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Northern Ireland Waiting Lists: Current and Historical Trends for Outpatients, Inpatients and Diagnostic Services

The purpose of this briefing paper is to highlight the current key statistics and some trends from the past decade that have emerged from the waiting times and numbers published routinely by Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). The most recent publications are the Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Quarter Ending December 2011, (published 23/02/12) for outpatient, inpatient and diagnostic waiting times. This paper also provides some discussion of the issues. The waiting times and numbers of patients waiting for outpatient appointments, inpatient admission and diagnostic services included in this briefing are taken from the DHSSPS Waiting Times Bulletins of the appropriate year as relevant.¹

¹ DHSSPS, Northern Ireland Waiting Times Bulletins, http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/waiting_times_main/stats-waiting-times.htm

Key Messages

Operational performance against waiting times has declined considerably since March 2009, according to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, with waiting time targets not achieved for inpatient treatment, outpatient appointments and diagnostic tests during 2010-11.

Outpatient waiting numbers have generally continued to rise over the past two years and at the end of December 2011 the number of people waiting for a first outpatient appointment in Northern Ireland was 124,100. This is still below the 2006 peak of the last decade, when over 180,000 were waiting for a first outpatient appointment.

Inpatient waiting numbers have also risen over the last two years and there were 56,470 people waiting for inpatient admission at the end of December 2011. This is just below the 2002 peak of the last decade when almost 60,000 patients were waiting for inpatient admission. Much of the recent rise is related to increases in Day Case admissions.

Waiting times for **diagnostic** tests and procedures have only been published since 2007 and are now at their highest point since this began in December 2007.

In November 2009, the NI Assembly Public Accounts Committee (PAC) discussed waiting times. The PAC commended the DHSSPS on the “*dramatic reduction in outpatient waiting times in 2006-2007 in comparison with those between 2000 and 2006*”.² Figure 1a in this briefing demonstrates the reduction at that time and also then shows that during 2007 to 2009 the rate of reduction slowed and since then outpatient waiting times have increased, with a slight decrease by the end of 2011.

The PAC identified that the success in tackling waiting times at that time was at least in part due to the DHSSPS funding additional treatments in the independent sector and the PAC “*warned of, and the DHSSPS acknowledged, the dangers of ‘a quick-fix approach’ since it fails to deliver a sustainable solutions....*”³. In addition to this measure, the DHSSPS outlined to the PAC a range of measures it had put in place to change systems and ways of working to reduce waiting times and these are described further in Section 6 of this briefing.

Purchase of extra capacity from the independent sector has continued with over £57million being spent in 2009/10 and the substantially lesser amount of over £24million being spent in 2010/11 (see Table 1 for exact figures and specialities).

Waiting times and related targets are measured differently in Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK and the BMA (British Medical Association) GP Committee has recently

² The Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, Official Report (Hansard), 12 November 2009, www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/committees2009/PAC/091112_PerformanceofHealthService.htm

³ General Report on the Health and Social Care Sector by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland – 2010-2011, Paragraph 3.2.1, http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/index/publications/recent_reports/report_gen_report_hsc.htm

expressed concern over the waiting times in Northern Ireland in comparison with the rest of the UK.⁴ In England, Scotland and Wales the *complete patient journey time* from GP Referral to Treatment (RTT pathway) is measured and the targets are based around that journey time.

In both England and Scotland the target is that a patient should begin their consultant-led treatment within a maximum of 18 weeks from referral for non-urgent conditions. Scotland also includes an outpatient target within the 18 week target by including that no patient will wait longer than 12 weeks for their first outpatient appointment. In Wales the target is that at least 98% of patients are to be referred for treatment within a maximum of 26 weeks, with no patient waiting longer than 36 weeks.

Recent statistics indicate that these targets appear close to being met however in England there has been concern over the issue of 'hidden' long waits past the 18 week target (see Section 2).

In Northern Ireland the total journey time of a patient is not published by the DHSSPS. Once the first wait from GP referral to first outpatient appointment is completed the clock starts again with a separate wait being measured from outpatient appointment to inpatient or daycase treatment.

In Northern Ireland, the 2011/12 waiting time targets for both outpatient appointments and inpatient treatment have become less ambitious than in previous years. For an outpatient appointment the 2011/12 target states that:

at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than nine weeks, and no patients should wait longer than 21 weeks for an outpatient appointment.

The previous 2010/11 target was substantially more ambitious and stated that:

by March 2011, no patient should wait longer than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment”.

With regard to **inpatient admissions**, the 2011/12 Ministerial waiting time target states that:

at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than 13 weeks, and no patient should wait longer than 36 weeks, for inpatient admission.

The same target was in place in 2010/11, however the 2009/10 Priority for Action target was more ambitious and stated that *from April 2009 no patient should wait longer than 13 weeks for inpatient or day case treatment.*

⁴ Northern Ireland waiting times 'worst in the UK', Lisa Smyth, Belfast Telegraph, 27th March 2012, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/northern-ireland-waiting-times-16136309.html>

1 Background

Outpatient waiting numbers have generally continued to rise over the past two years and as of the 31st December 2011 the total number of people waiting for a first outpatient appointment in Northern Ireland was 124,100. This is still below the peak of the last decade which occurred in 2006, when over 180,000 were waiting for a first outpatient appointment.

Inpatient waiting numbers have also risen over the last two years and there were 56,470 people waiting for inpatient admission at the end of the December 2011 quarter. This is just below the peak of the last decade when in 2002 almost 60,000 patients were waiting for inpatient admission. Much of the recent rise is related to increases in Day Case admissions.

Waiting times for **diagnostic** tests and procedures have only been published since 2007 and are now at their highest point since this began in December 2007.

In response to AQW 609/11-15 on the 7 June 2011 the Minister for HSSPS, Edwin Poots, made the following response when asked about the rise in patients waiting for more than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment:

I am at present considering a number of matters that impact on staff productivity, including revised targets on staff absence, improved technology and multi-faceted inter-agency approaches to the provision of care. While it is unlikely that the size of the workforce will change significantly, I am confident that there are areas where further productivity gains can be made.

Just over a year before this statement, in response to AQW 5430/10 on the 5 March 2010, the then Minister for HSSPS, Michael McGimpsey, made the following response when asked about the rise in waiting times:

My Department has made excellent progress in reducing hospital waiting times since 2005. The deterioration in performance during 2009/10 is the result of a number of factors, the most significant of which was the uncertainty until recently around the financial position of the Health and Social Care sector....

The financial position for the remainder of the 2009/10 is now clear. Each Health and Social Care Trust is currently implementing action plans that seek to improve performance with respect to access times across the full range of specialities for the rest of 2009/10 and beyond.

The Minister also highlighted that additional recurrent funding of £50million had been made available, in the last two years, in order to expand health service capacity and

accordingly to help to reduce waiting lists.⁵ The Department has confirmed to RaISe that in 2009/10 and in 2010/11, the Independent Sector was still being used to manage waiting lists and expenditure was £57.5m in 09/10 and £24.7m in 10/11.⁶ Table 1 overleaf shows the breakdown by specialty as to how this money was spent.

Table 1 Money Spent in Independent Sector in 2009/10 and 2010/11 by Specialty⁷

Independent Sector		
Service	2009/10	2010/11
	£000	£000
Cardiac Surgery	5,358	3,884
Dermatology	4,820	1,712
ENT	1,767	18
Gynaecology	3,985	922
Rheumatology	1,055	188
Orthopaedics	14,760	12,330
Ophthalmology	4,060	526
Urology	3,800	515
General Surgery	4,139	542
Plastics	3,595	1,313
Others	8,925	2,033
Diagnostics	1,234	733
Totals	57,498	24,716

2 Context - Waiting Time Targets in the UK and Republic of Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the 2011/12 Ministerial waiting time target for an **outpatient appointment** states that:

at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than nine weeks, and no patients should wait longer than 21 weeks for an outpatient appointment.⁸

The previous 2010/11 target was substantially more ambitious and stated that:

*by March 2011, **no** patient should wait longer than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment⁹.*

⁵ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Press Release, *More frontline staff will alleviate pressures on hospital waiting lists – McGimpsey*, 2 December 2010

⁶ Email communication from Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer, 20th January 2012

⁷ Information received via email from DHSSPS DALO, 7th February 2012

⁸ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Outpatient Waiting Times Quarter Ending December 2011*, Statistics Release, published February 2012

With regard to **inpatient admissions**, the 2011/12 Ministerial waiting time target states that:

*at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than 13 weeks, and no patient should wait longer than 36 weeks, for inpatient admission.*¹⁰

The same target was in place in 2010/11¹¹, however the 2009/10 Priority for Action target was more ambitious and stated that “*from April 2009 no patient should wait longer than 13 weeks for inpatient or day case treatment*”¹².

The Republic of Ireland has targets around the waiting times for elective medical and surgical procedures areas as follows¹³:

- Hospital Elective Medical and Surgical Procedures Wait Time Adults – 100% waiting times within 0-6 months;
- Hospital Elective Medical and Surgical Procedures Wait Time Children – 100% waiting times within 0-3 months;

The approach taken in England is different in that the target is based around the *complete patient journey time* from GP referral to treatment (RTT pathway) - a patient should begin their consultant-led treatment within a maximum of 18 weeks from referral for non-urgent conditions.¹⁴ Recent statistics indicate that this target is close to being met. For example, in August 2011, 90.4% of admitted patients (measured on an adjusted basis) and 97.3% of non-admitted patients completed their RTT pathway within a maximum of 18 weeks.¹⁵

However, Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, has recently highlighted the issue of hidden lists of ‘long waiters’, those 250,000 patients in England who have waited longer than 18 weeks, including 100,000 who have waited for more than six months and 20,000 who have waited at least a year. It is believed these ‘long waiters’ have arisen as NHS managers have focused on meeting the target of 90% of patients being treated within the 18 weeks RTT, with those waiting longer being forgotten once the target is met.¹⁶

⁹ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2010*, Statistics Release, published December 2010

¹⁰ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Inpatient Waiting Times Quarter Ending December 2011*, Statistics Release, published February 2012

¹¹ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2010*, Statistics Release, published December 2010

¹² DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2009*, Statistics Release, published December 2009

¹³ Personal Communication with Oireachtas Library and Research Service, 15/11/2011

¹⁴ Department of Health, *The Handbook to the NHS Constitution March 2010*, p. 21 Available at:

<http://www.nhs.uk/choiceintheNHS/Rightsandpledges/NHSConstitution/Documents/nhs-constitution-interactive-version-march-2010.pdf> Accessed: 07/11/2011

¹⁵ RTT Waiting Times Statistics, Department of Health,

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsStatistics/DH_130429

¹⁶ Ridge, S., NHS Crackdown On ‘Hidden’ waiting Lists, Sky News HD, Sky.com, 17th November, 2011, <http://news.sky.com/home/politics/article/16112189>

Similarly in Scotland they have an 18 week referral to treatment target¹⁷ and in the quarter ending June 2011 87.7% of patients were meeting the 18 week RTT target.¹⁸ Scotland also includes an outpatient target within the 18 week target by including that no patient will wait longer than 12 weeks for their first outpatient appointment. On the 12 week outpatient target during the quarter ending 30 June 2011, 98.1% of patients waited 12 weeks or less.¹⁹

The equivalent target in Wales is that at least 98% of patients are to be referred for treatment within a maximum of 26 weeks. Those who are not treated within 26 weeks, for clinical reasons or patient choice, are treated within a maximum of 36 weeks.²⁰ In September 2011, 83.7% were treated within 26 weeks and 96.7% were treated within 36 weeks of the date the referral letter was received in the hospital.²¹

3 Outpatient Waiting Numbers and Times

Outpatients waiting numbers are defined **as the number of patients waiting for their first appointment with a consultant at the end of the quarter**. Waiting time for a first outpatient appointment begins on the date the HSC Trust receives a referral for a first appointment and ends on that date the patient attends a first outpatient appointment. Patients who cannot attend (CNA) have their waiting time adjusted to commence on the date they informed the HSC Trust they could not attend, while patients who do not attend (DNA) have their waiting time adjusted to commence on the date of the DNA.²²

3.1 Outpatients waiting for a first appointment

As of the 31st December 2011 the total number of people waiting for a first outpatient appointment in Northern Ireland was 124,100. This was a decrease of 6,683 (-5.1%) from the previous quarter and a decrease of 489 (-0.4%) from Dec 2010.

Figure 1a below shows the historical trend from 1999 of total numbers waiting for a first outpatient appointment at the end of the December quarter in each year (see Appendix, Table 1a, for exact numbers). As can be seen outpatient waiting numbers are now around the level they were in 2000, when numbers were on the rise, but still

¹⁷ NHS Scotland, "NHS Scotland Performance Targets-Access" Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/NHS-Scotland/17273/targets/Access> Accessed: 07/11/2011

¹⁸ NHS National Services Scotland, ISD, Waiting Times, <http://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Waiting-Times/Publications/2011-08-30/2011-08-30-WT-Summary.pdf?72916811705>

¹⁹ NHS National Services Scotland, ISD, Waiting Times <http://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Waiting-Times/Publications/2011-08-30/2011-08-30-WT-IPDCOP-Report.pdf?30874270201>

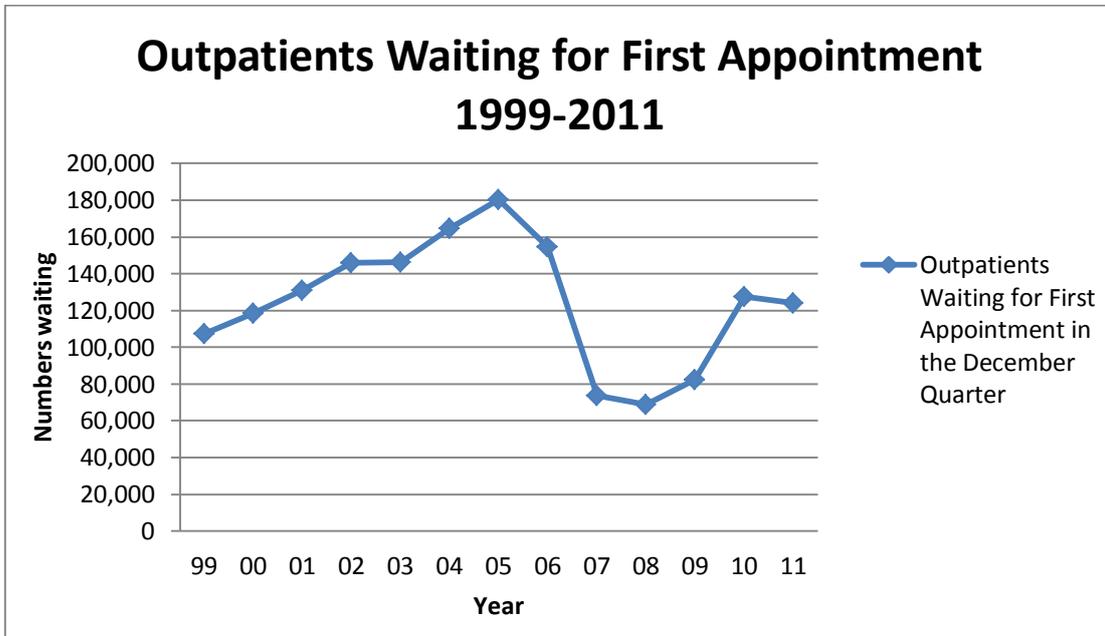
²⁰ NHS Wales, *Annual Operating Framework: High Level Summary 2010/2011*, 18th January 2010 p. 21. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/publications/health/letters/2009/aof201011/?jsessionid=zBqpTn2XRvy8cBjFW9pY6KJ6bw36TNSfthmH5WsgCH7fGnZT3WDZ!-1883660344?lang=en&ts=3&status=close>. Accessed: 07/11/2011

²¹ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/headlines/health2011/1111101/?lang=en>

²² DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists: September 2010, Technical Notes*, published December 2010

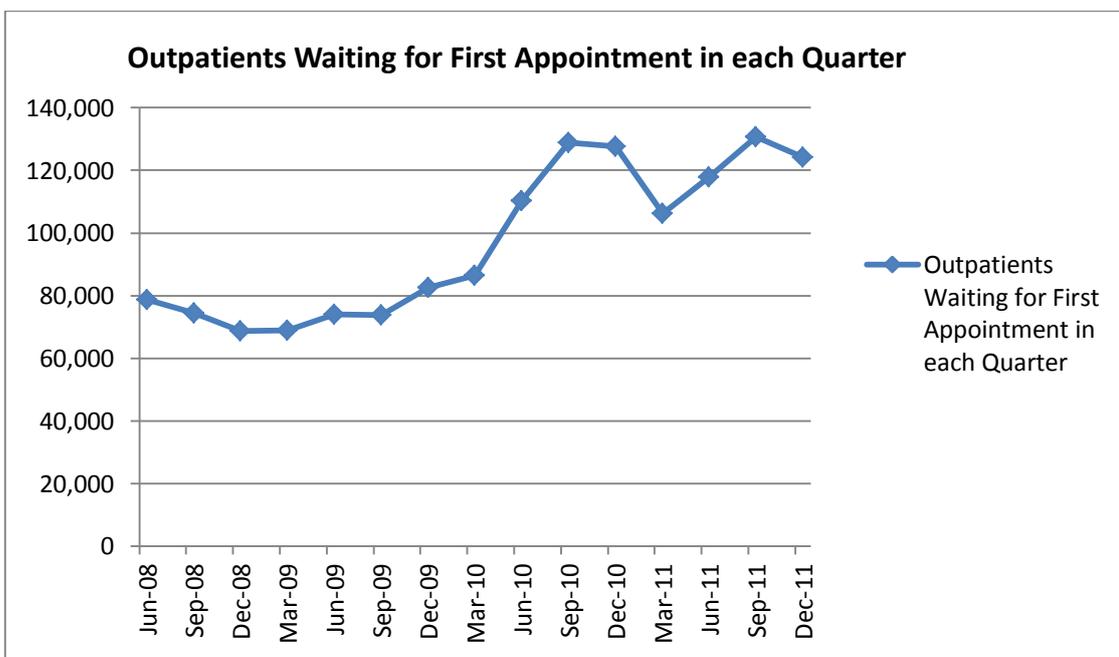
below the peak of the last decade which occurred in 2005, when over 180,000 were waiting for a first outpatient appointment. **Figure 1b** takes a closer look per quarter at the numbers from June 2008 (see Appendix, Table 1b, for exact numbers).

Figure 1a



(See Appendix, Table 1a, for exact numbers).

Figure 1b



(See Appendix, Table 1b, for exact numbers).

3.2 Outpatients waiting more than 9 weeks for a first appointment

As stated in Section 2 above, **the 2011/12 waiting time target states that at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than nine weeks, and no patients should wait longer than 21 weeks for an outpatient appointment.**²³ The previous 2010/11 target was more ambitious and stated that, “*by March 2011, no patient should wait longer than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment*”²⁴.

The most recent figures from the 31st December 2011 show that the first target is presently being met but the second is not. Of the 124,100 outpatients waiting, less than 50% (47.8%), 59,378 patients, were waiting for more than 9 weeks for their first outpatient appointment. This was an increase of 417 from the previous quarter but a fall of 4,906 since December 2010. However, of the 59,378 people waiting more than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment **24,720 were waiting more than 21 weeks.**

Table 2 below gives more detailed figures for those waiting more than 9 weeks over the past year, showing a peak in September 2011.

Table 2: Those waiting more than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment

Quarter	31 st Dec 2011	30 th Sept 2011	30 th June 2011	31 st March 2011	30 th Dec 2010
Total numbers waiting for a first outpatient appointment	124,100	130,783	117,926	106,227	124,589
Total numbers waiting more than 9 weeks for a first appointment	59,378 (47.8% of the total waiting)	58,961 (45.1% of the total waiting)	44,709 (37.9% of the total waiting)	31,909 (30.0% of the total waiting)	54,472 (43.7% of the total waiting)

3.3 Outpatient waiting time by speciality

Of the 124,100 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment in December 2011, 61.8% were waiting within the seven specialities of:

- Ophthalmology;
- Dermatology;

²³ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Outpatient Waiting Times Quarter Ending December 2011*, Statistics Release, published February 2012

²⁴ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2010*, Statistics Release, published December 2010

- General Surgery;
- Ear, Nose & Throat (ENT);
- Gynaecology;
- Trauma & Orthopaedics; and
- General Medicine.

Ophthalmology, Dermatology and Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT), included here as examples, had three of the largest numbers of people waiting as of the 31st December 2011. These three specialties are among those where the independent sector has been used to treat patients (see Table 1). The figures for these three specialties, including the numbers of patients waiting for **more than nine weeks**, have been included in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Waiting times and numbers for a first outpatient appointment in Ophthalmology, Dermatology and ENT Dec 2010 to Dec 2011

Patients waiting for an Appointment by weeks waiting	> 9-13	> 13-26	>26	Total number of patients waiting	Total number of patients waiting for longer than 9 weeks	Total number of patients waiting for longer than 9 weeks As a % of the total waiting
Ophthalmology Dec 2011	1,994	3,671	3,261	14,257	8,926	62.6%
Ophthalmology Sept 2011	1,569	4,244	2,259	13,907	8,072	58%
Ophthalmology Dec 2010	2,096	5,107	1,897	14,795	9,100	61.5%
Dermatology Dec 2011	1,179	3,267	4,058	12,665	8,504	67.1%
Dermatology Sept 2011	1,518	3,651	3,997	14,458	9,166	63.4%
Dermatology Dec 2010	1,831	3,953	3,364	14,244	9,148	64.2%
ENT Dec 2011	1,824	2,016	707	11,425	4,547	39.8%
ENT Sept 2011	1,678	1,434	766	11,600	3,878	33.4%
ENT Dec 2010	1,136	973	171	8,997	2,280	25.3%

3.4 Outpatients waiting time by HSC Trust

At the end of December 2011 there were 124,100 people waiting for a first outpatient appointment in Northern Ireland and the largest number of patients were waiting in the Belfast Trust; 45,705 (36.8% of NI total). Many regional services, for example cardiac surgery; vascular services; and trauma and orthopaedics, are based in the Belfast HSC which should be taken into account when noting the large numbers of patients waiting for first outpatient appointments in this Trust. **Table 4** shows the numbers waiting for a first outpatient appointment (and those waiting more than 9 weeks) in each HSC Trust for the December quarter in 2011 and 2010 as well as the September 2011 quarter.

Table 4: The numbers waiting for a first outpatient appointment (and those waiting more than 9 weeks) in each HSC Trust for the December quarter 2011, September 2011 and December 2010.

Health and Social Care Trust	Belfast HSC Trust	Northern HSC Trust	South Eastern HSC Trust	Southern HSC Trust	Western HSC Trust	Northern Ireland Total
Outpatient waiting numbers at December 2011	45,705 (36.8% of NI total)	22,010 (17.7% of NI total)	19,633 (15.8% of NI total)	18,945 (15.3% of NI total)	17,807 (14.3% of NI total)	124,100
Outpatient waiting numbers at September 2011	49,895 (38.2% of NI total)	22,465 (17.2% of NI total)	20,147 (15.4% of NI total)	18,763 (14.3% of NI total)	19,513 (14.9% of NI total)	130,783
Outpatient waiting number at December 2010	47,779 (38.3% of NI total)	19,245 (15.4% of NI total)	20,825 (16.7% of NI total)	17,452 (14% of NI total)	19,288 (15.5% of NI total)	124,589
Outpatients waiting more than 9 weeks for a first appointment At December 2011	21,092 (46.1% of total waiting in the trust)	13,217 (60% of total waiting in the trust)	9,098 (46.3% of total waiting in the trust)	8,217 (43.4% of total waiting in the trust)	7,772 (43.6% of total waiting in the trust)	59,396 (total in NI waiting more than 9 weeks)
Outpatients waiting more than 9 weeks for a first appointment At September 2011	22,053 (44.2% of total waiting in the trust)	12,384 (55.1% of total waiting in the trust)	9,067 (45% of total waiting in the trust)	6,859 (36.6% of total waiting in the trust)	8,598 (44.1% of total waiting in the trust)	58,961 (total in NI waiting more than 9 weeks)
Outpatients waiting more than 9 weeks for a first appointment At Dec 2010	19,157 (40.1% of total waiting in the trust)	10,043 (52.2% of total waiting in the trust)	9,692 (46.5% of total waiting in the trust)	6,177 (35.4% of total waiting in the trust)	9,403 (48.8% of total waiting in the trust)	54,472 (total in NI waiting more than 9 weeks)

4 Inpatient Waiting Numbers and Times

Inpatient waiting numbers comprises the number of patients waiting for either **ordinary admission** to hospital or for **day case treatment**. These are the numbers of patients waiting for inpatient surgery following a 'decision to admit' being taken by their consultant. **Ordinary admissions** include both (a) patients admitted electively with the expectation that they will remain in hospital for a least one night, and (b) non-elective admissions (e.g. emergency admissions). A patient who is admitted with either of the above intentions, but who leaves hospital for any reason without staying overnight, is still counted as an ordinary admission.²⁵

Day cases are patients admitted electively during the course of a day with the intention of receiving care but who do not require the use of a hospital bed overnight and who return home as scheduled. In the event that the patient has to stay overnight they are then counted as an ordinary admission.²⁶

The waiting time begins from the date the clinician decided to admit the patient. If the patient is offered a date but is unable to attend they will have their waiting time calculated from the most recent date offered.

4.1 Total Waiting for Inpatient Admission

There were 56,470 people waiting for inpatient admission at the end of the December 2011 quarter. This was a decrease of 523 (-0.9%) since the September 2011 quarter and a rise of 5,701 (+11.2%) since the December 2010 quarter.

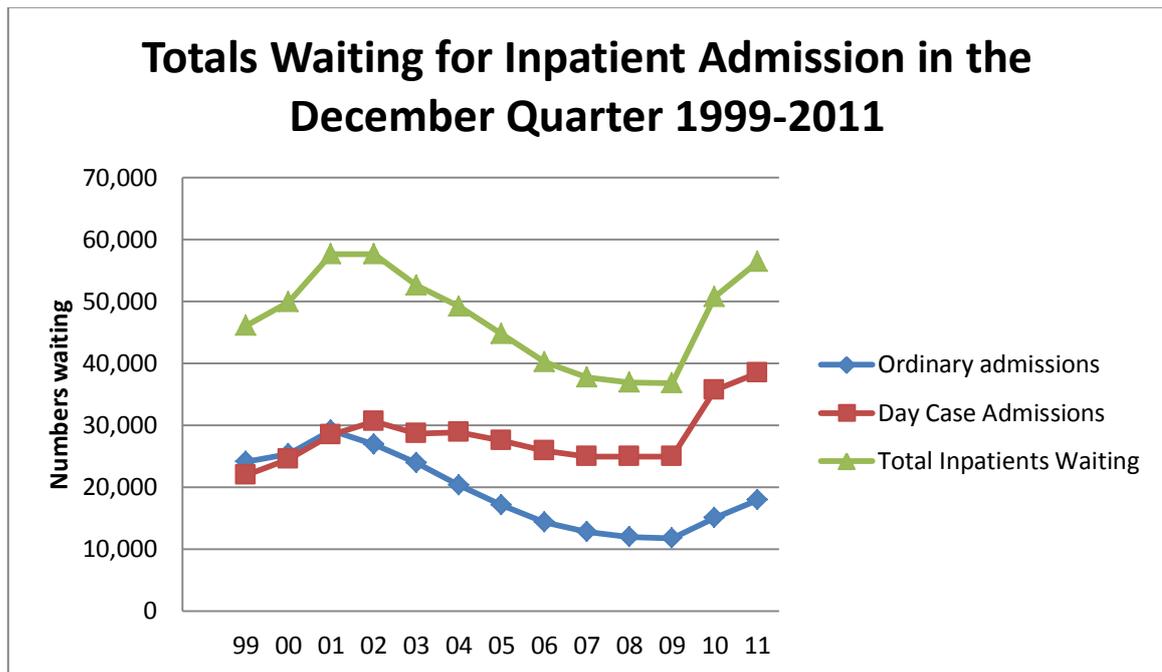
17,956 of the total 56,470 were waiting for **ordinary admission**. This is an increase of 1,000 (+5.9%) since the previous quarter and an increase of 2,843 (+18.8%) since the end of December 2010. 38,514 of the total 56,470 waiting were for **day case admission**. This is a decrease of 1,523 (-3.8%) since the previous quarter and an increase of 2,858 (+8.0%) since the December 2010 quarter.

Figure 2 shows the historical trend from 1999 of total numbers waiting for inpatient admission as at the end of the December quarter in each year and the numbers waiting for either day case or ordinary admission over the same time period. **Figure 3** shows a more detailed representation of the numbers from June 2008 per quarter. (Exact numbers can be found in the Appendix)

²⁵ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Inpatient waiting times quarter ending December 2011, Explanatory Note 4*, published February 2012

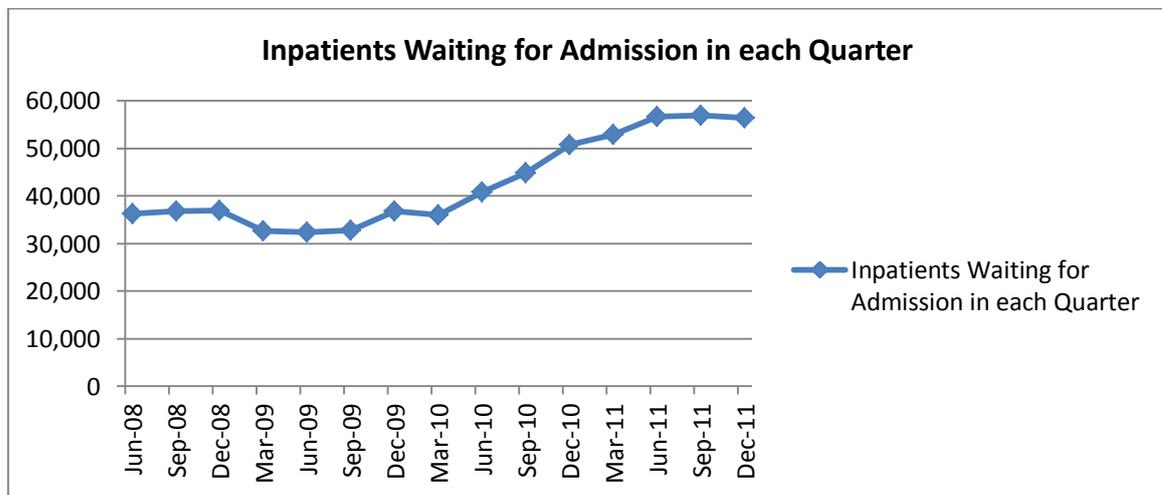
²⁶ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Time Statistics: Inpatient waiting times quarter ending December 2011, Explanatory Note 5*, published February 2012

Figure 2



(See Appendix, Table 3, for exact numbers).

Figure 3



4.2 Total waiting more than 13 weeks for Inpatient Admission

The 2011/12 Ministerial waiting time target states that **“at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than 13 weeks, and no patient should wait longer than 36 weeks, for inpatient admission.”** The same target was in place in 2010/11²⁷ and

²⁷ DHSSPS, Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2010, Statistics Release, published December 2010

previously the 2009/10 target was more ambitious stating that “*from April 2009 no patient should wait longer than 13 weeks for inpatient or day case treatment*”²⁸.

At 31st December 2011 there were 24,168 people waiting for more than 13 weeks for inpatient treatment which makes up 42.8% of all those waiting for inpatient treatment and therefore the first part of the present target is being met. With regards to the 2011/12 target, by the 31st December 2011, all HSC Trusts had met the target that at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than 13 weeks for inpatient/daycase treatment but none had met the second part of the target that no patient should wait more than 36 weeks as 5013 patients had been waiting more than 36 weeks.

Table 5: Totals waiting for inpatient admission and those waiting more than 13 weeks

	Total waiting at December 2011	Total waiting at September 2011	Total waiting at December 2010	Total waiting for more than 13 weeks at December 2011	Total waiting for more than 13 weeks at September 2011	Total waiting for more than 13 weeks at December 2010
Ordinary Admissions (OA)	17,956	16,956	15,113	*	*	5,649 (32.3% of total waiting for OA)
Day Case Admissions (DCA)	38,514	40,037	35,656	*	*	11,507 (32.3% of total waiting for DCA)
Total Inpatient Admissions (IA)	56,470	56,993	50,769	24,168 (42.8% of total waiting for IA)	26,611 (46.7% of total waiting for IA)	17,156 (33.8% of total waiting for IA)

* Only total inpatient admissions figure available now as separation of ordinary and daycase admission has now been removed with regards to the 2011/12 target.

4.3 Inpatient Waiting Times by Speciality

At 31st December 2011, over three-quarters (77.0%) of those waiting for inpatient admission were waiting within seven specialities:

- General Surgery;
- Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery;
- Urology;
- Ophthalmology;
- Gynaecology;

²⁸ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2009*, Statistics Release, published December 2009

- General Medicine;
- Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT).

Table 6 below shows that of the specialties named in the DHSSPS statistics, General Surgery, Trauma and Orthopaedics, Urology and Ophthalmology had the largest numbers of patients on their waiting lists as well as the largest proportion of patients waiting for more than 13 weeks for treatment along with ENT. Numbers for 2010 are included for comparison.

Table 6: Totals waiting for inpatient admission in General Surgery, Trauma and Orthopaedics, Urology, Ophthalmology and Ear, Nose and Throat

	Total Waiting at December 2011	Total Waiting at December 2010	Total Waiting for more than 13 weeks at December 2011	Total Waiting for more than 13 weeks at December 2010
General Surgery (GS)	14,025	11,384	6,159 (43.9% of total waiting in GS)	3,641 (32.0% of total waiting in GS)
Trauma and Orthopaedics (TO)	8,238	6,764	4,545 (55.2% of total waiting in TO)	2,663 (39.4% of total waiting in TO)
Urology (U)	5,627	4,923	2,712 (48.2% of total waiting in U)	1,818 (36.9% of total waiting in U)
Ophthalmology (O)	5,143	3,525	2,103 (40.9% of total waiting in O)	611 (17.3% of total waiting in O)
Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT)	3,221	2,939	1,344 (41.7% of total waiting in ENT)	694 (23.6% of total waiting in ENT)
Total waiting for inpatient admission from the above (IA)	36,254	29,535	16,863 (46.5% of total waiting in IA)	9,427 (31.9% of total waiting in IA)

4.4 Waiting for inpatient admission by HSC Trust

Of the 56,470 people waiting to be admitted to hospitals at 31st December 2011, 22,812 (40.4%) were in the Belfast HSC Trust. Of the 24,168 patients waiting for more than 13 weeks 11,271 (49.4%) were waiting in the Belfast HSC Trust. As previously stated in this briefing, regional services are largely based in Belfast which should be taken into account when noting the large numbers of patients waiting for inpatient admission in this Trust.

Table 7: Waiting for inpatient admission by Trust

Health and Social Care Trust	Belfast HSC Trust	Northern HSC Trust	South Eastern HSC Trust	Southern HSC Trust	Western HSC Trust	Northern Ireland Total
Total waiting for inpatient admission in Dec 2011	22,812 (40.4% of NI total)	6,488 (11.5% of NI total)	6,340 (11.2% of NI total)	9,894 (17.5% of NI total)	10,936 (19.4% of NI total)	56,470
Total waiting for inpatient admission in Sept 2011	23,104 (40.5% of NI total)	7,281 (12.8% of NI total)	5,939 (10.4% of NI total)	9,931 (17.4% of NI total)	10,738 (18.8% of NI total)	56,993
Total waiting for inpatient admission in Dec 2010	20,912 (41.2% of NI total)	7,100 (14.0% of NI total)	5,502 (10.8% of NI total)	8,560 (16.9% of NI total)	8,695 (17.1% of NI total)	50,769
Total waiting more than 13 weeks for admission in December 2011	11,271 (49.4% of total waiting in trust)	1,971 (30.4% of total waiting in trust)	2,239 (35.3% of total waiting in trust)	4,444 (44.9% of total waiting in trust)	4,243 (38.8% of total waiting in trust)	24,168 (42.8% of total waiting in NI)
Total waiting more than 13 weeks for admission in Sept 2011	12,454 (53.9% of total waiting in trust)	2,615 (35.9% of total waiting in trust)	2,353 (39.36% of total waiting in trust)	4,554 (45.9% of total waiting in trust)	4,635 (43.2% of total waiting in trust)	26,611 (46.7% of total waiting in NI)
Total waiting more than 13 weeks for admission in Dec 2010	7,219 (34.5% of total waiting in Trust)	2,520 (35.5% of total waiting in Trust)	1,406 (25.6% of total waiting in Trust)	3,269 (38.2% of total waiting in Trust)	2,742 (31.5% of total waiting in Trust)	17,156 (33.8% of total waiting in NI)

5 Diagnostic Services Waiting Numbers and Times

A diagnostic service provides an examination, test or procedure used to identify a person's disease or condition and which allows a medical diagnosis to be made.

The waiting time for a diagnostic service commences on the date when the referral for the service is received by the health care provider and stops on the date when the test is performed. Patients who cannot attend (CNA) have their waiting time adjusted to commence on the date they informed the HSC Trust they could not attend, while patients who do not attend (DNA) have their waiting time adjusted to commence on the date of the DNA.²⁹

The DHSSPS Commissioning Plan Direction 2011 set out one standard in relation to diagnostic testing - **From April 2011, ensure that Trusts achieve a level of performance that all routine diagnostic tests are reported on within 4 weeks.**

²⁹ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists: September 2010, Technical Notes*, published December 2010

Performance against this standard is reported on a monthly basis to the Departmental Board. ³⁰

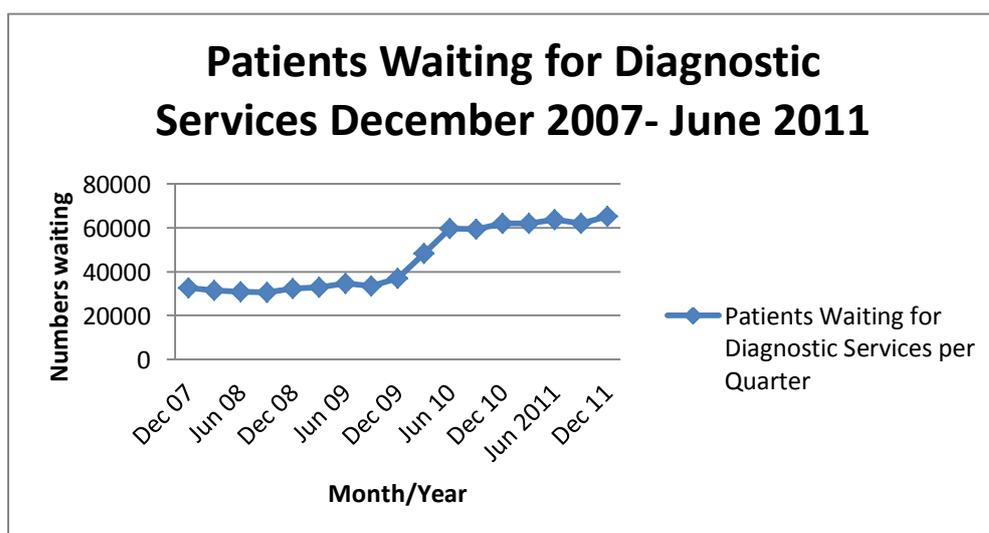
The previous targets included the 2009/10 target for diagnostic services which stated that “from April 2009, no patient should wait longer than 9 weeks for one of the selected diagnostic tests (13 weeks for a day case endoscopy [includes gastroscopy and colonoscopy])”³¹ and the 2010/11 target was that “patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a diagnostic service (the majority of patients waiting for a day case endoscopy should wait no longer than 13 weeks, with no patient waiting more than 36 weeks)”³². This was referred to as the 9/13 week target.

Note: From the end of March 2010 all diagnostic services are included in the data collated by the DHSSPS, prior to this data included only 16 selected diagnostic services. This may explain the increase seen at that time, although since then the trend remains upwards.

5.1 Total Numbers Waiting for a Diagnostic Service

The total numbers waiting for diagnostic services in the quarter ending December 2011 stood at 65,379. This represents an increase of 3,270 people (+5.3%) from the previous quarter. 15,021 were waiting for more than the 9/13 week target, which was a decrease of 163 (-1.1%) on the previous September 2011 quarter. With regard to the target, each HSC Trust reported over 99% of routine tests being reported on within four weeks. **Figure 4** shows the historical trend from December 2007 of total numbers waiting for Diagnostic Services. Statistics presenting numbers of patients waiting for Diagnostic Services have been collected since July 2007.

Figure 4(See Appendix, Table 4, for exact numbers).



³⁰ Personal Communication with DHSSPS DALO, 21st November 2011

³¹ DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2009*, Statistics Release, published December 2009

³² DHSSPS, *Northern Ireland Waiting Lists – September 2010*, Statistics Release, published December 2010

Of the 65,379 people waiting for diagnostic services at 31st December 2011, 42,494 (65.0%) were waiting for one of 7 services: Non-obstetric Ultrasound; Magnetic Resonance Imaging; Gastroscopy (day case); Colonoscopy (day case); Computerised Tomography; Echocardiography; and Neurophysiology.

Of the 15,021 people, waiting for more than 9/13 weeks for a diagnostic service, 11,177 (74.4%) were waiting within the seven diagnostic services listed above.

Of the 65,379 patients waiting for a diagnostic service, 26,695 (40.8%) were waiting within the Belfast HSC Trust. As previously stated in this briefing, regional services are largely based in Belfast which should be taken into account when noting the large numbers of patients waiting for diagnostic services in this trust.

6. Discussion

In November 2009, the NI Assembly Public Accounts Committee (PAC) discussed matters that were raised in an NI Audit Office General Report on the Health and Social Care Sector and this discussion included performance regarding waiting times.

The Chairperson of the PAC commended the DHSSPS at that time on the “*dramatic reduction in outpatient waiting times in 2006-2007 in comparison with those between 2000 and 2006*”.³³ The historical trend graph provide in this briefing at Figure 1a clearly demonstrates the reduction at that time. However, it also indicates that during 2007 to 2009 the rate of reduction slowed and since then outpatient waiting times overall are on the increase again, with a slight decrease observed this year. They still remain below the peak of 2006.

The statistics also show that inpatient waiting numbers have also risen over the last two years and are now just below the 2002 peak when almost 60,000 patients were waiting for inpatient admission (see Figure 2). Much of the recent rise is related to increases in Day Case admissions. Waiting times for diagnostic tests and procedures have only been published since 2007 and are now at their highest point since December 2007.

³³ The Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, Official Report (Hansard), 12 November 2009, http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/record/committees2009/PAC/09.11.12_PerformanceOfHealthService.pdf

At the PAC meeting in 2009, the DHSSPS noted that the need to improve waiting times had been a ministerial priority since early 2005 and outlined how the reduction had been achieved at that time, including³⁴:

- Significant expenditure to use the independent sector to clear backlogs of patients in order to get to a balanced position of supply and demand. (This expenditure has continued and in 2009/10 over £57million was spent and in 2010/11, the expenditure dropped substantially to over £24million – see Table 1 for exact figures and specialities).
- The balance of supply and demand was problematic in some specialties due to issues of staff recruitment and retention; and
- Much of the improvement was made by clinicians and managers looking at the detail of how systems worked, changing ways of working, undertaking higher volumes of work and re-organising patient pathways.

Specifically, the DHSSPS outlined to the PAC a number of measures it had put in place to change systems and ways of working to reduce waiting times³⁵:

- Ensuring patients of the same clinical priority are seen in strict chronological order;
- Pooling of lists between consultants in a specialty to equalise waiting times;
- Partial booking to offer patients a choice of date and time for their appointment;
- Review of clinical templates to ensure that a reasonable allocation of time is given to new, non-urgent referrals;
- Additional evening and weekend sessions; and
- Introduction of Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services to ensure patients are seen quickly by the most appropriate healthcare professional

In its subsequent Report on the Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, the PAC acknowledged the measures that the DHSSPS had taken to improve waiting times. It also recommended that a continued emphasis was placed on the further development of such initiatives to ensure that reductions in waiting times were sustained. In addition, the PAC was concerned that the use of the independent sector could have implications for value for money and recommended that this was regularly reviewed.³⁶

With regard to the waiting time targets of other jurisdictions (see Section 2), the PAC Report highlighted the NHS 18 week waiting time target from GP referral to eventual treatment as an inpatient or day case patient rather than separate targets for outpatient

³⁴ The Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, Official Report (Hansard), 12 November 2009,

http://archive.niassembly.gov.uk/record/committees2009/PAC/09.11.12_PerformanceOfHealthService.pdf

³⁵ Report on the Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, NI Assembly, Session 2009/10, Eight Report, www.niassembly.gov.uk/public/2007mandate/reports/2009/report_35_09_10r.htm

³⁶ Report on the Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, NI Assembly, Session 2009/10, Eight Report, www.niassembly.gov.uk/public/2007mandate/reports/2009/report_35_09_10r.htm

and elective treatment waits. The DHSSPS advised the PAC Committee that it did not have the resources needed to implement an 18-week target and felt it was not even realistic to consider a total journey time through the system of 25 weeks by 2011.³⁷

Dr Laurence Buckman, Chair of the British Medical Association's (BMA) GP Committee recently highlighted that waiting times for hospital appointments in Northern Ireland were the worst in the UK and that patient safety was being compromised, he said "*around England it would be unusual for patients to wait more than 13 weeks*".³⁸ It is useful to note that the waiting times measured in Northern Ireland are not for the total journey from GP referral to treatment as in England. In Northern Ireland once the first wait from GP referral to first outpatient appointment is completed the clock starts again with a separate wait from outpatient appointment to inpatient or daycase treatment.

One of the experts, the GP Dr Ian Rutter, involved with the Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, ("*Transforming Your Care*" published December 2011), has said that GPs should be encouraged to develop specialisms and do as much as possible to treat people in the community. Dr Brian Dunn, Chair of the BMA (NI) GP Committee believes that GPs need to be able to admit patients directly to a hospital ward as they used to do via a call to the house officer, rather than having to send them first to A&E as is the case now.³⁹

Although the latter comment is more concerned with A&E waits, such measures in general are expected to have an impact on waiting lists. For example, at the Holywood Arches Health Centre in Belfast some GP specialty services have already started including an ENT clinic which has shortened outpatient waiting lists for that service.⁴⁰

As part of the Review, an Omnibus Survey (by IpsosMORI) was conducted. It highlighted that with regard to waiting times for an appointment with a hospital consultant - 82% felt that some improvement was required and 36% felt that a lot of improvement was needed.⁴¹ In addition an online survey completed by 673 individuals (91% of respondents worked for an organisation providing health and social care) provided suggestions for improving waiting times for an appointment with a hospital consultant. The suggestions were summarised in the Review as follows⁴²:

- More consultants / specialists/ clear backlogs / increased training for these; more staff generally;
- No private work;

³⁷ Report on the Performance of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, Public Accounts Committee, NI Assembly, Session 2009/10, Eight Report, www.niassembly.gov.uk/public/2007mandate/reports/2009/report_35_09_10r.htm

³⁸ Northern Ireland waiting times 'worst in the UK', Lisa Smyth, Belfast Telegraph, 27th March 2012, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/northern-ireland-waiting-times-lsqquoworst-in-ukrsquo-16136309.html>

³⁹ Northern Ireland waiting times 'worst in the UK', Lisa Smyth, Belfast Telegraph, 27th March 2012, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/health/northern-ireland-waiting-times-lsqquoworst-in-ukrsquo-16136309.html>

⁴⁰ Northern Ireland GP surgeries to 'widen services', BBC News NI, 24 November 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northernireland-15865054

⁴¹ Transforming your Care – A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, December 2011, page 105

⁴² Transforming your Care – A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, December 2011, Appendix 2, Suggestions for Improvement

- More appointments (evening and weekends);
- Improved coding on new/review system / clarity on partial booking system;
- Use of ICATS (Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services);
- Expand Nurse led appointments /clinics;
- Penalties for DNAs (did not attend);
- Improve communication;
- Training for community specialists; and
- Telemedicine.

Appendix

All numbers taken from the appropriate DHSSPS waiting list publication, all of these can be accessed at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/waiting_times_main/waiting_times/waiting_times-previous.htm#waitinglist

Appendix Table 1a - Outpatients waiting for first appointment 1998-2011

Year (December Quarter)	Outpatients Waiting for First Appointment in the December Quarter
99	107,444
00	118,386
01	131,166
02	145,953
03	146,180
04	164,672
05	180,238
06	154,555
07	73,637
08	68,734
09	82,571
10	124,589
11	124,100

Appendix Table 1b - Outpatients Waiting for a First Appointment 2008-2011

Year (Quarter)	Outpatients Waiting for First Appointment in each Quarter
June 2008	78,791
Sept 2008	74,390
Dec 2008	68,734
March 2009	68,942
June 2009	74,000
Sept 2009	73,707
Dec 2009	82,571
March 2010	86,501
June 2010	110,220
Sept 2010	128,835
Dec 2010	124,589
March 2011	106,227
June 2011	117,926
Sept 11	130,783
Dec 11	124,100

Appendix Table 2 - Totals Waiting for Ordinary and Day-Case Admissions 1999-2011

Year (December Quarter)	Ordinary admissions	Day Case Admissions	Total Inpatients Waiting
99	24,144	21,946	46,090
00	25,400	24,520	49,920
01	29,216	28,488	57,704
02	26,965	30,684	57,649
03	23,971	28,635	52,606
04	20,360	28,890	49,250
05	17,145	27,595	44,740
06	14,373	25,879	40,252
07	12,813	24,950	37,763
08	11,962	24,938	36,900
09	11,811	24,997	36,808
10	15,113	35,656	50,769
11	17,956	38,514	56,470

Appendix Table 3 – Inpatients Waiting for Admission 2008-2011

Year (Quarter)	Inpatients Waiting for Admission in each Quarter
June 2008	36,273
Sept 2008	36,766
Dec 2008	36,900
March 2009	32,663
June 2009	32,342
Sept 2009	32,765
Dec 2009	36,808
March 2010	36,052
June 2010	40,875
Sept 2010	44,918
Dec 2010	50,769
March 2011	52,880
June 2011	56,689
Sept 11	56,993
Dec 11	56,470

Appendix Table 4 - Patients waiting for Diagnostic Services Jun 2008 – Jun 2011

Quarter	Patients Waiting for Diagnostic Services per Quarter
Jun 2008	30,751
Sept 2008	30,645
Dec 2008	32,204
Mar 2009	32,963
Jun 2009	34,484
Sept 2009	33,465
Dec 2009	36,831
Mar 2010	48,371
Jun 2010	59,575
Sept 2010	59,487
Dec 2010	62,001
Mar 2011	62,127
June 2011	63,909
Sept 11	62,054
Dec 11	65,379