

GP Access Survey 2024

A report by Healthwatch Harrow



April 2024

“I’d like to see one doctor as I’m disabled.

There should also be understanding of disability needs when booking appointments.”

Local GP Patient

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1. Introduction

Healthwatch Harrow is a statutory organisation that exists to make sure that the views of Harrow residents on health and social care services are heard and fed back to the people who commission services to ensure they improve. We listen, report, feedback and challenge.

2. Background

Recent light has been shed on people's experiences when accessing GP services. There has been media publicity as well as the general population sharing stories in their communities.

All GPs are contracted to offer a variety of ways to access appointments. Patients should have a choice as to which they would use. These are telephone, online or in person. Since 2020 more remote services are becoming popular. Although this increases the number of services available, research has shown that older people and those who are not computer literate are at a great disadvantage.

This survey was developed as we wanted to know if patients are being treated fairly equally, and whether any support offered met the wide variety of needs and circumstances. We intend to run this annually, so we can benchmark and assess any change in access.

3. Methodology

Participants who were already on our mailing list were sent the link for the survey. In addition, those who required paper copies were given the opportunity to be sent paper copies on request.

The survey run for six weeks.

4. Strengths & Limitations

We were able to target existing mailing lists and encouraged people to forward onto their contacts to increase take up.

The survey was developed in English and was not translated into any other language.

5. Executive Summary of Findings

During March - April 2024, 63 local people completed our survey on access to GP services in Harrow. As a follow up to our forum on “You and your GP” we have decided to run annual surveys on GP access with this year being the baseline. Prior to that each quarter we analyse feedback from residents which help us recognize trends. We see an improvement in the use of digital methods whilst there are various issues with telephone access. These trends are shared with stakeholders and the Borough Based Partnership to drive change and new solutions. We will continue to monitor and escalate to ensure patient experience drives change.

This section summarises key findings - see section 6 for findings in full.

Survey Response - In Summary

Appointment Booking

- On ability to ‘easily book appointments’ satisfaction is mixed, with 52% of respondents feeling satisfied, and a similar number (48%) feeling less so.
- Just over half of respondents (52%) usually book their appointment online, with 40% using the phone, and 8% preferring in-person.
- A quarter (26%) can usually make telephone contact within one minute. A third (32%) usually wait five minutes and a sizeable 42% wait for ‘at least’ ten minutes, when phoning.
- Around two thirds of respondents (62%) are able to ‘easily find’ the online form.
- 58% find the form easy to complete, while a significant 42% do not.
- Around three quarters of respondents (72%) are able to book appointments in-person.
- Three quarters (76%) usually feel respected and supported when booking their appointments.

Waiting Times

- A marginal majority of respondents (56%) are usually seen the same day for emergency appointments. A quarter (23%) say they have waited 3 days or longer.
- For routine appointments, 71% wait 4 days, or more.

Consultations

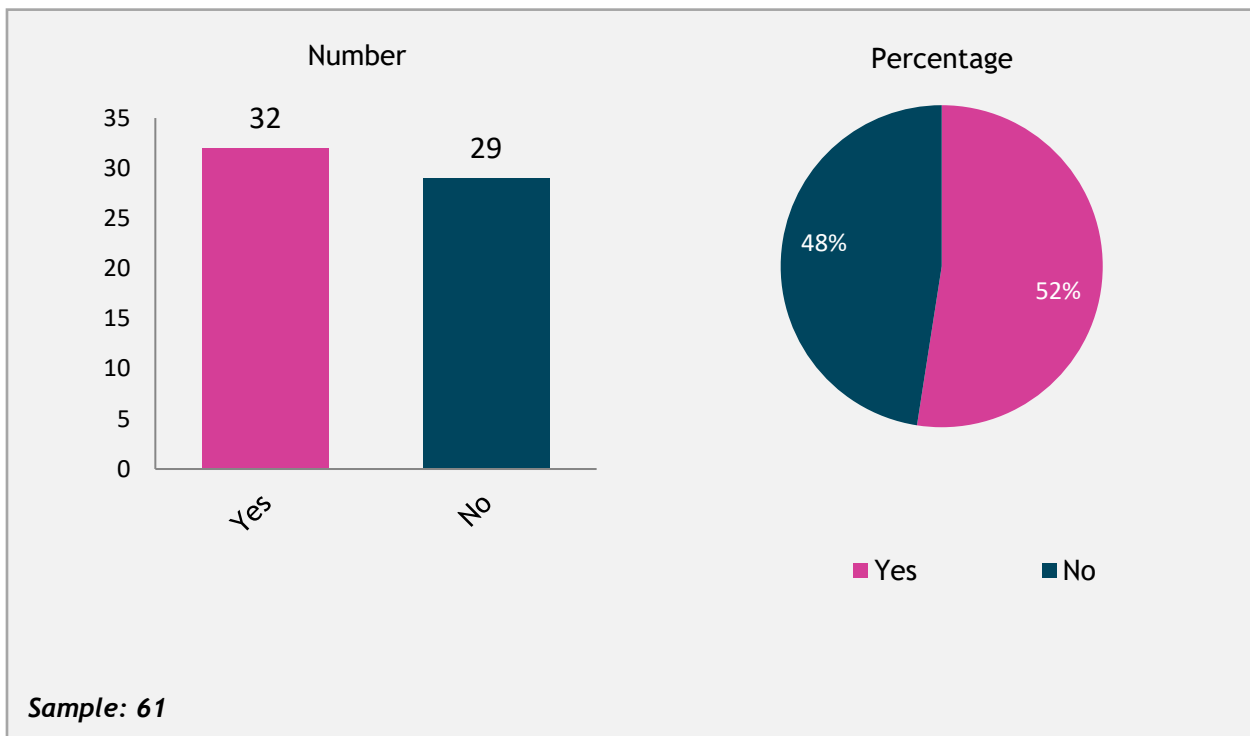
- When booking, half of respondents (52%) have been offered a choice of consultation method (in-person, telephone, video) while a similar number (48%) have not.
- Just 41% of respondents are able to see their preferred GP or nurse.
- A clear majority (92%) have experienced a remote appointment.
- A broad majority (88%) say they are usually called back within the expected time. A tenth of respondents (12%) say they are not.
- Almost two thirds of respondents (62%) feel that remote consultations have fully met their needs, while a significant minority (38%) feel they have not.

6. Our Survey - Analysis of Feedback

During March - April 2024, 63 local people completed our survey on access to GP services in Harrow.

We asked questions on ability to book appointments including telephone, online and in-person access, waiting times, experience of reception services, choice and quality of consultation, and whether issues related to disability, physical or mental health, the move towards online/remote services, or language have presented any barriers.

6.1 Is it easy to book appointments, to see a GP, Nurse or other professional?



On ability to 'easily book appointments' satisfaction is mixed, with 52% of respondents feeling satisfied, and a similar number (48%) feeling less so.

We receive both compliments and complaints on the general booking system.

Selected Feedback

"Easy access and helpful service."

"The appointment service is organised well."

"Good access for my daughter."

"It should be easier to get appointments."

“Too many patients on the books.”

“Mostly my GP doesn't offer appointments for adults, sometimes I manage to get GP appointment for my child.”

When booking, a lack of choice on appointment date and time is a frustration for many respondents - especially for those who work or care, and have to ‘drop everything’ to be able to attend.

Follow-up appointments, such as after hospital treatment, are said to be difficult to arrange.

Selected Feedback

“You can't ring up and book something in for school holidays to check ongoing health conditions.”

“Actually getting an appointment would be a good start. You just need to be able to ring up or walk in and get an appointment at an agreeable time. It's different if you are very ill, but you can't always just drop everything for when it suits them to see you.”

“You are allocated an appointment, with no ability to agree the time or date. I've had to drop everything at work and miss important meetings to rush to an appointment before! There is no triage either, so you either get an appointment on the day, or several weeks later. Nothing in between!”

“If you get sent off to a specialist you then don't get a follow up with the GP when you've been discharged.”

“Difficult to book non-urgent appointments as none available. Difficult if doctor asked for a follow up in ‘x’ weeks’ time but no space.”

While reception staff are commented to be efficient, the importance of staffing levels, and training (such as on disabilities) is underscored.

Selected Feedback

Positives

“The receptionists whom I have dealt with are good.”

“Dedicated staff, queries and requests are monitored and responded to quickly.”

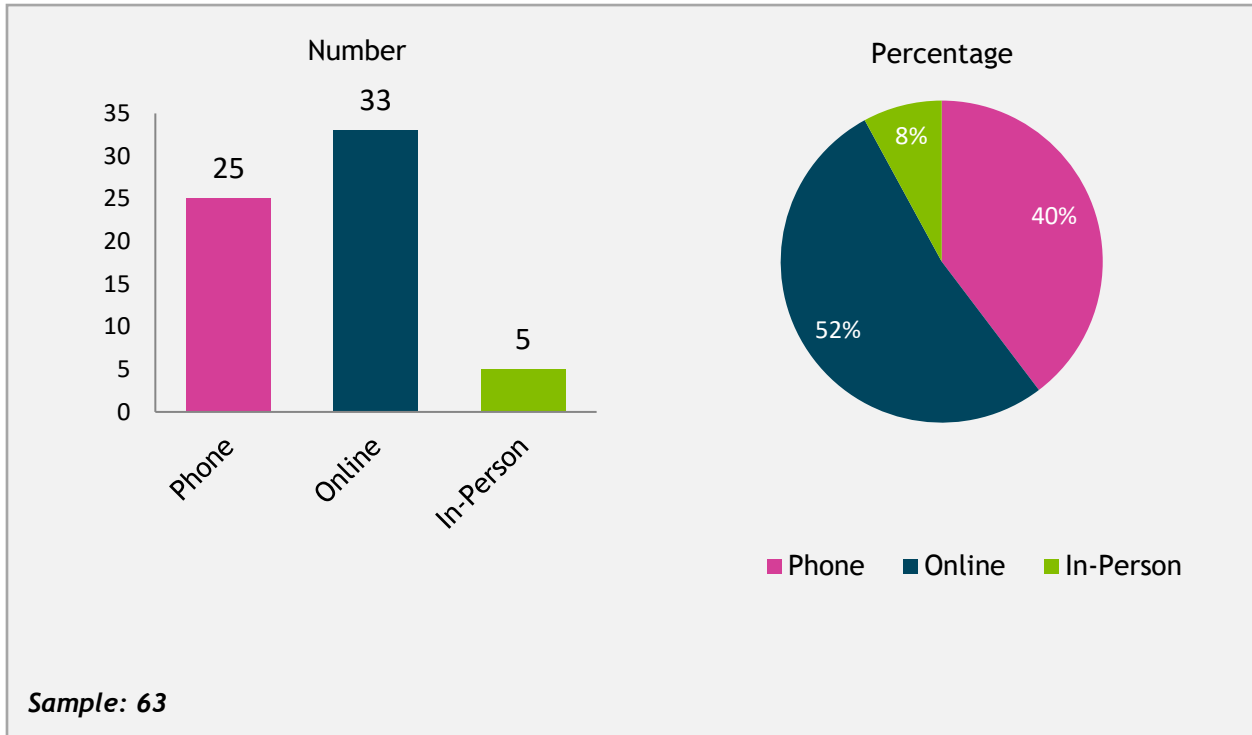
Negatives

“More staff at the reception.”

“Answering of the phones by trained staff.”

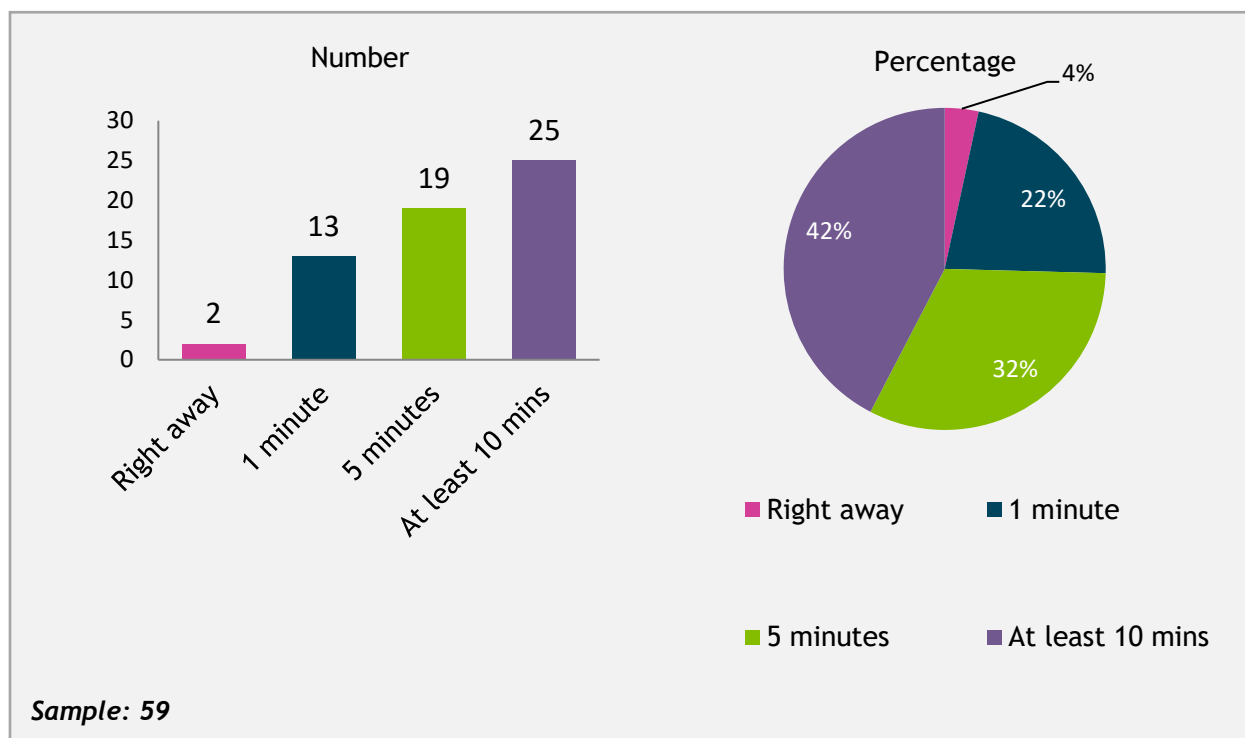
“I’d like there to be understanding of disability needs when booking appointments.”

6.2 How do you usually book your appointments?



Just over half of respondents (52%) usually book their appointment online, with 40% using the phone, and 8% preferring in-person.

6.3 If by phone, do you usually get through right away? If not, how long does it take to speak with someone?



A quarter of respondents (26%) can usually make telephone contact within one minute. A third (32%) usually wait five minutes and a sizeable 42% wait for ‘at least’ ten minutes, when phoning.

While some respondents have benefitted from new callback systems, lines are typically congested at peak morning (8am) and afternoon (2pm) times. This is a cause of ‘trepidation’ for some.

Selected Feedback

“It’s hard to speak to people, as the telephone system is well over subscribed.”

“I would like to be able to get through to make an appointment, often the line is busy, or there can be a long wait. Have to phone at 8am or 3pm to get same day, that is not always possible.”

“It is simply NOT POSSIBLE to book an appointment by phoning the surgery early in the morning or at 2pm. There are NO appointments available at those times no matter who quickly you phone. This is a myth.”

“From last years’ experience I telephone with trepidation.”

“Since callbacks have been introduced, the number of ‘calls waiting’ at my surgery has dropped significantly.”

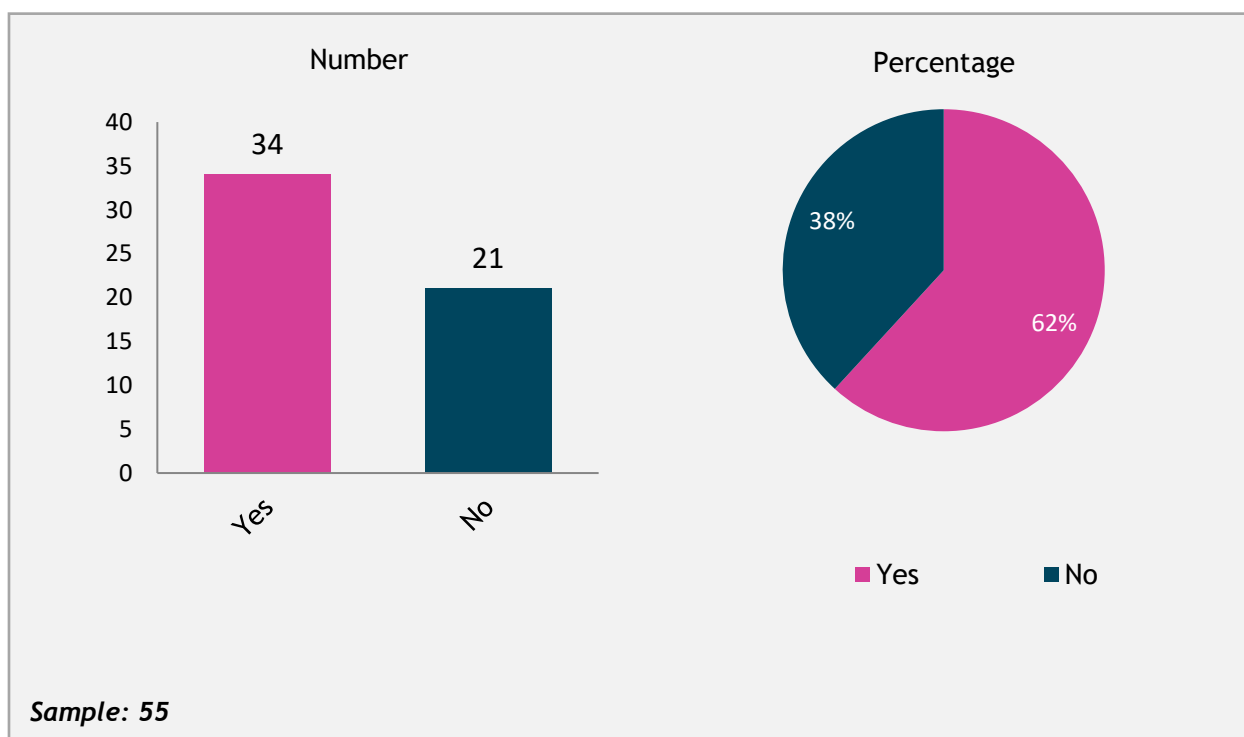
“Once I get through to the receptionist then I can achieve something.”

One carer finds it especially challenging to commit to peak-time calling.

Selected Feedback

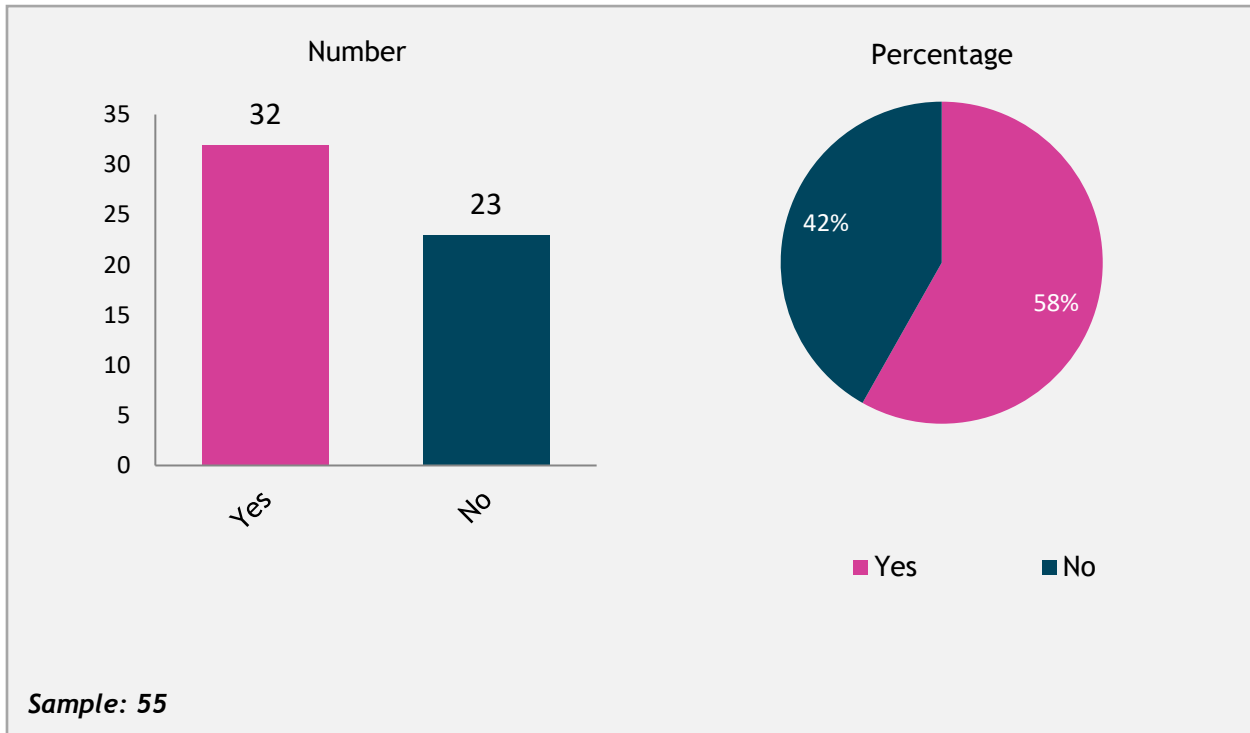
“For unpaid carers (not the NHS or paid care workers), to have a designated phone line that opens at 8am. Ideally no queue but I know that it's impossible. Or have a designated person to return our calls quickly and prioritise. To ensure that they will return the call at a pre-arranged time that suits the unpaid carer!”

6.4a If online, can you find the online form easily?



Around two thirds of respondents (62%) are able to ‘easily find’ the online form.

6.4b Is the online form easy to complete?



58% find the form easy to complete, while a significant 42% do not.

As with phone systems, we hear that PATCHS requires patients to log in at peak times (such as 7.45am) in order to successfully book - again a frustration for parents or workers. The ability to use the form at any time, is desired.

One person complains that online booking should not be required for all types of appointment - such as blood test follow-ups.

Selected Feedback

"The online booking system is a nightmare. You have to log in at 8am (when I am always busy with getting kids ready) and it is closed again about ten minutes later."

"Not everyone can be hanging over their computers from 7.40am to log on and get an appointment."

"If I go online at exactly 7.45am I get to fill in an online request. Need to be quick as appointments fill up."

"The PATCHS system needs more slots."

"Ability needed to go online when convenient and fill out a request even when the surgery is closed."

"I disagree that we have to fill-in a form for everything - even for a blood test follow-up."

“PATCHS is always closed for my surgery even when they say it will be open.”

When booking, we hear there is flexibility on appointment method (phone or in-person) but not on waiting times - viewed as excessive by some.

Selected Feedback

“I can go online to PATCHS and ask for an appointment, either face to face or phone.”

“Online appointments in NHS app - earlier available appointments needed.”

The form itself receives mixed feedback - especially on the volume of questions presented to users.

Selected Feedback

“PATCHS has only a few questions so it is more patient friendly.”

“Less questions on the online form.”

“I like being able to describe my issues in detail on the online portal - one is often interrupted when face to face. I can document what I think the issue is & whether & why it worries me.”

“Patients could be trained in on-line access.”

“PATCHS is rubbish and never worked for me.”

On submitting a form, response times are reportedly quick.

Selected Feedback

“They are quick to respond on the online appointment booking system.”

“Quick response from PATCHS.”

While online systems are convenient for repeat prescriptions, we hear that a lack of notification - following a form submission, can be frustrating.

Selected Feedback

"I can book appointments and order medicine from home at any time."

"Online prescriptions always need chasing and I don't get a notification if it can't be processed."

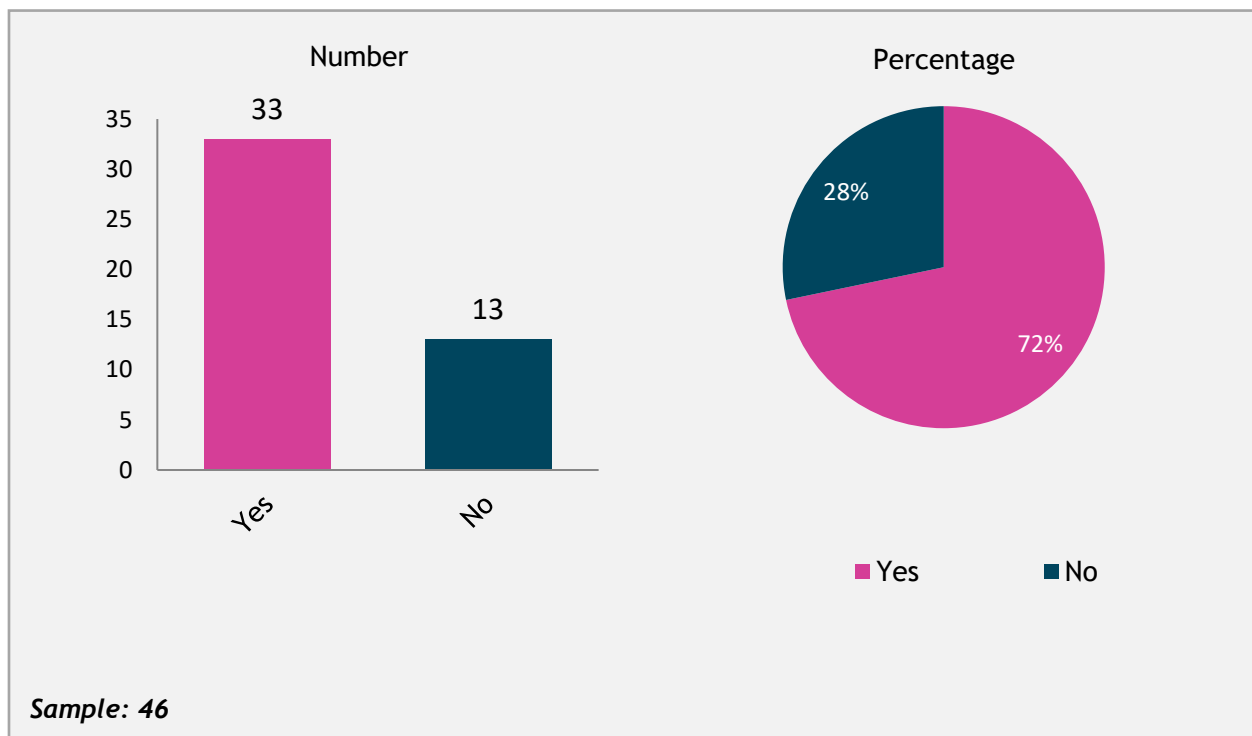
Compatibility with mobile phones, plus integration with other systems is questioned.

Selected Feedback

"We need software which works directly with all telephones."

"I use PATCHS for my urgent appointments but I have to go to another online platform (on my phone) to take the survey there for non-urgent. It would be nice if this would be integrated somehow."

6.5 Can you make an appointment in-person?



Around three quarters of respondents (72%) are able to book appointments in-person.

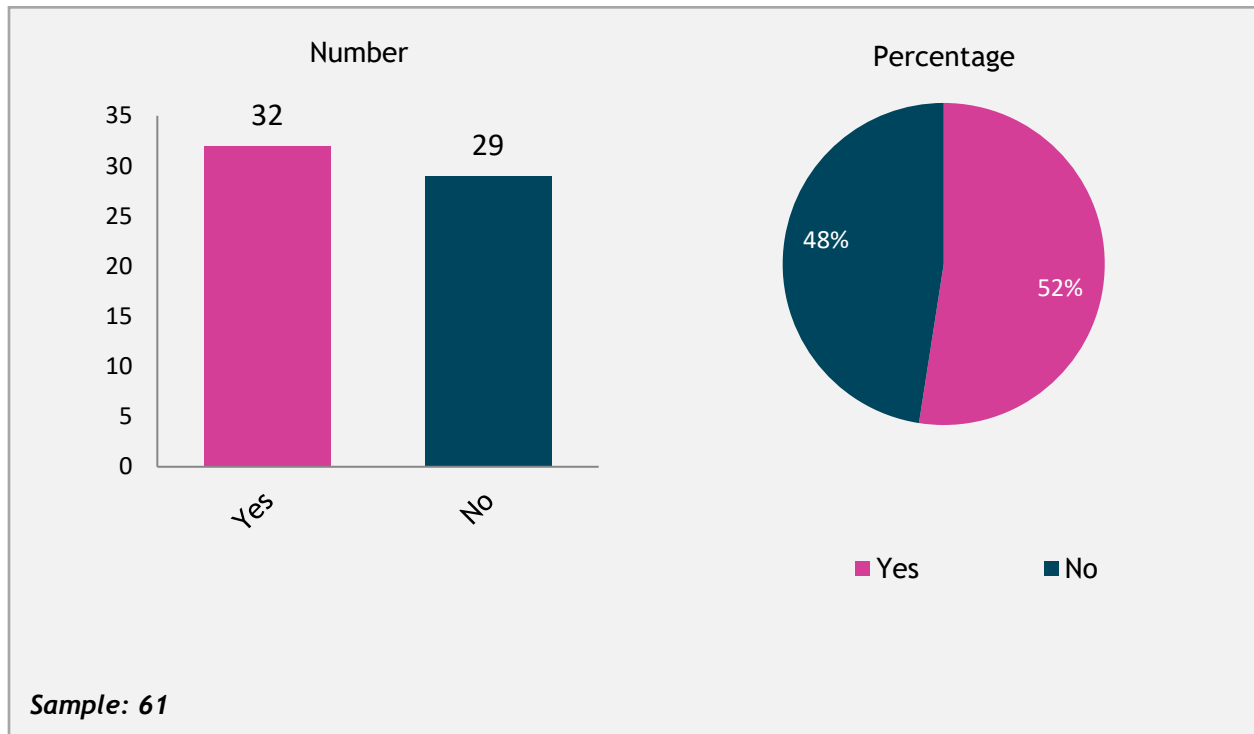
One person, having booked in-person has felt like an 'inconvenience' when doing so.

Selected Feedback

“Being able to book an appointment through the receptionist would be good.”

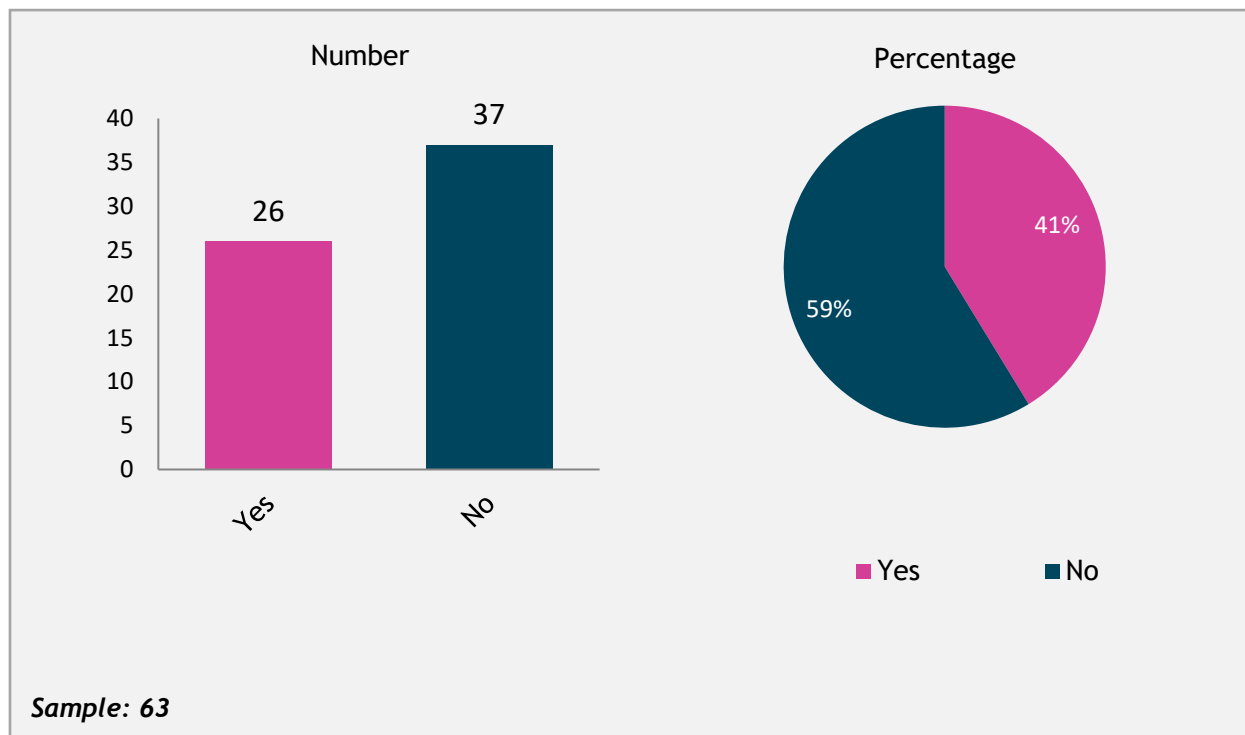
“Being able to make appointments in-person and not to feel intimidated as though I'm an inconvenience.”

6.6 Are you usually offered a choice of appointment method (in-person, telephone or video consultation)?



When booking, half of respondents (52%) have been offered a choice of consultation method (in-person, telephone, video) while a similar number (48%) have not.

6.7 Is your appointment usually to see your own GP or preferred Nurse?



Just 41% of respondents are able to see their preferred GP or nurse.

Having a regular, named GP is viewed as important for continuity of care, particularly for those with more complex needs - a long term condition or disability.

Selected Feedback

"If I am able to wait I can usually see the GP I am familiar with."

"Need to be able to book in person appointment with GP of your choice."

"Access to the same GP whenever possible in the interests of continuity of care."

"Have continuity of care by have "a GP" like we used to."

"Continuity of care is impossible - not seen my own GP for over 3 years and having long term conditions, continuity is essential."

"Same GP should be following up after seeing him/her rather than anyone who is available as different GPs have different thinking and ways of working."

"Going to a generic GP there is barely time to give medical history which is needed to inform best medical advice and direction."

"I'd like to see one doctor as I'm disabled."

Patients at larger (group) practices or more infrequent users are more relaxed about who they see.

Selected Feedback

“Our GP staff are helpful and I don't usually ask for a particular GP, as feel if you need help, any GP will be OK.”

On the extended team, pharmacists are both complimented and criticised. One patient, referred to see a pharmacist, is resentful that a GP was not an option.

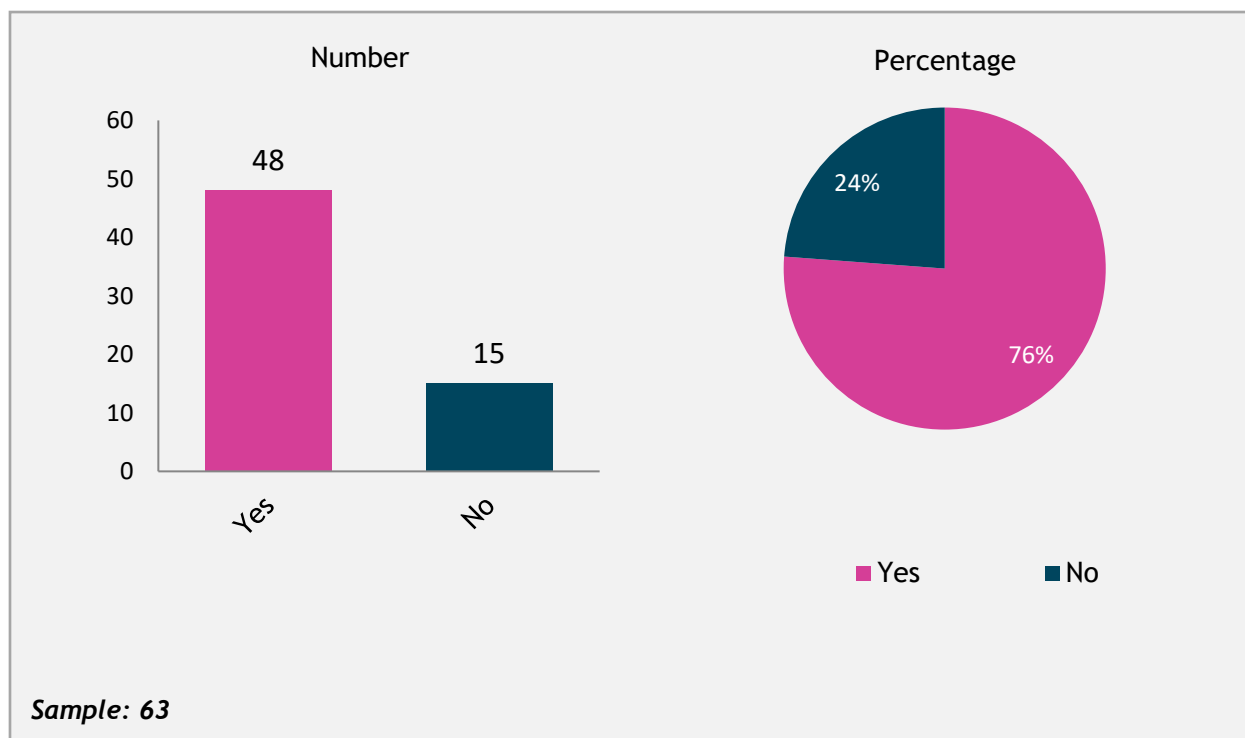
Selected Feedback

“I like the specialist Diabetes support - being able to speak with the pharmacist.”

“They should be efficient and sincere in offering appointments, instead of rejecting appointment requests and redirecting appointments to pharmacists who are not able to really offer any real help.”

“One very bad experience was when I was given an appointment with a pharmacist - who didn't say he was a pharmacist, didn't prescribe medication and made errors with my notes. Took 3 further calls to sort out. Never again.”

6.8 When booking, how are you generally treated by staff members? Do you feel respected and supported?



Three quarters of respondents (76%) usually feel respected and supported when booking their appointments.

While feedback is generally positive, it is observed that reception experiences may vary, depending on 'who' the staff member is.

The importance of 'good communication' is noted.

Selected Feedback

"Receptionists are very nice and helpful."

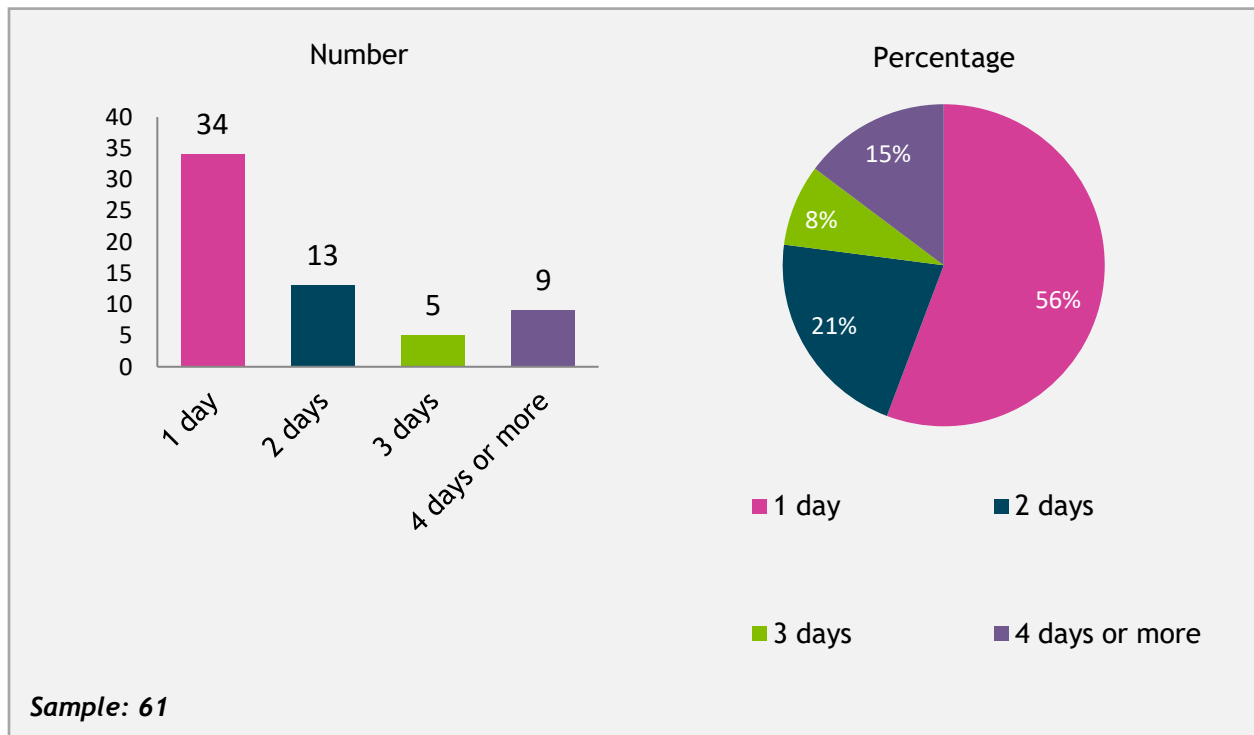
"The receptionist always asks what the problem was. However if I did not wish to disclose it, I would just say 'it's confidential' and they do not ask any more."

"Depends on who answers the phone."

"It depends how helpful reception is at your GP surgery. Ours are very helpful."

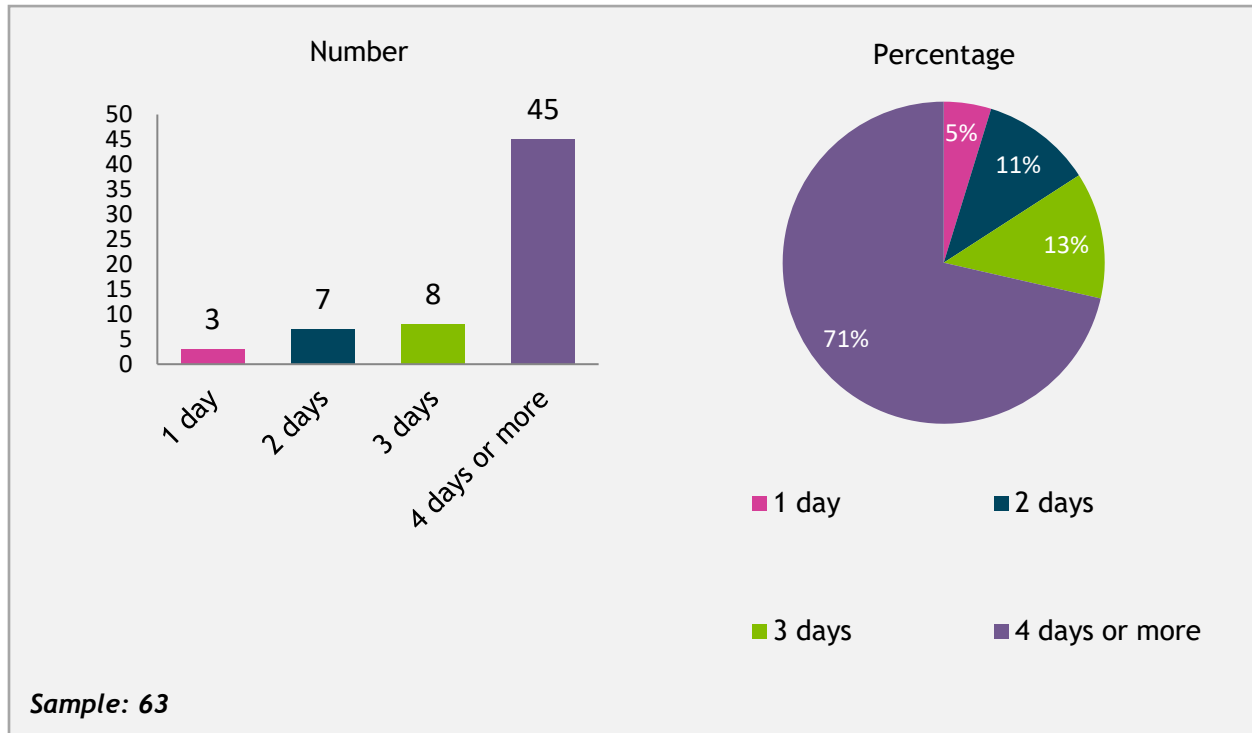
"More staff at reception with good communication and patient care would be most helpful."

6.9 For urgent appointments, how long do you usually wait?



A marginal majority of respondents (56%) are usually seen the same day for emergency appointments. A quarter (23%) say they have waited 3 days or longer.

6.10 And for routine appointments, how long do you usually wait?



For routine appointments, 71% wait 4 days, or more.

Waiting time experiences vary, according to feedback.

Selected Feedback

“Quick appointments and can resolve any queries we have - medical or non-medical.”

“When I have an urgent problem - usually with my kids they used to take me in 1 day, which is perfect to deal with these problems.”

“Response from the surgery within 24 hours.”

“On one occasion I was offered an appointment in 2 weeks’ time - when this needed action sooner.”

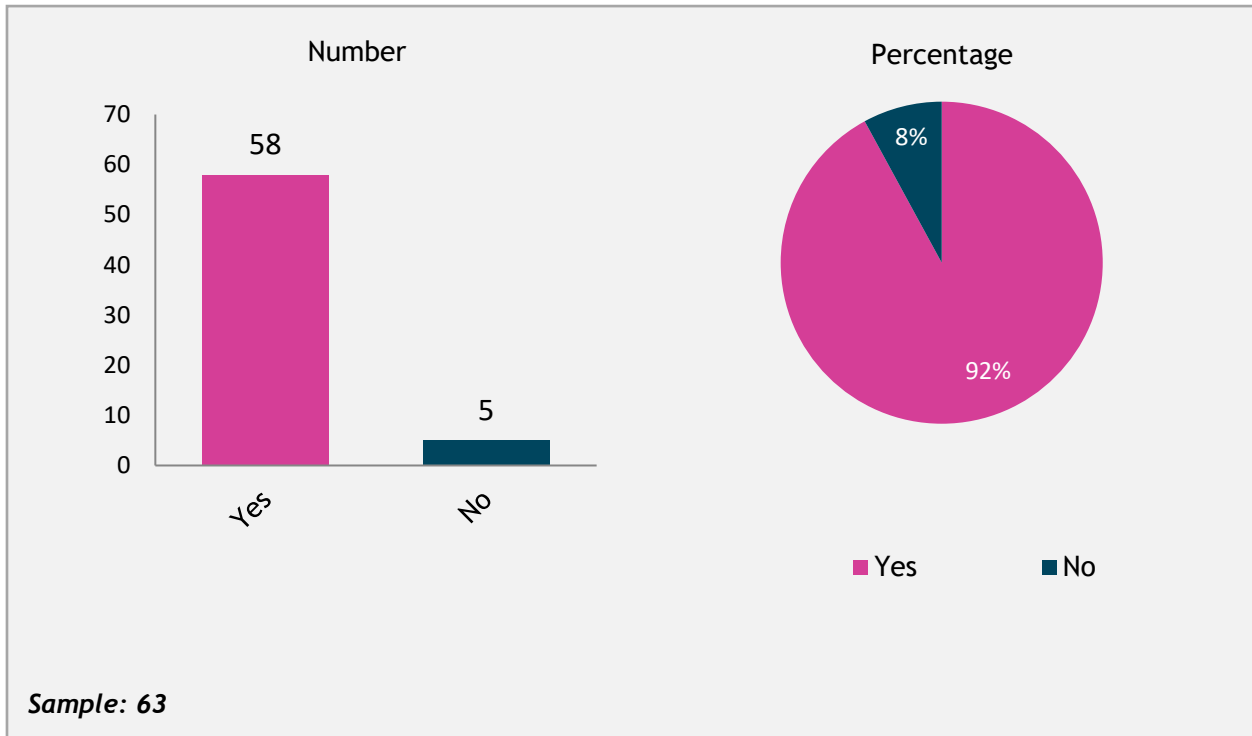
“Not having to wait over 4 weeks for a routine appointment.”

“Non-urgent appointments should be offered sooner than, possibly, maybe two weeks ahead of request.”

“I used to be able to get appointments on the day or the next day. Not now, I may have to wait 2 weeks for an appointment.”

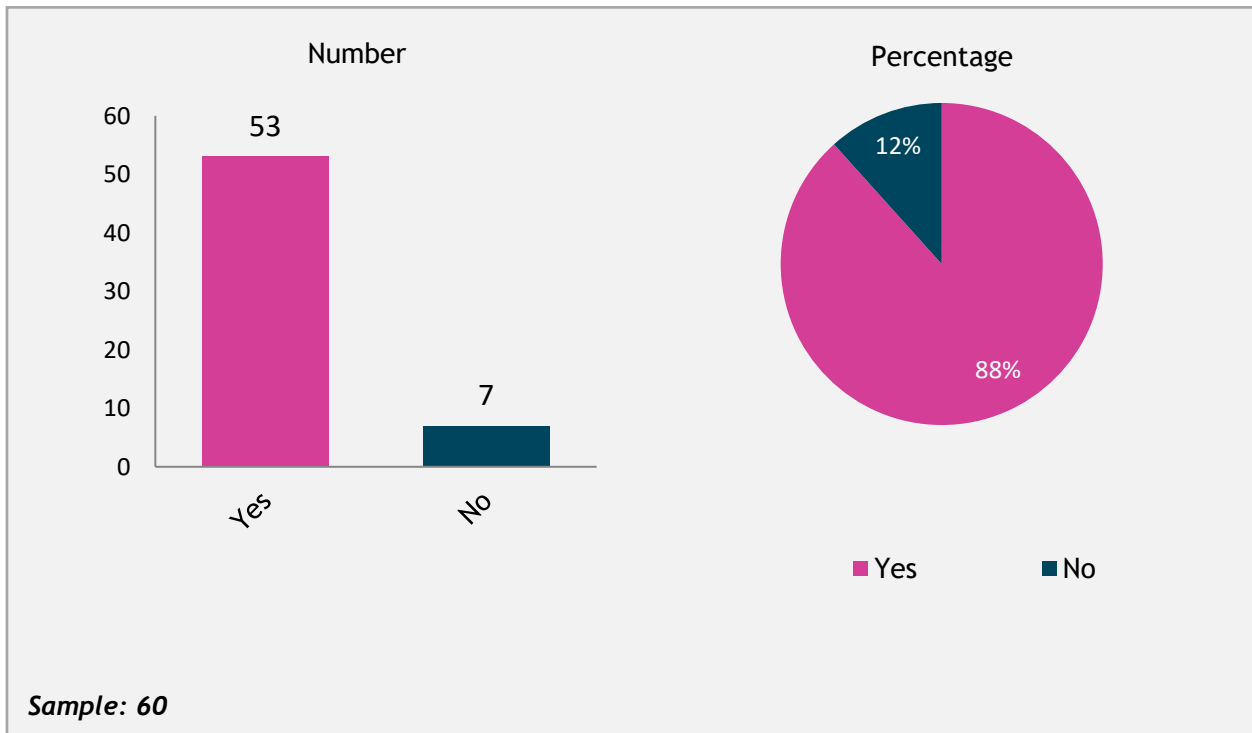
“Need to prioritise the appointments based on the seriousness of the issue, age and other factors.”

6.11 Have you had a 'telephone triage' or online appointment in the past?



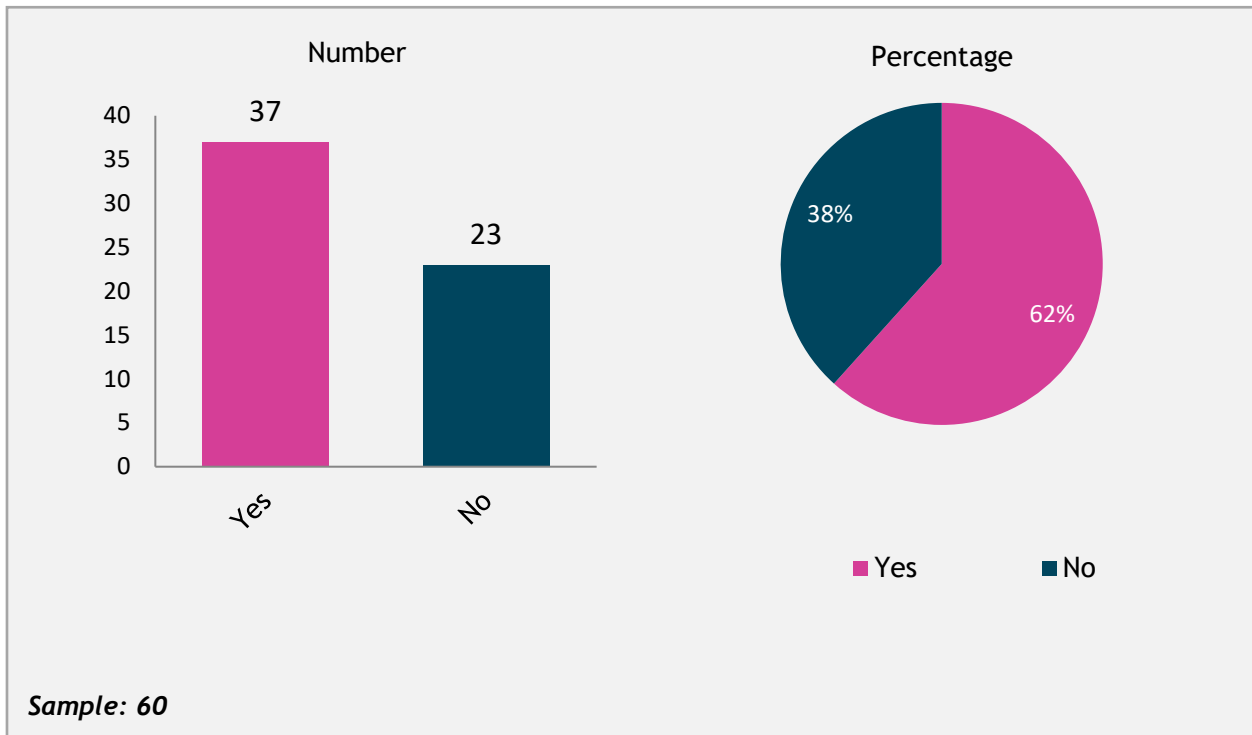
A clear majority of respondents (92%) have experienced a remote appointment.

6.12 If so, does the doctor (or other staff member) usually call you back, when you expected them to?



A broad majority (88%) say they are usually called back within the expected time. A tenth of respondents (12%) say they are not.

6.13 If you had a doctor's consultation, does it usually meet your needs? Do you feel the doctor is able to diagnose accurately on the phone or online?



Almost two thirds of respondents (62%) feel that remote consultations have fully met their needs, while a significant minority (38%) feel they have not.

Remote appointments are regarded by some as convenient and time-saving. For others, the ability to see a GP in-person is essential, especially for diagnosis.

Selected Feedback

“Having an appointment triage helps speed up seeing a GP.”

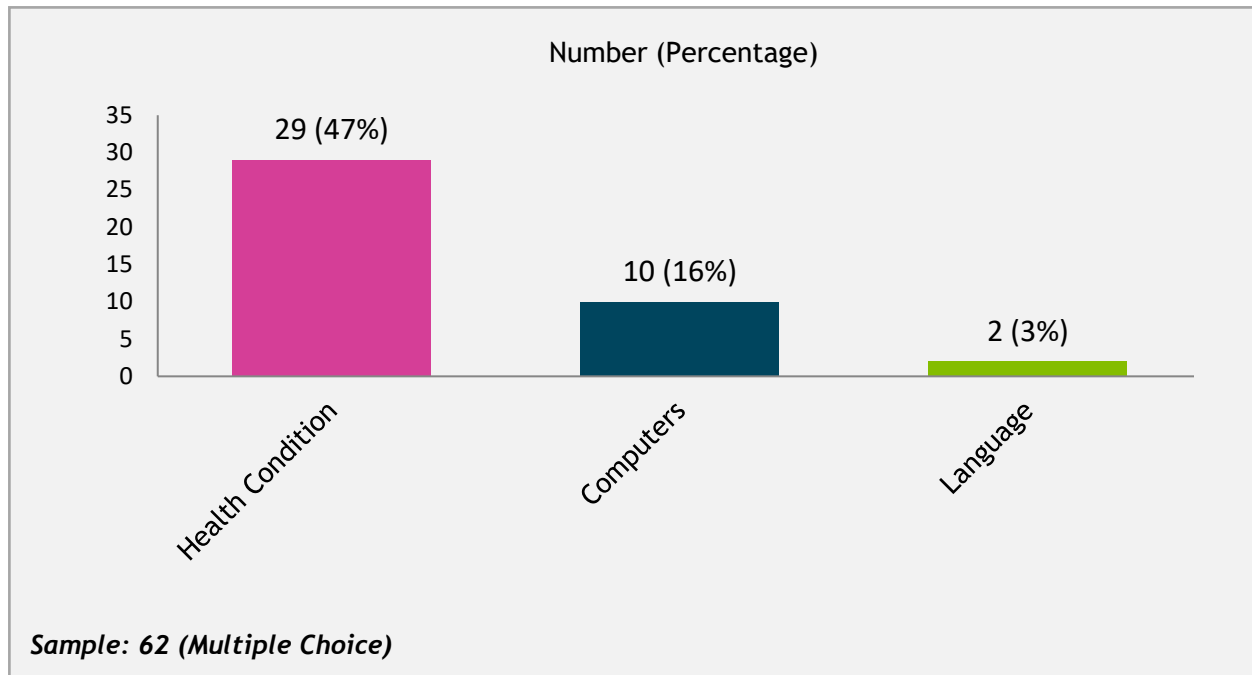
“Telephone consultation options are time saving.”

“More face to face appointments.”

“Having face to face appointments if I ask for one. Telephone appointments are fine for some things, but not always.”

“Currently my surgery does not do online appointments where a GP can also see and recognise any symptoms through seeing a face, seeing the issue etc. They only do face to face and phone.”

6.14 Potential Barriers: Do you have difficulties using computers, smart-phones or the internet? Do you have a disability or long term (health or mental health) condition? Is English not your first language?



Almost half of respondents (47%) have a health condition or disability. 16% cite computers as a barrier, while 3% mention language.

We asked participants to outline any potential barriers. While computers are an issue for some, it is also noted that receptionists should be able to assist - as demonstrated by feedback, in completing electronic forms.

Selected Feedback

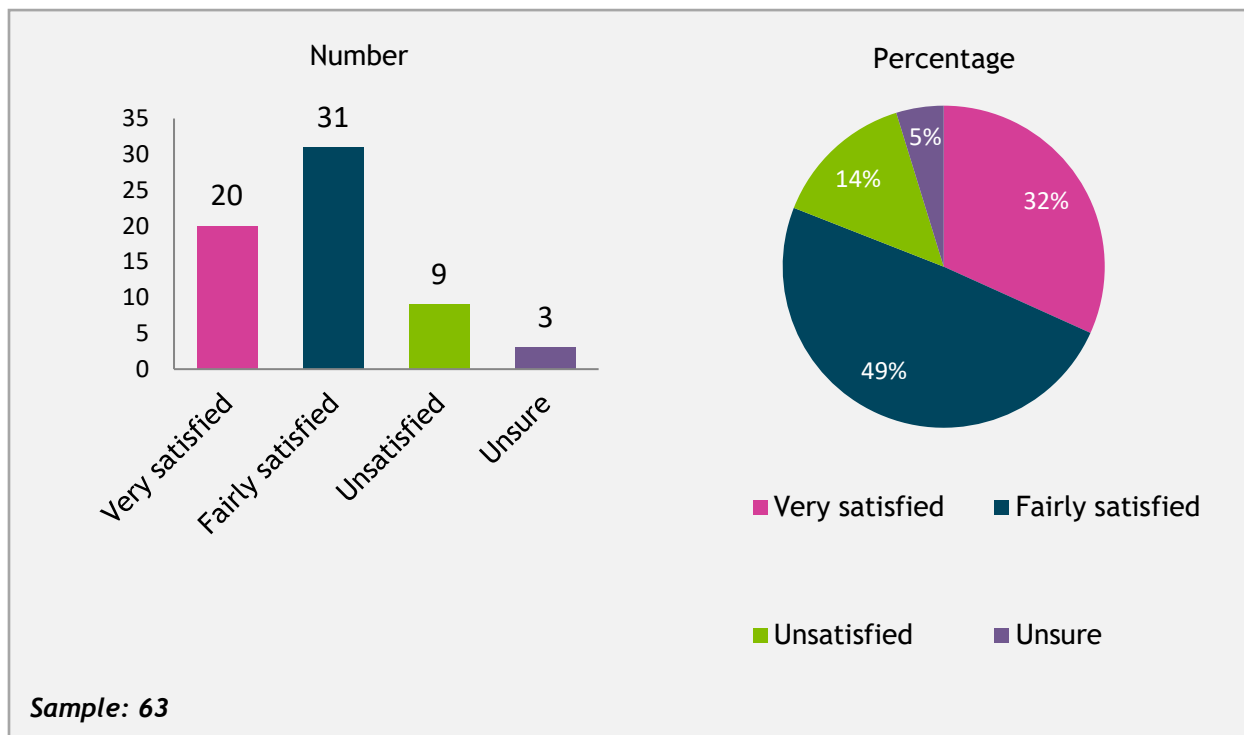
“I can’t book online as I can’t use a computer.”

“I have difficulty seeing and using a screen.”

“Receptionists will take down details of need and pass it to the triage team if no access via PATCHS.”

“You can ask reception, over the phone, to fill in the PATCHS form.”

6.15 How satisfied are you with your GP Practice and the services they offer?



A broad majority of respondents (81%) express satisfaction with their practice, on the whole. 14% are not satisfied.

We receive many general compliments on the GPs, and other practice staff.

Selected Feedback

“Huge improvement since 12 months ago.”

“Friendly people.”

“Doctors always so nice to me and I like that a lot!”

“The doctors and nurses are excellent, and the receptionists generally helpful face to face.”

“The doctors themselves are lovely.”

“The Doctors are usually nice when I see them. The pharmacist is good.”

“Good doctors, have empathy.”

Good levels of personal support are demonstrated.

Selected Feedback

“Being known to the practice is essential in sensitive situations, I feel involved in my family’s care.”

“90% of the time they have been amazing and accommodating with various requests and referrals. Several of the doctors I met for me or family member, I could see they did care.”

“Easy to discuss things with our GP.”

“If I need to see a doctor, I am usually satisfied with the outcome.”

Some would like to discuss more than one issue, per consultation.

Selected Feedback

“The biggest change in recent years is the one problem only, where symptoms of other problems could be part of the whole and can be missed.”

“It would be better to be able to address up to 2 issues, health problems at the appointment rather than booking several appointments and sit and wait for an hour for each appointment.”

6.16 Any other comments about your GP Practice (prescriptions, referrals etc)?

Finally, we asked participants to share any other comments about their practice. We detect themes on booking, general practice, prescriptions and referrals.

Selected Feedback

Booking

- I have no confidence that if I or my wife was ill and needed to see a GP, I would be able to be seen.
- I avoid going to the GP now unless desperate. It's hard to get an appointment and you see a different doctor each time.
- I personally do not like that on PATCHS I am being asked to write what my issue is. I am not sure who reads this and this does not feel safe in regards to keeping my details and information private. I wonder if the Information Commissioners Office would agree.
- Easy to access websites to make on-line appointments.

General Practice

- I get plenty of text messages about vaccinations so communication is good.
- I get blood test reminders.
- My GP does not listen to me or explain everything.
- Have to praise the admin who do a great job BUT when doing online repeats any requests added to notes section are never actioned. Why ask if always ignored?
- Great surgery - great team.
- My doctors are good however have limited or no knowledge about special educational needs. My son is autistic and I had to gather a lot of information myself from different sources to present to the GP as they did not have the knowledge or experience. Often other services ask for a GP referral or direct us to the GP and there is no help from the GPs.
- They do offer and ask your opinion regarding your treatment
- I have also had awful responses to things in the past (GP said my son - who had been passing out, was 'attention seeking'). He turned out to be autistic.
- Some reception staff are very rude, I do not like telling them what is wrong, that is personal & private.
- I would like to be seen by a female GP for consistency but that is not available.
- I am deaf and rely on interpreters. I cannot ask pharmacists to explain medication or instructions on how to take my medication. I worry about the new system where we will be required to talk to pharmacists instead of GPs.
- They do their best all the time. I wish they had better pay and funding.
- Not seeing a GP regularly is frustrating and causing anxiety as the locum doesn't know you, you have to explain everything again and again to different people. Then they can't access the system.
- Bloods could be quicker.
- We should be notified when blood test results have been completed regardless of whether any follow up is required.
- We need much better communication about any new changes and procedures.
- Response to test results. I do not like the 'if you hear nothing it [their test] is OK'.

Prescriptions

- Repeat prescriptions to the pharmacy work well.
- Prescriptions to the pharmacist work OK.
- I am limited with computer skills and sometimes get locked out of ordering prescriptions via Patient Access which causes me panic and need to attend surgery to get prescription sorted at reception.
- I'm on regular medication and only get 2 monthly prescriptions as opposed to 3 months.
- We order our prescriptions on line, but know many people who don't have computers or smart phones making it difficult for them.
- Prescriptions often delayed. I can't order in advance so often run out. Pharmacy says they aren't posted online properly so they miss them. Have to keep asking for meds to be put on representation list for online requests.
- Online medication renewal system works well, for stock management.
- I apply for repeat prescriptions online and this works.
- The auto renewal of drugs is good. About the only useful online service.
- Electronic prescription medication renewal works very well with local pharmacy direct.

Referrals

- Referrals usually not completed in detail resulting in delays because it gets sent back to the surgery for more info.
- Referral to physiotherapy worked well.
- Willing to refer when necessary.
- Occasionally referrals get lost or not followed through.
- Prompt referral. We had to chase them as a letter went from A&E, the receptionist just filed it! It was never read or picked up.
- Good for referrals or requesting sick notes or a written medical letter.
- Referral very late.
- Usually everything is fine. Referrals and after getting into the system takes too much time though.
- Difficult to keep track when appointments were cancelled due to strikes. When I pressed the button requesting a changed appointment, it didn't register and I got a second reminder of the same appointment.
- It is frustrating when you have been discharged from a consultant list that you have to begin the whole triage and referral process again.
- There are problems on referrals , it's not easy to get a second opinion.

7. Glossary of Terms

This report does not contain acronyms.

8. Distribution and Comment

This report is available to the general public and is shared with our statutory and community partners. Accessible formats are available.

If you have any comments on this report or wish to share your views and experiences, please contact us.

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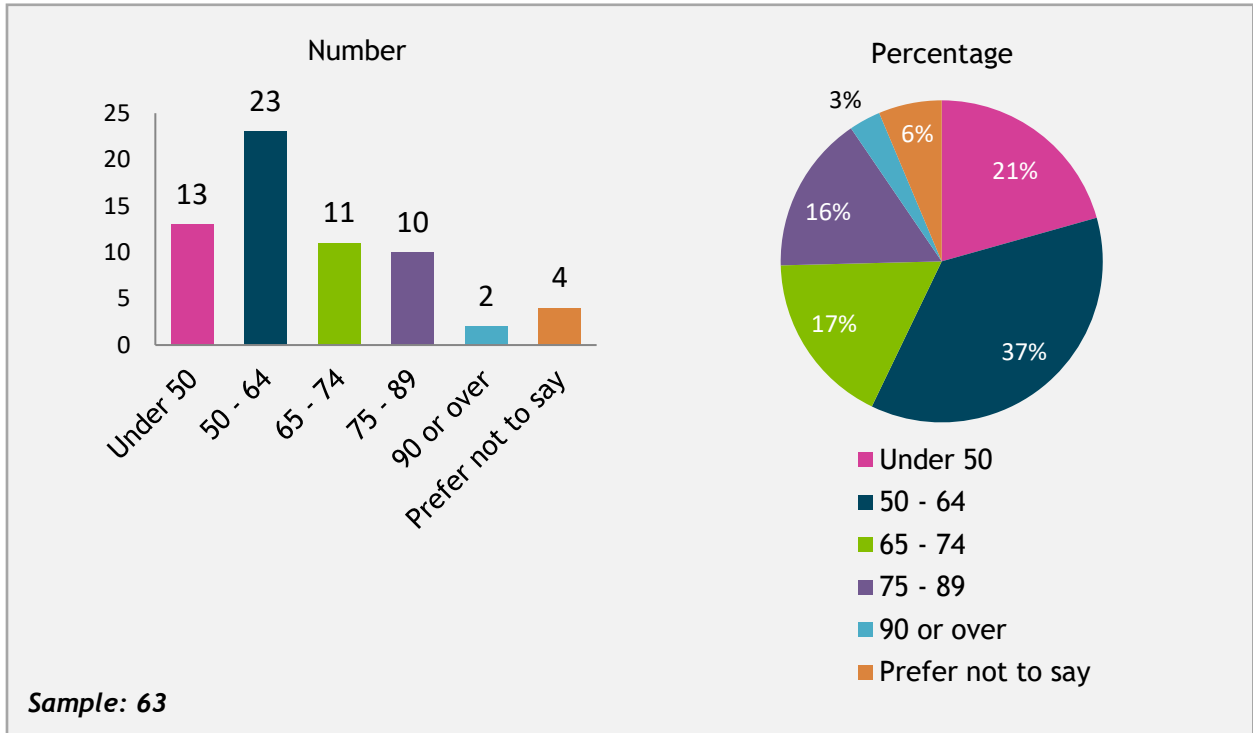
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Instagram: healthwatchharrow

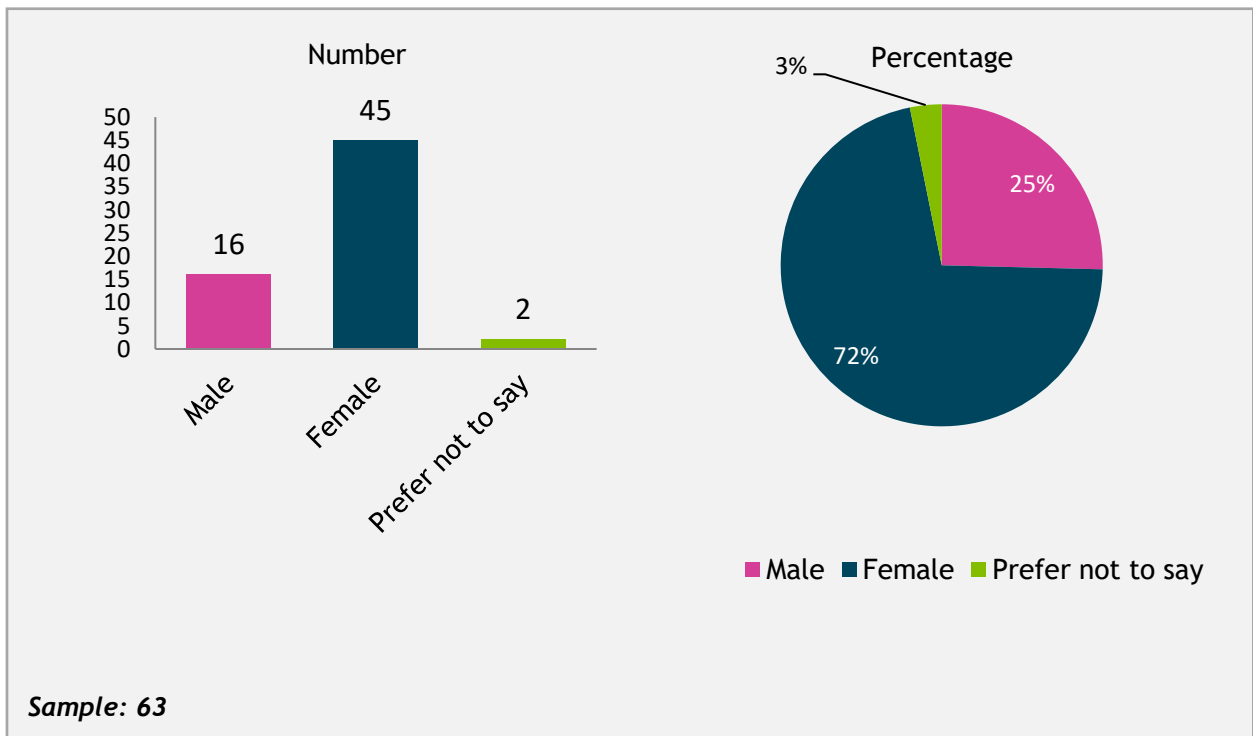
Appendix - Demographics

The demographics of participants are stated as follows:

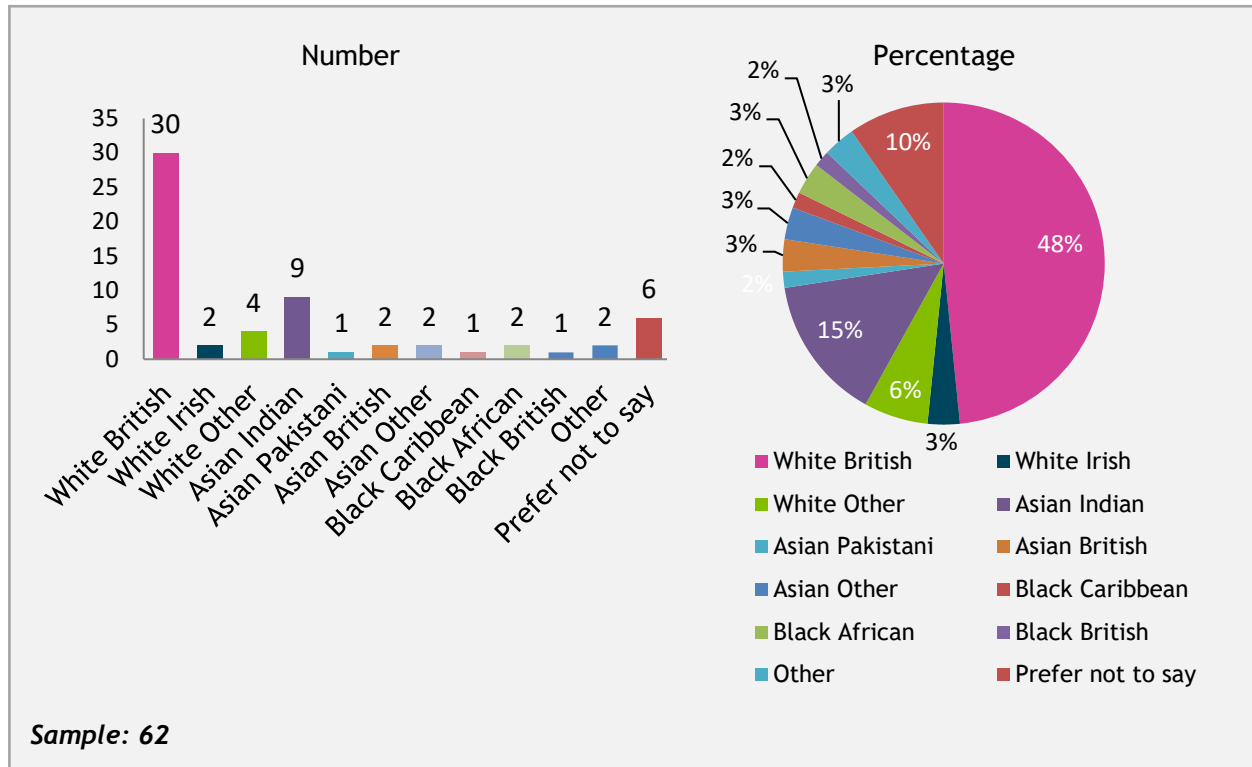
Age



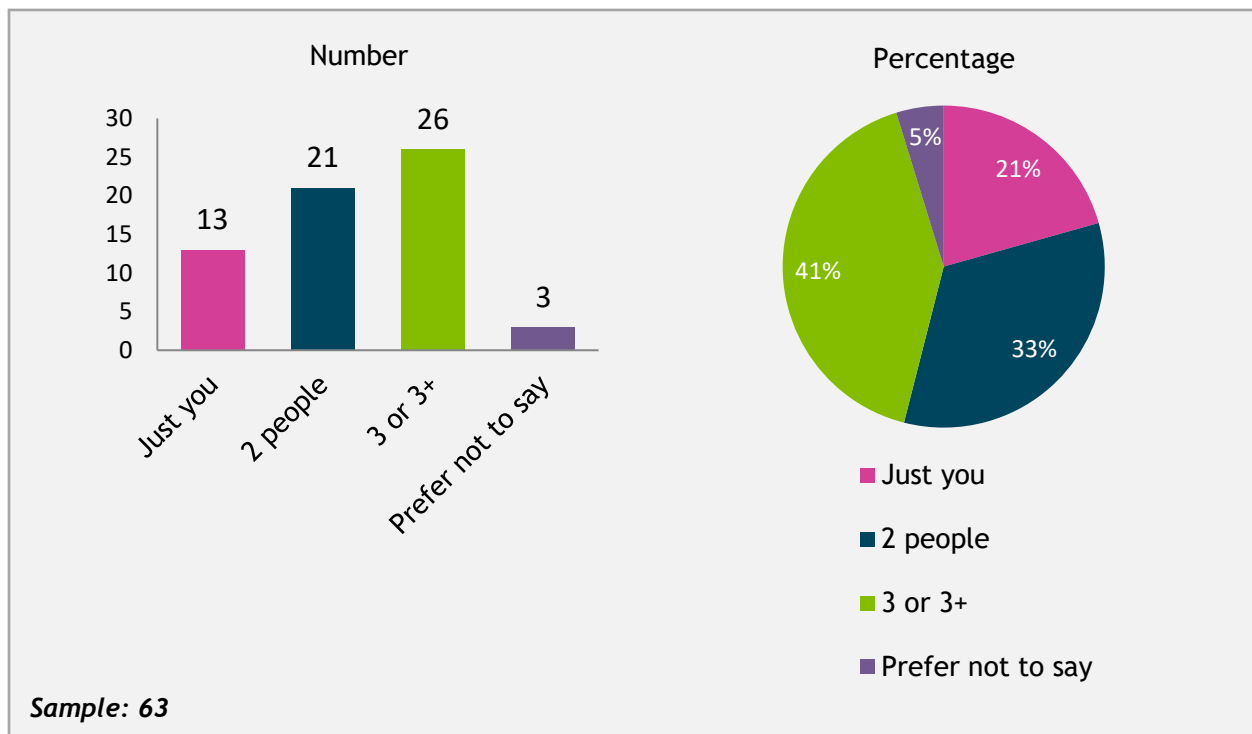
Gender



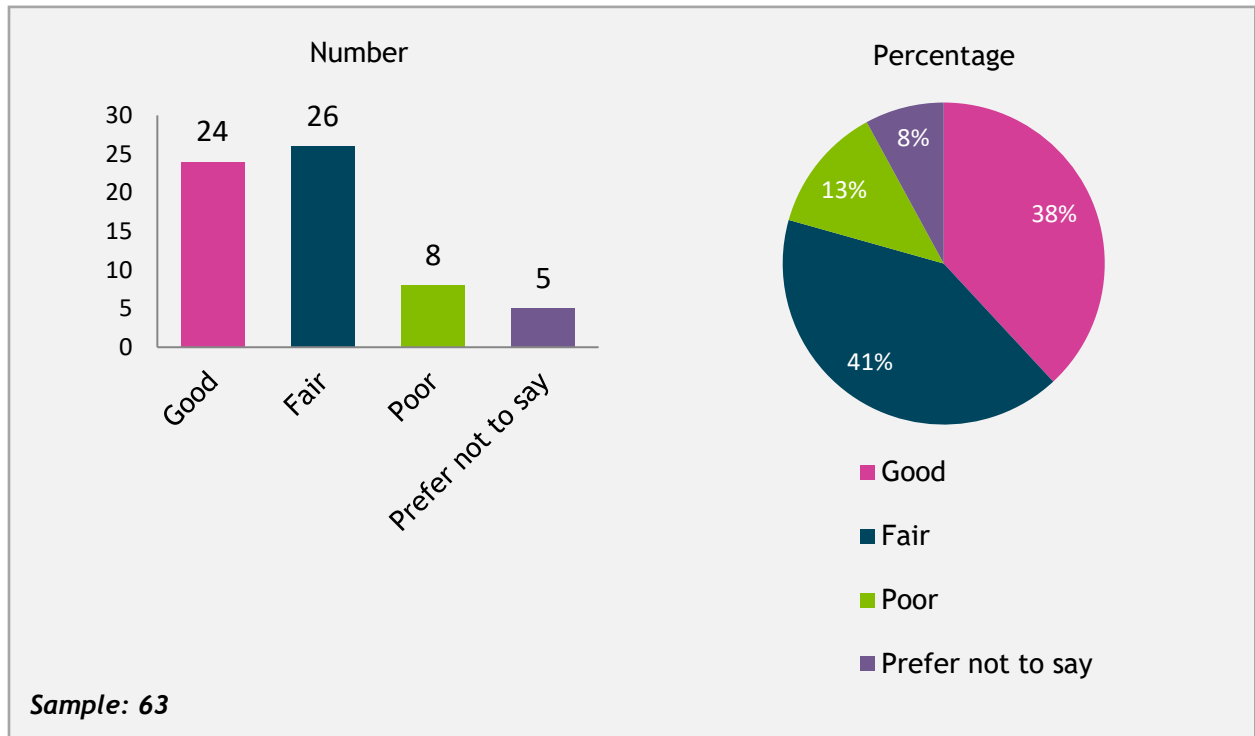
Ethnicity



Household



Health



“Actually getting an appointment would be a good start.

You just need to be able to ring up or walk in and get an appointment at an agreeable time.

It’s different if you are very ill, but you can’t always just drop everything for when it suits them to see you.”

Local GP Patient