

Patient experiences of the NHS 111 service in Devon & Somerset

Feedback Report

March
2022





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Introduction

Healthwatch in Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay (HWDPT) and Healthwatch Somerset (HWS) are the independent consumer champions for people using health and care services in Devon and Somerset. Healthwatch listens to what people like about services and what could be improved, and shares those views with those who have the power to make change happen.

In July 2020, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspected the 111 services provided by Devon Doctors in Devon and Somerset. The CQC's report identified areas requiring improvement; it was found that not all staff had completed required training, some staff felt that training was not fit for purpose, and information enabling staff to deliver safe care and treatment was not always up to date. In October and November 2020, in response to the CQC report, HWS and HWDPT gathered feedback from people who had used the NHS 111 service. 186 people completed an online survey about their experiences. The results showed that nearly one quarter of respondents (24%) waited longer than three hours for a call back, and one fifth (20%) never received an arranged callback. When asked how the 111 service could be improved, the most common suggestion was improved training for call operators.

In February 2021, HWDPT gathered feedback about "Think 111 First", a national campaign launched in December 2020 to raise awareness of the 111 service and encourage people to contact 111 before attending an emergency department. HWDPT ran four focus groups to find out about the experiences of key groups when accessing 111, and to find out how the Think 111 campaign was received. The participants were critical of the number and relevance of questions asked by call handlers, the long automated messages at the beginning of the calls, and the co-ordination between 111 and other services.

The reports by HWS and HWDPT made recommendations including reducing waiting times for arranged call backs and inbound calls, improved staff training, and improved call-handling procedures. In late 2021, HWDPT and HWS aimed to find out whether people's experiences with the 111 service had improved or changed since the previous research was carried out.



What we did

Respondents were asked nine multiple-choice and five open-ended questions about their experiences using NHS 111; these are detailed later in the report. This survey was modified from the original survey used by HWS and HWDPT in 2020.

Questions 1, 2, 6, 7, and 11 were the same or very similar to questions used in the 2020 survey. Questions 10, 12, 13, and 14 were added to the survey as new questions. The following questions were adapted from ones used in the original survey:

- Question 3: *“How easy did you find it to speak to someone, or use the NHS 111 website?”* was adapted from the original question *“Did you find it easy to access the NHS 111 website?”*
- Question 5: *“If you contacted 111 by telephone, how quickly was your call answered?”* was adapted from the original question *“Was your call answered in a timely manner?”*
- Questions 8 and 9: *“If 111 directed you to another service, which service?”* and *“If you decided to contact another service yourself after using 111, which service did you contact?”* were adapted from the original question *“If not, which service did resolve your needs?”*

Eight optional questions were also used at the end of the survey to gather demographic information. Additional comments and feedback about NHS 111 were also gathered through Facebook, Twitter, and Nextdoor. Respondents were asked to confirm that they gave consent for their comments to be anonymously published; comments from respondents who did not give their consent have not been published in this report.

256 respondents completed the survey; while this number represents a small proportion of NHS 111 service users, Healthwatch feels their feedback is significant and should not be overlooked. This report describes what people said about their experiences with the NHS 111 service. Please be aware that wherever possible, verbatim extracts have been used to ensure authenticity and the presence of a real public voice throughout. Any featured quotes in this section are therefore not the views of local Healthwatches.

The survey was promoted via social media; a total of 71 posts were made across the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages of HWDPT and HWS, with a combined reach of 83,021 (full reach and engagement figures are available in Appendix 1). The survey was also circulated via e-newsletters, the Healthwatch Assist network, and other community and voluntary sector partners.



Key findings

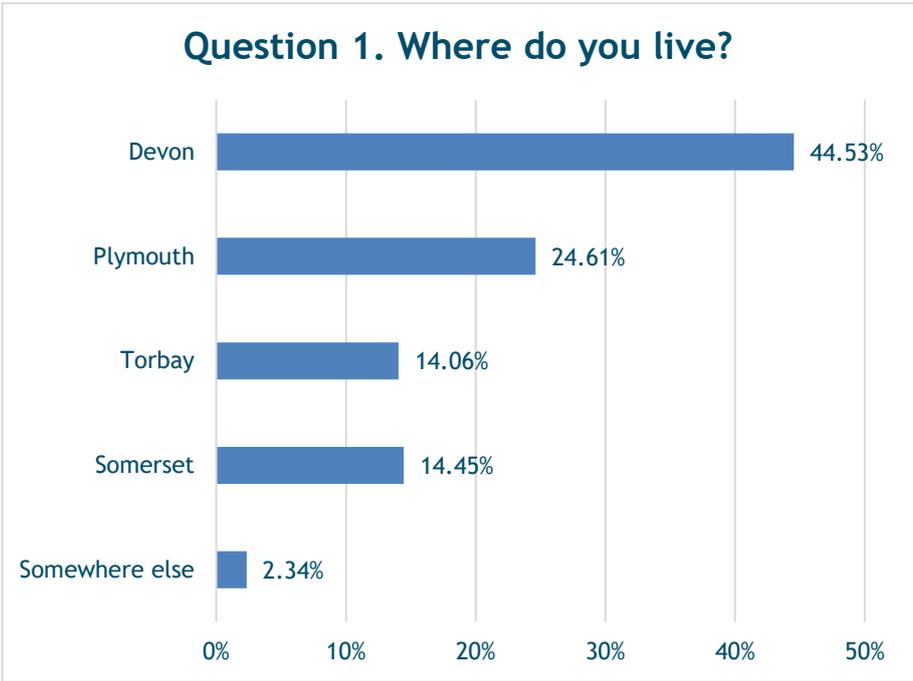
- Most respondents (53.23%) rated their experience of using 111 as “poor” or “very poor,” while 36.69% said it was “good” or “very good.” In the previous 2020 review by HWS and HWDPT, more than half of respondents (55.91%) rated their experience “good” or “very good” and just under one third (31.18%) said it was “bad” or “very bad.”
- 48.05% of respondents found it “easy” or “very easy” to speak to someone or use the NHS 111 website, while one third (34.77%) found it “difficult” or “very difficult.”
- 46.59% of respondents said NHS 111 directed them to another service; respondents were most commonly directed to 999 or the ambulance service (32.91%), an out-of-hours GP (19.62%), and a GP surgery during normal opening hours (17.09%). In the previous 2020 review, 55.91% of respondents said they were passed to another service by 111.
- 31.73% said they contacted another service themselves after using 111. When asked why they contacted another service, the most common responses were: inability to access 111 in a timely manner, the patient’s condition worsening or requiring more urgent treatment, and unsatisfactory advice. In the original 2020 review, 24.73% of respondents said they contacted another service themselves.
- 21.69% of respondents said the NHS 111 services resolved their issue over the phone or website. In the original 2020 review, 18.28% of respondents said 111 resolved their needs over the phone.
- When asked what went well, the most common responses were that 111’s solution was helpful or satisfactory, the call handlers were sympathetic and polite, the service was efficient, and that information was clear and adequate.
- Long waiting times or difficulty connecting to a call handler were the most common complaints among people who had poor experiences; 34.18% of respondents said they waited longer than three minutes for their call to be answered, and 18.57% said their call was not answered at all. Other complaints included long automated messages, too many questions, poor communication between services, and call handlers’ lack of medical knowledge or awareness.



Detailed findings

Question 1. Where do you live?

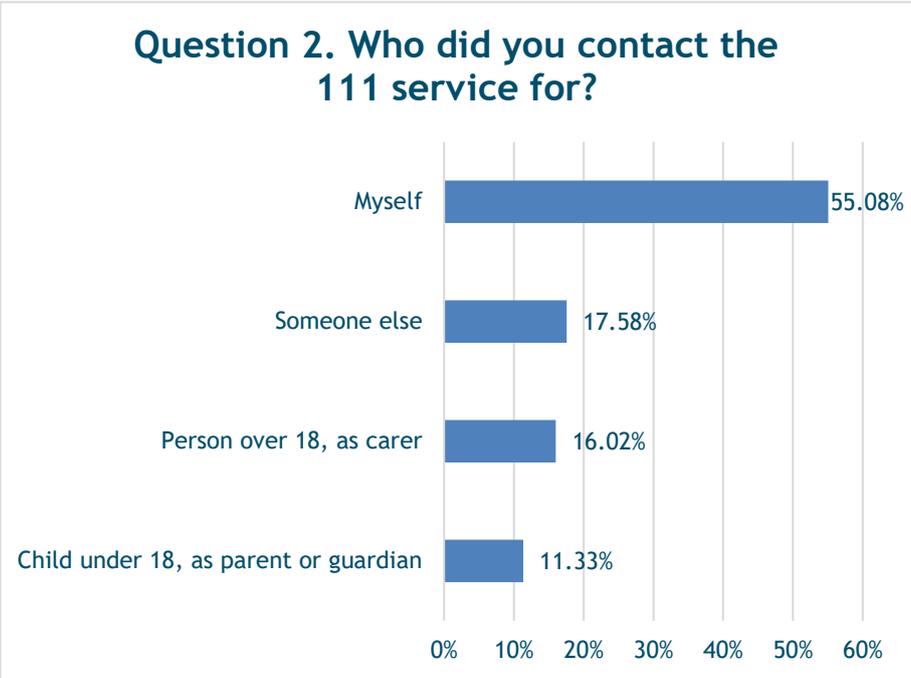
All 256 respondents answered this question. 44.53% of respondents (114 people) lived in Devon, 24.61% (63 people) lived in Plymouth, 14.06% (36 people) lived in Torbay, 14.45% (37 people) lived in Somerset, and 2.34% (six people) selected “somewhere else.” Of the respondents who lived elsewhere, five were from Cornwall and one was from Dorset.





Question 2. Who did you contact the NHS 111 service for?

All 256 respondents answered this question. 55.08% of respondents (141 people) contacted 111 for themselves, 17.58% (45 people) contacted 111 for “someone else,” 16.02% (41 people) contacted 111 for “a person over 18, as their carer,” and 11.33% (29 people) contacted 111 for “a child under 18, as their parent or guardian.”

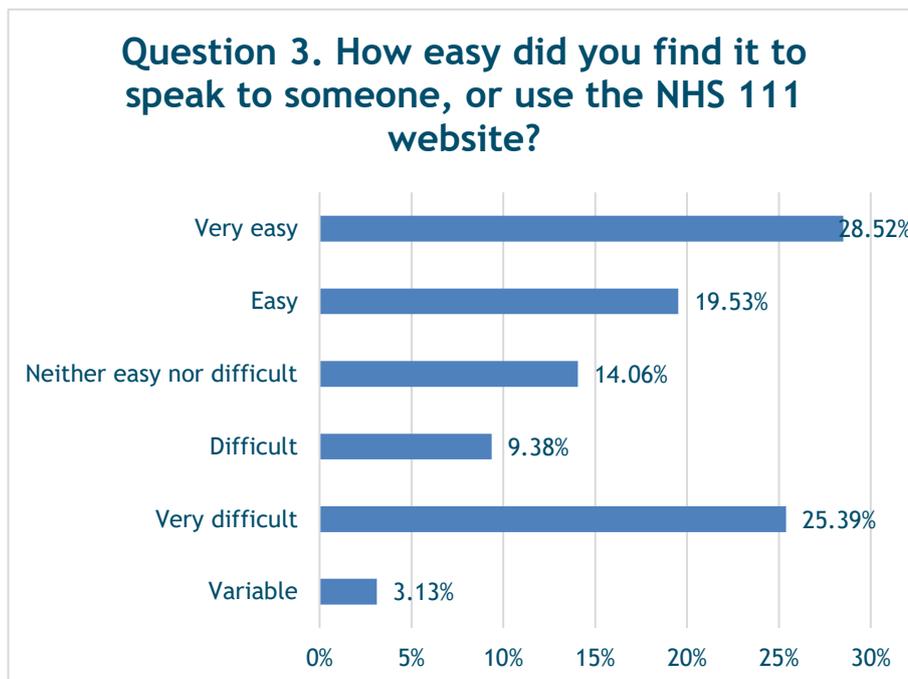




Question 3. How easy did you find it to speak to someone, or use the NHS 111 website?

All 256 respondents answered this question. 28.52% of respondents (73 people) found it very easy to speak to someone or use the website, 19.53% (50 people) found it easy, 14.06% (36 people) found it neither easy nor difficult, 9.38% (24 people) found it difficult, 25.39% (65 people) found it very difficult, and 3.13% (eight people) had variable experiences.

Respondents from Somerset were less likely to describe their experience as difficult than respondents from Devon, Plymouth, or Torbay. 13.89% of Somerset respondents found access “difficult” or “very difficult,” compared to 37.96% of Devon respondents, 33.33% of Plymouth respondents, and 41.67% of Torbay respondents. Somerset respondents were instead more likely to be ambivalent about their experiences. 27.78% of Somerset respondents described access as “neither easy nor difficult,” compared to 12.04% of Devon respondents, 11.11% of Plymouth respondents, and 11.11% of Torbay respondents.





Question 4. If you found it difficult to speak to someone or use the website, what made it difficult?

104 respondents answered this question and 152 did not. The most common issues were long waits for calls to be answered (42 respondents), calls being disconnected or not answered at all (34 respondents), and too many questions or automated messages (11 respondents).

Long waiting times (42 comments)

- “The website is easy, but when it advises you to call 111, [there is a] very long wait to speak to someone.” [Devon]
- “It took over 45 minutes to actually get through and be answered - a lot more than three minutes!” [Plymouth]
- “The website was straightforward enough, but needed to speak to someone, and it took time to get through.” [Somerset]

Call not answered or disconnected (34 comments)

- “The phone rang and rang. Then I was cut off. Three times.” [Devon]
- “Didn’t get to speak to anyone. Was on hold for over an hour then gave up.” [Plymouth]
- “I called constantly from 16:15 to 19:00. In total, over seven times. Every [call was] between 12 and 18 minutes on hold [before] the phone went dead. Eventually as it was a Sunday I had no alternative but to call 999.” [Torbay]
- “There was a message stating that the wait time to speak to someone was 20 minutes. I gave up.” [Somerset]

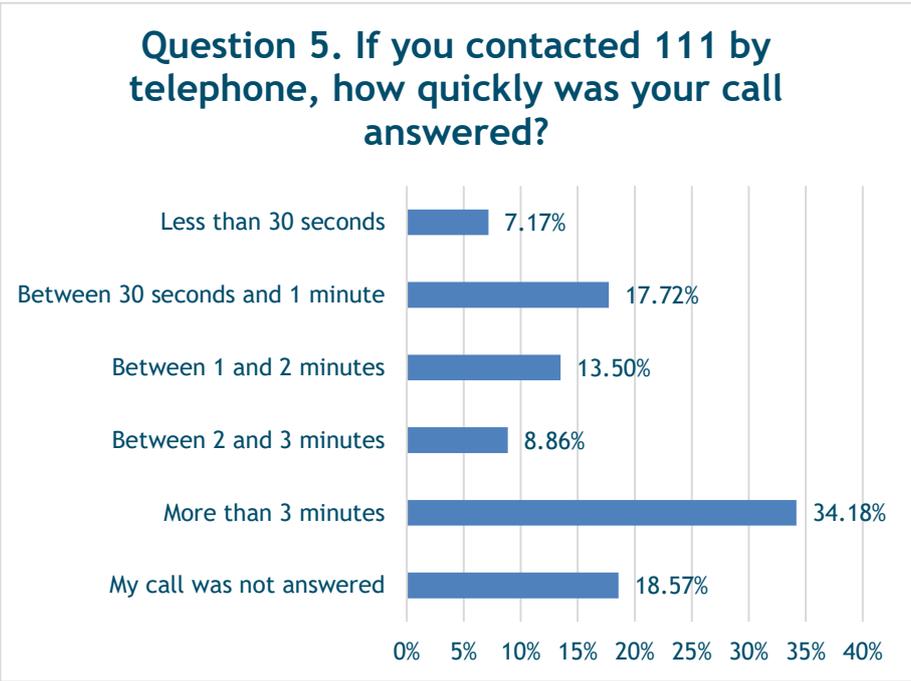
Too many questions or messages (11 comments)

- “The 3.5 minute message about Covid services and symptoms. They were not relevant and very frustrating.” [Devon]
- “So many computer generated questions before you get to a real person... very frustrating and upsetting when you’re feeling ill or in a bit of a panic.” [Devon]
- “[The questions are] not always appropriate to what you may be calling about.” [Plymouth]
- “Repetitive questions.” [Somerset]



Question 5. If you contacted 111 by telephone, how quickly was your call answered?

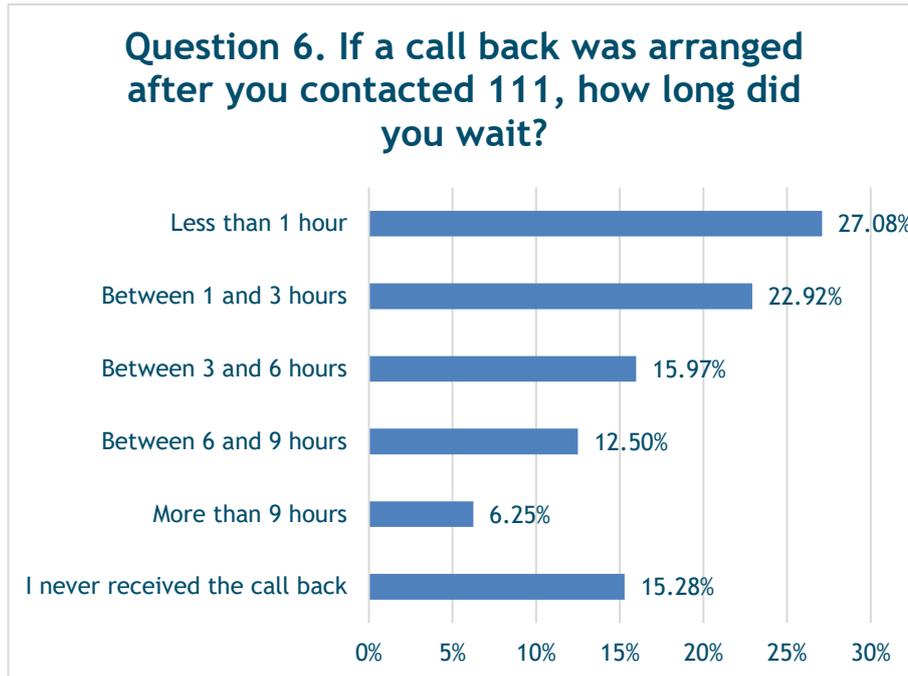
237 respondents answered this question and 19 did not, including 10 respondents who selected “not applicable.” 7.17% of respondents (17 people) had their call answered within 30 seconds, 17.72% (42 people) had their call answered within 30 seconds to 1 minute, 13.50% (32 respondents) had their call answered within 1 to 2 minutes, 8.86% (21 people) had their call answered within 2 to 3 minutes, 34.18% (81 people) waited longer than 3 minutes, and 18.57% (44 people) said their call was not answered.





Question 6. If a call back was arranged after you contacted 111, how long did you wait for this call?

144 respondents answered this question and 112 did not, including 84 respondents who selected “not applicable.” 27.08% of respondents (39 people) waited less than 1 hour, 22.92% (33 people) waited between 1 and 3 hours, 15.97% (23 people) waited between 3 and 6 hours, 12.50% (18 people) waited between 6 and 9 hours, 6.25% (nine people) waited more than 9 hours, and 15.28% (22 people) said they never received the call back.

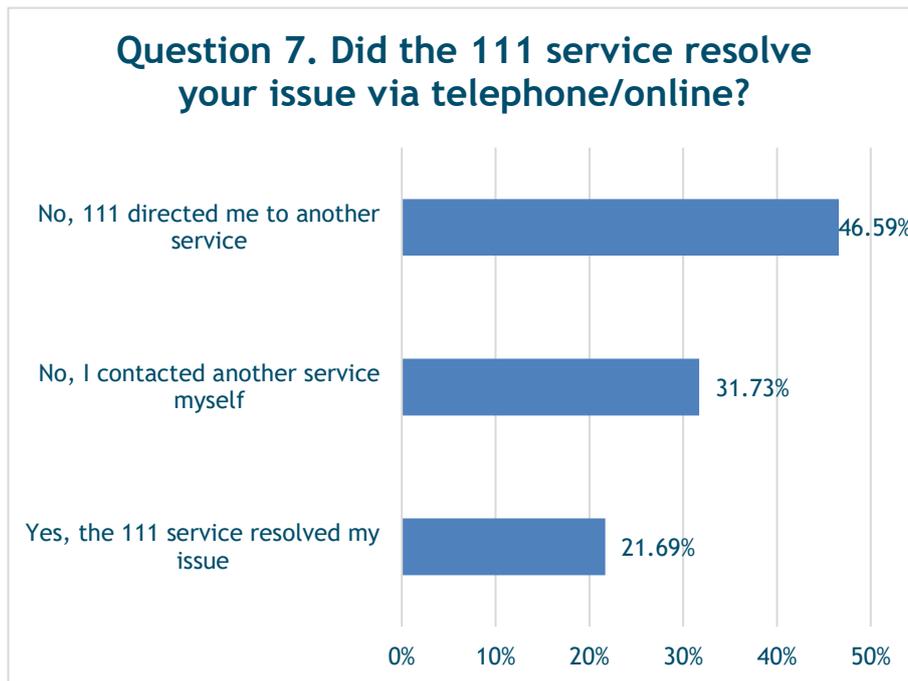




Question 7. Did the 111 service resolve your issue via telephone/online, or were you directed to another service?

249 respondents answered this question and seven did not. 46.59% of respondents (116 people) were directed to another service, 31.73% (79 people) contacted another service themselves, and 21.69% (54 people) said their issue was resolved by the 111 service.

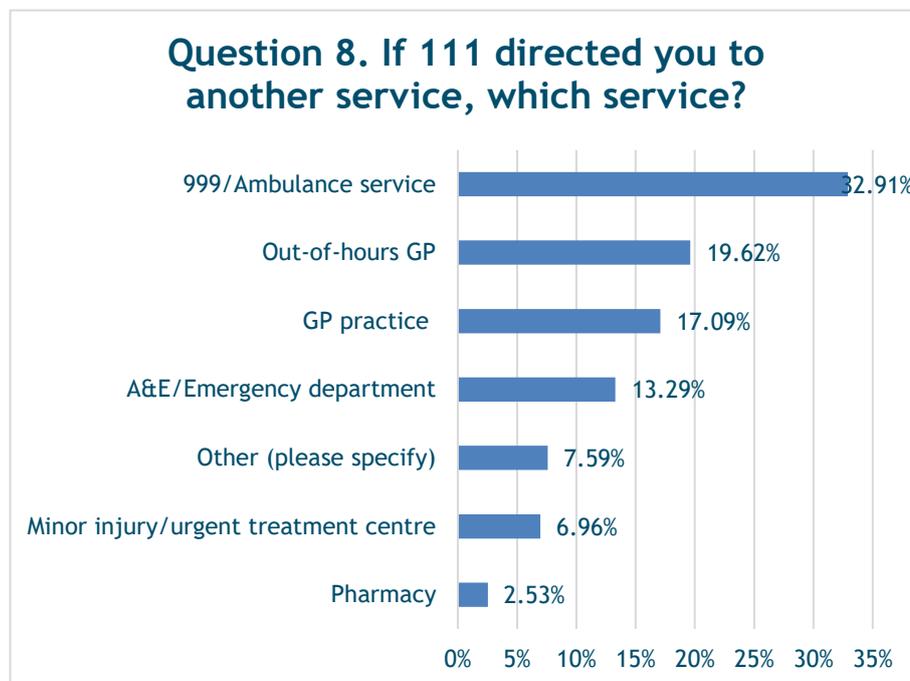
As respondents were not asked to state whether they used 111 via telephone or the website, it cannot be determined whether respondents' answers relate to the telephone service or online service.





Question 8. If 111 directed you to another service, which service?

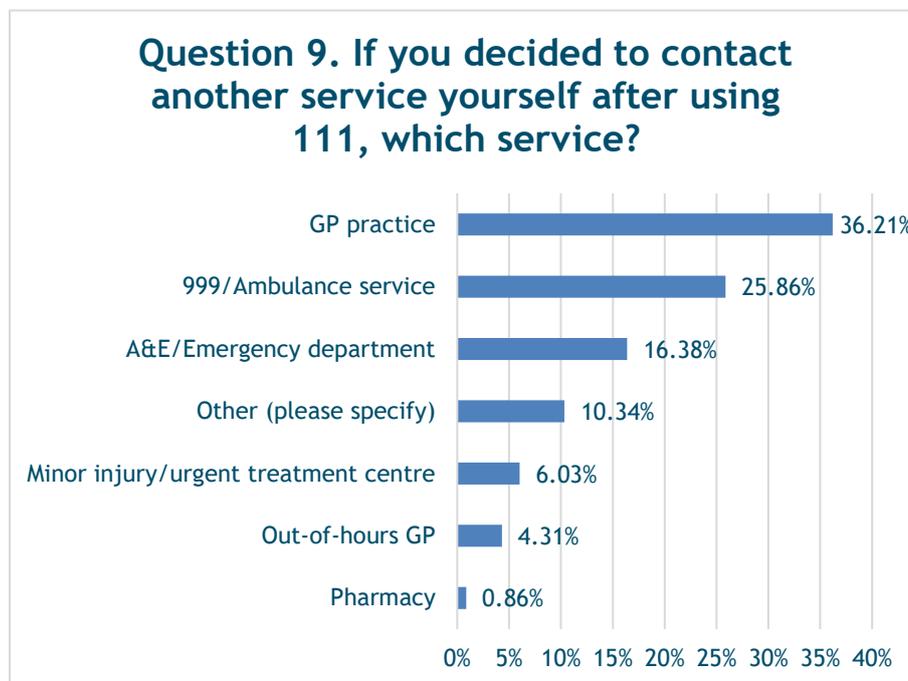
158 respondents answered this question and 98 did not, including 71 respondents who selected “not applicable.” As respondents were able to select more than one answer, percentages may total greater than 100. 32.91% of respondents (52 people) were directed to 999 or the ambulance service, 19.62% (31 people) were directed to an out-of-hours GP service, 17.09% (27 people) were referred to a GP practice (during normal opening hours), 13.29% (21 people) were directed to an emergency department, 6.96% (11 people) were directed to a minor injury, walk-in, or urgent treatment centre, and 2.53% (four people) were directed to a pharmacy. 7.59% of respondents (12 people) said they were directed to another service; of these respondents, five did not specify or gave unclear answers, three were directed to dental services, one was directed to a vaccination specialist/the yellow card scheme, one was directed to mental health services, one was directed to Devon Doctors, and one was directed to an eye infirmary.





Question 9. If you decided to contact another service yourself after using 111, which service did you contact?

116 respondents answered this question and 140 did not, including 84 people who selected “not applicable.” As respondents were able to select more than one answer, percentages may total greater than 100. 36.21% of respondents (42 people) contacted their GP practice (during normal opening hours), 25.86% (30 people) contacted 999 or the ambulance service, 16.38% (19 people) went to an emergency department, 6.03% (seven people) went to a minor injury/walk-in/urgent treatment centre, 4.31% (five people) contacted an out-of-hours GP, and 0.86% (one person) contacted a pharmacy. 10.34% of respondents (12 people) answered “other”; of these respondents, four contacted a hospital (unspecified), two contacted friends or family, two did not specify or gave unclear responses, one contacted Musgrove Park Hospital, one contacted a dentist, one contacted a mental health helpline, and one contacted a maternity ward.





Question 10. If you decided to contact another service after using NHS 111, why did you contact another service?

105 respondents answered this question and 151 did not. 42 respondents said they contacted another service because they had been unable to access 111 or their suggested service in a timely manner, 16 respondents said the patient's condition worsened or required urgent treatment, 14 respondents said they were unsatisfied with the advice or solution suggested by 111, and six respondents said they contacted another service because they were advised to (by 111 or someone else).

Unable to access 111 or their suggested service in a timely manner (42 comments)

- “After waiting one hour and ten minutes for a reply, I realised I was not going to get any help, so I phoned for an ambulance.” [Devon]
- “NHS 111 assessed me as needing to see a doctor within six hours, unfortunately I never received a call back.” [Plymouth]
- “Because I tried 111 three times and each time I didn't get through.” [Torbay]

Condition worsened or required urgent treatment (16 comments)

- “[The patient] was getting worse.” [Devon]
- “I did not feel able to wait any longer as the person I was phoning about was bleeding... I was not prepared to wait any longer.” [Devon]
- “Pain and need for a diagnosis.” [Somerset]

Unsatisfied with 111 advice or response (14 comments)

- “Because I knew 111 gave me the wrong info.” [Plymouth]
- “[I was] not happy with the 111 service and response.” [Somerset]

Advised to contact another service (by 111 or someone else) (six comments)

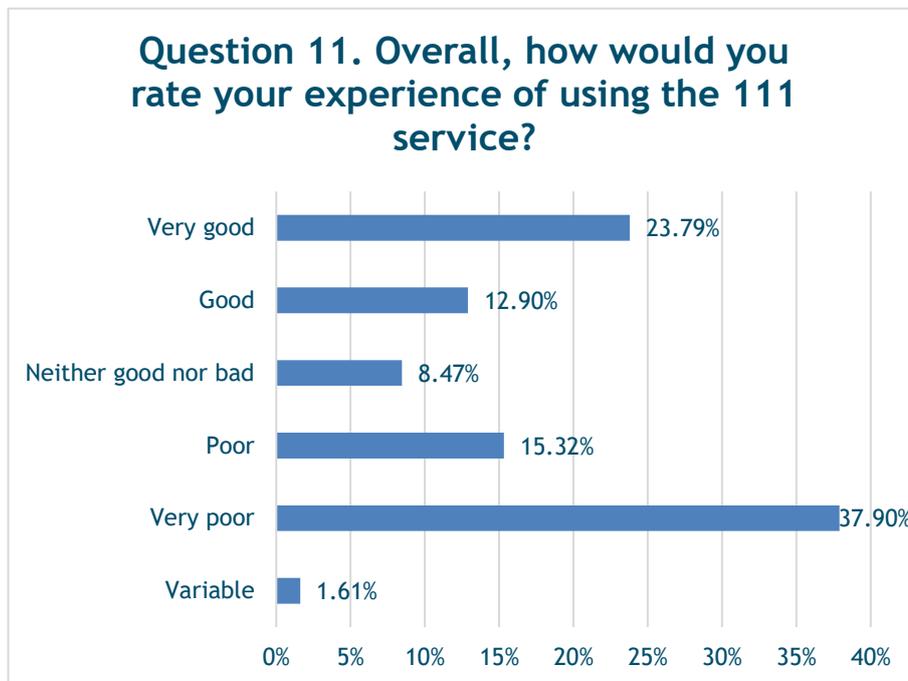
- “Based on their advice, and how I felt.” [Devon]



Question 11. Overall, how would you rate your experience of using the 111 service?

248 respondents answered this question and eight did not. 23.79% of respondents (59 people) rated their experience as very good, 12.90% (32 people) rated it as good, 8.47% (21 people) rated it as neither good nor bad, 15.32% (38 people) rated it as poor, and 37.90% (94 people) rated it as very poor. 1.61% of respondents (four people) had variable experiences.

Respondents in Somerset were more negative than respondents from Devon, Plymouth and Torbay; 28.57% of Somerset respondents rated their experience as “good” or “very good,” compared to 35.92% of Devon respondents, 37.71% of Plymouth respondents, and 47.23% of Torbay respondents. 68.57% of Somerset respondents rated their experience as “poor” or “very poor,” compared to 49.51% of Devon respondents, 50.81% of Plymouth respondents, and 47.22% of Torbay respondents.





Question 12. What went well when you contacted 111?

206 respondents answered this question and 50 did not. 52 respondents said the guidance given by 111 was helpful or satisfactory. 51 respondents praised call handlers, describing them as “polite,” “kind,” or “sympathetic.” 27 respondents praised the speed and efficiency of the response or guidance they received, 17 respondents said they were given clear and adequate information when they contacted 111, and five respondents made positive comments but did not specify what went well.

Solution was helpful or satisfactory (52 comments)

- “They contacted the medical centre and got a GP to phone me, all within less than two hours.” [Devon]
- “They told me to go to A&E immediately... I’d had a stroke... it probably saved my life.” [Devon]
- “Quick to advise and got an ambulance out to us really quickly.” [Plymouth]
- “A phone call to a doctor, who then said I would have a visit from a doctor.” [Somerset]
- “I explained to the lady what had happened with my heart and she told me to go at once to A&E.” [Somerset]

Polite, sympathetic, or helpful call handlers (51 comments)

- “[I spoke to a] very professional and sympathetic responder.” [Devon]
- “[The call handler was] very polite, listened carefully, and was efficient.” [Somerset]

Efficient service (27 comments)

- “[I] spoke to an operator promptly, they did have to put me on hold to check as it was a complicated case... [the out-of-hours GP] called me back within three hours.” [Devon]
- “[The call handler was] quick to advise and got an ambulance out to us really quickly.” [Plymouth]
- “Clear and precise questions. They asked to speak to the stroke victim, and decided this speech was slurred and slow. They called an ambulance.” [Somerset]

Clear and adequate information (17 comments)

- “They were very upfront about expected delays due to being under so much pressure, which I understood.” [Devon]
- “Thorough questioning to get to the facts, clear about what would happen next.” [Devon]
- “Good communication, straight to the point.” [Plymouth]
- “The website was clear.” [Somerset]

General positive sentiment (five comments)

- “Both advisors and the doctor dealt with me excellently.” [Plymouth]



Question 13. What could have been improved about your experience of contacting 111?

201 respondents answered this question and 55 did not. 69 respondents said their experience would have been improved if they had been able to speak to a call handler in a timely manner. 23 respondents said better interactions with call handlers could have improved their experience; common complaints included unclear communication and handlers' lack of medical awareness and understanding. 21 respondents suggested that fewer questions and multiple choice options might improve the experience of contacting 111. 20 respondents said there could have been better continuity and communication between services, and 20 respondents said they could have received better advice or guidance from 111.

Being able to speak to a call handler promptly (69 comments)

- “More staff to deal with the current massively increased workload.” [Devon]
- “I was on hold for over 20 minutes.” [Devon]
- “Someone answering the phones within three minutes. Call should not drop out or go unanswered.” [Plymouth]
- “[The] wait time to get through was longer than I would have liked.” [Somerset]
- “Quicker response and fewer questions.” [Somerset]

Better interactions with/information from call handlers (23 comments)

- “Understanding and compassion. You feel [bad already], then to have to go through this experience is not what you need.” [Devon]
- “Actually having a person who knows what they are talking about advise people.” [Plymouth]
- “More medical knowledge needed by people answering calls.” [Somerset]

Questions and automated messages (21 comments)

- “Ask what is wrong with the patient before enquiring about ethnic matters and details of Covid, etc.” [Devon]
- “[The] questions were too general, which then meant [a] maybe unnecessary call for an ambulance. [An] out-of-hours doctor would have been more suitable.” [Devon]
- “Useless triage pathways create extra work. [They are] just another barrier to care, decide things are urgent when they are not [and] send ambulances inappropriately.” [Somerset]

Better continuity and communication between services (20 comments)

- “I arranged with 111 to meet the ambulance at my back gate... this was not passed on.” [Devon]
- “Better communication between 111, Devon Doctors and the patient.” [Devon]
- “The person returning the call did not have the information that I had provided when I called.” [Plymouth]



- “Not promising a call back that doesn’t happen.” [Somerset]

Better advice or guidance (20 comments)

- “Better advice from experienced staff.” [Devon]
- “Not being sent back to my GP, the reason I called was because I couldn’t get hold of them in the first place.” [Plymouth]
- “[It would help if I had been] directed to the right person easier, I had to go through several people to then be told I had to go into A&E.” [Plymouth]
- “Medical knowledge in the call centre. She tried to refer me to someone medically trained but there was no response.” [Somerset]



Question 14. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience with 111?

140 respondents answered this question and 116 did not. 35 respondents made non-specific negative comments about their experience with 111, 34 respondents made positive comments about their experience with 111, 30 respondents said they received unsatisfactory or unhelpful guidance or advice from 111, and 18 respondents complained of long waiting times and poor staffing levels.

General negative sentiment (35 comments)

- “I will avoid using it another time.” [Devon]
- “I would never ring 111 again.” [Devon]
- “Needs improvement [and a] better system.” [Torbay]

Positive comments (34 comments)

- “The operator we spoke to at 111 and the GP that called us were incredibly compassionate and patient with us. So grateful, as it was a very difficult situation.” [Devon]
- “The lady I spoke to escalated my call quickly and possibly saved my life.” [Plymouth]
- “In the past, I and others have always been able to speak to someone promptly and have been very satisfied.” [Somerset]

Unsatisfactory advice or suggestions (30 comments)

- “The first person I spoke to advised against given ibuprofen in addition to paracetamol, when I spoke to the doctor she advised to give [both], however this was many hours later. Had I been given this advice initially, then it would have helped in the management of my child’s fever.” [Plymouth]
- “I expected them to at least direct us to someone who could help. Sadly because they did not help us I had to visit A&E, which we realised is under great pressure.” [Torbay]
- “The NHS person sent to our house to assess my mum was uninformative, didn’t want to hardly communicate and the time spent assessing my mum was minimal. My mum got worse over the next 24 hours and was admitted to hospital.” [Somerset]

Long waiting times and understaffing (18 comments)

- “[It was a] waste of time trying to get through.” [Devon]
- “I was, as a result of my call not even being answered, left in agonising pain for much longer than was necessary.” [Devon]
- “It seems easier to access NHS 111 online than it is by phone.” [Torbay]
- “From first contact with 111 during the afternoon it took approximately 9 hours for an ambulance to arrive, during which time I was literally shaking with pain.” [Somerset]



Question 15. Healthwatch in Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay and Healthwatch Somerset would like to anonymously use comments provided in this survey within published reports. These reports are shared with the public and health decision makers to help improve services. Do you consent to have your comments anonymously published?

All 256 respondents answered this question. 94.14% of respondents (241 people) gave consent for their comments to be published and 5.86% (15 people) did not give their consent. Only comments made by respondents who gave their consent have been published in this report.



Demographics information

Question 16. What is the first part of your postcode?

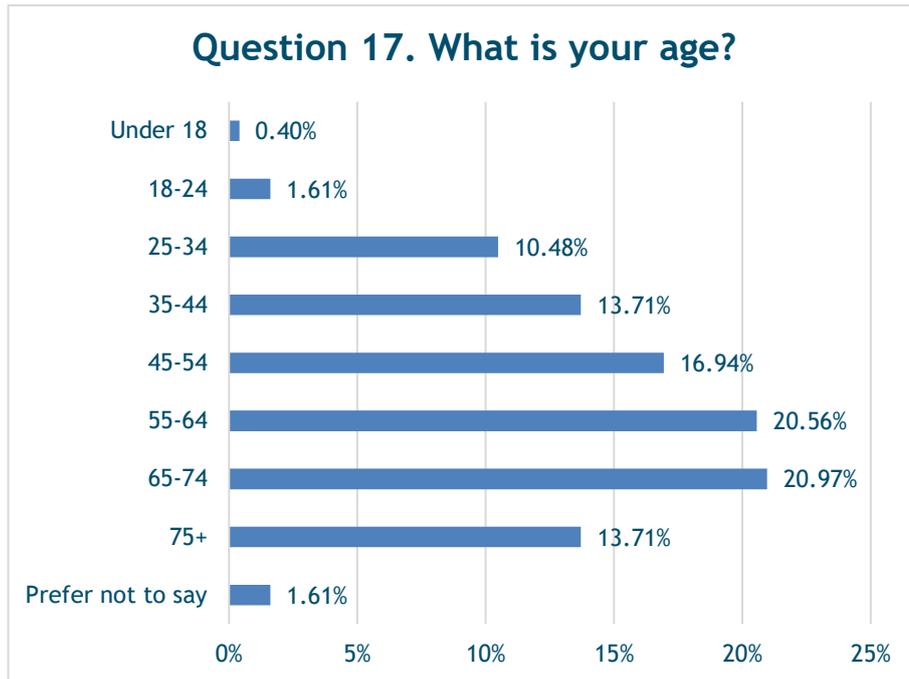
231 respondents answered this question and 25 did not. A total of 63 different postcodes were named by respondents. A full list of all named postcode areas is available in Appendix 2. The 10 most common postcode areas were:

- EX39 (18 respondents)
- PL5 (13 respondents)
- PL6 (13 respondents)
- EX31 (12 respondents)
- TQ2 (12 respondents)
- EX32 (10 respondents)
- PL2 (10 respondents)
- TQ1 (eight respondents)
- TQ3 (eight respondents)
- EX34 (seven respondents)



Question 17. What is your age?

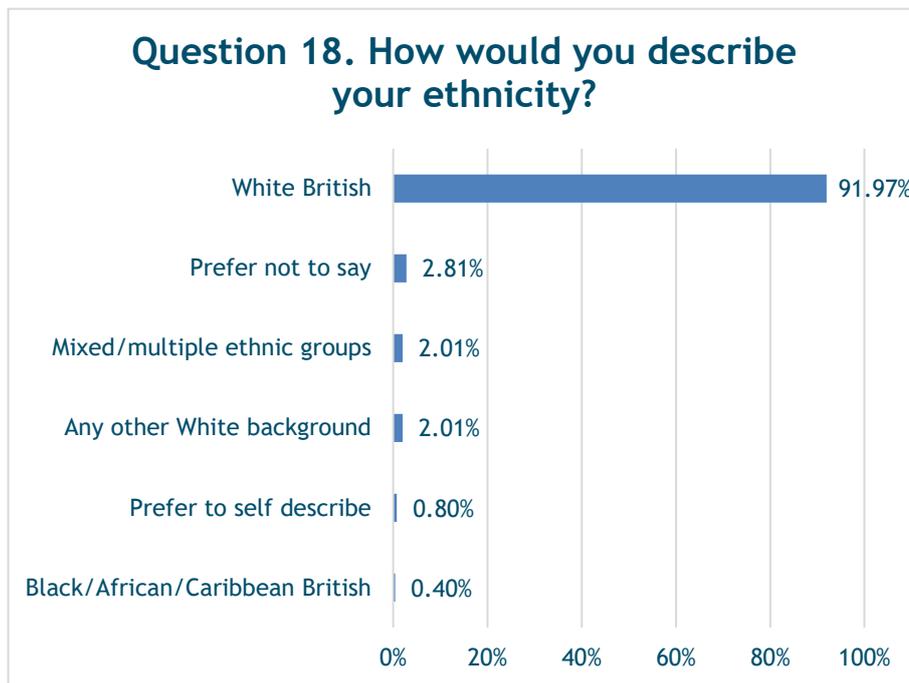
248 respondents answered this question and eight did not. 0.40% of respondents (one person) was aged under 18, 1.61% (four people) were aged 18 to 24, 10.48% (26 people) were aged 25 to 34, 13.71% (34 people) were aged 35 to 44, 16.94% (42 people) were aged 45 to 54, 20.56% (51 people) were aged 55 to 64, 20.97% (52 people) were aged 65 to 74, and 13.71% (34 people) were aged over 75. 1.61% of respondents (four people) selected “prefer not to say.”





Question 18. How would you describe your ethnicity?

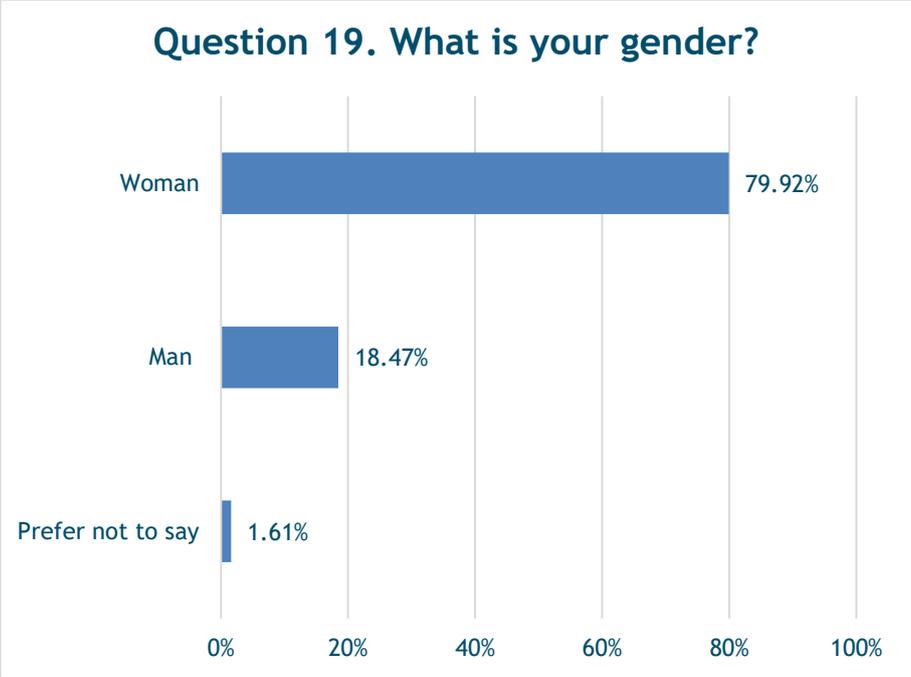
249 respondents answered this question and seven did not. 91.97% of respondents (229 people) identified as White British, 2.01% (five people) identified as belonging to mixed or multiple ethnic groups, 2.01% (five people) identified as belonging to another White background, and 0.40% (one person) identified as Black, African, or Caribbean British. 2.81% of respondents (seven people) selected “prefer not to say” and 0.80% (two people) selected “prefer to self describe.” Of the respondents who preferred to self-describe, one said they were “White” and one said they were “White European.”





Question 19. What is your gender?

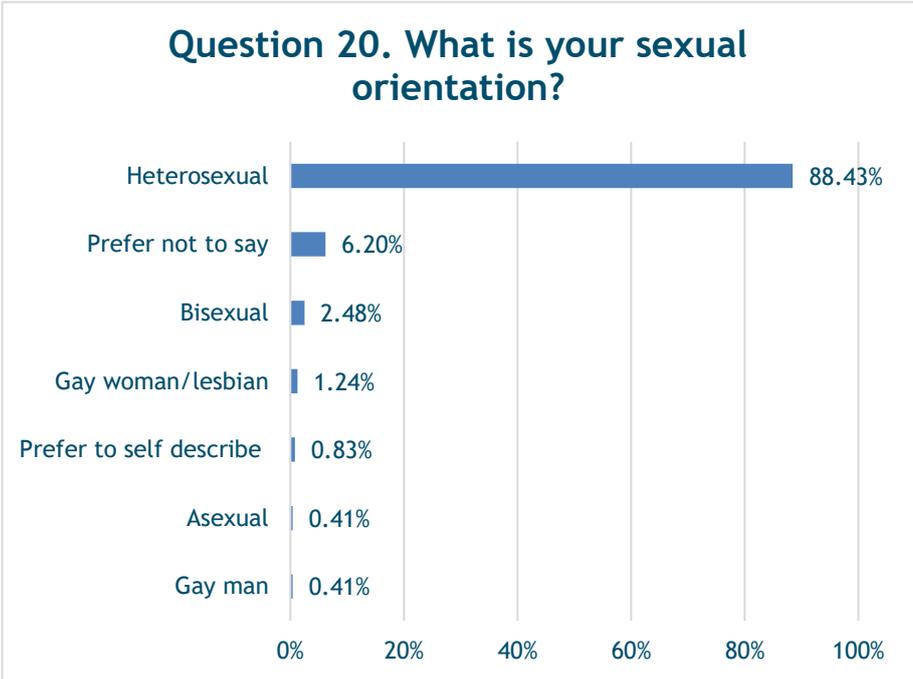
249 respondents answered this question and seven did not. 79.92% of respondents (199 people) were women, 18.47% (46 people) were men, and 1.61% (four people) selected “prefer not to say.”





Question 20. What is your sexual orientation?

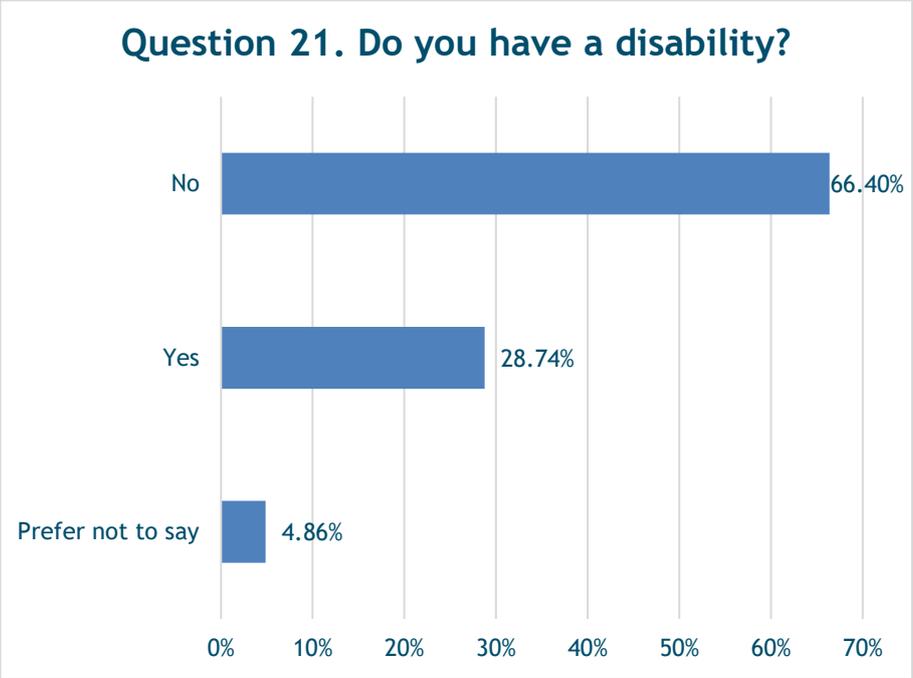
242 respondents answered this question and 14 did not. 88.43% of respondents (214 people) identified as heterosexual, 2.48% (six people) identified as bisexual, 1.24% (three people) identified as gay women/lesbians, 0.41% (one person) identified as asexual, and 0.41% (one person) identified as a gay man. 6.20% of respondents (15 people) selected “prefer not to say” and 0.83% (two people) selected “prefer to self describe,” though these two respondents did not specify their orientation.





Question 21. Do you have a disability?

247 respondents answered this question and nine did not. 66.40% of respondents (164 people) did not have a disability, 28.74% (71 people) did have a disability, and 4.86% (12 people) selected “prefer not to say.”





Question 22. If you have a disability, what type of disability do you have? Please tick all that apply.

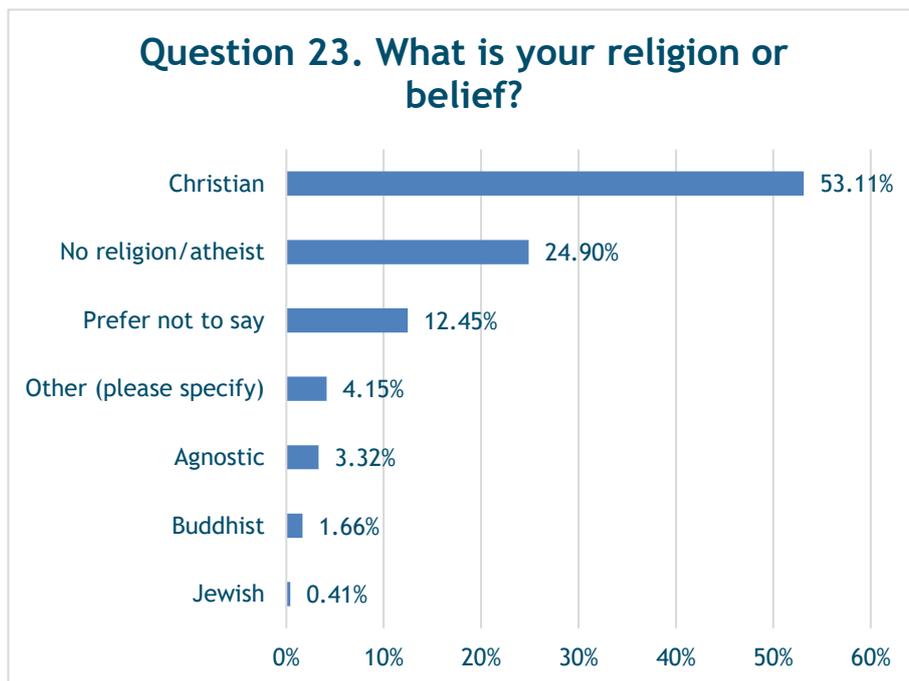
78 respondents answered this question and 178 did not. As respondents were able to select more than one answer, percentages may total more than 100. 61.54% of respondents (48 people) had a long-term health condition, 39.74% (31 people) had a physical disability, 14.10% (11 people) had a hearing impairment, 14.10% (11 people) had a mental illness, 8.97% (seven people) had a visual impairment, 8.97% (seven people) had a learning disability, and 2.56% (two people) had a cognitive impairment. 6.41% of respondents (five people) selected “other” and 3.85% (three people) selected “prefer not to say.” Of the respondents who selected “other,” one described a sleeping disorder, one said they had sight problems, one said they had post-traumatic stress disorder, one said they had autism, and one said they did not have a disability.





Question 23. What is your religion or belief?

241 respondents answered this question and 15 did not. 53.11% (128 people) identified as Christian, 24.90% (60 people) identified as atheist or had no religion, 3.32% (eight people) identified as agnostic, 1.66% (four people) identified as Buddhist, and 0.41% (one person) identified as Jewish. 12.45% of respondents (30 people) selected “prefer not to say” and 4.15% (10 people) selected “other.” Of the respondents who selected “other,” three said they were Pagan, two said “none”, two said “spiritual,” one said they were Catholic, one described themselves as a “free thinker,” and one said they were “Humanist/Taoist/Quaker.”





Feedback gathered from social media

Feedback about NHS 111 was also collected via social media and email. The following themes were identified from the comments.

General negative sentiment (six comments)

- “[I have done the survey] as it’s been pretty poor recently.”
- “Not much help.”

Efficient and satisfactory treatment (four comments)

- “Only had to call 111 once and they were brilliant, got me talking to a GP within two hours when I was unable to talk to one at all, I have no complaints.”
- “They responded quickly to my call, by getting an ambulance. Only time I’ve used this service, so [I’m] very pleased.”

Long waiting times (three comments)

- “My husband called 111 back in June with an emergency concern. It took 45 minutes for the call to be answered.”

Too many questions or automated messages (three comments)

- “Rang NHS 111 at 01:30, waiting through all the menus is horrendous.”
- “[The patient is] Arabic speaking, therefore not able to access 111 as you have to listen to about nine messages in English before you are asked if you want an interpreter.”

Unable to reach call handler (two comments)

- “Forced to call 999 as my call to 111 was not answered. In a queue for ages, then cut off, three times.”

Inadequate guidance or advice (two comments)

- “When I had a UTI... they prescribed me the wrong antibiotics which then led me to have a nearly unnoticeable but residual infection for four months.”
- “I went online and at the end, they said phone an ambulance.”

Poor communication between services (one comment)

- “[I was] directed to the Cumberland Centre... they were shut and 111 obviously didn’t know.”



Next steps

We will be inviting the CQC and Devon Doctors Ltd to work collaboratively with HWDPT and HWS to implement changes highlighted in our recommendations, to improve services delivered to our community. Our findings will be presented to various organisations who have significant interest in the NHS 111 service, and the report will be published on both HWDPT and HWS websites. It will also be shared with Healthwatch England, who will be able to raise the key findings that are nationally mandated and outside the ability of the local provider to change.

Recommendations

The 2020 report by HWS and HWDPT made six recommendations for improvement to the 111 service. These recommendations will be compared to the findings of the current report. As the survey questions used in the original review were modified for the current review, some findings cannot be compared directly.

Recommendations that require NHS England action

Reducing waiting times for arranged call-backs and inbound calls

- In the original 2020 review, 23.12% of respondents answered “no, I experienced a delay or gave up” to the question “was your call answered in a timely manner?” Furthermore, 4.84% of respondents said they waited 7 to 9 hours for an arranged call-back and 20.43% said they never received an arranged call-back.
- In their response to the 2020 report, Devon Doctors said that staffing levels are determined nationally, and their rotas are designed based on these levels. They also said that the average waiting time for calls had fallen to an average of less than 90 seconds.
- In the current review, 18.57% of respondents said their initial call to 111 was not answered, and 34.18% said they waited longer than three minutes. 12.50% of respondents waited 6 to 9 hours for an arranged call-back, 6.25% waited longer than 9 hours, and 15.28% never received the call. This data suggests that waiting times for inbound calls and arranged call-backs still require improvement.

Improvements to the call-handling procedures and staff training surrounding these processes. This includes improving training for difficult and emergency situations, increasing call handlers’ access to qualified medical support, and increasing staffing levels.



- In the 2020 review, lack of medical and local knowledge, incorrect or poor advice, and long waiting times were named by respondents as things they disliked about the 111 service.
- In their response to the 2020 report, Devon Doctors agreed that training for difficult situations could be improved, but said that levels of clinical resources and staffing were determined by NHS England.
- In the current review, when asked what could have improved their experience of using 111, the most common suggestions were shorter waiting times and better quality advice and information. These findings suggest that there are still improvements to be made to call-handling procedures and staff training.

Review the pre-recorded messages and frontline options for patients before they are connected to a call operator

- In the 2020 review, respondents complained that pre-recorded messages were too long or not relevant.
- In their response to the 2020 report, Devon Doctors said that all pre-recorded messages and question pathways are determined nationally, and call handlers are unable to deviate from these questions.
- In the current review, some respondents mentioned the length of the pre-recorded messages when asked what could be improved about the 111 service, suggesting that this is still an issue for service users.

Recommendations that may be actionable locally

Ensure that training is consistent for all staff so that delivery of the assessment and conclusions are of the same standard for all patients

- In the 2020 review, some respondents complained that the quality of service varied depending on the call handler.
- In their response to the 2020 report, Devon Doctors said that all call handlers are audited monthly to ensure an appropriate level of service is provided and to identify where further training is required.
- In the current review, consistency of service (either positive or negative) was not identified as a theme among the responses.

Improve procedures surrounding calls relating to patients with mental health problems to ensure they are handled with empathy and diverted to the correct support

- In the 2020 review, HWS and HWDPT recommended that mental health-related procedures be improved.
- In their response to the 2020 report, Devon Doctors agreed that procedures should be improved, and said they would work with Livewell and DPT to improve the management of mental health related calls.
- In the current review, the handling of mental health-related calls was not identified as a theme among the responses.



Consider the viability/benefits of a call-logging system that provides a point of reference, so that if patients need to call back, a record of their previous call is easy for the call operator to access and review.

- In the 2020 review, some respondents complained of poor continuity between calls and services, suggesting that 111 could be improved if call handlers could access records of their previous calls or treatment.
- In their response to the 2020 report, Devon Doctors said that a patient's date of birth and address were used as a point of reference, and that when a patient's details are entered into the system all recent contacts are listed.
- In the current review, respondents again suggested that better continuity and communication between services could have improved their experience of using the 111 service. Improvements to this system may therefore be necessary.

Statement from Devon Doctors Ltd

We would like to thank Healthwatch for its report in relation to patient experiences of the 111 service in Devon and Somerset.

It is regrettable that the sample size for the research was so small that the findings are not representative of the populations of either counties.

Particularly in Somerset where just 35 people (0.006% of the population) were engaged in the piece of work. We handle between 12,000 and 17,000 calls a month for Somserset.

We value all feedback and would encourage patients to continue to feedback about their experiences. People can share their feedback with us, by emailing:

Ddoooh.governance@nhs.net or by calling 01392 822340

Recognition

Healthwatch in Devon, Plymouth, & Torbay and Healthwatch Somerset would like to thank everyone who took the time to provide their feedback.



Appendix

Appendix 1. Full social media engagement figures

Healthwatch DPT: unpaid posts

Healthwatch Devon

- Facebook: reach 34,137; engagement 677
- Twitter: impressions 1,052; engagement 35
- Instagram: impressions 153; interactions 5

Healthwatch Plymouth

- Facebook: reach 17,313; engagement 348
- Twitter: impressions 1,508; engagement 31
- Instagram: impressions 131, interactions 3

Healthwatch Torbay

- Facebook: reach 16,507; engagement 132
- Twitter: impressions 1,010; engagement 27
- Instagram: impressions 96; interactions 6

Healthwatch DPT: paid Facebook posts

- Healthwatch Devon: reach 1,919; engagement 86
- Healthwatch Plymouth: reach 720, engagement 28
- Healthwatch Torbay: reach 713, engagement 26

Healthwatch Somerset: all unpaid and paid posts

- Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram: reach 7,762; engagement 166



Appendix 2. Detailed breakdown of postcode areas (Q16)

The number of respondents from each postcode is listed in brackets.

- EX39 (18)
- PL5 (13)
- PL6 (13)
- EX31 (12)
- TQ2 (12)
- EX32 (10)
- PL2 (10)
- Unclear/incomplete (10)
- TQ1 (8)
- TQ3 (8)
- EX34 (7)
- EX8 (6)
- BA11 (5)
- PL21 (5)
- PL4 (5)
- EX16 (4)
- EX2 (4)
- TA21 (4)
- TQ12 (4)
- TQ14 (4)
- EX4 (3)
- EX7 (3)
- PL1 (3)
- PL19 (3)
- PL3 (3)
- PL7 (3)
- TQ4 (3)
- BA4 (2)
- EX10 (2)
- EX20 (2)
- EX33 (2)
- EX5 (2)
- PL12 (2)
- PL9 (2)
- TA1 (2)
- TA12 (2)
- TA3 (2)
- TQ13 (2)
- BA16 (1)
- BA20 (1)
- BA21 (1)
- BA6 (1)
- BA9 (1)
- BS23 (1)
- EX1 (1)
- EX11 (1)
- EX14 (1)
- EX15 (1)
- EX17 (1)
- EX21 (1)
- EX36 (1)
- EX37 (1)
- PL14 (1)
- PL17 (1)
- PL18 (1)
- PL20 (1)
- PL8 (1)
- TA10 (1)
- TA11 (1)
- TA19 (1)
- TA24 (1)
- TA8 (1)
- TQ5 (1)
- TQ6 (1)

Contact us

healthwatch Devon

Jan Cutting Healthy Living Centre
Scott Business Park
Beacon Park Road
Plymouth
PL2 2PQ

www.healthwatchdevon.co.uk
t: 0800 520 0640 (Freephone)
e: info@healthwatchdevon.co.uk
tw: @HwDevon
fb: facebook.com/healthwatchdevon

healthwatch Plymouth

Jan Cutting Healthy Living Centre
Scott Business Park
Beacon Park Road
Plymouth
PL2 2PQ

www.healthwatchplymouth.co.uk
t: 0800 520 0640 (Freephone)
e: info@healthwatchplymouth.co.uk
tw: @HealthwatchPlym
fb: facebook.com/HealthwatchPlymouth

healthwatch Torbay

Room 17
Paignton Library
Great Western Road
Paignton
TQ4 5AG

www.healthwatchtorbay.org.uk
t: 08000 520 029 (Freephone)
e: info@healthwatchtorbay.org.uk
tw: @HWTorbay
fb: facebook.com/HealthwatchTorbay
Registered Charity No: 1153450

healthwatch Somerset

Woodlands House
Woodlands Business Park
Bristol Road
Bridgwater
TA6 4FJ

www.healthwatchesomerset.co.uk
t: 0800 999 1286 (Freephone)
e: info@healthwatchesomerset.co.uk
tw: @HWatchSomerset
fb: facebook.com/HealthwatchSomerset