

GP access in Shropshire

An examination of the NHS General Practice appointments data.

Data period: August 2023
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About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Shropshire is your local health and social care champion.

If you use GPs and hospitals, dentists, pharmacies, care homes or other support services in your area, we want to hear about your experiences. We are independent and have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to local feedback and improve standards of care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice. Last year, the Healthwatch network helped nearly a million people like you to have your say and get the support you need.



We work to make your voice count when it comes to shaping and improving services. We use a variety of methods to find out what people like about services, and what could be improved and we share these views with those with the power to make change happen. Our reports go to:

- the organisations who provide services
- the commissioners who pay for services (e.g. Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Integrated Care Board, Shropshire Council)
- service regulators (the Care Quality Commission, NHS England)
- our national body Healthwatch England to let them know how local services are working in Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin

We are not experts in health and social care but use a variety of methods to put a spotlight on services and ask people to share their views with us. We also help people to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

Context

Healthwatch Shropshire continues to receive patient experience highlighting issues with accessing GP services.

As part of our role in helping people understand NHS services we thought it would be helpful for patients if we were to analyse the recent data released by NHS Digital about General Practice appointments in Shropshire.



At the time of writing this report the latest data release was for August 2023, [Appointments in General Practice, August 2023 - NHS Digital](#). Later months are now available and they include a link to an interactive visualisation tool for examining the data.

The data provides a snapshot of appointments in the month of August 2023;

- the number of appointments offered by each practice
- an indication of how long people waited from the point of booking to attending
- the channels used for the appointment, face to face, phone, video and online¹
- the number of patients who did not attend their appointments.

It should be noted that the monthly data will change during the year as general practice is impacted by seasonal pressures and other local factors that will affect the demand for appointments and the supply of appointments, for example workforce considerations, sickness and holiday, and the availability of locum cover.

¹ Experiences of using different channels can be found here [Phone, video and on-line appointments during the Covid-19 Pandemic | Healthwatch Shropshire](#)

It is also important to note that “it does not show the totality of GP activity/workload. The data presented only contains information which was captured on the GP practice ... appointment systems. This limits the activity reported on and does not represent all work happening within a primary care setting or assess the complexity of activity.”²

There is no breakdown of the clinical circumstances surrounding the appointments and whether, for example, appointments are deemed ‘routine’ or ‘urgent’.

Key Facts for all England in August 2023³:

- 28.3 million appointments were estimated to have been delivered by Practices and Primary Care Networks and were recorded in GP Practice appointment systems.
- 43.7% of appointments took place on the same day that they were booked.
- 90.5% of all appointments were attended.
- 45.5% of all appointments were carried out by a GP and 20.9% were carried out by nurses.
- 67.9% of all appointments were carried out face to face.

Patient Feedback about General Practice Appointments

This was a desk-based exercise and we did not specifically engage with patients to gather patient experience. We have however received feedback during the last year about GP appointments in Shropshire and an illustrative selection is included here and in other sections of the report.

- “Service user said he had no complaints about his surgery. He can book an appointment easily over the phone and never has to wait more than 3-4 days to be seen.”
- “The wait for GP appointments is very long and can only get a telephone appointment weeks later than when you had the issue.”

² [Appointments in General Practice, August 2023 - NHS Digital](#)

³ [Appointments in General Practice, August 2023 - NHS Digital](#)

- “An elderly woman, has struggled to get a GP appointment, unless she says it is an emergency. You have to ring at 8.30am but when you finally get through, there are no appointments.”
- “It's either a medical emergency or you get an appointment in 3-4 weeks time. "Is it a medical emergency?" is just such an insensitive question.”
- “Elderly patient (85yrs) with COPD, diabetes and other serious conditions tested positive for Covid. Telephoned GP to ask for the treatments available for such patients, no call back as promised - instead a telephone appointment booked for 12th September [4 weeks time]. Appalling.”
- “People are then going to A+E because they can't get diagnosed early enough or see a doctor in person. People are getting frustrated.”
- “Totally impossible to get a routine GP appointment most of the time. Regularly told no appointments available either phone or face to face. Really bad when trying to live with chronic health issues.”
- “It's become so complicated that you just don't want to bother anymore. I want to SEE somebody, so I just won't bother getting an appointment.”
- “I have no problem getting an appointment with my GP. I have to wait two and a half weeks for face-to-face but that's fine. You don't have to make up a sob story to see them.”

Note: Several reports we have published cover similar areas and contain patient experience which may be of further interest:

- [Because we all care – GP referrals | Healthwatch Shropshire.](#)
- [Phone, video and on-line appointments during the Covid-19 Pandemic | Healthwatch Shropshire](#)

Key findings for Shropshire

There are some key findings to be found within the data.



- There is significant variation in:
 - the number of appointments practices offer per patient
 - the ratio of appointments offered with different types of clinical staff
 - the percentages of patients waiting for different lengths of time for appointments from the time of booking
 - the percentage of appointments held face-to-face, over the telephone or via video/online channels
 - the percentages of patients who do not attend appointments across the different practices
- In Shropshire practices the average percentage of appointments being with GPs was 47.6% compared with 45.5% across England.
- There appears to be no correlation between the number of appointments offered and waiting times.
- The average percentage of appointments carried out face to face in Shropshire is 73.2% which is higher than the national average of 67.9%
- The total number of appointments where patients did not attend was 5,784. If these were 10-minute appointments it is the equivalent of 964 hours of clinical staff time in one month.

Response from Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin NHS

Nicola Williams, Interim Associate Director of Primary Care at NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, said:

“At NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, as it is nationally, GP access is a top priority. This report is published at a time when there is rising demand for services and falling numbers of GPs, with practices providing more appointments than ever before.

“In 2023, approximately 250,000 appointments were provided each month in General Practices across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, an increase of 22.55% compared to January 2021. Seven out of 10 patients were seen face-to-face, with 55% of patients in Telford and Wrekin and 52% in Shropshire being seen on the same day or the next day.

“However, we do recognise that patients are concerned about getting a GP appointment and we are working hard to make improvements through extensive work to support the national Primary Care Access Recovery Plan. A local system improvement plan is being delivered to ensure that improvements are made to tackle the pressures facing General Practice and other services as they work to get back to normal after the pandemic.

“These include patient ease and experience of both getting through to their practice and the timeliness of appointments based on clinical need; improvements through digital telephony for people struggling to contact their practice; and maximising the use of other digital tools to support access which are already having a positive impact.

“As a core component of this work, the multi-skilled extended healthcare teams based in practices, including Care Navigators, take on a defining role to enhance appointment capacity, build confidence in this new way of accessing

General Practice, and ensure that people are seen by the most appropriate member of the practice team for their health and care needs.

“Further efforts to improve access include utilising the wider care available within the local health and care system, such as community pharmacy and NHS 111, so that people gain the most appropriate care and treatment as quickly as possible.

“We are grateful for this feedback and will continue to review patient experience around GP access, aided by both Healthwatch organisations for the county, as part of the delivery of this plan.”

Note: This report contains data for those practices based in the Shropshire Council local government area. We recognise that Shropshire residents may well attend practices in neighbouring local government areas, especially in Telford & Wrekin with the implementation of Primary Care Networks that cross local government boundaries. ([Primary Care Networks \(PCNs\) – NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin \(shropshiretelfordandwrekin.nhs.uk\)](https://www.shropshiretelfordandwrekin.nhs.uk))

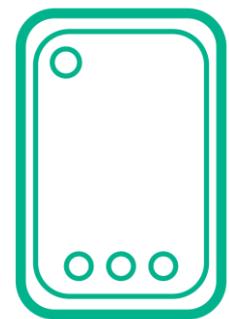
The data for practices in other English local government areas is available here [Appointments in General Practice, August 2023 – NHS Digital](#).

General Practice appointments during August 2023

Booking Appointments

The data does not give a description of the process of booking appointments, time spent trying to arrange appointments nor the channels through which appointments can be booked.

The issues around booking appointments have been highlighted in the Healthwatch England report 'The public's perspective: The state of health and social care', November 2023⁴;



'Research by others showed that in 2023, people's experience of booking an appointment got worse. They found it harder to contact their GP surgery by phone. And when asked for their top priorities for the NHS, making it easier to get GP appointments was second only to increasing the overall number of NHS staff.'

Examples of Shropshire patient experience:

- "Went to the reception to ask for any appointment to be told "you can't talk to me you have to go online". I went back home fuming and went online and had fill out a 10-page form to make the appointment."
- "It's quite easy to ring [the practice] and be 48th on the list. You can get a week's ironing done in the time you get through. Then by the time you do get through and get to option 5 you can't remember what option 1-4 were. They rely on patients saying, "do I really need to bother?" Especially when you can't get an appointment for over a month."

⁴ [The public's perspective: The state of health and social care | Healthwatch](#)

- “You aren't allowed to walk in and make an appointment or make an appointment if you are already there. You HAVE to ring up. I don't understand why you can't just do it with the receptionist – there usually isn't even a soul in the surgery. Do the doctors just not work in the surgery at all?”

Number of Appointments available

It should be noted that the Care Quality Commission (CQC), who are responsible for regulating General Practice, point out that *‘there is no formula and we do not advise the ratio for the number of appointments a GP practice should offer. Different populations have differing care needs. So [practices] need to consider staffing models, skill mixes and approaches that are appropriate for [their] local population.’*

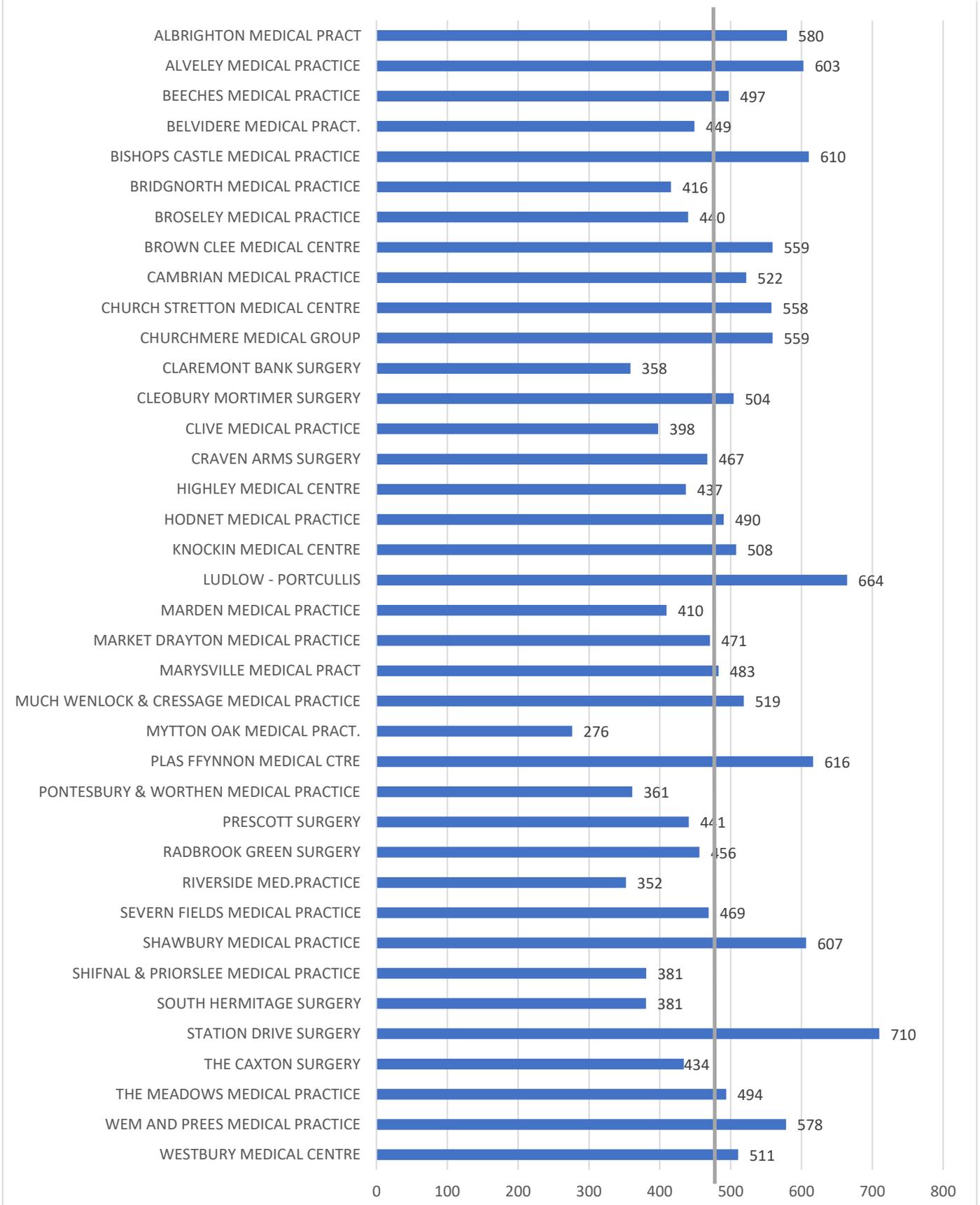


There are many factors that will affect the supply of appointments, such as the number of consulting rooms available and the number of staff available. Demand for appointments will also vary depending on factors such as deprivation levels and age of the local population.

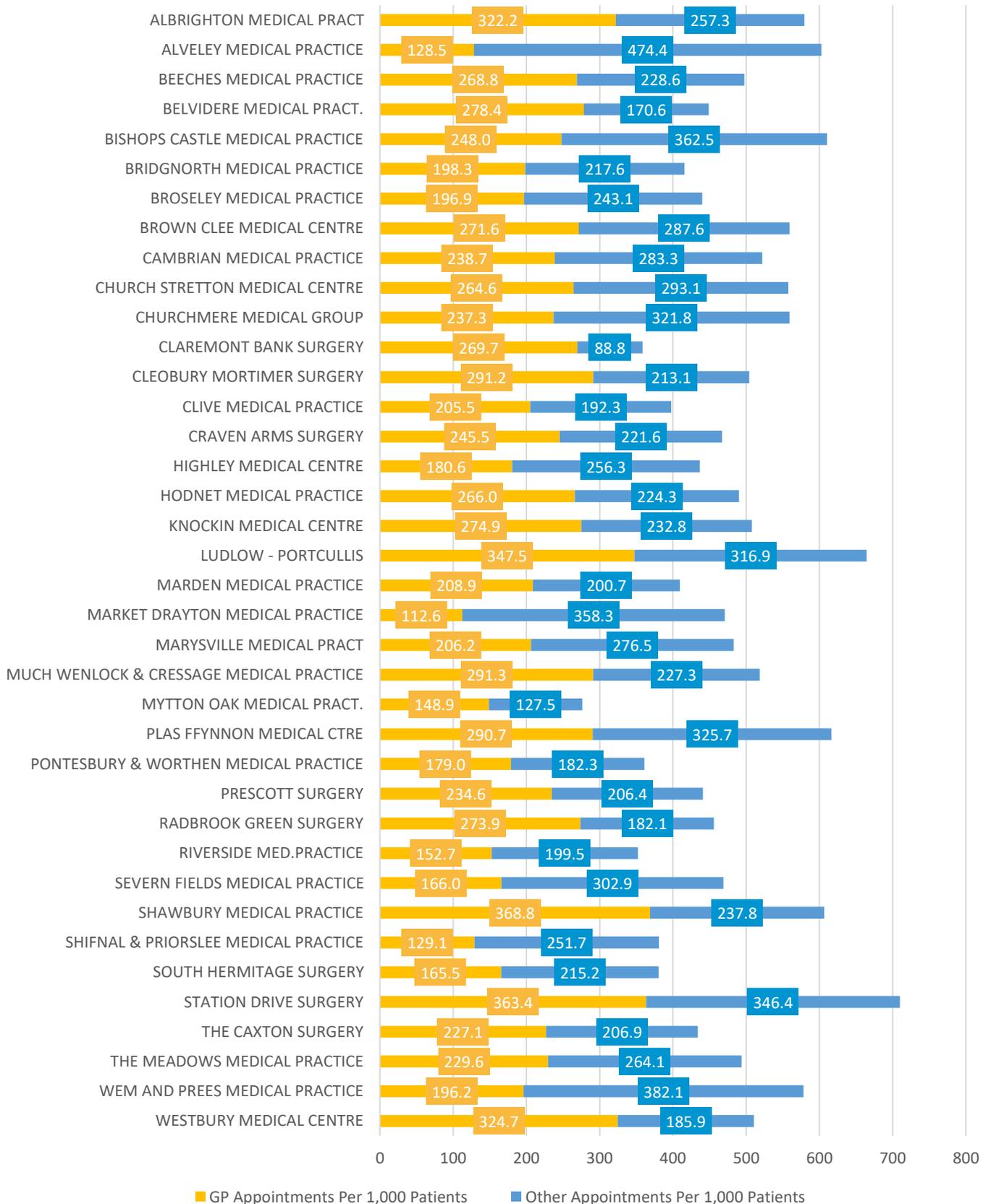
The average number of appointments offered by all practices across England was 482 appointments per 1000 patients on the practice list.



Appointments per 1000 patients **England Average (482)**



Breakdown of appointments, GP appointments and other clinical staff



Appointments with different Clinical Staff

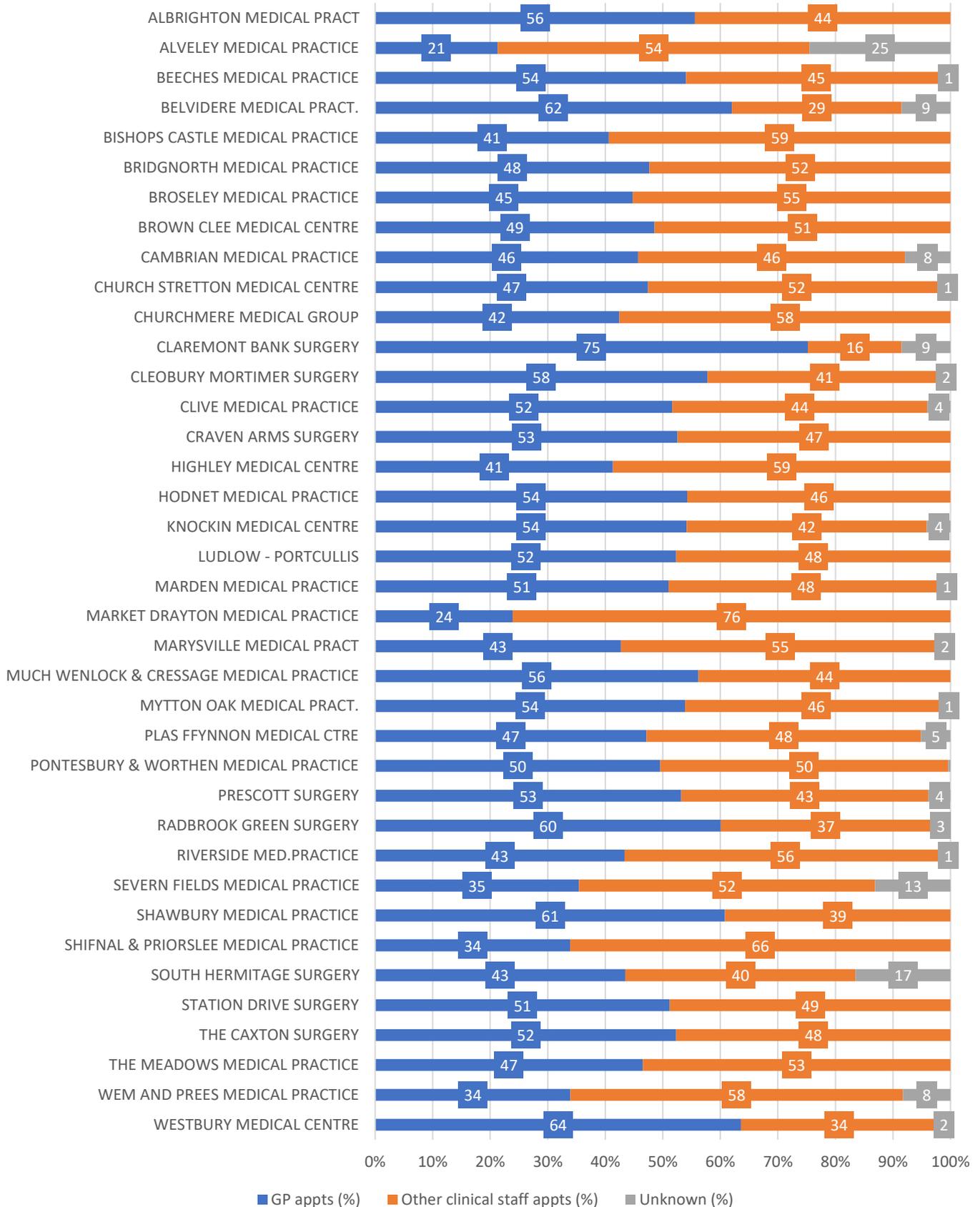
45.5% of all appointments in England during August 2023 were carried out by a GP and 20.9% were carried out by nurses. In STW the average percentage of appointments carried out by a GP was 45.3%.



Examples of Shropshire patient experience:

- “It’s impossible to get an appointment with an actual GP at my surgery. You are only offered an appointment with a nurse, mental health nurse or paramedic. I have [several conditions] which means I have compromised immunity and I need antibiotics for any infection. I had a sinus infection and got a paramedic appointment; he wouldn’t give me antibiotics despite this being on my record. The infection spread to my chest and into my ears. It resulted in pressure building up and a perforated ear drum with hearing loss. I was given antibiotics at the second appointment with a nurse but my hearing loss wasn’t taken seriously and despite my asking for a referral this was not made. I had to make another appointment; I asked to see a GP and was told I could but when I turned up it was a nurse appointment. They did finally refer me to ENT for the hearing loss. Had I had antibiotics the first time I might not have a perforated ear drum and hearing loss. My consultant was concerned about this and has now issued me with emergency antibiotics.”
- “No complaints with access. I will see a Nurse but can also get to see a GP if I need to.”
- “It’s ever so hard to see a doctor. I saw a nurse one day and it was such a waste of time as at the end of it she said she would have to go and check something with the doctor anyway”.

Clinical Staff Appointments



Waiting times for appointments

Each practice reports on how long it is between a booking taking place and the appointment taking place.

There are various factors that can affect the time elapsed from when the booking was made to when the appointment happened, including:



- appointment availability at the practice
- patient availability
- urgency of the appointment
- GP advice
- regular/repeat appointments that may be booked in advance

We hear from patients in practices where appointments are released in batches and are quickly booked each morning meaning some patients have to call back the following day. This may affect the figures for waiting times as the reported times are taken from when the appointment is entered on to the GP appointment system.

Examples of Shropshire patient experience of waiting to book an appointment:

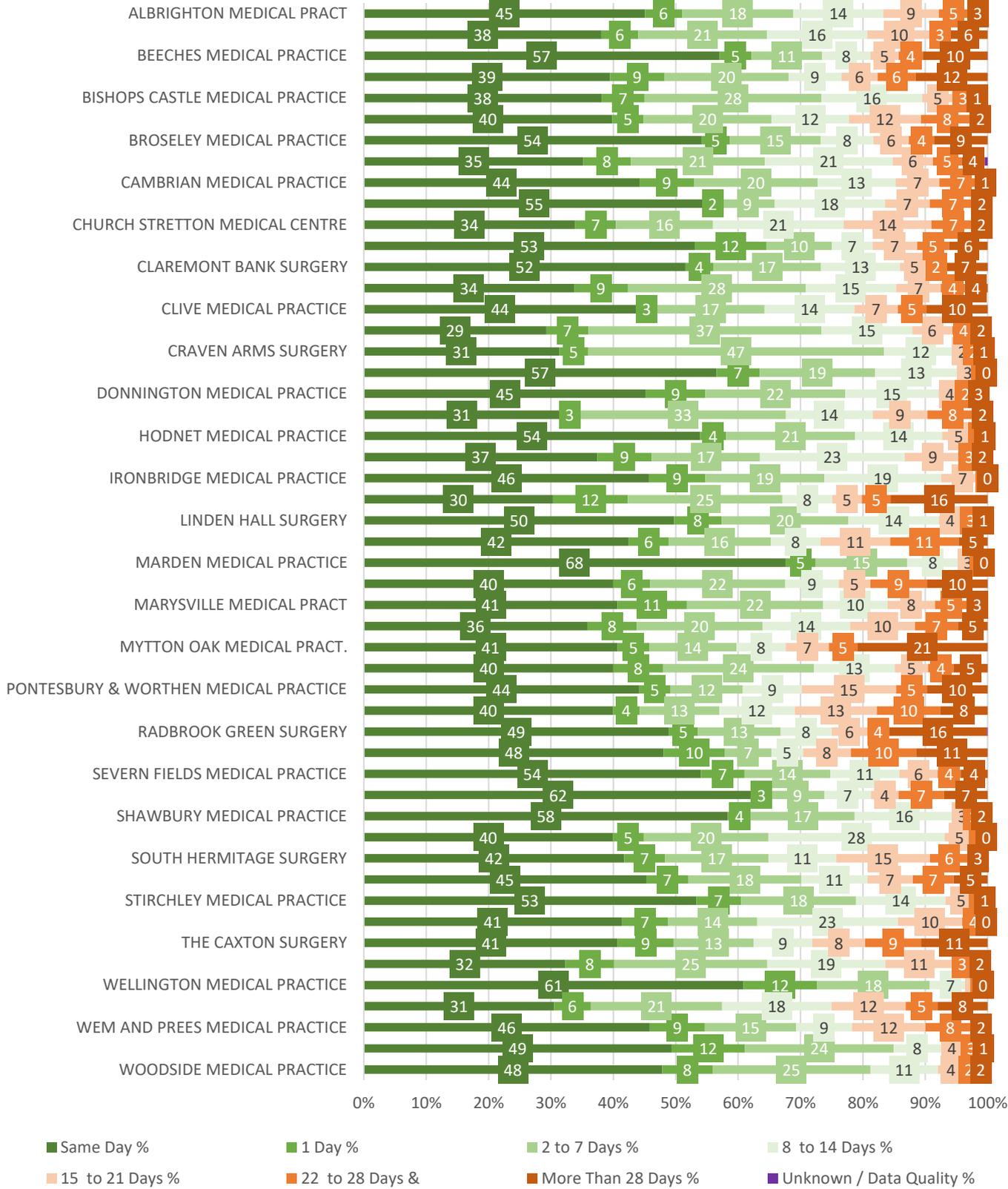
- "I was told by my doctor via text that I need a routine appointment with a doctor. I rang the practice to be told there were no appointments available at all and I would have to ring back the next day at 9am when they would have appointments available. I was told that they only release appointments for a single day at a time and that is done 7 days in advance. The next day I couldn't ring at 9am so rang at 10am, all the appointments had gone and I was told to try again the following day. This I did and managed to get an appointment. This system doesn't seem to make much sense, I assume it is set up to add a little friction to the system of arranging an appointment in order to manage patient demand. I imagine it just leads to more pressure on reception staff (multiple calls from frustrated patients) and any patients lacking tenacity missing out on care."
- "I find it difficult to get appointments with the doctor. I either telephone at 08:00 on the day and wait in a long queue; or try on-line; however, these

have usually been taken. I sometimes need an appointment in a couple of weeks, which are impossible to arrange in advance. It is also extremely difficult to get appointments with my preferred doctor, for continuity."

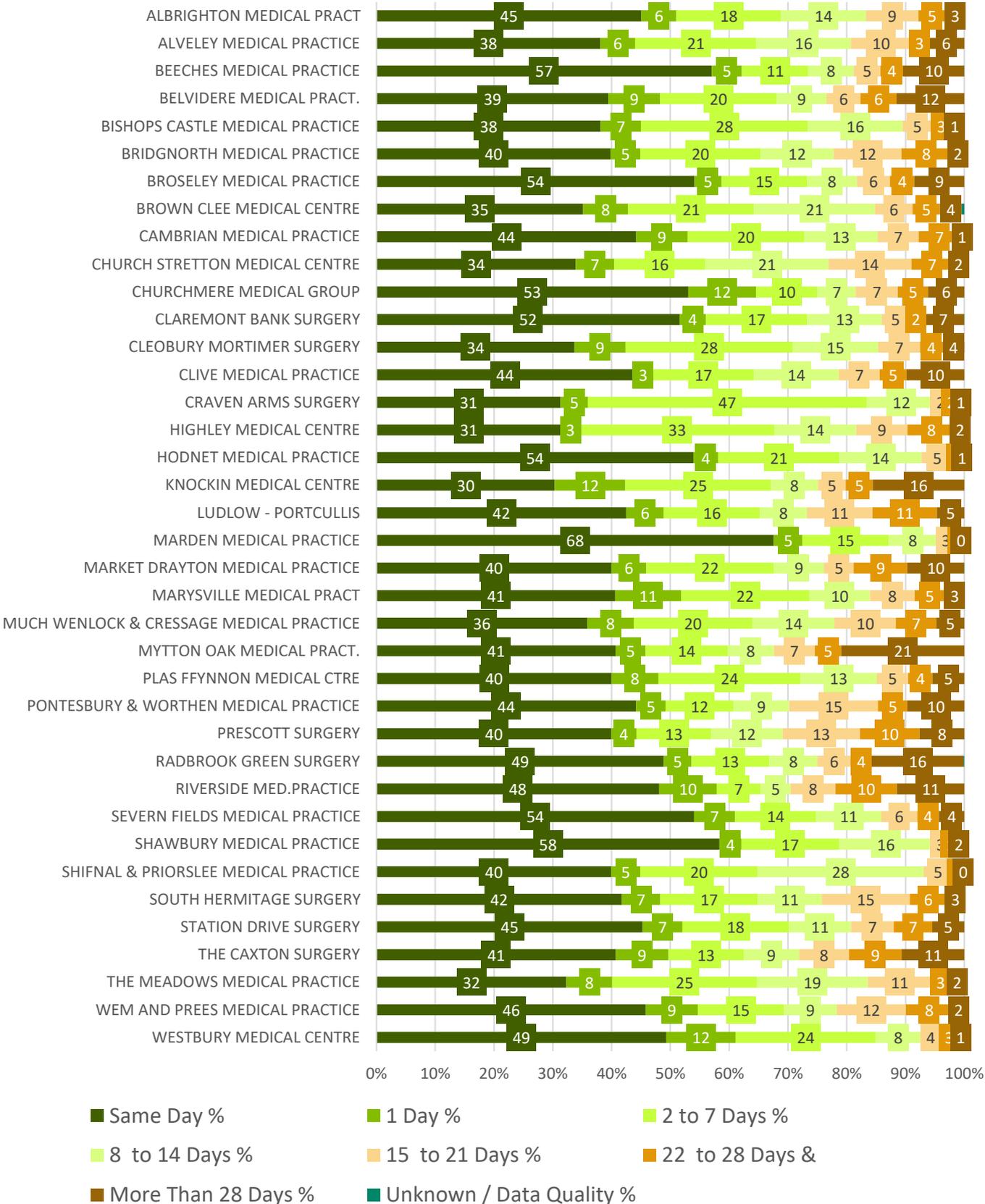
- "If you need an appointment at the practice you have to fill out an online form. I wasn't able to do it so I visited the practice and the receptionist did it for me. I should have heard back about my booking within 48 hours but that was 10 days ago. I am quite assertive and I spoke to the practice today and they have given me an appointment tomorrow. They told me the delay was because the admin staff were off sick but I did explain that sickness was a management problem and shouldn't be a problem for patients. This new system is a real admin barrier and I told them I don't feel safe now." [Note: Having checked the online form, we found it to be repeatedly closed with the message, "Temporarily Closed. Due to high demand, we have hit capacity for today. If you need urgent medical attention, please call 111 or attend the walk-in centre. If your query can wait until our next working day, the triage system will re-open at 8am on our next working day"]



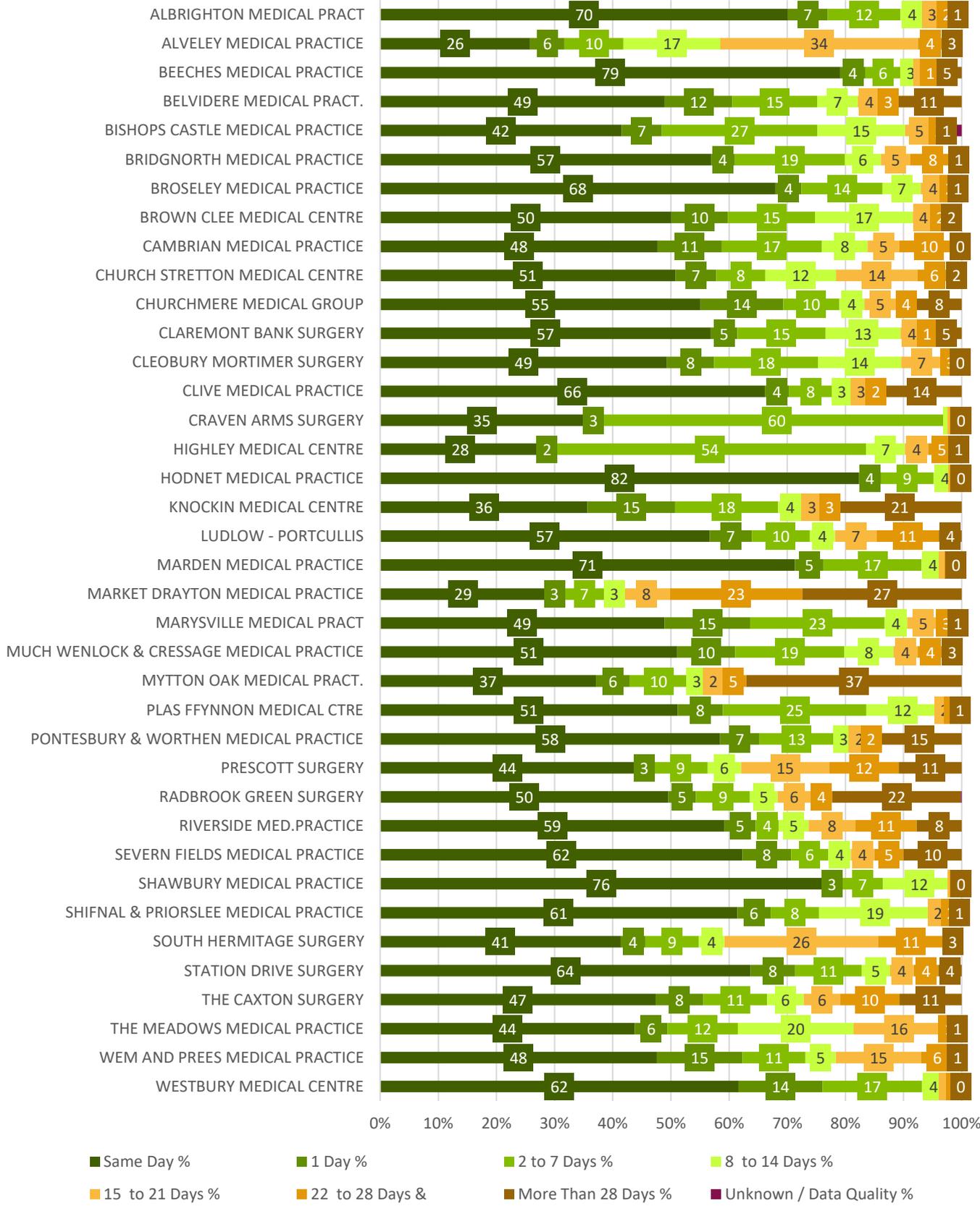
All appointments (GP and other clinical staff) - Time between booking and attending



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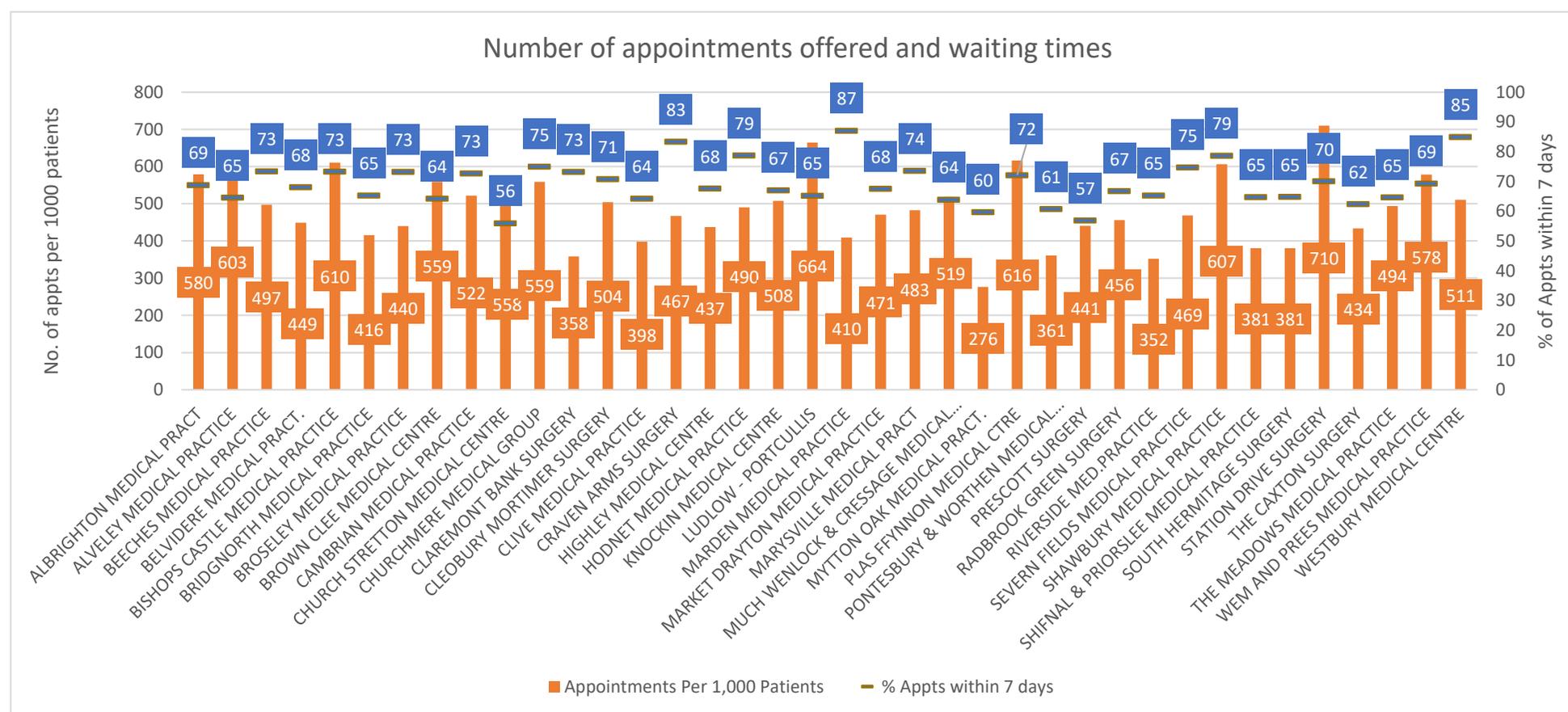


GP appointments - Time between booking and attending



Number of appointments available and waiting times

To try and understand if the number of appointments affected the time patients waited between booking and attending an appointment we looked to see if patients at practices offering more appointments waited less time between booking and being seen, for this we used a combined figure for waits up to 7 days. There does not seem to be a correlation between the two figures.



Appointment type

The data does not look at the suitability of the different modes nor the patient experience of the different modes. In the past patients who have contacted us have reported a number of advantages, concerns and difficulties around accessing health and social care services remotely.⁵



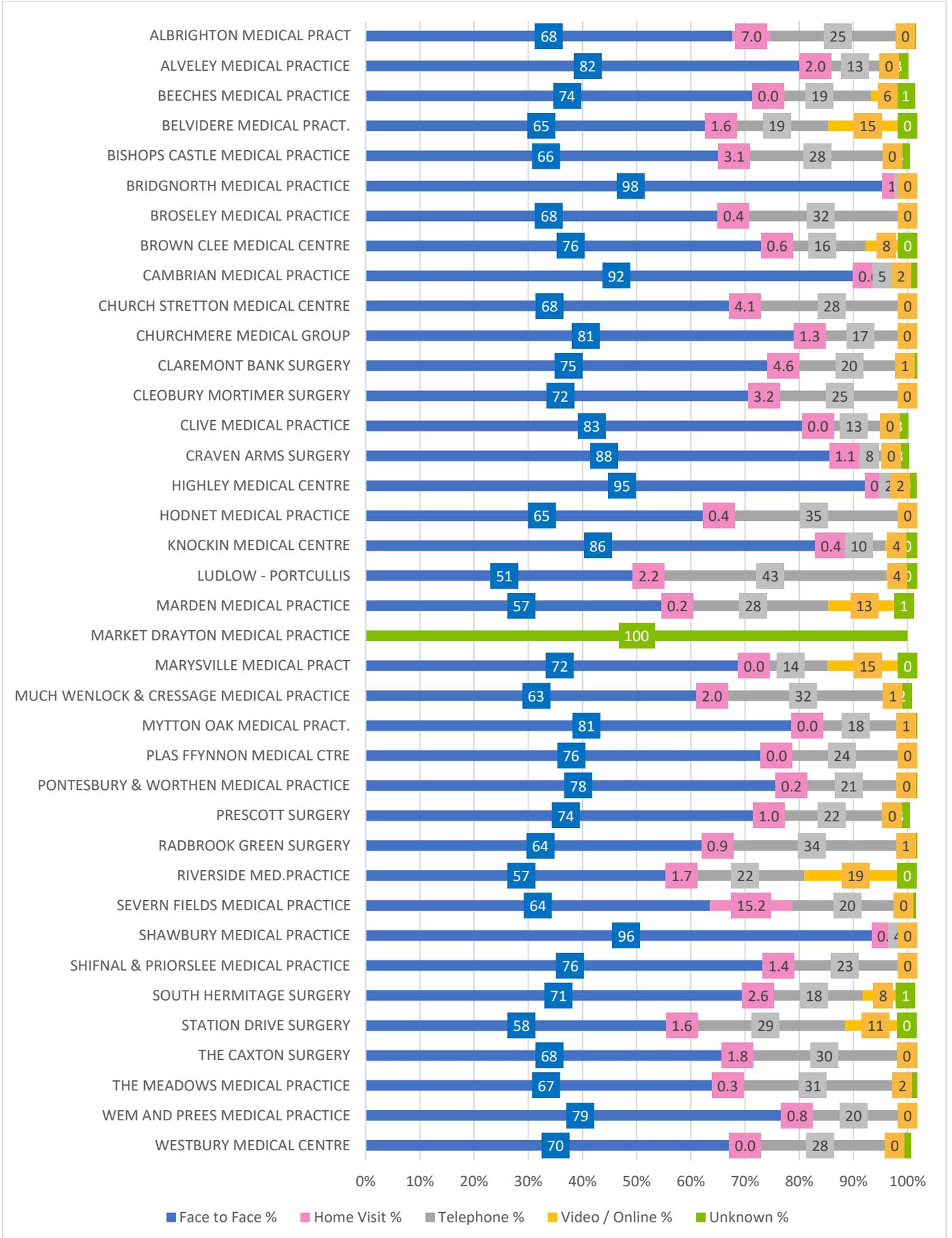
Some recent feedback:

- “There is difficulty in ‘getting past the receptionist’. Although it is good when the doctor does a pre-appointment call before inviting you in for a face-to-face appointment.”
- “I got to see my doctor face-to-face and they were brilliant. I felt a real rapport with him and got the referral I needed.”
- “I have a repeat prescription for some medicine I only need twice a year, but I've had it for 10 years and the GP told me I need a face-to-face appointment to get it. I don't understand why waste an appointment every time for this when in other cases you almost have to lie about the severity of your problem than it really is to see a doctor face-to-face.”

In England the average percentage of appointments carried out face-to-face was 67.9%, the average for Shropshire was higher at 73.2%.



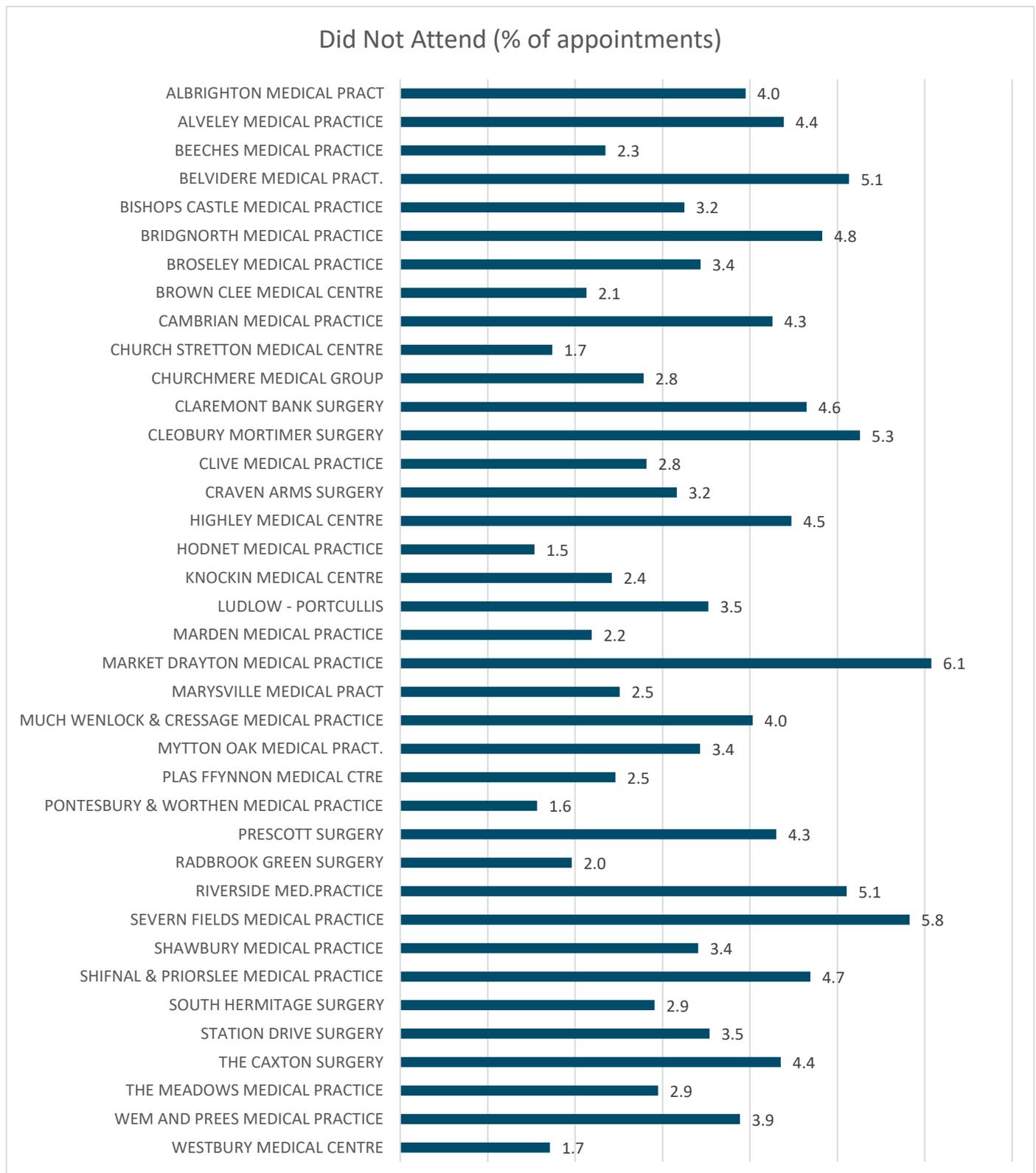
⁵ [Phone, video and on-line appointments during the Covid-19 Pandemic | Healthwatch Shropshire](#)
General Practice Appointments August 2023



General Practice Appointments August 2023

Appointments not attended

The total number of appointments during this period where the patient did not attend appointments across all practices was 5,784.





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