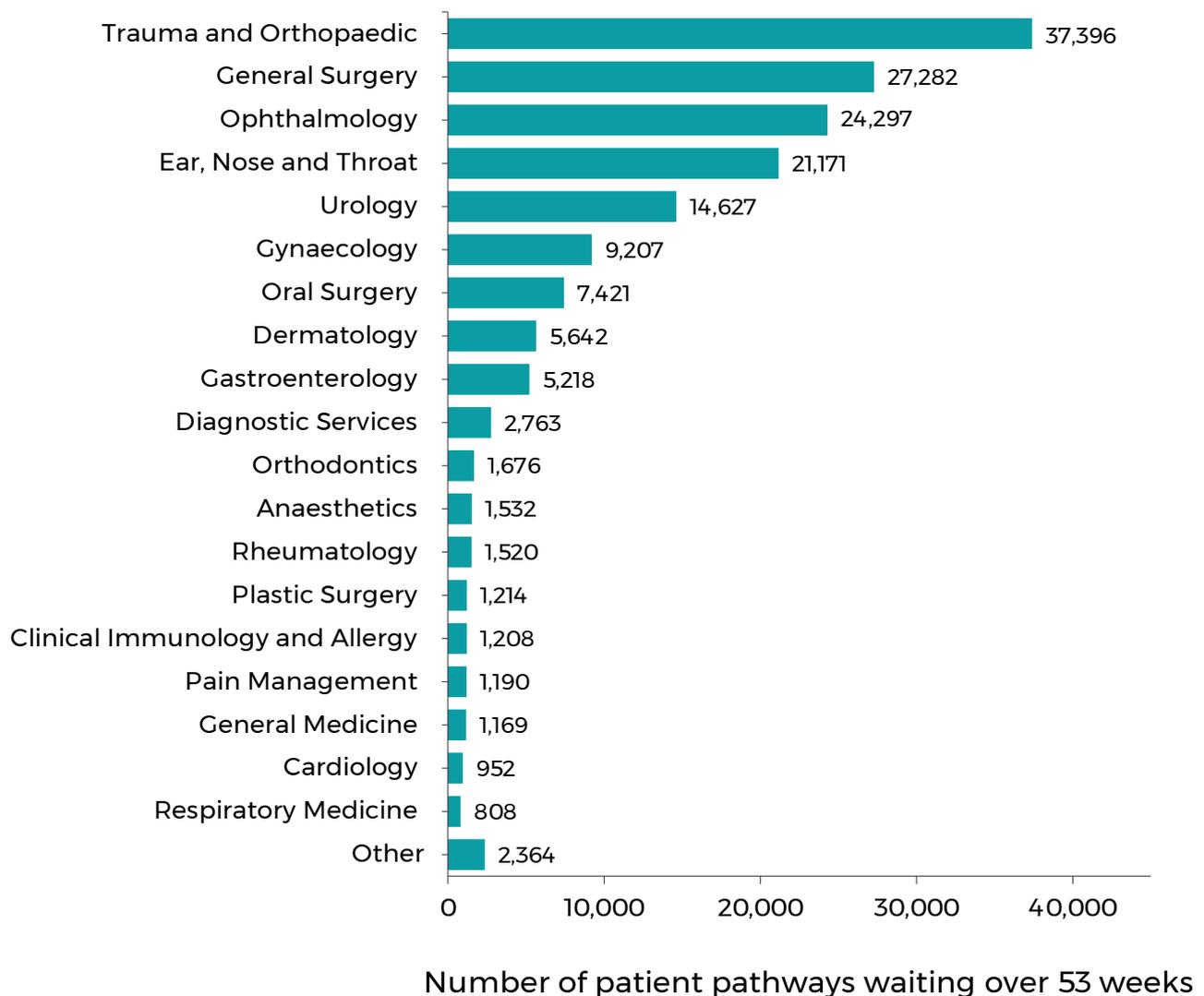


Source: StatsWales, Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and treatment function, January 2021 onwards

In November 2022, 168,657 patient pathways were waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) to start treatment across all specialties. **This is down 8%** from the peak of 183,450 patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks in August 2022.

Projection using data from August to November shows that, at the current rate of progress (i.e. the rate of progress since August is sustained), **the recovery target will not be fulfilled until October 2025** (the recovery target is by Spring 2025).

Figure 8: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment by treatment function

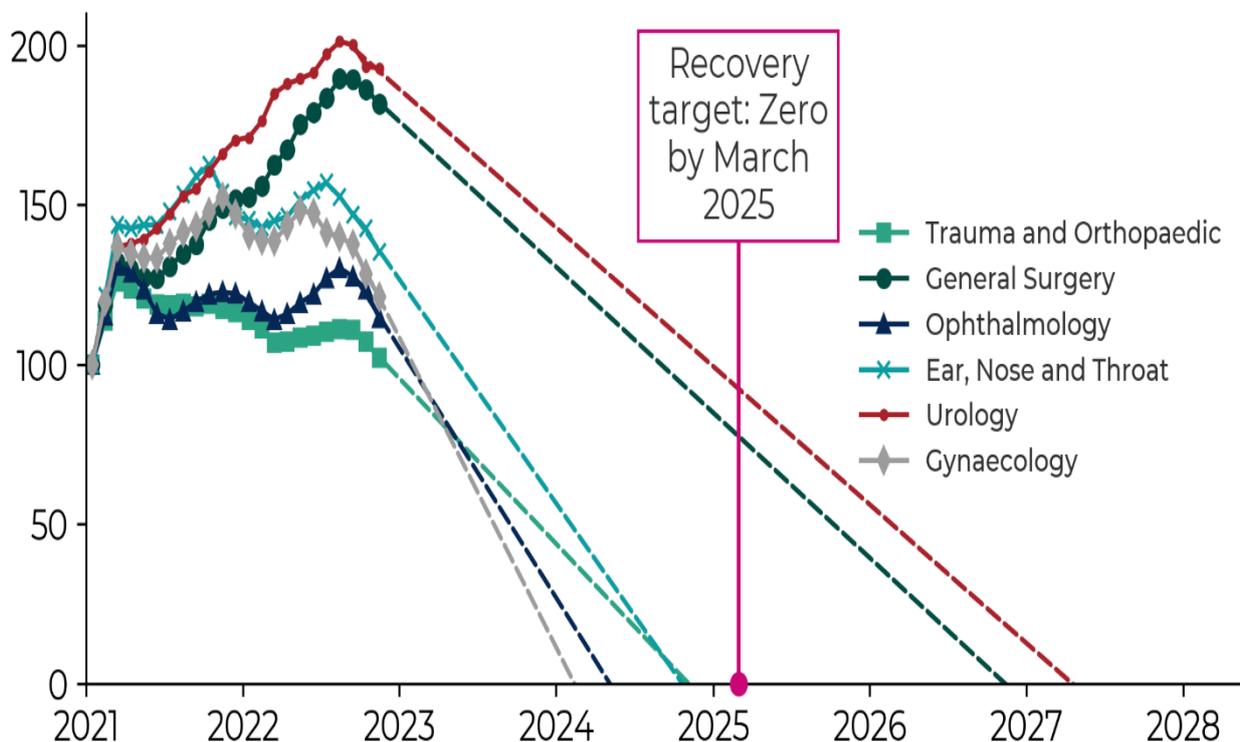


Source: StatsWales, [Patient pathways waiting to start treatment by month, grouped weeks and treatment function, January 2021 onwards](#)

In total, 37,396 patient pathways were waiting over 53 weeks (more than a year) in November 2022 for trauma and orthopaedic treatment, 27,282 for general surgery and 24,297 for ophthalmology treatments.

There was a **notable decrease** in the number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment from July 2022 to November 2022 for ear, nose and throat treatments (3,402), trauma and orthopaedic (3,014) and ophthalmology (2,667). However the number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment **increased** in gastroenterology (532), neurology (351), orthodontics (175) and clinical immunology and allergy (193) and other treatment functions.

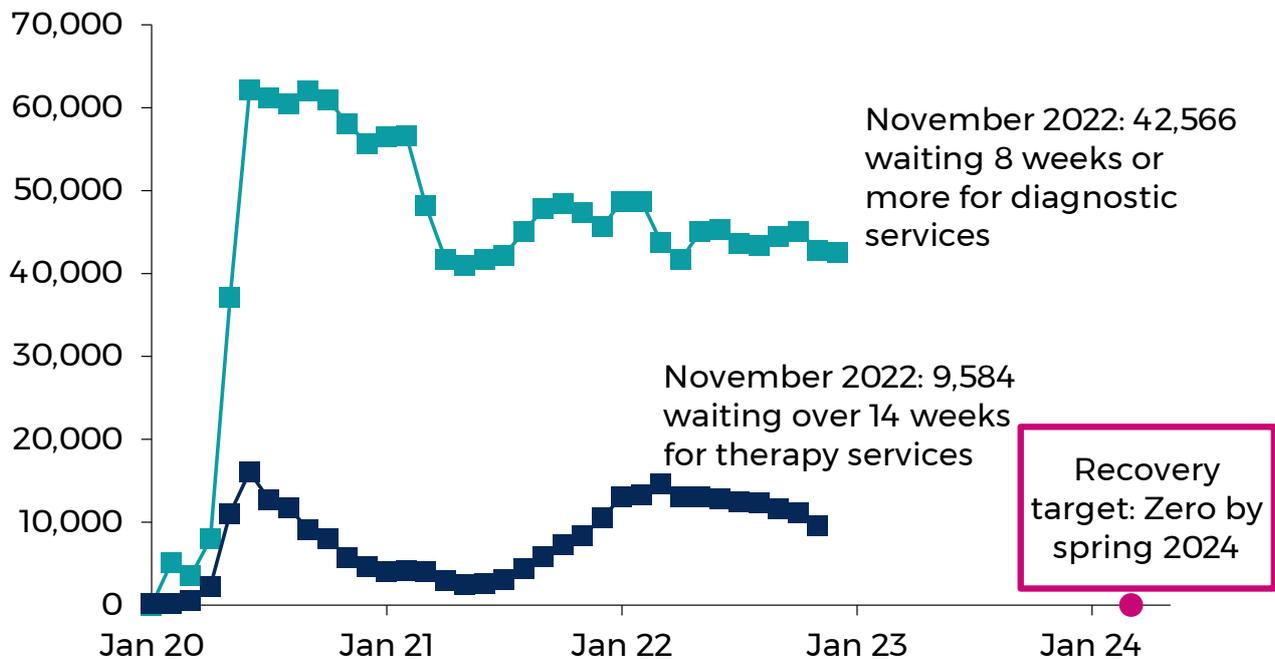
Figure 9: Number of patient pathways waiting over 53 weeks to start treatment (index: 100 = January 2021) and projection based on September to November 2022 data, by treatment function



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

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

Figure 10: 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, such as endoscopy, imaging, radiology and cardiology, the number of patient pathways waiting decreased to 111,672 in November 2022. 42,566 patient pathways (38%) were waiting 8 weeks or more.

The November data shows that endoscopy and neurophysiology have the highest percentage of patient pathways waiting over 8 weeks. Endoscopy has 24,571 patient pathways waiting in total which equates to 22% of all diagnostic pathways waiting. Radiology has 64,509 patient pathways waiting (combining the 2 radiology categories), which equates to 58% of all diagnostic pathways waiting.

The **longest waits** in November 2022 were for diagnostic endoscopy (median 13.9 weeks) and neurophysiology (median 9.3 weeks).

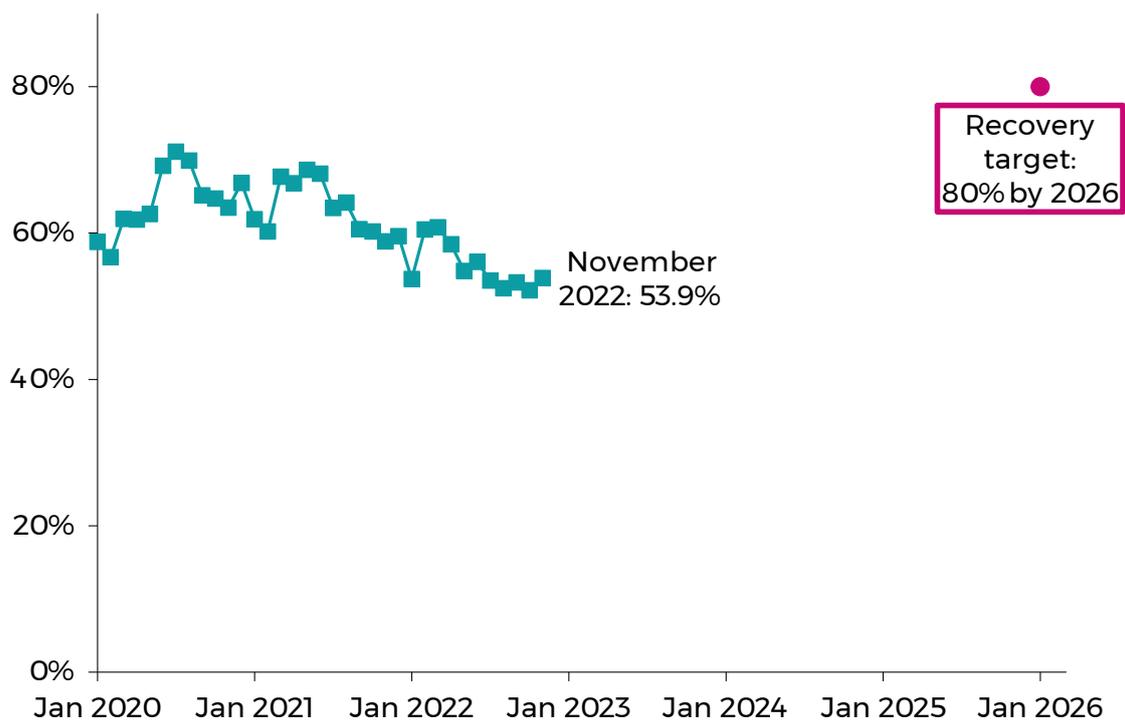
Therapy services

A further 9,584 patient pathways were waiting over 14 weeks for therapy services, such as audiology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, podiatry and speech and language etc.

The number of patient pathways waiting decreased to 65,321 in November but remains high in historical context. The number waiting longer than fourteen weeks (the target maximum wait) **decreased to 9,584**, falling for the eighth consecutive month.

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

Figure 11: 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.

53.9% (942 out of 1,749) of patients who started their first definitive treatment in November 2022 did so within 62 days of first being suspected of cancer. This is an increase on the figures in September 2022 (53.3%) and October 2022 (52.2%).

There are statistics available by tumour site. The November 2022 data show the tumour sites with the lowest percentage of people starting their first definitive treatment within 62 days are **gynaecological, head and neck and urological**.

Figure 12. 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.

