

RTT waits at 24 weeks as long waits deteriorate sharply

August saw a sudden increase in elective waiting times, putting at risk the NHS long-term plan’s promise of choice at six months.

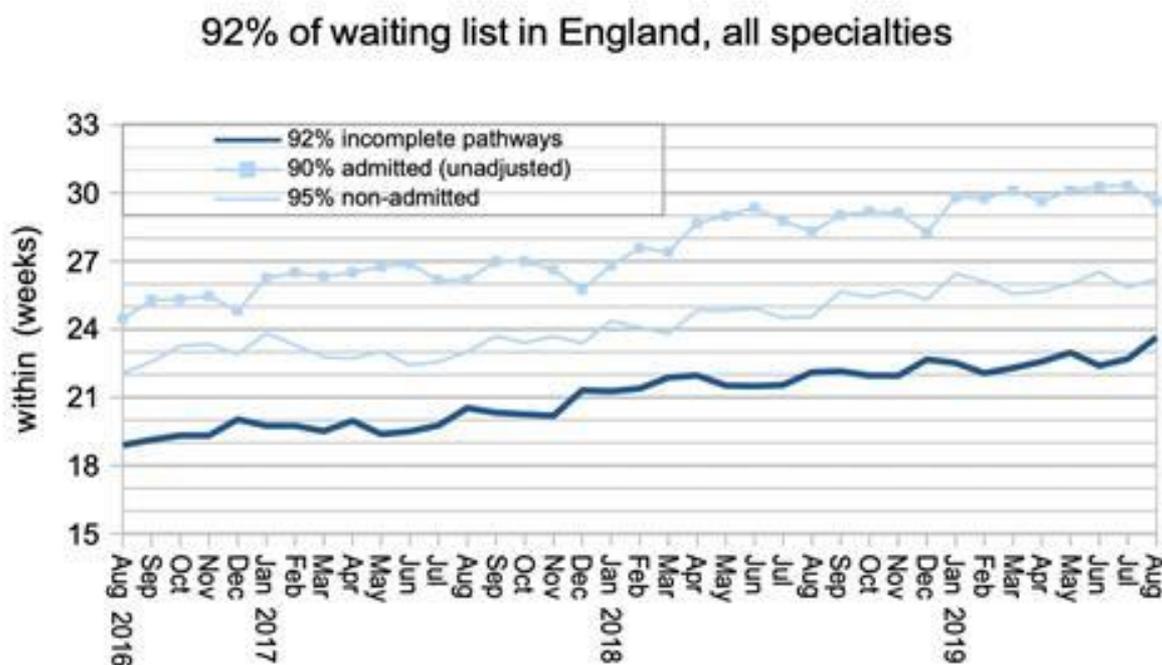
English referral-to-treatment waiting times rose sharply in August to nearly 24 weeks. The drivers were partly a rapidly-growing waiting list, but mostly a change in the shape of the waiting list as the longest waiting times grew.

This has consequences for the [NHS long-term plan](#), which promised that “anyone who has been waiting for six months will be reviewed and given the option of faster treatment at an alternative provider”. This will be a hollow choice in many parts of the country as waiting times increasingly exceed that threshold.

Why did longer waiting times slip so quickly in August (as they have done before in August 2017)? The short answer is that I don’t know, but the most likely explanation is pressures on hospital capacity.

In the following discussion, all figures come from [NHS England and NHS Improvement](#). If you have a national statistic that you’d like to check up on, you can download our [RTT waiting times fact checker](#).

RTT waiting times shot up in August to 23.7 weeks (on the reported figures), which is the longest since January 2009.

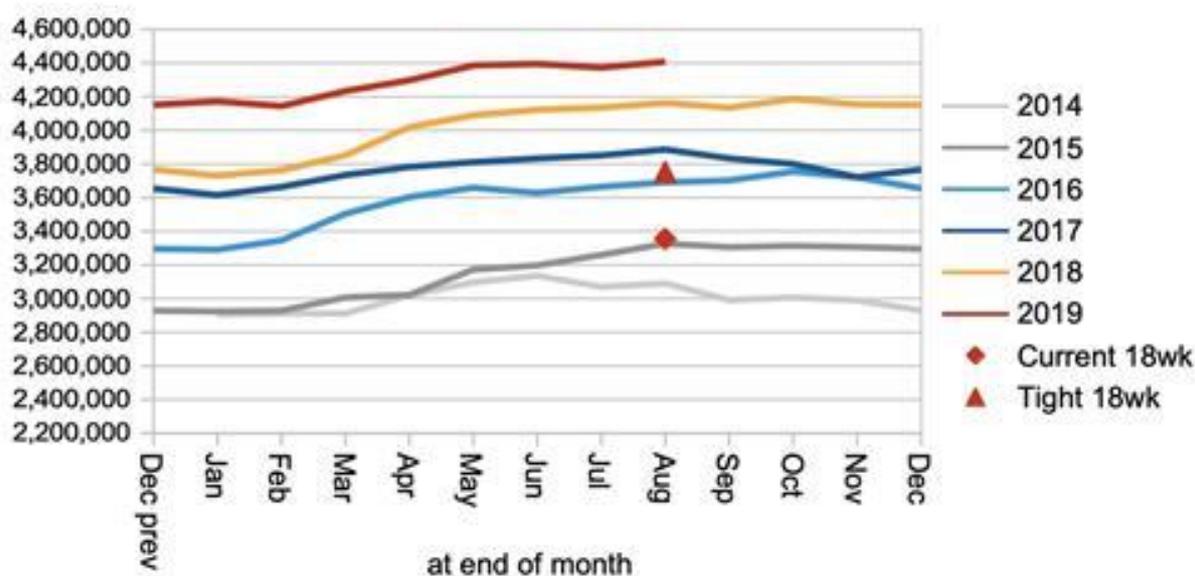


If you add back in the last known positions at non-reporting trusts, that figure becomes 23.9 weeks.

Trust not reporting waiting list data	Last reported	Total list size	Over 18 weeks	Over 52 weeks	% within 18wks	92% within (wk)
Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust	Dec 2017	46,100	14,104	156	69.4%	33.0
Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust	Jan 2019	65,953	17,224	67	73.9%	30.4
North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust	Jun 2019	38,274	5,572	9	85.4%	23.0
TOTAL non-reports		150,327	36,900	232	75.5%	29.9
Reported list size - latest		4,407,974	662,053	1,233	85.0%	23.7
Estimated actual list size		4,558,301	698,953	1,465	84.7%	23.9

In the long term, rising waiting times are mostly driven by the rapidly growing waiting list.

Waiting list in England, all specialties



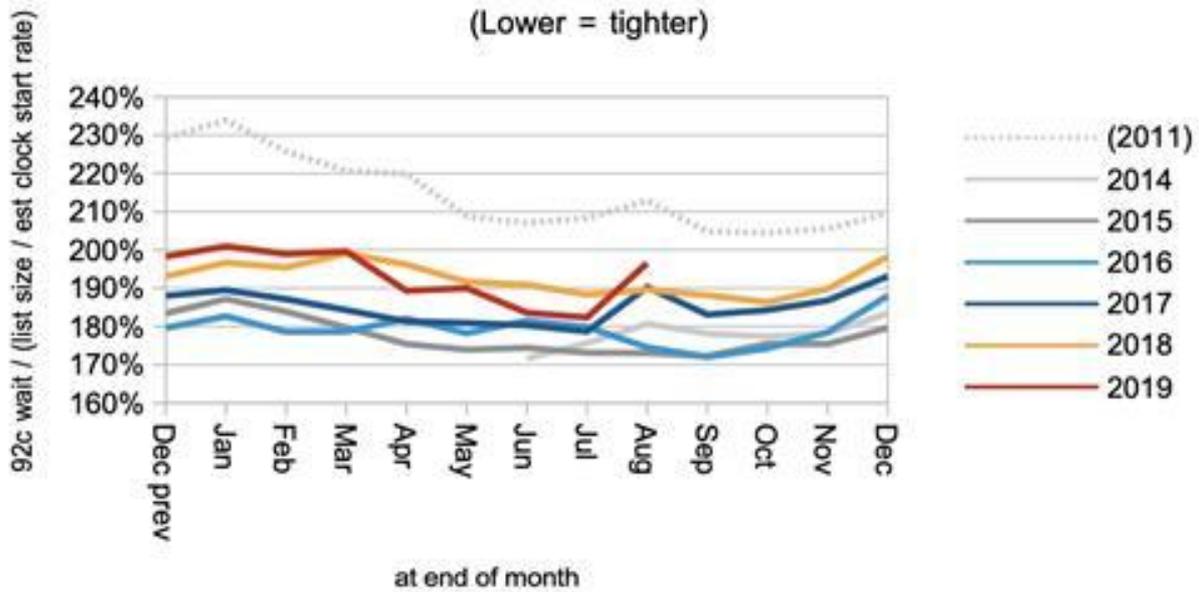
But in the short term, the management of the waiting list can cause waiting times to change much faster, and this is what happened in August (as it did in August 2017).

Why? The short answer is that I don't know, but there is ample evidence of severe capacity pressures across the system (particularly in the ongoing run of exceptionally poor accident and emergency waiting times), so that is perhaps the most likely explanation.

But can anyone explain why August is particularly affected? Summer holidays are the obvious feature of August, but when the index of waiting list management spiked in August 2017, it didn't fully recover when the holidays were over, and remained high for a year.

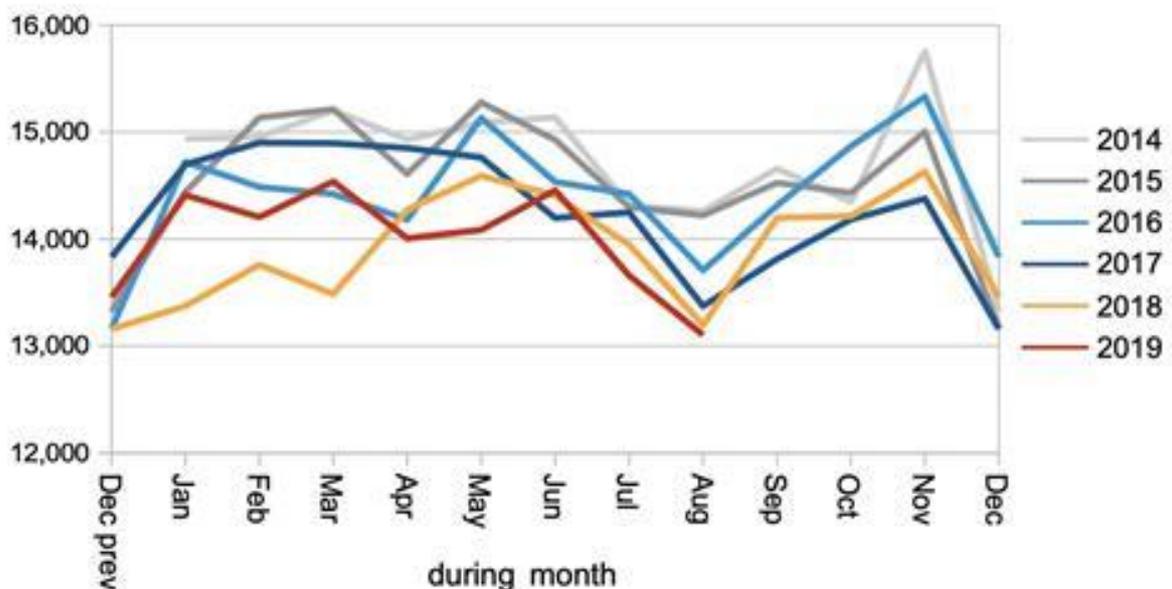
Index of waiting list management

(Lower = tighter)



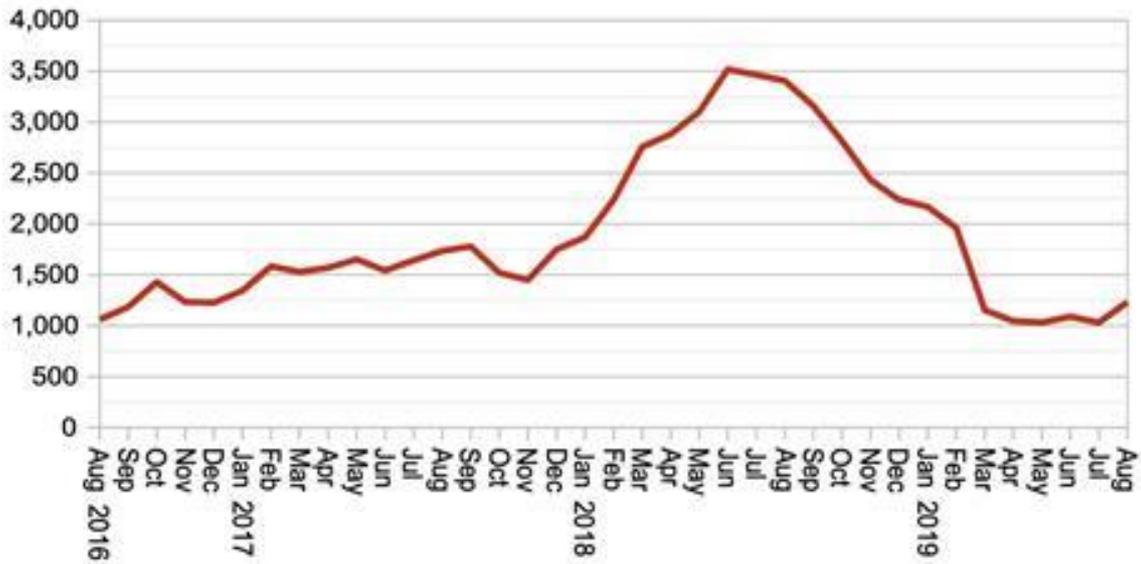
The rate of admissions (as inpatients or day cases) was low even for an August, and again capacity pressures are likely to be the main cause. Admitted patients dominate the longer-waiting end of the waiting time spectrum (as the first chart above shows) so lower admission rates could explain the deterioration we are seeing in the longer-waiting end of the spectrum.

Admissions per working day in England, all specialties



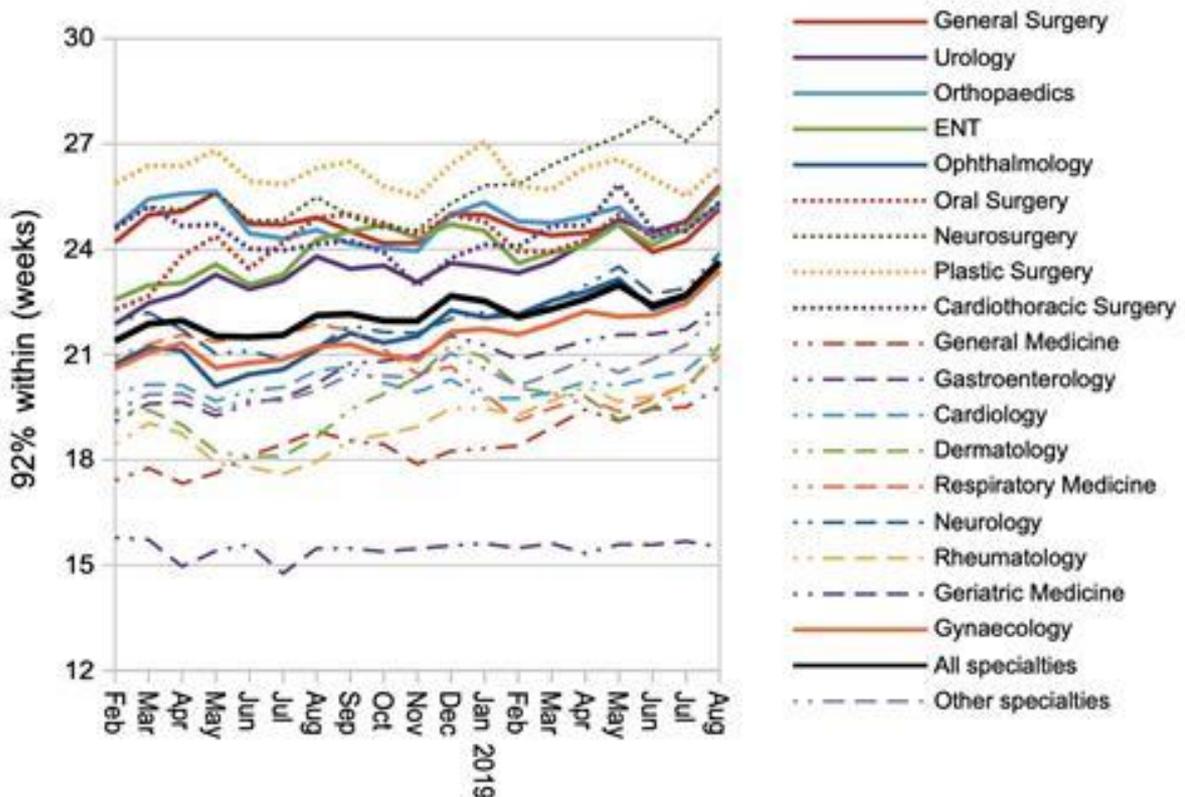
The number of one-year waiters is broadly steady following last year's dramatic improvements. However, if the overall pressures on waiting times continue then we can expect these ultra-long waits to increase in future.

Over 52 week waiters on the waiting list



The increase in waiting times was seen in all specialties (apart from geriatric medicine), with no evidence on this measure of heavy-case mix specialties (such as orthopaedics) being more affected than lighter-case mix ones (such as ophthalmology).

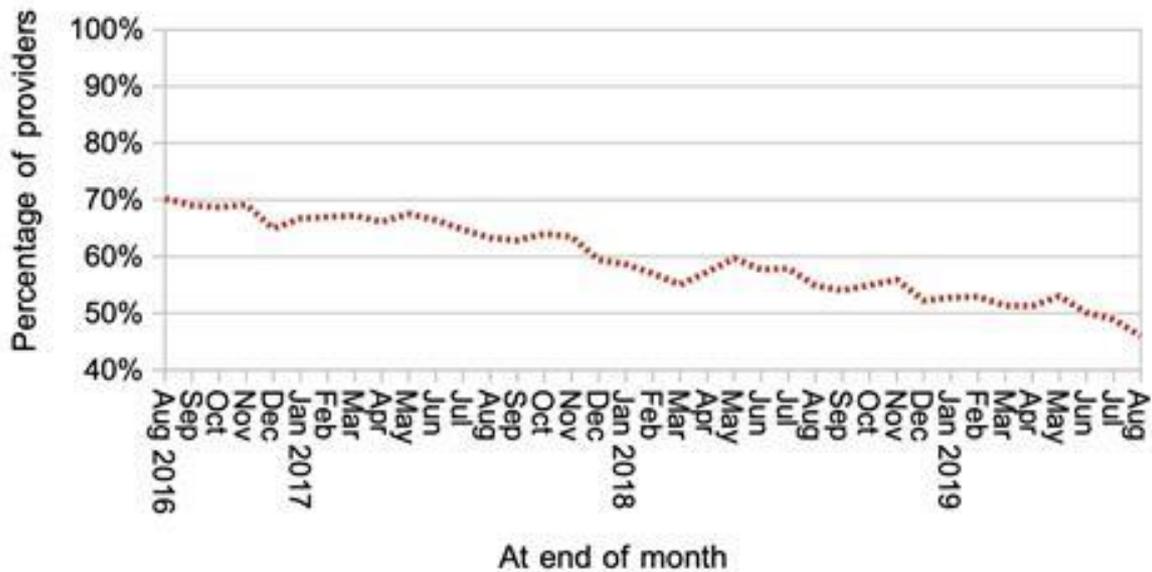
92% of waiting list by specialty, in England



Local detail

Only 46 per cent of local services (specialties within trusts) are now achieving the “92 per cent of incomplete pathways within 18 weeks” target.

Providers and specialties with 92% of waiting list within 18 weeks



The increase in waiting times was concentrated at the longer-waiting end of the spectrum.

Distribution of provider-specialty 92pc incomplete pathway waits

