ESTIMATING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HEALTHCARE WAITING LISTS IN ENGLAND

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Summary

- Covid-19 has increased the number of patients waiting for treatment in England to record highs
- Many patients with chronic conditions did not seek care during the pandemic but may still require treatment in the future. This "hidden need" is likely to result in an almost doubling in the number of patients waiting for treatment
- Without intervention the total known and unknown waitlist population could peak at 15.5 million in 2023

Background

- The Covid-19 pandemic has had a large impact on healthcare systems, leading to many patients with non-Covid-19 conditions having their care postponed or delayed
- Consequently, the number of patients waiting for treatment in the National Health Service (NHS) in England has reached record highs
- Those who already have been referred for care, and are on a **waiting list** are only the 'known' part of the issue
- An 'unknown' amount of people have not come forward for care over the course of the pandemic, these are people with '**hidden need**'
- The waiting list and hidden need must be considered together for a more holistic estimate of the elective care backlog, this is the '**unmet need**'

SCAN ME

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Methods

- We used monthly data published by NHS Digital on all patients referred for elective treatment (including surgery) in England to estimate waitlists, hidden need and unmet need during the pandemic
- Hidden need was estimated by subtracting new monthly referrals in a baseline year prior to the pandemic from new referrals in the respective month during the pandemic
- We used multi state modelling to estimate the impact on waiting list numbers up to 2025 over 4 different scenarios
- The modelled scenarios were
  1. No additional intervention to clear the elective backlog
  2. 30% increase in elective capacity above pre-Covid-19 levels (inpatient and outpatient increasing in equal measure)
  3. 30% increase in elective capacity above pre-Covid-19 (outpatient capacity increases at a quicker rate than inpatient)
  4. Same as for Scenario 2, but pre-Covid-19 capacity levels reached immediately

There are regional and local waitlist inequalities in England

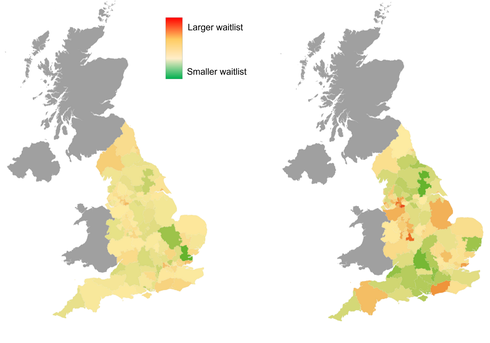

Figure 1. Total on the wait list per 100,000 people by CCG pre-Covid-19 (February 2020) and currently (January 2022)

Unmet need projections

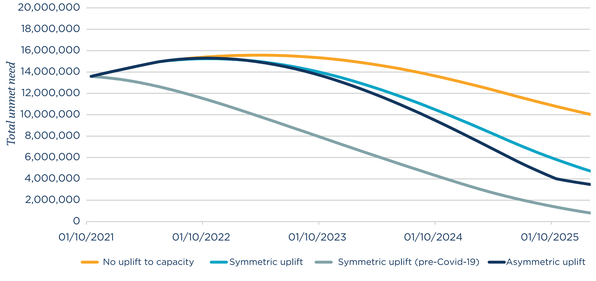

Figure 2. NHS unmet need projections (including national total on the waiting list and hidden need) until December 2025

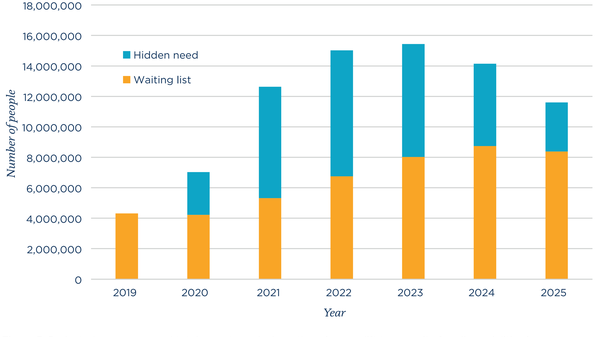

Figure 3. Projected average annual total unmet need where there is no uplift to capacity for all specialities in England (broken down by number on the waiting list and hidden need) until 2025

Results

- **A record 5.8 million were waiting** for elective care in September 2021, a 38% increase compared to the beginning of the pandemic
- There were an **estimated 7.8 million people with hidden need**, who had not come forward for care
- There is geographic inequalities at regional and local NHS level. Per capita:
  - The Midlands has the greatest waitlist size
  - North-West has the greatest hidden need
- Assuming no additional capacity is made available in the NHS, the number of known patients waiting for treatment was estimated to increase from ~4.2 million in 2019 to 8.7 million by 2024
- However the total unmet need may peak at 15.5 million in 2023
- Initially increasing outpatient capacity at a quicker rate than inpatient capacity could help the NHS to clear the backlog more quickly

Conclusions

- Due to Covid-19, the total unmet health need of the known and hidden waiting list populations may reach 15.5 million in 2023
- There is currently considerable regional and local variation in waiting lists across England, which is weakly associated with social deprivation
- Solutions to clear the backlog should be focussed in areas with greater health needs

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