



**healthwatch**  
Bexley

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## **GP Access Report**

November 2021

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## Introduction

GP access has been a well-documented concern both nationally and locally for Healthwatch and the public, during and pre the Covid pandemic (Healthwatch England, 2018, 2020). Bexley residents have told us through our surveys and feedback procedures that they have experienced difficulty making appointments, getting through on the phone or getting a timely appointment at their GP practice (Healthwatch Bexley, 2018). The pandemic has exacerbated many of these issues and Healthwatch has seen an increase in residents wanting to comment or make a complaint about GP access during the pandemic and as government restrictions started to ease in July 2021.

As a result, the six South East London (SEL) Healthwatch (Bexley, Bromley, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark) worked together to look at GP access across SEL during August 2021. As these individual reports are published they will be available through each respective Healthwatch website.

This report looks specifically at the experiences and views of local Bexley residents, who have accessed or tried to access primary care since national government Covid restrictions started to relax from July 2021.

According to the Healthwatch England (HWE) report, 'GP access during Covid-19' (HWE, 2020) public perception is often that GP practices have been closed as people have not been able to walk in and speak freely to reception, sometimes being asked to wait outside or communicate through intercom systems. Busy phone lines have given the impression there is either not enough staff or that no one is there to answer calls. If people can enter their surgery they may find the once packed waiting rooms empty and think they are not busy. Following NHS guidelines practices have moved to a total triage system, with a heavy reliance on digital triage and phone appointments rather than face to face appointments, some residents have become frustrated and confused about how best to access their practice. Although for many people the changes have been a welcome improvement, others have questioned what primary care are doing if not answering the phones or seeing patients.

During the pandemic, media messages have often focused on the need to prevent the NHS, primarily hospitals, from becoming overwhelmed with Covid patients, with the country struggling to cope with increased hospital admissions due to Covid (NHS England, 2021a). Public support for the NHS was high and this was demonstrated with people coming out into the streets to clap and publicly show their support and appreciation of the role the NHS were playing in the pandemic (Addley, 2020).

The public has seen lots of media coverage and communication nationally and locally about the pandemic, hospital pressures, social distancing and the Covid vaccine. There has been very little national or local communication, if any, about changes to accessing their GP practice.

The suddenness of the pandemic has meant that changes to accessing GP practices happened rapidly, without any public consultation and with little communication about the changes. General practice has remained open during the pandemic and like many other services has had to quickly adapt to different ways of working to keep both patients and practice staff safe. **In line with NHS guidelines, this included restricted public access to surgeries and the introduction of a total triage system as a means to ensure patients were accessing the most appropriate service for the condition they presented with (NHS, 2020a). This included a recommendation to redirect patients to seek help at other settings such as pharmacies or for more urgent help, a visit to A & E or an Urgent Treatment Centre (UTC).** Patients were urged to use digital services such as online consultation rather than calling into the practice or telephoning to get an appointment. Face to face appointments were still available after triage by a GP, but many appointments were conducted by telephone. Those without digital access telephoning their practice may be offered help and advice by the reception staff on completing an online consultation. Alternatively, they could speak to reception staff to discuss their needs and book an appropriate appointment.

To help alleviate the pressure on hospitals, some hospital and specialist care was put on hold during the pandemic resulting in backlogs and longer than normal waiting times for hospital treatments, clinic appointments and operations. This has had an impact on primary care services as patients have remained

under the care of their local GP practice or were discharged from hospital to primary care settings for follow up treatment.

In some cases, people not wanting to overwhelm NHS services put off seeking help for non-Covid related conditions (HWE, 2020). This resulted in the NHS Chief Executive, Sir Simon Stevens urging the public to come forward and seek medical treatment due to fears of the long term health risks of delaying treatment (NHS England, 2020b). As Covid rates in the population decreased and Covid restrictions eased, primary care has seen an increase in demand from the public seeking medical help.

According to the Local Government Association, (LGA, 2021) Bexley has the second-highest Covid vaccination rate amongst all the London boroughs. Primary care should be commended and recognised for the vital role they have played in helping to vaccinate the local population. However, this may have had some impact on routine primary care services with staff working on the vaccination program.

Primary care was under strain from patient demand pre-pandemic. There is a National shortage of not only GPs but other NHS staff such as nurses and nurse practitioners. Bexley Borough has historically found it difficult to attract primary care staff to work in the area (BMJ, 2015). At this stage in the pandemic, practices may be finding it difficult to cope with the increased demand, demonstrated by patients having to wait longer to see a GP. According to the British Medical Association (BMA) (BMA, 2021), there is 1,803 fewer full-time equivalent GPs now than in 2015 with practices often finding it difficult to recruit staff.

The pandemic has increased and exacerbated the pressures faced by general practice pre-pandemic, as they are now struggling to cope with an increased workload and demand for appointments, whilst having to deal with the additional workload from the Covid vaccination program and seasonal Flu vaccination program. BMA data for appointments in August 2021, including Covid related appointments, showed appointments had increased by two million when compared to August 2019.

The pressure faced by primary care is taking its toll on staff wellbeing. A survey of BMA members in July 20-21 (BMA, 2021) showed that over half of those responding were suffering from conditions such as anxiety, stress, depression and burnout and planned to change their working patterns after the pandemic by working fewer hours, more flexibly or by leaving the NHS. If this is not addressed nationally the NHS will be under even more pressure from staff shortages.

**Primary care has played a critical role during the pandemic supporting people with Covid and non-Covid care and it is disappointing that there is a divide between peoples' perception of primary care based on their experiences and what is happening as primary care struggles to cope with demand.**

However, as many NHS services resume more normal working practices and are seen by the public as operating as normal, GP practices must be seen to be doing the same. Healthwatch Bexley hopes that this report and its recommendations will help to show the need for clearer communication both nationally and locally, to improve understanding of the problems faced by both patients and primary care and more importantly help improve residents' access to their GP practice.

## Methodology

The GP access survey ran from 8<sup>th</sup> August -31<sup>st</sup> August 2021 and had 685 responses from residents. Healthwatch Bexley worked in partnership with the other five SEL Healthwatch to agree on a universal questionnaire so that residents across SEL were asked the same questions. This report looks at the findings from Bexley Borough only. The individual reports from the other SEL Healthwatch will be available via their respective websites once published. A mix of qualitative and quantitative questions was agreed and for some questions, respondents were able to provide more than one answer resulting in a percentage total of more than 100%. The survey was generally run throughout August across SEL.

Residents in Bexley were able to complete the survey online via Survey Monkey. Those without digital access were provided with a hard copy of the questionnaire or a member of the Healthwatch team completed the online version on their behalf. The survey was promoted on our Healthwatch website, via social media and distributed via our connections with community groups and local charities. Healthwatch visited local venues such as food banks and joined the Covid Let's Talk Bus to increase awareness of the survey.

After the closing date, we were contacted by residents asking us to reopen the survey as they wanted to comment. We declined to do this as we felt we had enough responses and had already started collating the data.

The report was written in October by a member of the Healthwatch Bexley team and signed off by the Healthwatch Advisory Board before publication. Individual data is available for each practice upon request and will be provided after the report has been published.

The Local Medical Council (LMC), SELCCG, GP Federation, Primary Care and other stakeholders were allowed to comment on the report before it was published. Any responses can be seen in appendix 1 at the back of this report.

This report will be shared with partners, stakeholders including the SELCCG, primary care, The GP Federation, LMC and residents.

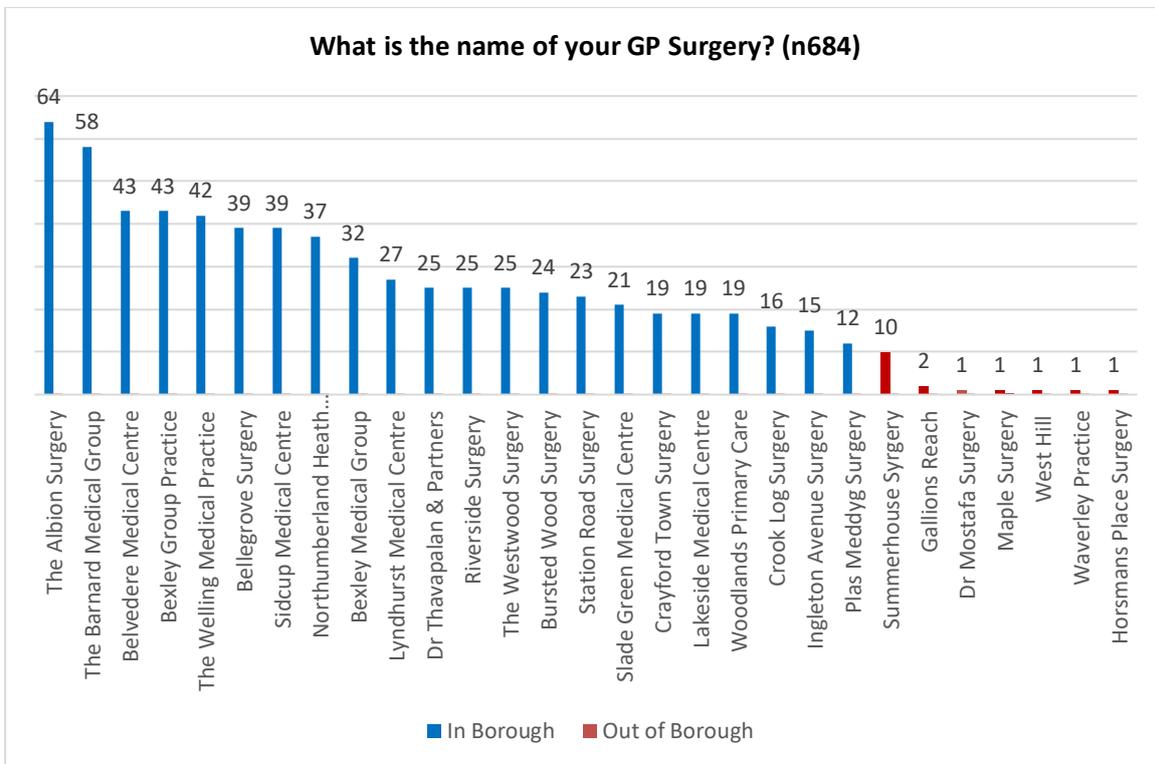
Healthwatch would like to thank all involved in this report. Particularly the residents who kindly shared their views with us in the hope that understanding of the complex system and access to services may be improved.

## Limitations

Although respondents were asked to comment about their experiences from July 2021, we acknowledge that comments may be from experiences before this time. The comments and views of the residents in this report are self-reported and may not be generalised to the wider population of Bexley. They do, however, give a valuable insight into public perception and views at the time respondents completed the survey.

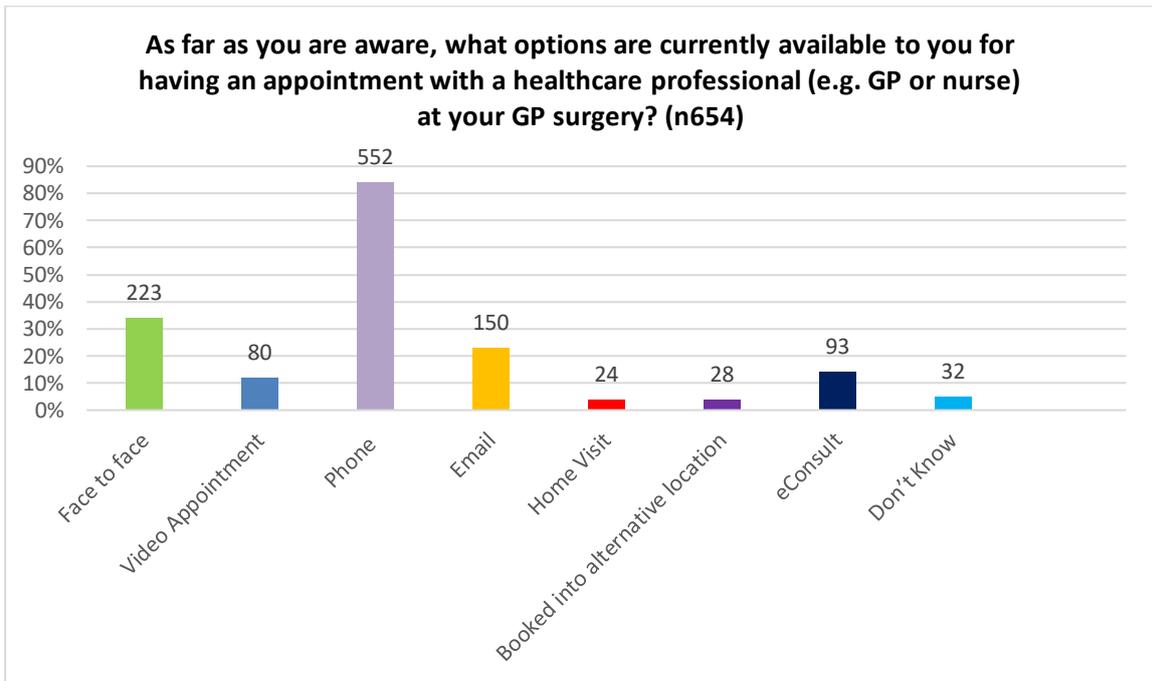
## Breakdown of Responses

### 1. What is the name of your GP Surgery? (n684)



### 2. As far as you are aware, what options are currently available to you for having an appointment with a healthcare professional (e.g. GP or nurse) at your GP surgery?

Over 80% of residents told us that phone consultations are available at their GP practice, just over 30% told us that they thought face to face appointments were still available. Just over 10% mentioned video appointments and having to use eConsult and 5% were unsure what appointment methods are available to them.



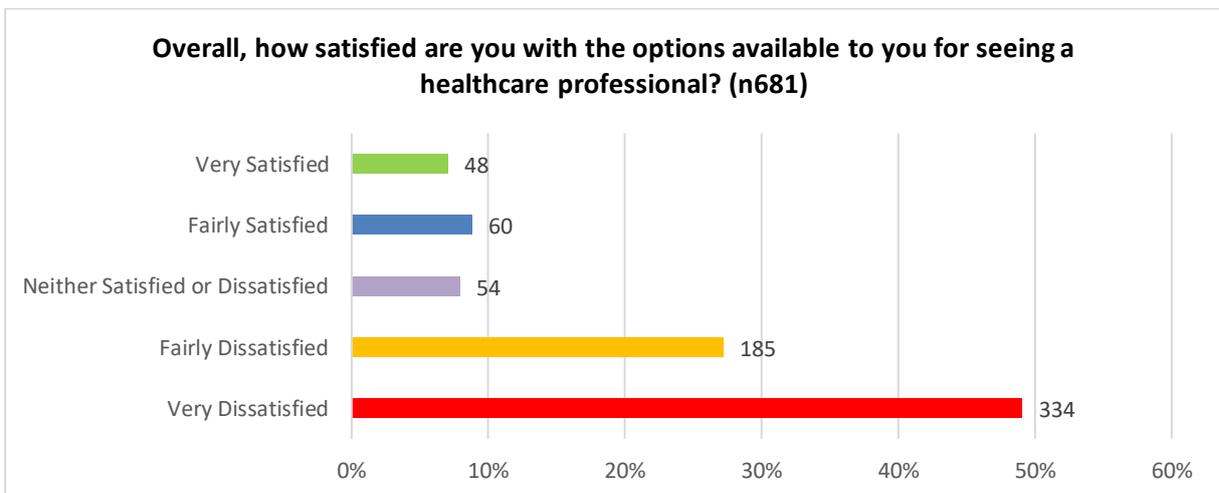
*Telephone triage, after an inordinately long wait, might lead to a face to face appointment but usually a telephone consultation is the result.*

*You can get a face to face appointment but only if the doctor deems it necessary when you have a telephone appointment.*

*Very hard to get through then wait for an appointment or never get back.*

**3. Overall, how satisfied are you with the options available to you for seeing a healthcare professional? (n681)**

49% of residents reported being very dissatisfied and 27% fairly dissatisfied with the options available to them for seeing a healthcare professional. 16% were either fairly satisfied or very satisfied with the options they believe are available to them.



#### 4. Please tell us why you chose this answer? (n643)

Reasons residents gave for how satisfied they are with the options available to them to see a healthcare professional (GP, nurse) included the following:

##### Positive comments

*I like using e-Consultation. I would only visit now if it was really needed.*

*No wasted trip to surgery, sitting around as they are running late, much easier with eConsult option.*

*Whilst telephone calls and emails are not always an appropriate substitute for a face-to-face appointment, you are at least guaranteed a response within 48 hours; whereas, pre-pandemic, it was extremely difficult to get an appointment within a reasonable timeframe (sometimes 2 weeks or more).*

*Because when I rang for an appointment I got a face to face one within an hour. I have also previously sent a picture of a specific problem and the doctor rang within half an hour, excellent service.*

*For the reasons I need to speak to a doctor, a telephone appointment is enough for me. It's also quicker as I don't have to walk around the corner to the surgery for an in-person appointment, I can just have the phone call from wherever I am, then continue with my day. I understand other people / other ailments would require face-to-face, but right now I don't need that. I would hope that if I did need a face-to-face appointment, I would be able to book one.*

##### Less positive comments

##### Other health services appear to be resuming a more open/normal service

*Everything else is reopening and going back to normal but my practice is not.*

*Because the surgery is still acting as if it is in full lockdown. Only offering a call back from GP if they then cannot resolve with a prescription they tell you to go to A&E.*

*Pubs and restaurants are open but GP's are not! I work in a chemist and all the patients go there and overwhelm the chemist because they can't get a Dr Appointment.*

*My dentist, optician seem to be managing fine. Restrictions seem to be aimed at restricting access to a doctor/practice rather than enabling it. Now, to speak to the receptionist you stand in the rain, press the buzzer and discuss your requirements for anyone walking past to hear. The reception has been behind a glass screen since well before Covid.*

##### Reception and other practice staff do not show empathy, care or understand patients concerns or needs

*Not happy with the reception staff they speak to you like you are a nuisance, they are unhelpful and unkind. Before you get to even finish what you are saying they just say fill in an e-consult form.*

*Very rude and unsympathetic who doesn't understand and doesn't have medical knowledge they are very unhelpful.*

*Option from receptionist was wait 4 weeks for phone appointment or go to walk in at either Erith or Queen Mary's.*

*Reception made us wait 4 weeks for a phone appointment when we finally had it the doctor was able to book for another for the next day? She made us wait as she didn't deem what we were requesting as important.*

#### **Online booking/walk in appointments**

*Can't book appointment on line. You have to do an eConsult and they ring u with a date a doc will call. The time given is not always suitable but you get no other option of date or time.*

*Cannot make appointments online have to complete eform online, no help to patients who do not use internet.*

*No walk in appts anymore. All through E consult - then as and when you get a call back, you get left a message to say if you don't call back by such and such time (within a couple of hours) we'll close your case and you have to start with E consult again. That is not reasonable - especially if you are working.*

#### **Long waits for calls to be answered**

*Can't ever get through on the phone, told to not go to the surgery and to only fill out eConsult.*

*Very hard to get through on the phone and then told you can't book appointments in advance. Only on the day and it's always really hard to get through. Much more convenient to be able to book in advance for a time that suits you.*

*When I needed to make an appointment I waited so long I had to hang up as my lunch break was over and I work in a school so cannot hold on the phone..*

#### **eConsult**

*We are repeatedly told by politicians and medical executives that the NHS is open for business yet we are pushed towards completing an e form which seems to repeat the same questions and is inflexible as regards the questions asked.*

*You have to do an eConsult, then wait 48hours for a reply to be told you have been triaged into a phone appointment a week later.*

*The alternative for a sick person to wait on the phone to talk to a receptionist is to fill in an E-consult. This takes just as long since one has to answer numerous questions which have no relevance to condition being reported.*

*Since many sick patients are elderly and have no experience of internet forms this is unacceptable.....*

#### **Booking process unacceptably lengthy for patients**

*I can't just phone and book an appointment. I have to fill in a form half of which does not apply. To have someone email me back telling me to phone the surgery to book a telephone appointment. To speak to a Dr who can call anytime between 7am and 6pm regardless if you cannot take calls at that time due to work commitments. When you eventually speak to them they have no idea of who you are, your situation as they don't read your notes. They then tell you you need to make another appointment to see them in person. Please give me a break!*

### Long waits for an appointment either by phone or face-to-face

*I have to wait 3 days to get a call back which I never get. If we call the surgery for an emergency appointment for my 18 month old they cut you short to go for e-consult. There are so many occasions I have told them I have done the e-consult but they explain to shorter way to get a call back is to do administrative consult. 10 days ago my daughter fell so ill it could have been sorted by antibiotics but we waited for someone to call and in the end we ended in A&E and she was admitted.*

*The e consultation is a joke, I needed medical help and by the time the doctor came back to me with the medication I needed it was too late and I ended up in hospital.*

### Comments re appointments offered

*It does appear to us that local GPs are reluctant to provide face to face service. Even phone calls are not made at time stated. E.g. will ring between 8am and 12 noon but receives phone call at 17.50 hours.*

*How can you examine someone over the phone? This gives no confidence to me as a patient at all. Also by not seeing patients face to face the GP's say if you are concerned go to the hospital .....Correct me if I am wrong wasn't it to be the other way around and reduce the chaos in hospitals?*

*There is often much more detail that can be discussed when face to face rather than over the 'phone. The latter is much more just answering the GP's questions which may not explore the full problem.*

*You should be able to see your GP face to face now. Phone appointment's don't help if you need an in depth examination. Still operating a lockdown service which is galling now most of the population has had the 2 Covid vaccines.*

### No patient choice

*We haven't seen our GP for almost 2 years...it's appalling. We need our GP Surgery to return to normal now. There's NO excuse for them to continue with the E-Consult system unless some patients prefer to use it. We should be given a choice...most people hate this system.*

*Although the options are apparently in place they don't seem to be offered.*

*I think it would be useful to have the option to see a doctor face to face, especially with on going issues as some things may be missed from not seeing the person. If not, a video call would be useful but I have not been given that option.*

*... you can get an appointment quicker this way there are some things that you need to discuss face to face so I think that now restrictions have been lifted you should be given the choice.*

### Poor communication from practice

*Surgery closed to public. Only seeing patients following phone call appointment if necessary. Won't let you in to reception desk to book appointments or collect prescriptions/forms/drop samples etc. Talks to you from door on street next to busy bus stop, not private at all.*

*The surgery staff when you finally get to speak to someone are unhelpful and just refer you to e-consult. The phone queues are significant. There are multiple options on the answerphone most of which just tell you to submit a form. Requests are triaged, and you are told to expect a doctor to call you from a private number but not at a specific time, if working and the call is missed, it is not possible to return the call and there is no follow up.*

### Use of UTC/A&E as an alternative

*We cannot see a doctor and are having to rely on the urgent care centre at Erith to see a doctor.*

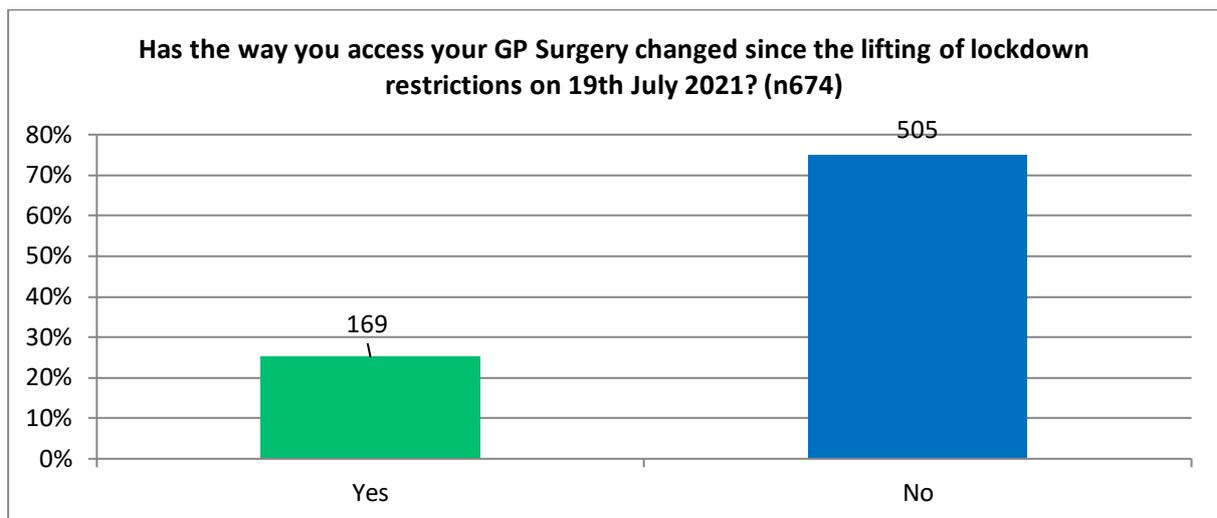
*Have to go to walk in at Erith, as unwell and when phone was finally answered at surgery all they could offer was a phone consultant in 4 weeks.*

*You have to do an eConsult, then wait 48hours for a reply to be told you have been triaged into a phone appointment a week later. Theres no time slots for kids and I call at 3pm for an emergency appointment to be told at 310pm there isn't any!!! Then end up taking my child to a and e to be told it's something that the GP could sort out.*

*I had used E-Consult and after taking time off unpaid and waiting 48hrs I still wasn't called back. On the second occasion of using this service I ended up taking my child to Urgent Care. The service now that we are apparently out of lockdown is atrocious. The receptionist seem overwhelmed and doctors are hiding behind they're screens.*

### 5. Has the way you access your GP Surgery changed since the lifting of lockdown restrictions on 19th July 2021? (n674)

75% of residents reported that they have not seen any changes to the way they access their GP surgery since lockdown restrictions were lifted on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2021. Only 25% told us they had seen any changes.



### 6. If yes, how has it changed? (n187)

*It's changed from "difficult" to get an appointment to "almost impossible" to get an appointment.*

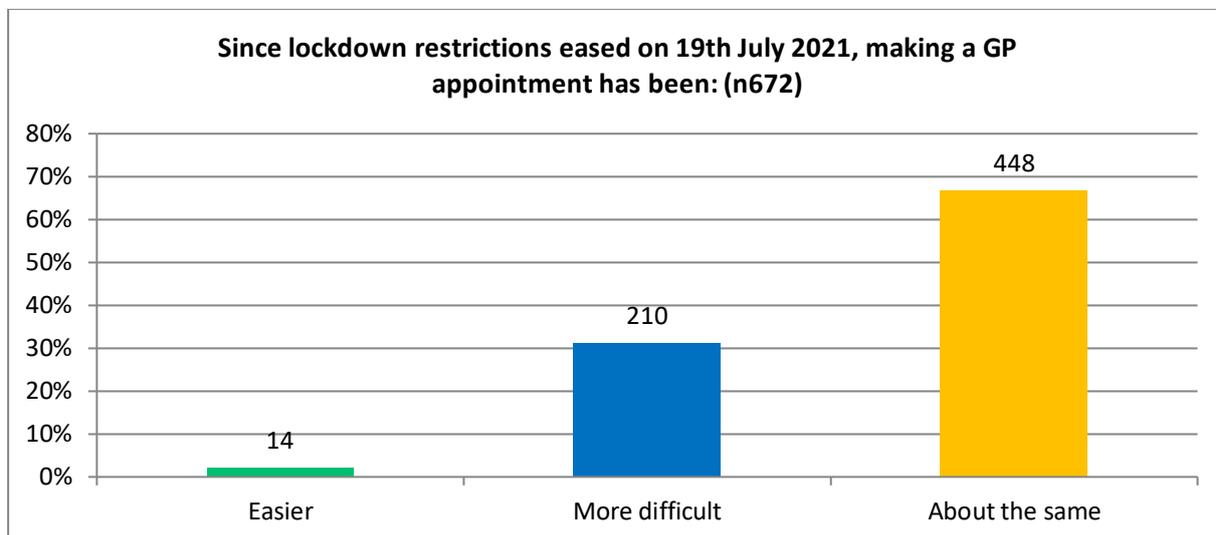
*The door is open to speak to a receptionist but you can't make an appointment. You are sent away to phone at 8am the next morning.*

*It hasn't changed it would appear they have not realised lock down has ended.*

*Can't walk in neither can you get through on the phone.*

7. Since lockdown restrictions eased on 19th July 2021, making a GP appointment has been: (n672)

The majority of respondents, 67%, do not feel there has been any change in making a GP appointment since lockdown restrictions eased on 19<sup>th</sup> July. Only 2% felt it was easier to make an appointment and 31% told us they believed it was harder to make an appointment.



8. Please tell us why you chose this answer? (n579)

Reasons respondents gave for their answers regarding if getting an appointment had changed since lockdown restrictions eased on 19<sup>th</sup> July included:

Positive comments

*Now after a first conversation if an appointment is necessary then the visit to the surgery is much quicker and there is much less waiting in a surgery full of sick people.*

*Doctor was efficient during lockdown and still is.*

*My practice was very good for getting appointments..*

Less positive comments

No changes to access since restrictions eased on 19<sup>th</sup> July.

*It has unfortunately not improved. eConsult is preferred by the surgery and therefore the access by telephone is made harder.*

*...nothings changed everything through eConsult.*

*Because they still say ring e consult or go urgent care or ring 111. When will my own surgery be open again as if it's urgent and my doctors can see you I would have to go to..... (another practice branch) practice which is very difficult for me.*

*It is expected that everyone must be on-line, whilst it might work for some, for many all they wish to do is pick up the phone and make an appointment for a face to face appointment.*

*Remains impossible to see GP. Not even allowed in surgery to collect prescription have to ring a bell and wait for ages outside in the rain. Even though reception area has screens.*

### **Problems contacting the practice by phone**

*My surgery never answer the phone, I have waited more than an hour on many occasions. When you do get someone, they have no appointment, as they have a shortage of doctors.*

*..think more people are trying to get appointments. I have waited on the phone for 40 minutes even though being 'second in the queue' and 20 minutes when 'next' on another occasion. Also online triage form can only be completed between 0800-1800 now.*

*Nigh on impossible to get through on the telephone, impossible to get past the receptionists, very unwilling to provide any of the services you would expect from your doctors surgery*

### **Staffing, reception and privacy**

*We are still using the rules we had during the pandemic and it seems to be up to the receptionists if we get an appointment or not because she obviously knows our bodies better than we do and has had medical training*

*The receptionist questions the reason for the appointment, like a triage system, you will be questioned whether you phone or email. I question whether the receptionist is qualified to make judgement for the appointment and how important it is. I am uncomfortable with this as someone who can suffer with mental health.*

*It's just impossible to get any sort of appointment and told that our GPs are still working from home. So never any face to face appointments. The nurses however at the practice are all there and working hard and have had very good service from them. We are constantly told to ring 111.*

*Went to Doctors & could not see a Doctor & had to tell the receptionist all that what was wrong with me on full view of patients in the waiting room - that is disgusting behaviour.*

### **Long waits for appointments**

*There seems to be less appointments available, it was quicker to get an appointment during lockdown. Not sure if this is because people didn't want to bother doctors.*

*Everything takes longer via email consult and if you call the surgery the message is over 3 mins before getting through.*

*We are only being offered phone appointments, unless you book on the day which involves phoning at 8 and queuing which generally results in a long wait and no appointment, if you want to book an appointment in advance there is usually at least a 6 week wait.*

*..booked for telephone consultation but has been cancelled and was given appointment next day which is after filling up online consultation practitioner called us after 6 days . We are thinking about going to A&E, I think that is the reason why hospital A&E are busy because GP are not able to see the patient in time.*

### No return to face to face appointments and a reliance on phone appointments first

*In light of the restrictions being lifted I was hoping you could go back to booking an appointment to see a doctor rather than having to wait for a phone appointment then they decide if they will see you..*

*It is very difficult to get a face to face appointment without having a phone consultation first.*

*GP's are not any more keen to book face to face appointments. Still have the same difficulty getting through to them to request an appointment.*

*Had a concern re my medication but really hard to just ask a question. Ended up speaking to reception and telling all, a phone appointment was then booked but this was quick and didn't really reassure me*

### Communication

*I have not had any emails or text messages to say that they are up and running as usual.*

*No information from the surgery so presuming just the same.*

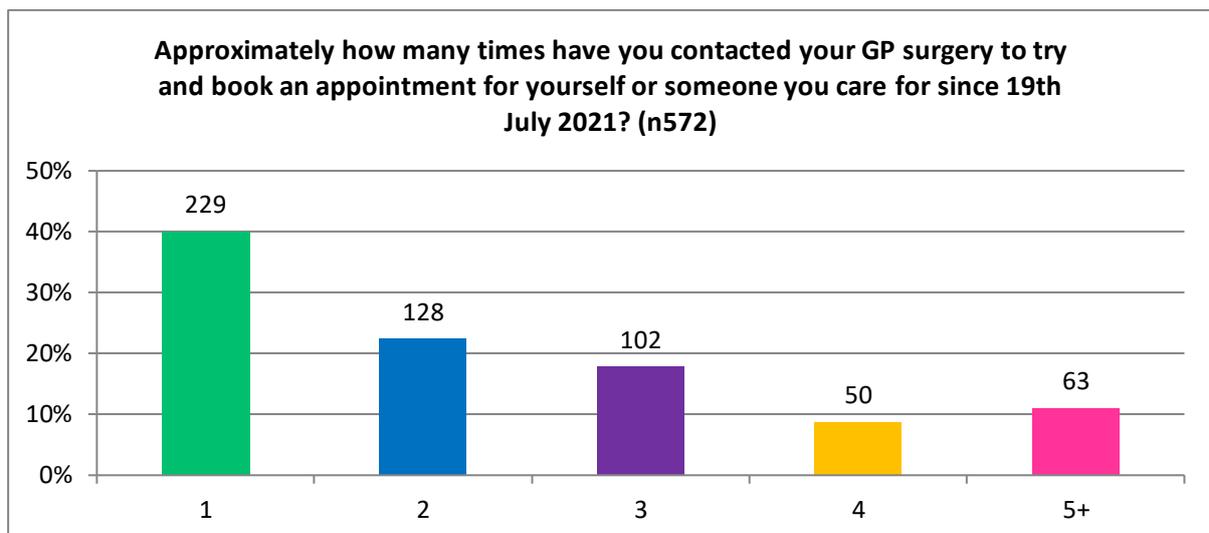
*Systems changed so unclear about best way to access an appointment.*

### Other

*I would rather check internet for advice or use urgent care rather than using these appalling services from GPs, where you can't actually get appointments when you are ill and not in your fullest strength.*

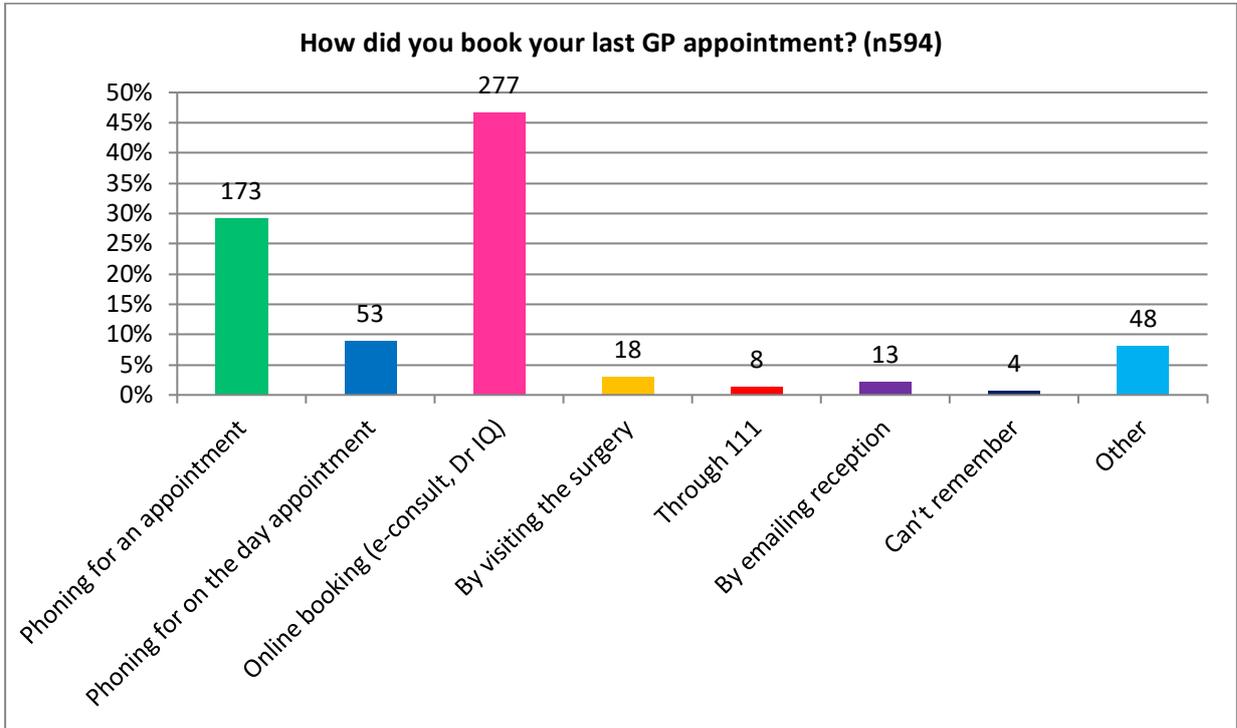
9. Approximately how many times have you contacted your GP surgery to try and book an appointment for yourself or someone you care for since 19th July 2021? (n572)

The majority of respondents (40%) had contacted their GP practice once since 19<sup>th</sup> July, 22% had contacted them twice and 11% had contacted their practice five or more times.



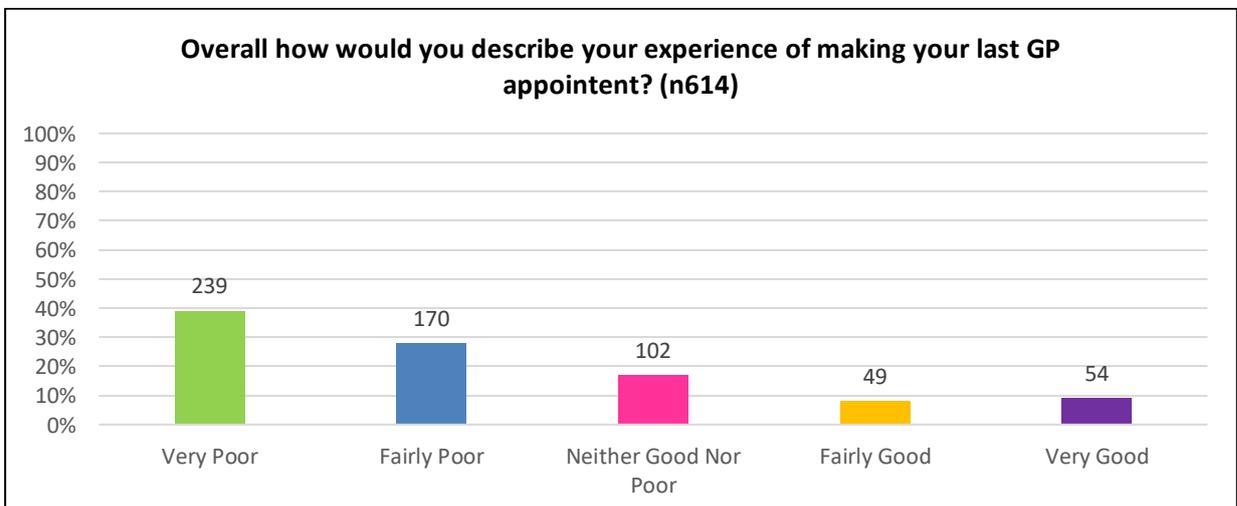
### 10. How did you book your last GP appointment? (n594)

47% of respondents booked their last appointment by using online booking, 29% phoned for a general appointment whilst 9% called for an on the day appointment. 3% visited their surgery and 1% booked via NHS 111. Others included using the NHS app, being contacted by the practice i.e. the district nurse or GP who booked the appointment.



### 11. Overall how would you describe your experience of making your last GP appointment? (n614)

39% described the experience as very poor, 28% as fairly poor, 17% as neither good nor bad, and 8% described it as fairly good or 9% very good.



## 12. Please tell us why you chose this answer? (n516)

### Positive comments

*E-consultation early morning. Phone call to me mid afternoon. Prescription at pharmacy immediately.*

*Didn't have to wait too long on hold and the receptionist who answered was friendly and understanding.*

*Because the reception, nurses and doctors at..... surgery are all excellent. Polite and caring. eConsult is great. You get a response from the doctor which is efficient. No sitting around for ages in germey waiting rooms.*

*We are very lucky to have good receptionist at .....who are understanding and kind, know if we need to see a doctor we are not 'time wasters' and get us seen in the appropriate time!!*

### Less positive comments

#### Long winded booking process

*I had a message from the surgery telling me I needed a telephone appointment with a GP to discuss blood test results. I telephoned, couldn't get through, so completed eConsult only to receive an email telling me to ring. I rang again and after 30+ minutes waiting, I got through to be told 1<sup>st</sup> available appointment was a weeks wait.*

*Long winded and have to be available all the time after eConsult to receive call back about appointment not always easy when working.*

#### Can't get through on phone

*They hardly ever answer the phone and when you get someone they just say fill in the online form.*

*I can't get to speak to anyone to explain that I need to see a doctor. I feel only half listened to*

*Long waiting times to answer, then no available appointments.*

#### Online consultation difficult

*It's just difficult and stressful especially when feeling frightened or low. I am very computer literate but the online form is useless when it doesn't relate to the need of seeing a GP....*

*Because they ask 1 million stupid questions and you have to keep changing your answers otherwise it just says call 111.*

*E consults forms are too lengthy to fill in and not easy to understand, that's if you have the means to fill the form in in the 1st place!*

*Phoned surgery, was told I had to fill in an E consultant online. Completed form which resulted with it telling me to call 111 or my GP surgery to make an appointment. Called surgery to tell them. Was*

*advised I couldn't have an appointment and I should fill in the e consultant and make my illness sound less urgent!*

#### **Long waits for a phone or face to face appointment**

*Because I became very ill waiting for the appointment, had to call 111, who got me a phone appointment same day.*

*It was obvious that I needed to be examined by a doctor but I could not see one until I had completed E Consult which is not set up to handle my condition. Then a telephone appointment with a nurse which did not achieve anything and then the actual face to face appointment with a doctor. Each step causes delay in getting the treatment you need.*

*Neither my family or friends who use the same practice have managed to get face to face appointments in a very long while. Even telephone consultations are virtually impossible. An example of which was when a family member was seriously ill with food poisoning and told he could have a telephone consultation in 3 weeks!!! All he wanted was some advice which thankfully 111 did. I don't know what we would do without them. They have even managed to book me an appointment at Queen Mary's urgent care as I was unable to talk to or see anyone at our practice.*

*I had to call 111 in the end and was sent to a&e, which would have been prevented had someone answered the telephone and given me an appointment.*

*I needed to speak with a clinician urgently, the soonest reception offered was 5 days away. 111 contacted my GP and I received a call within 2 hours.*

#### **Not happy with type of appointment offered**

*You can't get to see a GP.*

*All I got was a telephone call from a nurse (not my doctor) and with phone consultations you do not get a time slot you just have to wait for the call.*

#### **Staffing and privacy concerns**

*Feels like GPs just don't want patients anywhere near them any more.*

*The receptionists are very rude and unhelpful.*

*Staff are rushed and unsympathetic. Often they are curt to the point of rudeness.*

*Because I don't think it is right that I should have to discuss my illness to the receptionist.*

#### **Patients who self-medicated or stopped trying to get medical help**

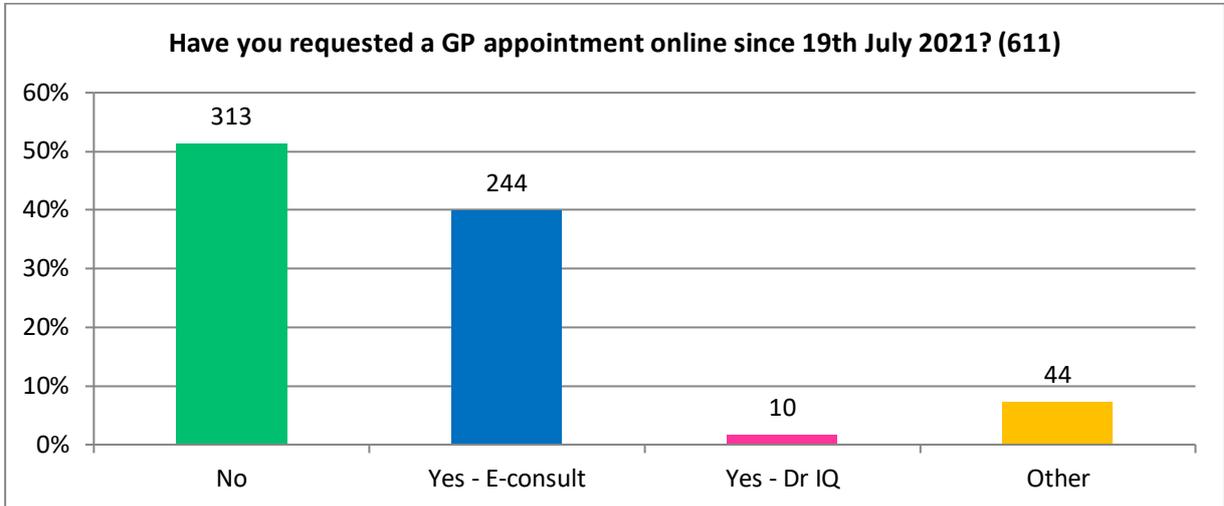
*My parents and parents in law are avoiding seeking medical support as it's so impossibly hard to get an appointment or speak to someone. So sad*

*I was offered an appointment in 3 weeks time. I ordered antibiotics online and dealt with the infection myself!*

*Called, told to have a PCR test for wheezing (which was negative) and not followed up - so left it!*

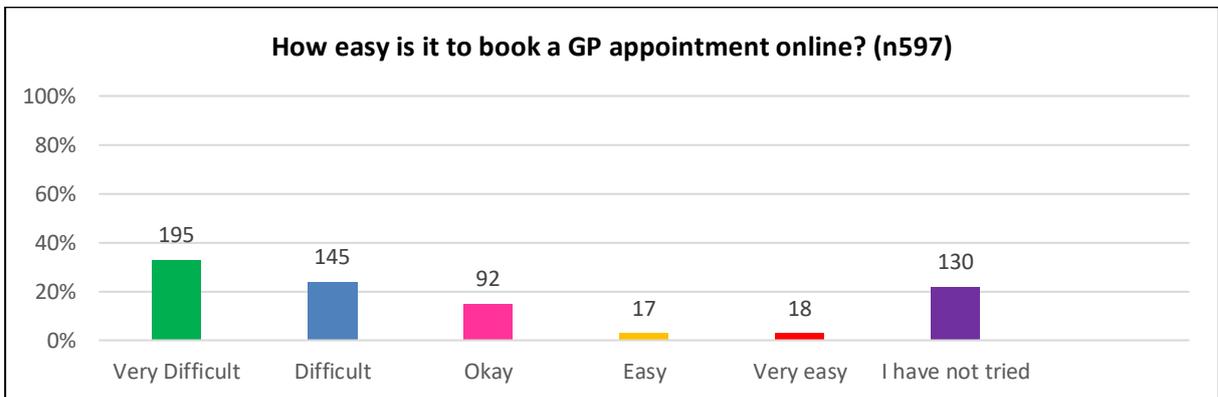
### 13. Have you requested a GP appointment online since 19th July 2021? (n611)

51% of respondents have not requested an appointment using online booking, whilst just over 40% have. Other methods included trying to use online booking systems such as the NHS app and emailing the practice.



### 14. How easy is it to book a GP appointment online? (n587)

33% found booking an appointment online very difficult, 25% found it difficult, 15% found it OK and 3% found it easy. 22% told us they had not tried to book an appointment online.



### 15. Please tell us why you chose this answer? (n440)

The majority of respondents said they found online consultation systems difficult because the form was hard to complete and understand and was often repetitive. They told us if they did complete it they were often redirected being asked to call their GP practice, NHS 111 or go to A&E or an Urgent Treatment Centre. Residents told us they were sometimes advised by their practice or chose themselves to dumb down their answers to avoid being referred to other services. Respondents told us that once the form was completed they did not always get a response/call back from their practice

promptly or if at all which was frustrating. Some residents told us that online consultation was the only method available for them to contact their practice.

Alternatively, a smaller number of residents found online systems easy to use, telling us it worked well, was convenient and speeded up the booking process.

#### Easy and very easy comments

*eConsult is great. You get a response from the doctor which is efficient. No sitting around for ages in germy waiting rooms.*

#### Very difficult or difficult comments

*When you are ill and elderly, answering seemingly endless questions online is difficult you put in all the information that are asked but no one answers*

*When I have tried to complete it in the past it has referred me to A&E or 111 which is inappropriate when I want a GP's appointment*

*It's not easy to book appointment using eConsult as you have to await response. Even then when an appointment is given there is no discussion as to what time is convenient for patient. Before you could call surgery or pop in and make appointment which is convenient for you.*

#### Digital exclusion

*I assist my 81 year old mother by completing the online form for her, she would not be able to do this herself*

*Not everyone has internet or know how to book online*

### 16. What, if any, are the main barriers/issues you are currently experiencing when trying to book an appointment via telephone? (n540)

The main barriers respondents told us they are experiencing when trying to book an appointment by phone are:

Long waits for the phone to be answered or giving up before the phone is answered due to excessive waiting times.

*Can't get through, no face to face, husband diagnosed with cancer not spoken to doctor once to explain things or reassure us*

*The system doesn't tell you how many people are waiting.*

*The usual constantly engaged phone line*

*Waiting 40 minutes on a phone when feeling very ill*

Being cut off whilst waiting or not receiving call backs.

*Waiting times on hold. Our home phone has run out of battery before being answered in the past.*

*They don't answer the phone. Have been waiting in a queue for over 2 hours twice this week and eventually someone picks up the phone and hangs up without even speaking. This is very frustrating.*

Lengthy answer phone messages before being given the options to connect to the relevant service.

*Four minutes of worthless information being given before you get a chance to speak to a receptionist my time and money being wasted.*

*Lengthy waiting times to answer, repeated irritating messages, having to then constantly call back.*

Practices not allowing patients the choice or option to book appointments by phone, instead redirecting people to complete the online consultation form regardless of digital ability or access.

*Phone line constantly busy, when you get through you are told you have to fill in the consult form. You just go round in circle.*

*No internet, unhelpful employees at surgery.*

*Delay in surgery answering/Told no face to face unless assessed by e-consult/111.*

*In hold for ages (average over 20 mins) one time 40 mins, then they insist you do eConsult, even when u say it wont let you properly record symptoms.*

Reception being unhelpful or rude in the way they deal with callers.

*Surgery receptionists who are rude and unhelpful and do not show an ounce of compassion just told no appointments available and fill out an e consult which will be triaged and you may have to wait up to a week to speak to anyone.*

*The incredibly long hold times to speak to a receptionist who really doesn't want to help.... The people who answers the phone are rude and ask us to do e-consult and advise easy way to get phone call earlier is to ask for administrative help.*

*Rude Receptionists think they are doctors. Waiting on phone for up to an hour despite 25 mins into the call being told you are next. What are they actually doing in the surgery because they aren't seeing patients.*

Long waits to call at specific times of the day for on the day appointments, which have been allocated by the time the call is answered.

*From opening at 8am the surgery phone line tend to be engaged. The waiting time varies. If you cannot get through early any appointments are usually filled.*

*It takes so long to get through on the phone (I've waited up to an hour trying to get through) and when finally get to speak to someone there aren't any appointments available and receptionists are quiet rude and blunt.*

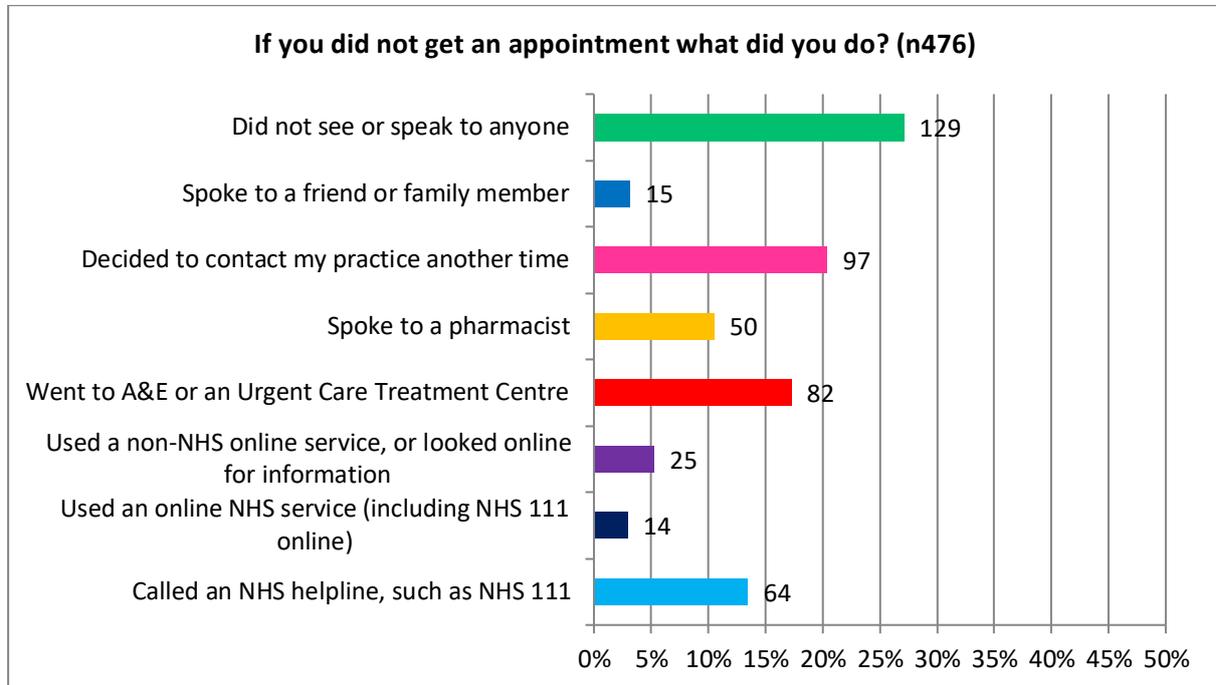
No barriers

*There have never been any barriers making an appointment the staff on reception are very accommodating.*

*Wait times, but this has never been longer than 5 minutes or so.*

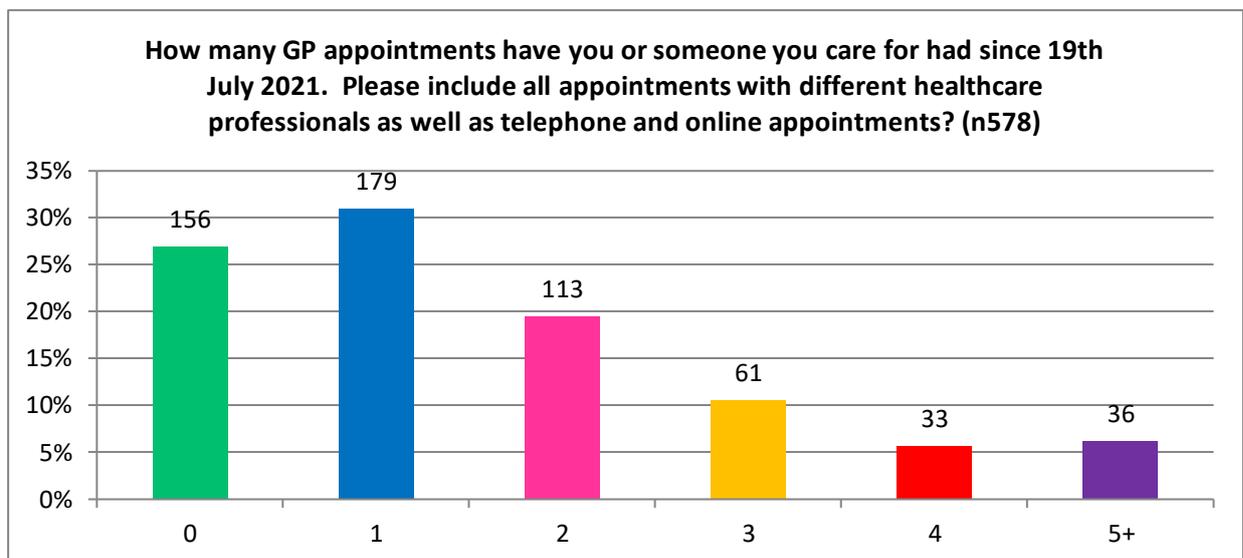
17. If you did not get an appointment what did you do? (n476)

27% of respondents reported that if they could not get an appointment they did not see or speak to anyone else, 13% called NHS111, 17% went to A&E or UTC, 11% spoke to a pharmacist, 8% went online and 20% tried to contact the practice again.



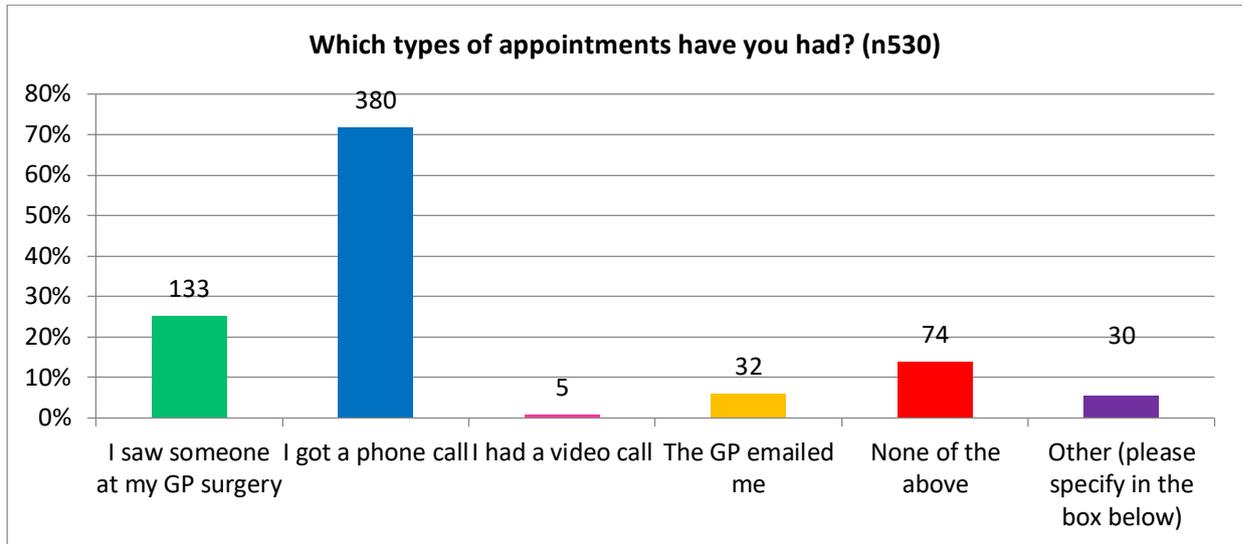
18. How many GP appointments have you or someone you care for had since 19th July 2021. Please include all appointments with different healthcare professionals as well as telephone and online appointments. (n578)

27% of respondents told us they had not managed to get an appointment, 31% had one appointment, 20% had two appointments, 11% had 3 appointments, 6% had 4 and 6% had 5+ appointments.



## 19. Which types of appointments have you had? (n530)

25% of respondents received a face to face appointment with a healthcare professional ie GP, nurse. The majority were given a telephone appointment, 6% had been emailed and 1% had a video call. Respondents reported that they were still waiting to either get an appointment or were waiting for the appointment they had booked to take place. Others said they were referred to other services without further practice contact, never heard back from their practice or couldn't get through to the practice for an appointment.



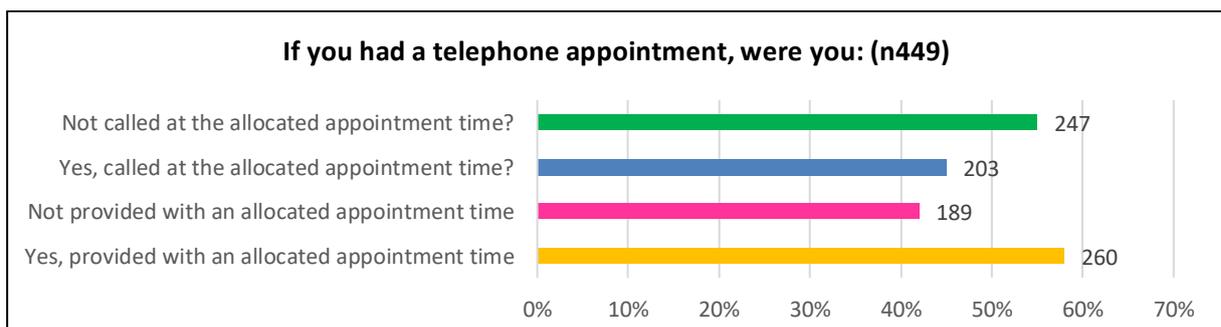
*Eventually got an appointment after ringing surgery and really pushing for appointment. Had already gone to A & E via 111 7 days before with the same problems.*

*The text I received did not specify if I would get a call or video so I turned up at the surgery, the doctor then told me she tried to call me for a chat.*

## 20. If you had a telephone appointment, were you:

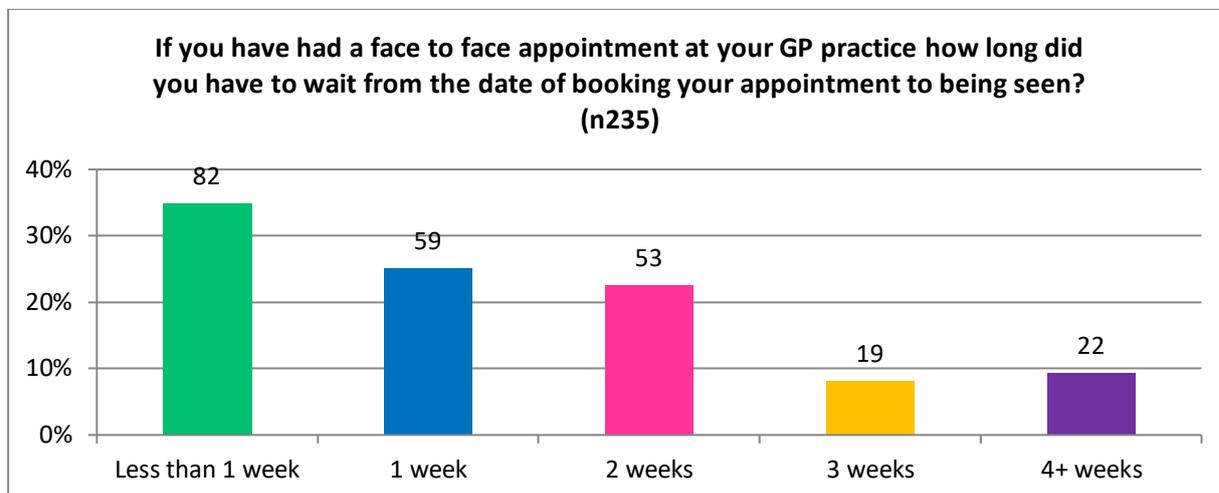
**Provided with an allocated appointment time (e.g. 11am or between 10am & 11am);  
Called at the allocated appointment time? (n449)**

58% of people told us they were given a phone appointment and would be called within an allocated time slot ie between 10am and 11am. However, only 45% reported being called within the allocated time.



21. If you have had a face to face appointment at your GP practice how long did you have to wait from the date of booking your appointment to being seen? (n235)

35% of respondents who had a face to face appointment had this less than a week after booking their appointment, 25% waited about a week, 23% waited 2 weeks, 8% waited 3 week and 9% told us they had waited 4 or more weeks.



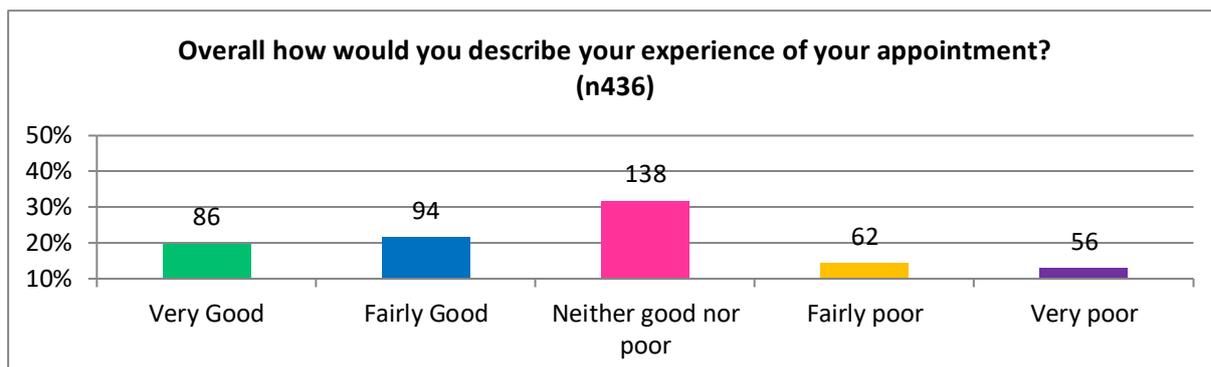
22. Please rate your experience of the following - length of appointment, communication during the appointment, outcome of the appointment, treatment explanation. (n433)

Rate your experience of:	Excellent	Good	OK	Bad	Terrible
Length of appointment	15%	21%	34%	12%	10%
Communication during the appointment	18%	24%	40%	10%	9%
Outcome of the appointment	14%	24%	41%	12%	9%
Treatment explanation	15%	23%	42%	12%	8%

23. Overall how would you describe your experience of your appointment? (n436)

Patients who managed to access an appointment were generally more positive about their experience than the experience of trying to make an appointment.

20% of respondents rated their appointment as very good, 22% fairly good, 32% neither good nor bad, 14% fairly poor and 13% very poor.



## 24. Please tell us more about your experience? (n279)

### Positive experiences

*I saw or spoke to the same doctor throughout my medical issues. He was very good at listen and explaining what my options were.*

*The doctor was very empathetic and compassionate. She gave my husband some relieving treatment and also contacted Guys Hospital to give him an early appointment.*

*The doctor who 'phoned listens and is good at asking questions and explaining what he is going to do. He is also careful to prescribe medication that is appropriate bearing in mind existing medication prescribed.*

*Once eventually seen by a Dr. the appointment was good.*

*It was so good to have a face-to-face appointment and feel much more confident then having a phone call consultation.*

*I have been looked after very well & given follow up appointments where necessary in without having to wait very long.*

*Dr said a clinic would follow up. They did. Prompt, efficient experience.*

*I eventually visited a Specialist Nurse and everything went well - on time and efficient. My Doctor herself us very caring but would prefer face to face.*

*It is not always easy to express yourself over the phone and it does feel a bit rushed sometimes.*

### Less positive experiences

#### Rushed appointment

*Phone calls not always effective. Calls are short and you don't feel able to ask too many questions because if the timings of their workload.*

*All felt rushed after the time and effort it took to get the phone appointment. Also time slot not always easy as cant just sit and wait for call as I am working. If you miss the call you dont know if they will call back.*

*Rushed with poor communication. I felt I was not listened to and was talked over.*

#### No call back

*Nurse advised she would get the GP to call me, only she never did.*

#### Getting an appointment

*When you actually get to see a doctor they are fine it's getting to see one which is a nightmare.*

*Doctors are fine. It's the technical side of getting in touch with the team and the long waits.*

*Surgery is locked up, receptionists let you in, only one other person in waiting room. Very impersonal.*

### Not listened too

*The doctor was very blunt and I didn't feel as though he listened to my concerns.*

*GP was not interested and did not listen. Had blood tests and ecg have heard nothing back from GP in 3-4 wks still getting dizzy spells not point in using GP service will go to a&e until the surgery sorts itself out.*

*Doctors are under pressure I get that, but it seems they're like just wanting to issue a prescription for something and get you out. It's a very bad service and I'm scared for what happens if I generally need to see a doctor and they misdiagnose me.*

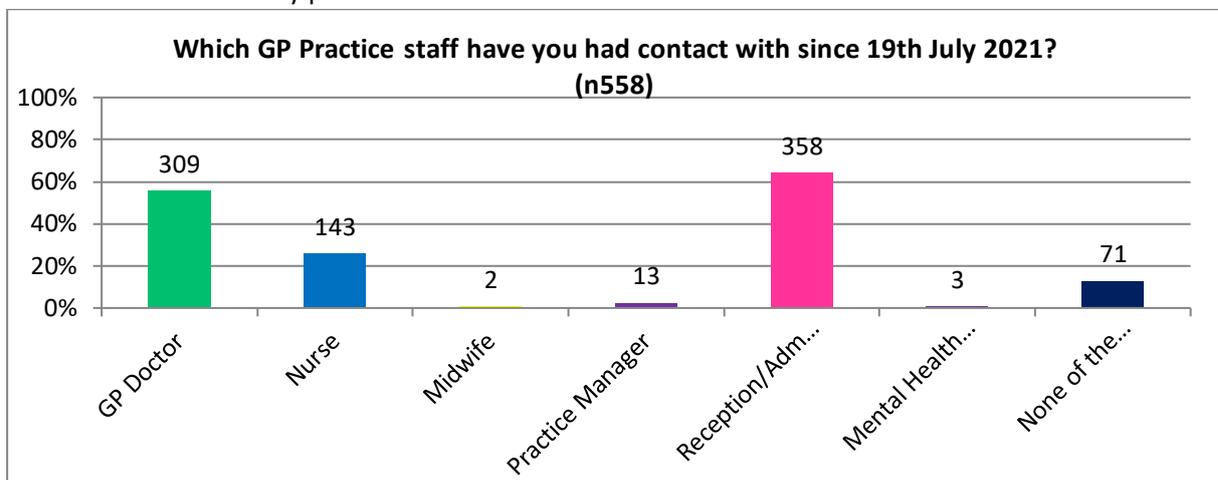
### Concerns re phone appointments

*I found the telephone appointment very challenging, it was difficult to hear / understand everything the GP was saying.*

*Was contacted on my mobile while shopping as wasn't given a time and could not here and kept losing signal.*

## 25. Which GP Practice staff have you had contact with since 19th July 2021? (n558)

55% of respondents told us they had had contact with a GP, 26% with a nurse, 2% with the practice manager, less than 1% had contact with a midwife or mental health nurse and 13% had not managed to have contact with any practice staff.



## 26. What is your experience of engaging with staff? (447)

Respondents had mixed views and experiences of engaging with staff. Some were happy and found the staff helpful and caring. In comparison, others found staff such as receptionists rude, uncaring and without empathy or understanding. Reception was described as 'struggling' and 'stressed' and respondents sometimes felt communication with the staff was rushed making them feel like a nuisance. We were told that experiences were often mixed and dependant on who respondents were engaging with ie reception and GP poor (rushed) but nurse was helpful and understanding. Problems were sometimes described as not being with the staff, but the process to get an appointment with

reception being seen as creating a barrier to getting an appointment. This resulted in frustration and a feeling that there was lack of understanding and empathy by practice staff of respondents struggle to contact the practice and communicate their perceived needs especially if they were simply told to complete the online consultation form.

### Positive experiences

*Fine - staff at ..... surgery have always been good - just have to jump through hoops now to actually get to them.*

*All very caring and understanding.*

*Greeted with a smile, know their patients, helpful with info - lovely practice staff.*

*Very good service from each one. Less waiting around in the doctors and appointments were on time.*

### Less positive experiences

*Variable, rude and uncaring most of the time.*

*Poor.... Passed from person to person, not very helpful.*

*They are so rude as stressed.*

*Having to explain over and over again what the problem is on one occasion we explained to 4 different people.*

### Mixed experiences

*The doctors are usually polite and helpful. The receptionists are terrible with their communication towards patients.*

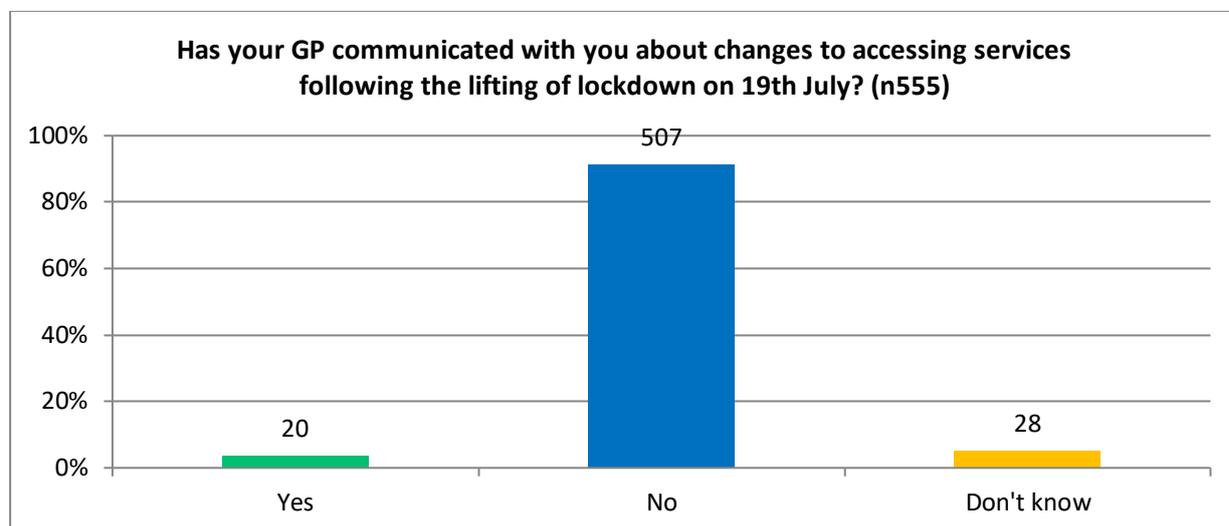
*Some really positive and helpful and others just want to get you off phone as fast as possible without really helping.*

*Nurse practitioner is fantastic and takes time to explain everything, she never rushes the appointment or makes you feel like she is busy doing other thing while on the phone with you. The last time I spoke to the doctor I could hear him moving around the room he was in doing other things and he was very dismissive, telling me to watch Shirley Valentine to help with my depression. Depending on the reception staff you speak with they are either very helpful of completely the opposite. This is depending on if you speak with the original ones from our surgery or the ones from the surgery that has joined with ours who seem to be very abrupt.*

*Medical staff are generally polite and helpful. Reception staff have been varied - some are okay, but patient service generally leaves a lot to be desired. It doesn't feel like a community facing service and it should..*

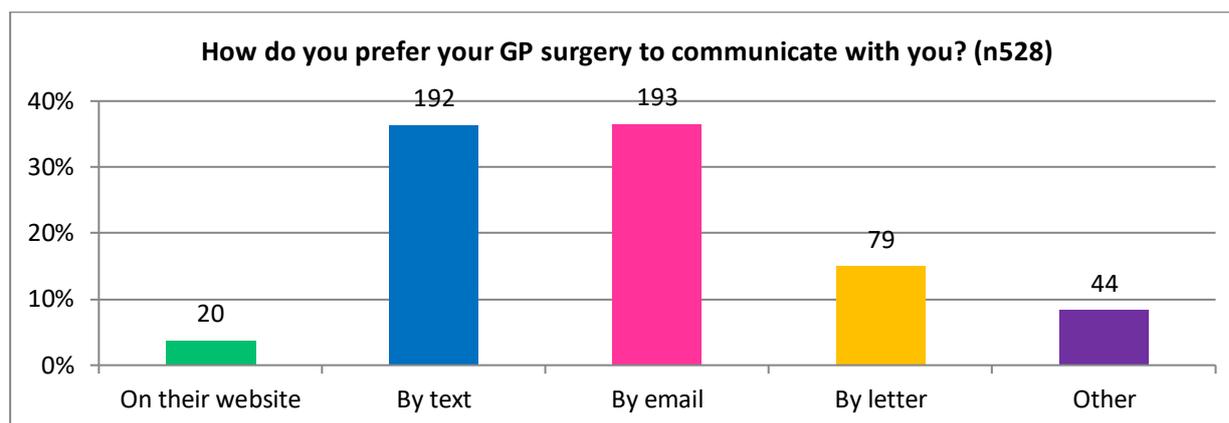
27. Has your GP communicated with you about changes to accessing services following the lifting of lockdown on 19th July? (n555)

91% told us they had not had any communication from their practice about changes to accessing services following the lifting of lockdown on 19<sup>th</sup> July, 5% were not sure and 4% had seen communication re-accessing services.



28. How do you prefer your GP surgery to communicate with you? (n528)

4% prefer communication via the practice website, 36% via telephone, 37% via email, 15% by letter. Other methods included being given information face to face by reception or another health professional or visually.



Other comments included communication by phone, face to face or via visiting the practice

*I'm grateful for any communication but this doesn't happen with my surgery. We are all kept in the dark, frustrated and confused of the best way to get care.*

*I don't mind how they communicate as long as they do.*

*Any communication about how to book an appointment would be welcome in any format.*

*Text is good for reminders and to request you to call the surgery, Email is good for anything that a letter would have been sent for, and website is good for generic information. I would only prefer a letter as a backup contact to other communications.*

*I am more than happy to be contacted by any means available but as I only use the Patient Access app and not the surgery website if that was how changes were communicated I would not see them along with lots of elderly people who do not have access to this platform.*

**29. Is there any information about current access that you would like to know from your GP surgery? (289)**

*Yes I have heard that surgeries will not be going back to how it was, but I along with most do not want a diagnosis over the phone it is not acceptable its already worrying about things in the first place, but a phone call does not in any way give confidence to the patient and this will lead to further hospital waiting and chaos which could be preventable.*

*How can I move to different GP?*

*How much of a GPs time is spent on face to face consultations?*

*How do you book an appointment? What should I do if I need an appointment and nobody answers the phone. I keep thinking I will go to urgent care when it gets really bad.*

*What services they provide.*

*When will they drop eConsult?*

*Will it become easier again to see medical professionals FACE TO FACE or has the pandemic shifted this to a new 'normal' (which is not satisfactory!).*

*What is the access? What are the doctors doing right now? I understand that the receptionists are busy fielding calls but what are the doctors doing? Why are the waiting rooms empty, why can't hospitals or other medical staff get in touch with doctors. It's a mystery!*

*We would like to know what services are available to be booked and how to book (what ways they can be booked). Would like to know how many people are registered with their Surgery and how many Doctors are available ... i.e. how many patients and how many doctors ? As a surgery are they over subscribed??*

*Can you actually walk in to ask a question of reception staff?*

*We used to have a walk in surgery which was brilliant. Are we ever going to be able to go back to this.*

*I would like to know why they are not going back to normal services as I believe the government indicated.*

*How are things being done now. Would like to see a GP when necessary.*

*Why can't we have at least 10 mins on the phone instead of being told they are in a hurry. Why can't we choose which doctor we want to speak to. Why can't we phone for an appointment at any time*

*of day. I missed an awaited call because I was in the toilet and the doctor doesn't call back because they are too busy. They only have to press the recall button.*

*Is there a time related cut off for the phone queue? Would it be for all parties to further limit the number queuing. I have been cut off when there are less than five, after spending nearly 30mins on the phone!*

*what else is available for alternative health and wellbeing, what other choices can I make about my wellness (life coaching, an NLP coach, a health coach, a massage, mindfulness, walking groups etc.) it would be helpful to have visibility of this info and receive more news from the surgery about other local avenues I could explore.*

*When are diabetes checks going to start? I haven't had my bloods or medication checked for over a year.*

*Can the GP do home visits?*

*Is an e-consult and telephone appt with a health care professional and not a qualified GP the only option for patients now?*

### 30. What changes to GP access (e.g. phone appointments, online booking) have worked well for you, if any? (n383)

Comments were made about phone appointments and how they can save on travelling and waiting times and can sometimes be more convenient. However, this may not always be an appropriate method if it is difficult to talk over the phone or if you need a further appointment for an examination. Online forms are useful to triage patients in terms of urgent and non-urgent cases, freeing up appointments for those that need them.

*It's good that you can get a GP phone call within 2-3 days. However, it's hard if you don't know exactly when you'll be called back. In my job I'm not permitted to have a phone with me.*

*The phoned appointment seems to work better as there is not a long wait at the surgery*

*For non-urgent, routine follow-ups, I would continue to use the online E-consult as I can do at my time and let the reception staff take more important phone calls.*

*Arranging my repeat prescriptions to be done by the pharmacy has been great as I would always run out of meds before the GPs did my new prescription*

### 31. What suggestions do you have for improving access at your practice? (n426)

*Transparency! Communicate with the patients - let us know what you are doing.*

*Unlock the doors and open reception!*

*More information may be on a monthly or quarterly letter or email.*

*Facetime calls & walk in appointment for over 80's and other vulnerable patients.*

*To choose to either book an appointment yourself online or go via the eConsult route.*

*For the staff to get a course in communication and how to help people.*

*A nurse type triage, not discussing symptoms with the receptionist.*

*E consult are ok if you have the technology to do it. The form is too long with questions that are t necessary. Simplify the form.*

*Needs to have an email to use to contact surgery.*

*Better 'phone system and more staff to answer the phones. Booking appointments by 'phone should be easier and patients should not be felt to be a nuisance if they either can't or are unhappy about using e consult.*

*They need more doctors and appointments.*

*Listen to the patients and don't assume that everyone is computer lit. Provide face to face appointments.*

*Get rid of all the telephone messages on the telephone so that you can get through quicker and take off the e-consult message.*

**32. Is there anything else you want to tell us about your GP Surgery? i.e., referrals, positive experiences etc. (n275)**

*I have had the need to use the GP service a lot during lockdown, and the Doctor I have spoken to has been excellent in advice and supportive during a very difficult time for myself.*

*Tomorrow 31/08/2021 I need to go to the visit the ..... surgery and plead for an appointment for my Dad . My Dad has been fobbed off with nobody returning his call when my Mum called to speak to doctor, last week whilst at his caravan everything came to a head when he fell and couldn't get up , my Mum had to call an ambulance, after a full check up the paramedic has advised my Dad to visit his GP (easier said than done !). When the paramedics tried emailing my Dads notes over to the surgery it could find no email address and his words to us were "your surgery doesn't get very good reviews " we are not demanding he gets seen straight away but he does need a doctor to check him out .*

*In general the doctors and staff at my GP have worked well in a difficult and dangerous situation. The doctors recognised a problem that they may need expert help with and referred me across with no problems or pushing on my part.*

*If you actually see a doctor or nurse they are very good its such a shame you cannot make appointments.*

*I believe 2 of the doctors and reception staff are very good. It is the systems that the .... Centre is using do not take the patients' needs sufficiently into account.*

*I am a carer and I am suffering from stress and other issues. I paid to have some basic tests blood pressure cholesterol etc. The pharmacy advised me to speak to GP. I find contacting and seeing GP at ..... Practice the most stressful challenging parts of my life. For self I don't bother but I have to contact them for my elderly mother with Dementia. Awful when I feel bad and do not have confidence in GP I have told them.*

*I have been with my surgery for years and have no intention of moving. I have actually recommended to my new neighbour. I have been fully supportive of changes during lockdown. The elderly, vulnerable or those who find it all too difficult are deciding not to seek help. This has come from friends and family and local people I know personally. Many are not at my surgery but know this is happening across the board.*

*My daughter has a learning disability and lives in supported accommodation she has to have an annual health check. I rang in April to book her as she did not have her check in 2020 due to pandemic I was told by reception staff that their nurse that does these is not available at the moment but they will contact me when she is - I am still waiting ! ..... Our GP's seem very out of reach now and I feel my surgery has become so large in recent years that they cannot manage the numbers of patients they have. I have been with this surgery for 30 plus years the service has definitely deteriorated and since the pandemic they seem very reluctant to see anyone....*

*The frustration with the process of getting to see a GP now makes me delay or put off seeking help. I am sure other people feel the same and I have no doubt that people are becoming very unwell because of these frustrations.*

*The nurse is lovely but receptionist seemed to think a smear test could be done by phone! Communication between receptionists, GPs and patients must be improved.*

*Overall, I would say the GPs try their best. But they do regularly seem overrun and done in. It's not great when the healthcare professionals don't even have space to look after their well being. that being said, generally professional and you can get things done. Reception is usually good when you call. GPs usually get tasks done that need to be done in good time.*

*They need to train admin staff better to deal with people sometimes at their lowest and don't need to have a battle with rude staff just for an appointment. Treat people on an individual basis, not be abrupt and rude to everyone.*

*During the pandemic our family experiences of your practise have been outstanding and we are extremely impressed by the ease of access, prompt delivery and knowledge of your staff. Thank you for delivering such a good service during such difficult times.*

*Overall have always had good service, but Covid seemed like an excuse to be as obstructive as possible.*

*Most doctors seem to be locums, so not much continuity of care.*

*I have had nothing but a positive experience from my interactions with my practice since the start of the pandemic and since re-opening. I am thankful as I have heard horror stories from friends and family registered at other Bexley GP practices.*

### 33. Please select if you would be interested in joining your GP Patient Participation Group? (n39)

39 respondents expressed an interest in applying to join their local practice PPG. They have been contacted by Healthwatch regarding how to do this.

## Conclusion

Our survey found that public perception was of GP practices running a reduced service, were closed, had restricted access and were not seeing patients face to face, with little or no patient choice being offered.

Many reported seeing little or no change to access since Government restrictions started to lift in July 2021 despite other services such as dentists and hospitals being more open and the government announcing 'business as usual'.

### Barriers to access

**Residents felt practices were still had barriers to access and didn't understand why questioning what staff were doing if not seeing patients or answering the phones.** If they did manage to visit the practice they told us waiting rooms were empty and very few staff visibly working, compounding the perception that the practice was not busy.

Residents often told us pre-pandemic that they could not get through to their practice by telephone and for many this has worsened during the pandemic, with patients becoming frustrated with long waits on hold, being cut off or being told once the phone was answered that they needed to complete an online consultation (or that no appointments were available).

### Increased pressure on the system

**Primary care has reported receiving significantly higher call volumes than pre-pandemic, which they could not always cope with. One local practice told us they had 1,000 calls in a day and another 600 calls, volumes that are physically impossible to deal with.**

Telephone systems and staffing levels must be adequate to cope with demand. However, getting through on the phone will not guarantee an appointment if the wider problems of the national general practice staff shortage and funding for primary care are not addressed. Quickly getting through to an understanding polite receptionist, who is caring and has time to talk may help to improve residents understanding of the situation.

**The move to a total triage system and digitalisation has worked well for some residents who have found it more convenient to use online consultation or have a telephone appointment, not needing to take time off work or travel to appointments.** Others told us the triage system meant they had experienced shorter waiting times for appointments, both phone and face to face, than pre-pandemic as patients were prioritised according to need.

### Confidentiality

Residents questioned the confidentiality of the total triage system, and the need to discuss personal medical problems with reception staff who are seen as the gate keepers to appointments. **Sometimes describing reception staff as uncaring and un-sympathetic showing little understanding of the frustration residents have experienced in the often lengthy process of contacting the practice.** Residents' tempers sometimes fray if they feel reception staff are rude or short with them.

**Conversely, there is little understanding from residents about the pressure reception staff are under from callers who are not happy that they have waited for their call to be answered and find no**

**appointments available or a long wait for an appointment.** One respondent told us they didn't call the practice anymore because they were 'scared' to do so, potentially using other services, avoiding or delaying treatment. It is unacceptable that a patient should feel this way.

Training and support are vital for public-facing staff who need to be caring understanding and show empathy for residents frustrated at trying to access their practice. The public also needs to be made aware of the pressure reception staff are under and that it is unacceptable to be rude or abusive to staff who simply may not have an available appointment.

## Digitalisation and Online Consultation

The move to digitalisation was needed to help keep both patients and practice staff safe from Covid. It is now an integral part of primary care which is likely to stay. However, **more evidence of the blended approach recommended by NHS England is needed by all practices.** This will help to ensure greater patient choice and that residents without digital access or confidence can contact their practice in convenient and preferred ways, rather than being told by reception to complete an online consultation form regardless of digital ability.

Although it works well for some residents, online consultation was found to be frustrating, often sending residents in circles, asking them to call the practice or contacting other services such as NHS 111. The online consultation system needs to be improved to be more efficient and user friendly. Residents told us there was a 'knack' to completing the form which may include dumbing down their answers so they weren't redirected to A&E.

A vast difference in what happens after an online consultation was completed was found. Some received a fast response, whilst others heard nothing at all or for days and were unsure how long they should be expected to wait before they were contacted. This created concern over whether the form had been seen and what they should do. Concerns were raised about confidentiality and who looked at the online consultation forms. Residents should be informed and given guidelines about what to expect once an online consultation has been completed, including who looks at the form, timelines and information about when and how they may be contacted and by whom. This would help build residents confidence in the system and may encourage wider use, freeing up the phone lines for those without digital access.

## Reassurance and choice

Face to face appointments are often residents preferred choice of engaging with primary care and should be offered when appropriate but the introduction of phone appointments is a positive step for some patients. Others may need more reassurance and understanding that phone appointments are effective in diagnosing certain conditions or as a way of assessing needs, to build patient confidence. If a patient feels they can communicate better face to face or that they need to show the problem to medical staff their right to choose should be respected. Patients must be made aware of the practice procedure for phone appointments, such as a time frame for the call so that patients are not waiting indefinitely for practice calls and know what will happen if they miss a call.

The patient's situation also needs to be taken into account. Residents told us they had missed calls as they were not given a time frame or choice of when the call would happen, and were working or were unable to talk privately at the time of their call.

## Communication

The lack of SELCCG communication and communication specifically from patients own practices appears to have contributed towards confusion, a lack of understanding and empathy from some residents towards primary care. Communication is needed not just at SELCCG level but between practices and their patients to help boost understanding and give residents a clearer understanding of the pressures primary care faces. Practice specific information may help towards improving public perception and support for primary care.

Primary care and SELCCG could explore ways to inform their patients of the new ways of working, procedures and systems such as what happens once an online consultation form is completed. **Due to the**

**pandemic and the need to adopt new ways of working quickly, residents have not been consulted about the changes and may not be fully aware of what is happening in primary care resulting in a lack of choice and frustration that they can't get the help they need.**

Communication specifically from their practice may help increase understanding on a personal level, not only of the systems now in place but the pressure general practice is under. This may then help to address perceptions and manage expectations.

Many of the issues discussed in this report are national issues that cannot be addressed locally such as NHS funding. Following on from the HWE report, 'GP access during COVID-19', Sir Robert Francis QC, Chair of Healthwatch England has called on NHS England to undertake a formal review of GP access to make sure the service works for everyone. This would also help people to understand the way they can access care. The report also recommends improved communication between primary care and patients both nationally and at a local level.

A full list of recommendations made to NHS England can be found in the HWE report (HWE, 2020) a link is available in the reference section of this report.

## Recommendations

1. GP practices should immediately start to promote patient choice and make clear the different methods of communicating with the practice, especially regarding ways to book an appointment, who they see and speak to. If patients cannot have their preferred choice a reasonable explanation should be provided.
2. Customer service and call handling training and support should be provided by the SELCCG for reception staff. This will help practice staff understand the problems patients are experiencing trying to book an appointment and deal with them in a caring and sympathetic way. Staff should also be made aware of services offering wellbeing support to help them cope with the stresses of the job.
3. Regular communication between the practice and their patients is needed to help improve patient understanding of the services offered, capacity and level of access. Healthwatch has produced a fact sheet that could be adapted and used by primary care. An example can be found in Appendix 1: I.e. how many telephone appointments/face to face appointments patients had and with whom in a specified time. This could be produced by PPG's, practice managers or other admin staff in the form of a fact sheet, newsletter, digital displays or posters in the surgery.
4. In the next three months, Healthwatch is happy to work with primary care and SELCCG to produce a Healthwatch Bexley leaflet to be made available in practices and distributed throughout the borough for example through pharmacies, libraries etc. This would let residents know how to access primary care, alternatives to primary care and how to make a comment or complaint about primary care (example in appendix 2).
5. In the next 3 months and beyond, there should be a communications program from SELCCG, the Local Care Partnership and other partners to address residents' concerns about primary care and reassure residents. It should include common questions and answers, how to access GP based primary care and alternative services including pharmacies and NHS 111. This will help ensure residents know how to get help and the most appropriate place to go to. This could also include information in the Bexley magazine, digital communications and details on the SELCCG and practice websites, as well as being shared on social media channels or the practice website. Healthwatch is happy to promote and share any communication produced.

6. This report has not specifically explored GP access for those with additional needs such as a learning disability. Further exploration of GP access should be undertaken by Healthwatch and other stakeholders over the next 6 months, to ensure everyone in the borough has support to access the care and help they need.
7. Digital training support for residents should be made available, by SELCCG and other partners, (such as building on the local digital champions scheme as currently provided by Bexley Voluntary Services Council. Training should focus on helping residents to use online consultation platforms to contact their GP practice, as well as other tools that help manage their health and wellbeing. These should be free and situated in the community (such as libraries) and be easily signposted to from GP practices.

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Rimmer, Abi 2015. Over 70% increase in GP numbers needed in some areas, says RCGP

**Spotlight on (practice name) July 2021 – September 2021**



**Our GP's have seen XX patients for face to face appointments**



**We administered XX flu jabs**



**We made xx telephone appointments**



**We did XX health checks**



**XX appointments were face to face with our nurse practitioner**



**We have written XX prescriptions**



**We have made XX video appointments**



**We received an average of XX telephone calls per day**

## Appendix 2: Healthwatch and GP leaflet

This is a sample leaflet, the wording can be changed.

<p><b>How to Access Your GP</b></p> <p><b>GP practices are open but the pandemic is not over</b>          GP practices in the London Borough of Bexley are open and seeing more people than before the pandemic. They have increased the number of phone appointments available so people can have their consultation at home. This means you don't have to travel to the surgery and your risk of exposure to Covid is reduced. If your condition means you need a face-to-face appointment your surgery will arrange this. Covid-19 has not gone away. GP practices treated people throughout the Covid lockdowns and continue to do so.</p> <p><b>How can I contact my GP?</b>          You can contact your GP practice on the phone, but if you are able to and if your practice offers it, the best thing to do is to fill out an online form on the practice website. You will then be contacted with the best appointment for you. If you need help with minor injuries at any time or urgent care when your GP practice or pharmacy is closed visit 111.nhs.uk or dial 111. 111 can also book out of hours appointments. You can access NHS 111, contact your practice and get your Covid Pass using the NHS App. Search NHS App in your app store</p>	<p><b>How to Access Your GP</b></p> <p><b>How are practices working now?</b>          So that the people with greatest need are seen first; and so we don't ask people to travel and come into contact with unwell and infectious people, you will be assessed to decide who needs: • to be seen in person by one of the team • a phone consultation • a video consultation • help from a community pharmacy or another health service</p> <p><b>Why do receptionists ask personal questions?</b>          GP reception staff are skilled professionals and ask questions to make sure you see the right person at the right time and treat all information confidentially. If you don't want to speak on the phone, where possible fill in an online form on the practice website          I wanted to see my GP, so why am I seeing someone else? Many GP practices now include a range of professionals like nurses and paramedics. This means you can often be seen more quickly and not need to be seen by lots of different people</p> <p><b>I wanted to see my GP, so why am I seeing someone else?</b>          Many GP practices now include a range of professionals like nurses and paramedics. This means you can often be seen more quickly and not need to be seen by lots of different people.</p>	<p><b>healthwatch</b> Bexley</p> <p><b>A guide on how to access your GP Practice</b></p>  <p><b>Healthwatch Bexley is your local health and social care champion. From Sidcup to Thamesmead and everywhere in between, we make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care.</b></p> <p><b>Talk to us...</b></p> <p><b>Have your say</b></p>
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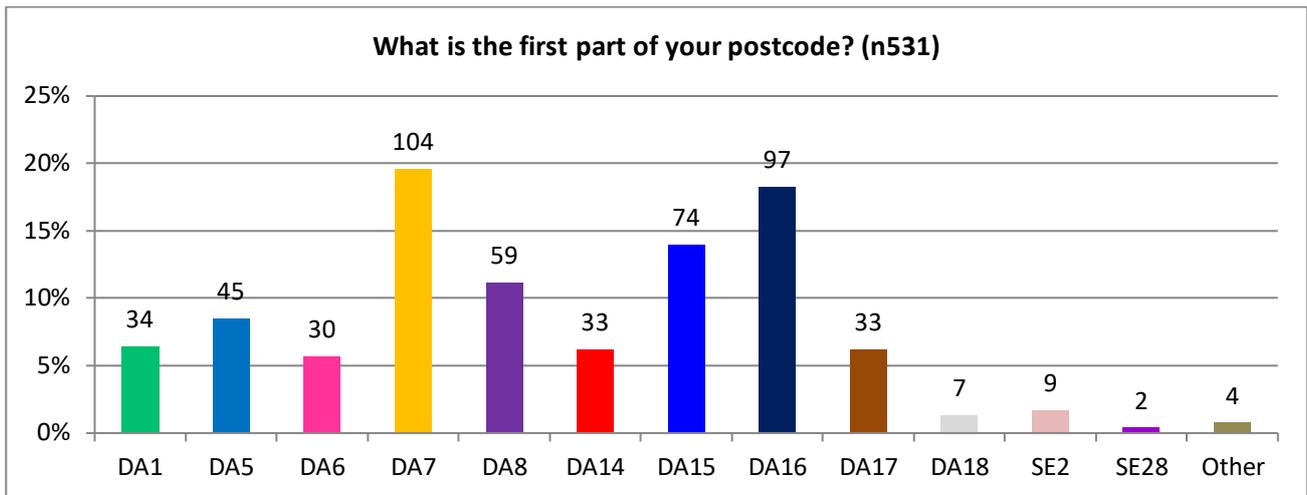
<p><b>healthwatch</b> Bexley</p> <p><b>How we can help you</b>          If you've recently visited your GP, or local hospital, or used any health and care services in the London Borough of Bexley we want to hear from you. Whether you've had a good or bad experience, we can use your feedback to improve services for everyone and we have the power to make NHS leaders and other care providers listen to what you have to say. We're completely independent and impartial and anything you say is confidential. We also offer information and advice to help you to get the support you need. Our service is free, simple to use and can make a real difference to people in the London Borough of Bexley and beyond.</p> <p><b>Share your experiences with us</b>          Share your experiences whether good or bad, speak up, and let us help NHS and social care services spot issues that are affecting care for you and your loved ones.</p>	<p><b>healthwatch</b> Bexley</p> <p><b>Help Making a Complaint</b>          Making a complaint about NHS or social care services can be daunting. You might be wondering whether it's worth the time and effort. But we're here to advise you, so that you and others get the right care. If you need to make a complaint about a healthcare service and do not know the best way to do this just contact us.</p>  <p><b>Advice and Information</b>          If you feel lost and don't know where to turn, Healthwatch is here for you. In times of worry or stress, we provide confidential support and free information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. We can also signpost to advocacy services.</p>	<p><b>healthwatch</b> Bexley</p> <p><b>Contact Us</b>          There are many ways to contact us. Whether you'd like to share your feedback about using a health or care service, looking for local support or need advice on how to make a complaint – we're here for you. Drop us an email or give us a ring for a friendly chat over the phone.          info@healthwatchbexley.co.uk          0208 304 9344 or          www.healthwatchbexley.co.uk</p> <p><b>Follow us on social media</b>          f Healthwatch Bexley          @HWBexley          hwatchbexley</p> <p>Why not sign up for our newsletter. It will be delivered directly to your mailbox and will tell you all about the work we have been doing. Visit our website and sign up at the bottom of our home page <a href="http://www.healthwatchbexley.co.uk">www.healthwatchbexley.co.uk</a></p>
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# Appendix 3: Response from primary care

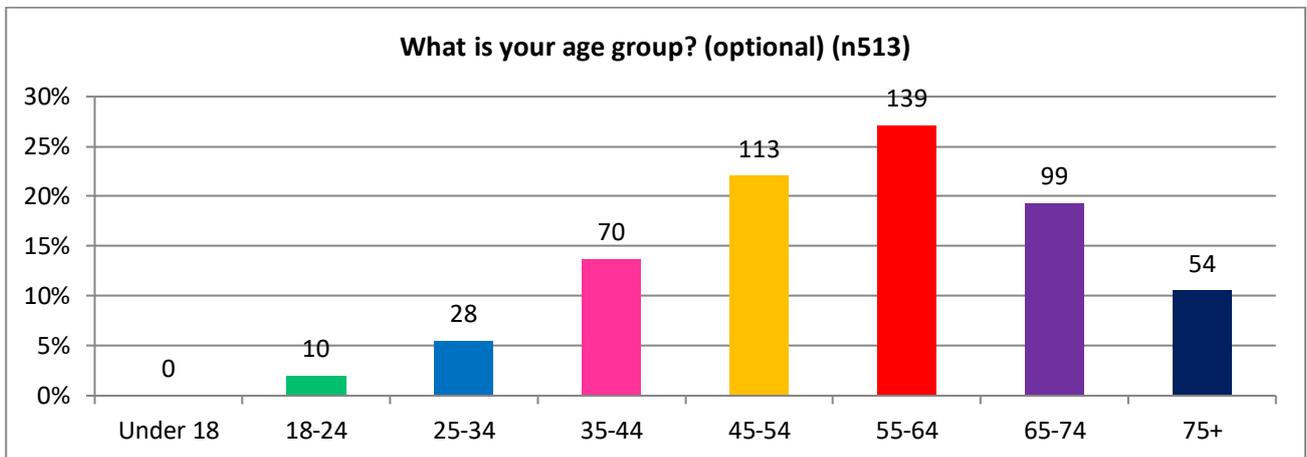
When responses are received this report will be updated.

## Appendix 4: Demographics

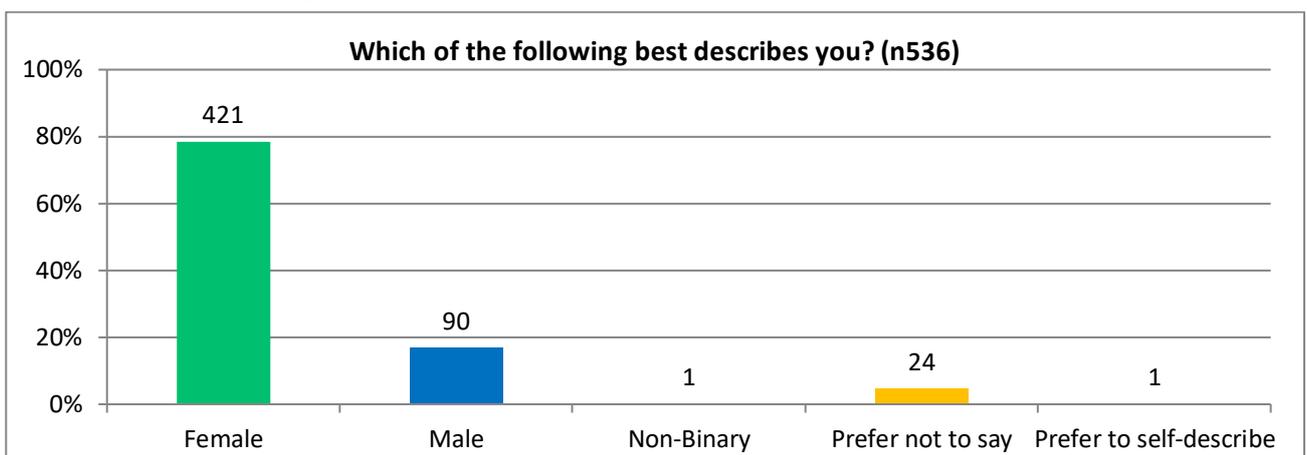
What is the first part of your postcode? (n531)



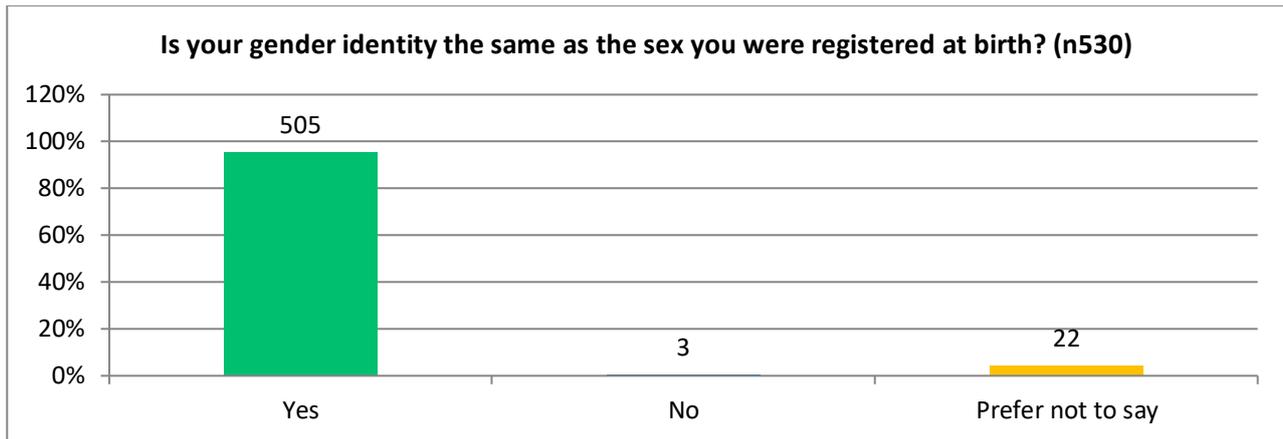
What is your age group? (n531)



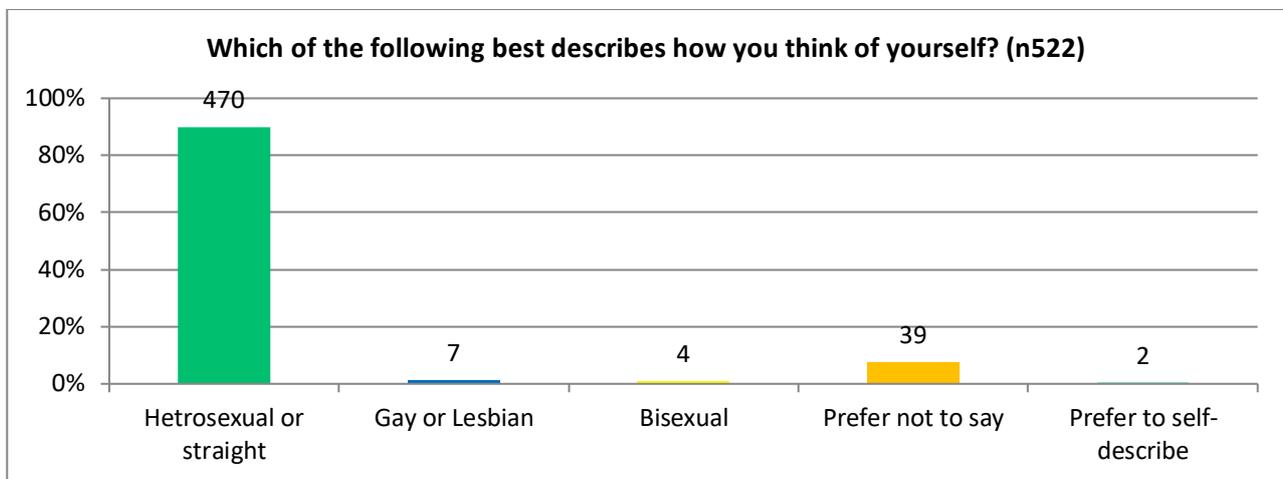
Which of the following best describes you? (n536)



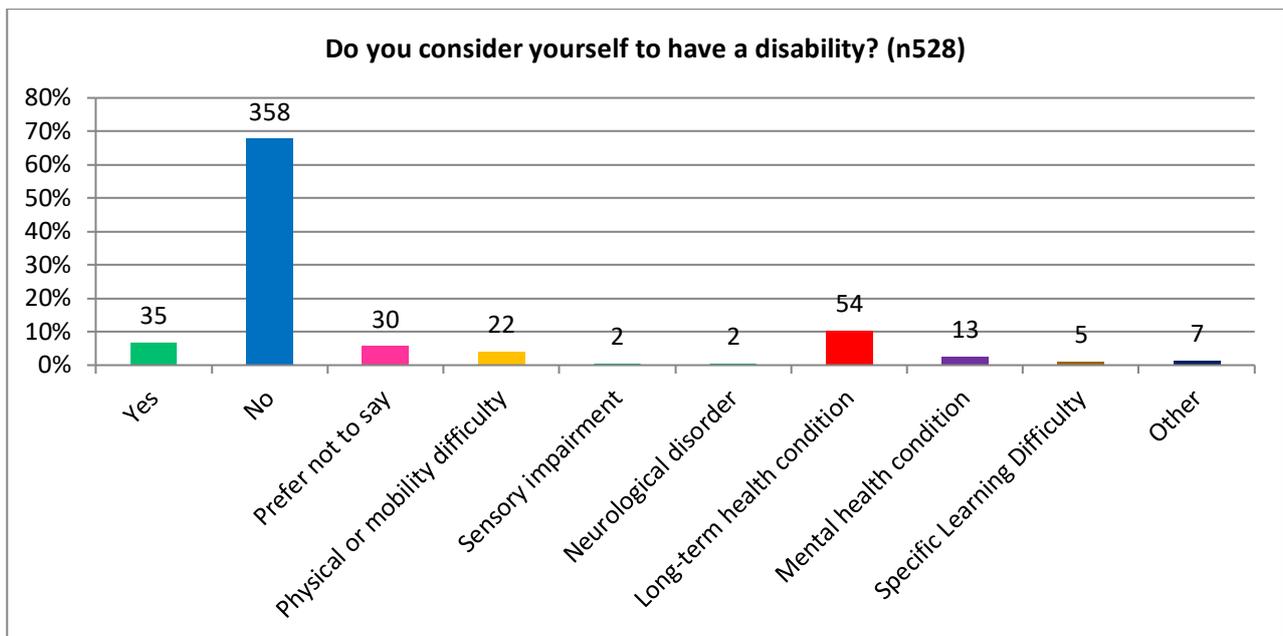
Is your gender identity the same as the sex you were registered at birth?



Which of the following best describes how you think of yourself?



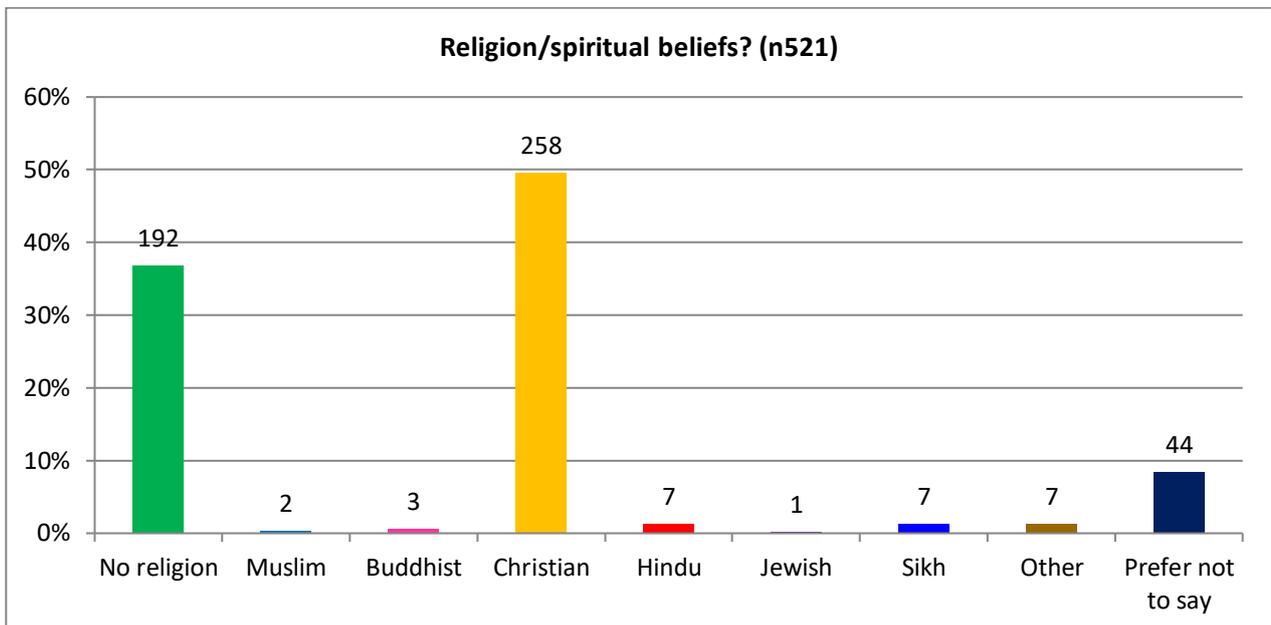
Do you consider yourself to have a disability? (n528)



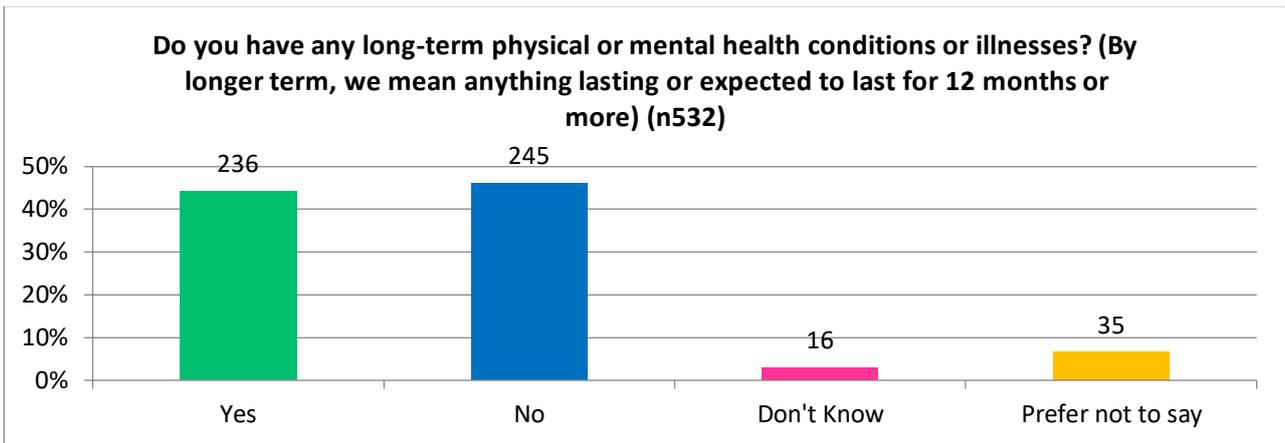
## What is your ethnic group?

<b>White English, Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish</b>	<b>424</b>
<b>White Irish or British Irish</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Asian or British: Indian</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Any other White background</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Black/Black British: Caribbean</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Black/Black British: African</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Asian or British: Chinese</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Any other ethnic group</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Any other Asian background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Group: White and Asian</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Any Other Mixed or Multiple ethnic background</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Asian or British: Pakistani</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>White Gypsy or Irish Traveller</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>White Roma</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Group: White and Black Caribbean</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Group: White and Black African</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Asian or British: Bangladeshi</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Other Black, African or Caribbean background</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Arab</b>	<b>0</b>

## Religion/spiritual beliefs (n521)



Do you have any long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses? (By longer term, we mean anything lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more) (n532)



Do you look after, or give any help or support to, family members, friends, neighbours or others because of either: long-term physical or mental ill health / disability, or problems related to old age? Don't count anything you do as part of your paid employment.

