northern cancer alliance

Working together to improve cancer care across the North East and North Cumbria

NHS

Achieving Sustainable Performance in Cancer Pathways

Small changes, consistently applied, delivering better pathways for patients

Aaron Tucker | Head of Programmes

Northern Cancer Alliance

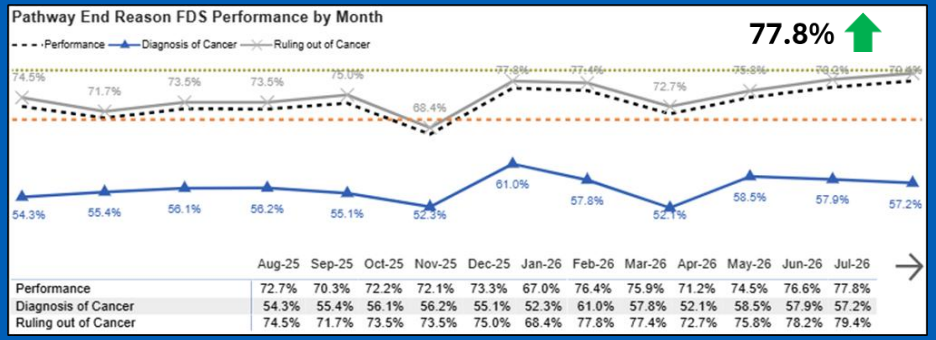
Achieving sustainable performance is not about one quick fix

Sustainable performance is rarely achieved through one major intervention. It comes from understanding the pathway, addressing the right issues and consistently delivering a series of manageable improvements.

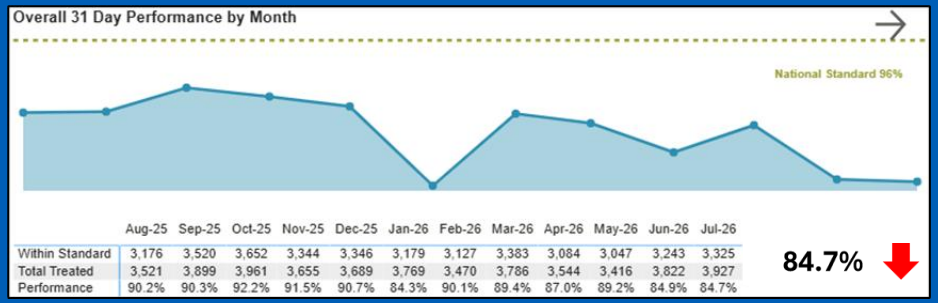
- To consider how sustainable improvement is achieved in cancer pathways
- To encourage teams to understand where delays and variation occur
- To focus on practical, manageable improvements
- To learn directly from high-performing FDS pathways

Understand it. → Break it down. → Improve it. → Sustain it

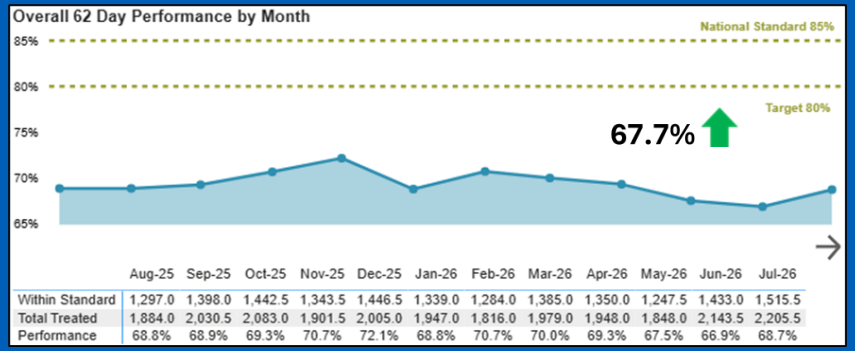
Why are we talking about this today?



	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct-25	Nov-25	Dec-25	Jan-26	Feb-26	Mar-26	Apr-26	May-26	Jun-26	Jul-26
Performance	72.7%	70.3%	72.2%	72.1%	73.3%	67.0%	76.4%	75.9%	71.2%	74.5%	76.6%	77.8%
Diagnosis of Cancer	54.3%	55.4%	56.1%	56.2%	55.1%	52.3%	61.0%	57.8%	52.1%	58.5%	57.9%	57.2%
Ruling out of Cancer	74.5%	71.7%	73.5%	73.5%	75.0%	68.4%	77.8%	77.4%	72.7%	75.8%	78.2%	79.4%



	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct-25	Nov-25	Dec-25	Jan-26	Feb-26	Mar-26	Apr-26	May-26	Jun-26	Jul-26
Within Standard	3,176	3,520	3,652	3,344	3,346	3,179	3,127	3,383	3,084	3,047	3,243	3,325
Total Treated	3,521	3,899	3,961	3,655	3,689	3,769	3,470	3,786	3,544	3,416	3,822	3,927
Performance	90.2%	90.3%	92.2%	91.5%	90.7%	84.3%	90.1%	89.4%	87.0%	89.2%	84.9%	84.7%



	Aug-25	Sep-25	Oct-25	Nov-25	Dec-25	Jan-26	Feb-26	Mar-26	Apr-26	May-26	Jun-26	Jul-26
Within Standard	1,297.0	1,398.0	1,442.5	1,343.5	1,446.5	1,339.0	1,284.0	1,385.0	1,350.0	1,247.5	1,433.0	1,515.5
Total Treated	1,884.0	2,030.5	2,083.0	1,901.5	2,005.0	1,947.0	1,816.0	1,979.0	1,948.0	1,848.0	2,143.5	2,205.5
Performance	68.8%	68.9%	69.3%	70.7%	72.1%	68.8%	70.7%	70.0%	69.3%	67.5%	66.9%	68.7%

- 28-day FDS performance for patients diagnosed with cancer is around 19% lower than for those with cancer ruled out
- 31-day performance has declined over the past 12 months and remains below both the 94% target and the 96% national standard.
- 62-day performance has declined over the past 12 months and remains significantly below both the 80% target and the 85% national standard.

Behind all the numbers are our patients…

Every pathway. Every wait. Every patient.

northern cancer alliance

NHS

How we currently monitor cancer performance

No single metric is a reliable proxy for good cancer care.

OUTCOMES

Stage, survival, treatment completion, quality of life

How: COSD, National Cancer Audit reports, GIRFT

WAITING TIMES

FDS, 31-day, 62-day, pathway milestones

HOW: Weekly performance meetings, weekly PTLs, fortnightly performance recovery meeting

QUALITY

Safety signals, rework, cancellations, prehabilitation, education

HOW: Audits, GIRFT, DNA rates, provision of information and support, digital and other resources, education provision

CAPACITY

Diagnostics, theatre, clinics, workforce

HOW: Optics, NSOR capacity and demand modelling, wider trust level capacity modelling

EXPERIENCE

Communication, coordination, support, staff experience

HOW: NCPES, F&F, Quality of Life survey, complaints and compliments

EQUITY

Deprivation, access, protected characteristics

HOW: Access to support services e.g. prehabilitation, psychology, contribution to trust and locality health inequalities workstreams, literacy, lung screening

The challenge: Don’t eat the elephant whole

- The whole cancer pathway can appear complex and overwhelming
- Trying to improve everything at once can dilute effort
- Break the pathway into individual stages
- Identify where the greatest delays, variation and opportunities sit
- Select a manageable number of priorities
- Make the changes, measure the effect and build from there

The starting point is not a bigger action plan. The starting point is a better understanding of the pathway.

Understand the pathway - Where patients wait and why?

- Map the pathway from referral to diagnosis or cancer ruled out
- Understand demand, capacity and patient flow
- Look beyond the overall FDS percentage
- Identify differences between tumour sites, pathway stages and patient outcomes
- Find the points where patients repeatedly wait
- Distinguish isolated pressures from recurring process problems
- Use patient-level information and pathway analysis alongside headline performance

Team Sky: Marginal Gains

Small improvements, added together, can create a significant result

Application to cancer pathways

A small gain could be:

- Referrals triaged earlier
- Missing information obtained more quickly
- Diagnostic tests booked sooner
- Results reviewed more consistently
- Fewer unnecessary handovers
- Patients tracked before they approach day 28
- Escalations made earlier
- Communication between teams improved
- Administrative steps standardised

Each individual change may appear small, but when several improvements are delivered reliably across the pathway, the cumulative impact can be significant

Formula 1: Continuously improving

Performance is created by improving both the system and the way people work within it

The pit-stop comparison

Success depends on:

- A clearly defined process
- Every team member understanding their role
- The right equipment being available
- Work being completed in the correct sequence
- Precise coordination between different people
- Problems being identified and addressed quickly
- Repeated practice and continuous refinement
- No single person trying to complete the entire task

What this means for cancer pathways

Improve the pathway and improve the way the team works

High-performance principle	Cancer pathway application
Break down overall performance	Map the individual stages of the pathway
Look for marginal gains	Identify small, achievable improvements
Improve the equipment or car	Improve pathway processes, information and systems
Refine the pit stop	Make handovers and operational processes more efficient
Give everyone a clear role	Establish clear ownership and accountability
Use real-time information	Maintain visible, accurate pathway tracking
Identify problems early	Escalate patients and operational risks before a breach
Review every performance	Learn from delays, variation and successful cases
Practise and standardise	Embed consistent operating procedures
Work as one team	Connect clinical, diagnostic and administrative functions

Focus effort where it matters

Do not try to improve every part of every pathway at once

- **Understand** the pathway
- **Identify** the constraint
- **Prioritise** the opportunity
- **Test** a manageable change
- **Measure** the effect
- **Refine** the approach
- **Standardise** what works
- **Repeat** the process

Control, influence and escalate

Act on what you control and highlight where support is needed

What pathway teams control	What may require management support	What may require NCA or system support
• Day-to-day pathway processes • Tracking and escalation disciplines • Roles and responsibilities • Communication between teams • Use of available appointments • Local standard operating procedures • Data quality and visibility • Testing small operational change	• Workforce prioritisation • Changes across departmental boundaries • Diagnostic or reporting capacity • Job planning and clinical engagement • Digital or administrative support • Decisions about investment or service configuration	• Issues involving more than one organisation • Regional pathway variation • Mutual aid or shared capacity • Access to improvement expertise • Comparative data and benchmarking • Wider escalation or commissioning action • Sharing and spreading effective practice

Improvement must become the normal way of working

Make the distinction between temporary recovery and sustainable performance.

Sustainable performance requires:

- Standardised processes
- Clear operational ownership
- Reliable pathway data
- Routine review of variation
- Early escalation
- Continuous testing and learning
- Changes that are deliverable within the core operating model
- Ongoing attention even after the target is reached

Sustainable performance is not reaching the standard once. It is building a pathway that can continue to deliver the standard when demand, staffing and operational pressures change.