

Accessing GP services Quarterly Report

November 2021



Accessible Formats

This report is also available in Welsh.

If you would like this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us.

You can download an electronic copy from our website:

<https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/>

Or ask for a copy by contacting our office. Contact details can be found on page 47.

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About Swansea Bay Community Health Council (CHC)

Swansea Bay CHC is the independent watchdog of the National Health Service (NHS) within Neath Port Talbot and Swansea. We encourage and support people to have a voice in the design and delivery of healthcare for their families and local communities.

Swansea Bay CHC works with the NHS, inspection and regulatory bodies. We provide an important link between those who plan and deliver NHS services, those who inspect and regulate them and those who use them.

We hear from the public in many different ways. Before the coronavirus pandemic, we regularly visited NHS services to hear from patients while they were receiving care and treatment. We spoke directly to their families and carers too. We also heard from people at local community events and by talking to community representatives and groups.

Since the coronavirus pandemic, we have needed to change the ways we engage the public and patients. This includes surveys, social media and videoconferencing using apps such as Zoom, Teams and Skype, to hear from people directly about their views and experiences of NHS services. Apps have made it possible to attend virtual engagement events too. We continue to hear from people through enquiries and our complaints advocacy service. Swansea Bay CHC represents the “patient and public” voice in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea.

Background and Introduction

In line with our Operational Plan 2020/21, we set out to collect feedback from people about their experiences of accessing services at their GP practice.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, access to GP services changed for patients, with practices no longer operating an “open door” policy. GP practices needed to protect patients and staff from the risks of infection. One of the ways some patients could safely access GP services was using online services, such as ‘askmyGP’, my Health Online and e-Consult.

In May 2021, we published our report, “The askmyGP online service: Is it working for you?” Patient feedback at this time was mostly positive, although we were told that online systems were inaccessible for some people in the community and led to inequalities. Feedback in that report also highlighted access challenges with traditional methods of contacting practices, such as telephoning.

Our current report explores in more detail people's experiences of accessing GP services, covering both telephone and online access.

A significant number of people (60%) told us their overall experience of accessing GP services was ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’, with **booking appointments** raised as a key issue; almost 3 quarters of people we spoke to (69%) told us their experience of booking appointments was “poor or very poor”, with booking appointments over the telephone being particularly bad.

Our “GP Surgery Mystery Shopper report: Telephone Systems”, provides a review of GP practice telephone systems over 60 sites. The results support some of the feedback we have received from people in this report, about their experiences when they contact their practice by phone.

We also heard how people’s earlier positive experiences of the ‘askmyGP’ online system, had diminished, with many reporting the service was now rarely available to use.

Workers and parents of young children found the process of getting an appointment to be particularly challenging, given the limited ‘window of opportunity’ to make appointments and the brief ‘open window’ to receive call-backs from the practice.

An increasing number of people told us they are being forced to seek help elsewhere, such as calling 111 and worryingly, attending accident and emergency. Some told us they just “gave up trying” to get an appointment.

A full list of our recommendations can be found on page 43.

What we did

Between July and October 2021, we asked people across the Swansea Bay area to share their views and experiences of accessing GP services.

People shared feedback with us by completing our local survey online, or by contacting us by post, phone, email and website.

We reached out to people using social media, including Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, providing direct links to our online survey.

We shared our engagement messages promoting the survey on social media and by email, with many local groups and stakeholders, in an effort to reach as many people as possible, including:

- Council for Voluntary Service (Neath Port Talbot & Swansea)
- GP cluster networks
- Local Area Coordinators
- Swansea Bay University Health Board
- Local community groups, including Covid-19 support groups
- Seldom heard groups
- Local and national charities

We picked up feedback in other ways too, e.g., through our enquiries and complaints advocacy service, local community networks, community representatives and groups, and monitoring of health board activities, including feedback and complaints.

Our survey gave people the opportunity to answer questions on a range of topics, such as:

- 🕒 Making appointments
- 🕒 Quality of care
- 🕒 Helpfulness of staff
- 🕒 GP 'Out of Hours' service
- 🕒 Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on GP services

A copy of our survey is available on request.

Who we heard from

The table on page 8 provides a snapshot of the 315 people who shared their views and experiences with us through our local survey.

You can find out from our Equality Plan what we are doing to hear from different groups of people so that we can better represent the diversity of the communities we serve. You can find our Equality Plan on our website: <https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/about-us/our-governance/governance-documents/equality-plan-2021-2022-pdf/>



Everyone shared his or her views and experiences in English although our survey was also available in Welsh and Easy Read

81% were female

Around 96% were White (Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish, British)

Around 51% were Christian while 42% told us they did not have a religion

Age range categories:

Almost 39% were aged 45 – 60 years old

Around 33% were aged 60 – 75 years old

Almost 19% were aged 26 – 44 years old

Around 90% identified as heterosexual

23% told us they had carer responsibilities for someone in their household with a long-standing health problem or disability

Many told us they had a long-standing condition, such as:

- A physical condition – 36%
- A mental health condition - 25%
- A long-standing illness – 26%
- Deaf or a severe hearing impairment – 9%
- Blind or partially sighted – 2%
- A learning disability – 1%

What we heard

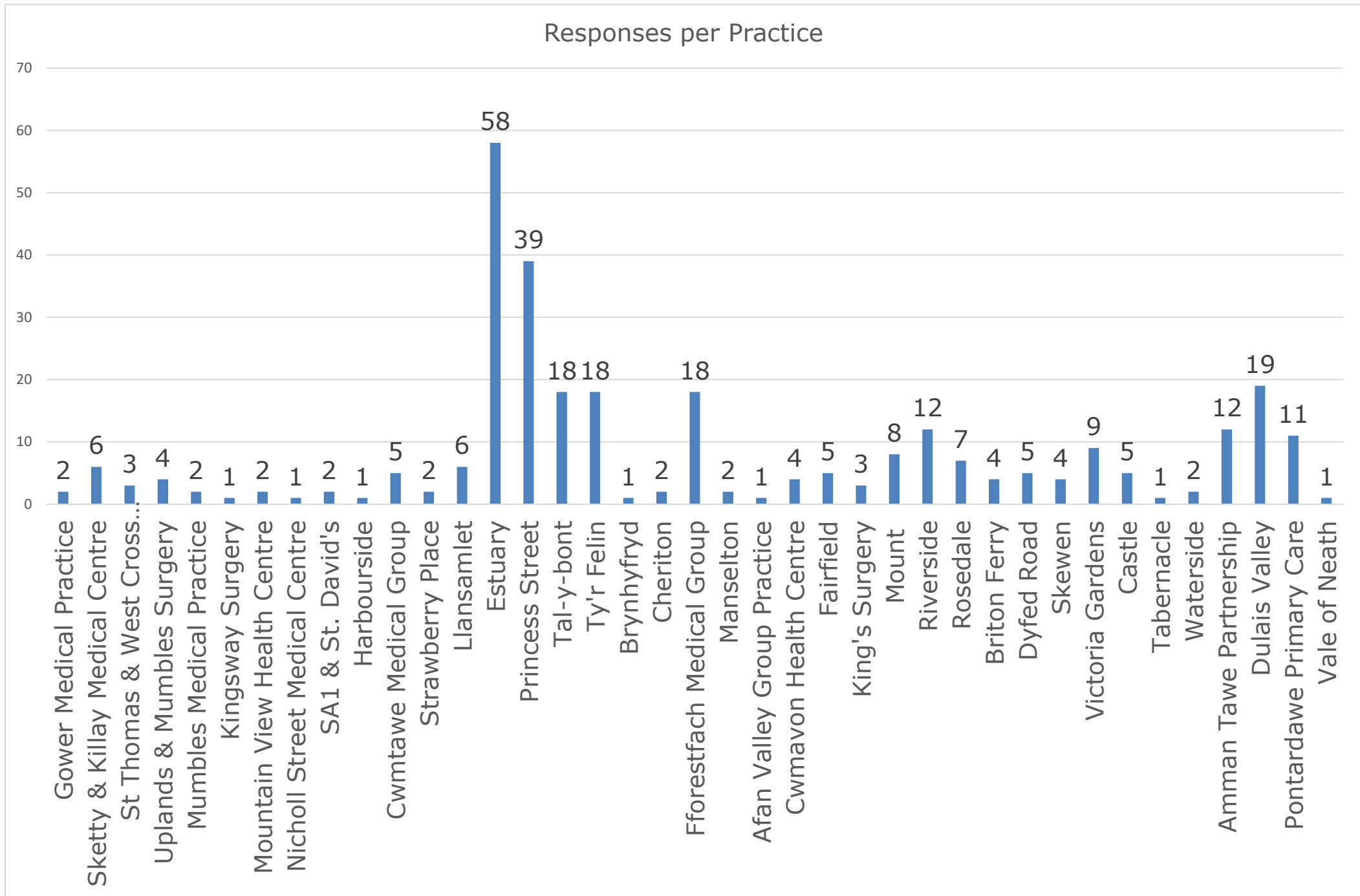
315 people shared their experience with us. 195 people were from the Swansea area and 112 from Neath and Port Talbot. 8 people told us they lived in another Health Board area. The majority of people (293) shared their own personal experience while 19 people responded on behalf of someone else.

We have used some word clouds in the report to show the most common words mentioned by patients in the feedback. The larger the word, the more frequent the word was used in the feedback we received.

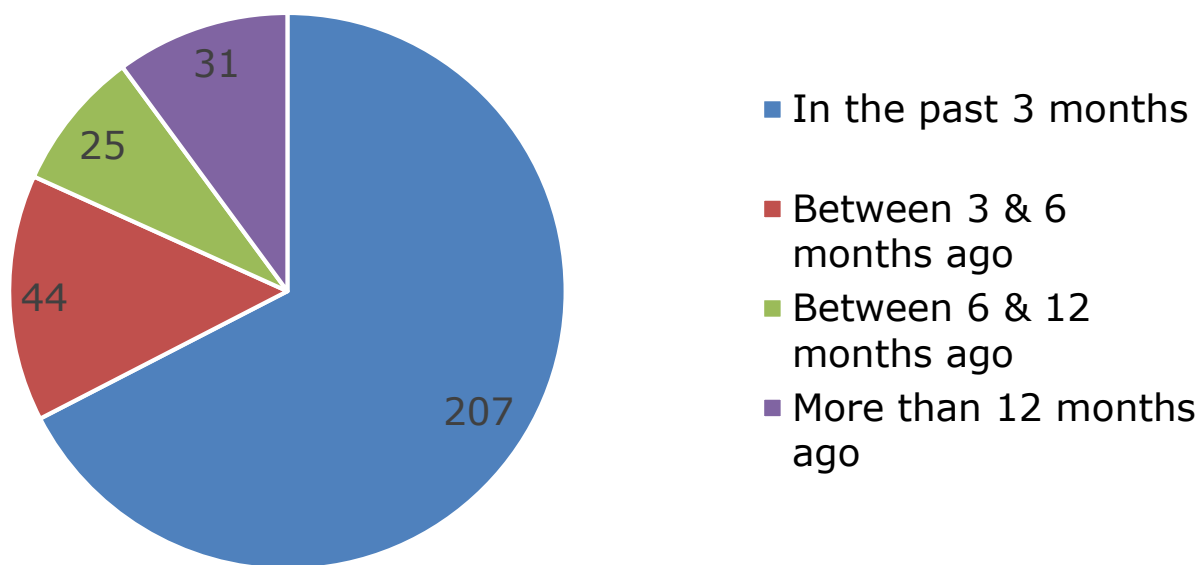
Nearly everyone (310) told us they were a registered patient of a GP practice in Neath Port Talbot or Swansea.

We heard from patients registered at practices across all 8 Primary Care Clusters (Afan, Bay Health, City Health, Cwmtawe, Llchwyr, Neath, Penderi, Upper Valleys).

The bar chart on page 9 shows the number of responses for each practice. The majority of responses were received from patients registered at practices within the Llwyher Cluster: The Estuary Group Practice (comprising Gowerton, Penclawdd, Pen y Bryn) Princess Street Surgery, Gorseinon, Tal-y-bont and Ty'r Felin. Patients registered within the Llwyher cluster comprised around 42% of the total responses.



The majority of people (207, 67%) told us they had seen or spoken to a GP, nurse or other healthcare professional at their GP practice within the **last 3 months** and 276, 90%, within the last 12 months. The pie chart below shows the breakdown.



Contacting the practice



The majority of people (227, 72%) told us they usually contact their practice by telephone.

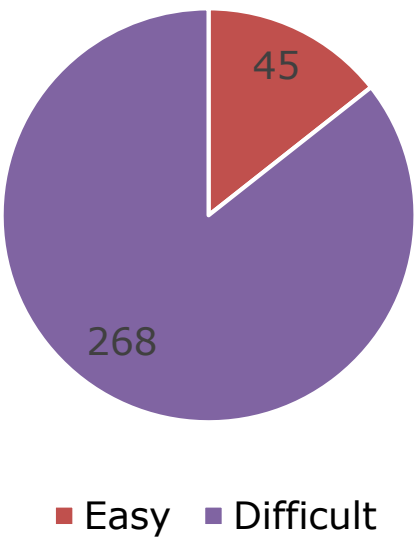
More than a quarter (85, 27%) usually contacted their practice online



2 people said they attended in person (walk-in)

Getting through by telephone

The majority of people (86%) told us they found it **difficult** to get through to their practice by telephone.



287 people shared additional feedback about their experiences when contacting their practice by phone. The word cloud below identifies some of the common themes.



Repeatedly redialing

People left comments expressing their frustration at having to repeatedly redial to get through to their practice, with some people making hundreds of calls.

"It can take over a 100 calls to get through"

"You can ring up to 50 times and when you get through all the slots have gone it's very frustrating"

"You have to re-dial over 200 times, bang on 8am then when you get through all slots are full"

"It usually takes more than 200 redials to get through. It is a very stressful system that creates its own anxiety problems"

Some people felt that the recorded messages were too long¹.

"Phone line is frequently engaged and there is usually an extensive telephone message before you are presented with phone options"

The answering system gives over a minute of talk from a person who sounds like they have no compassion to then having to wait to get to the end to say you want to speak to reception. Too long winded"

"The recorded message takes a long time before you actually get told you are in a queue"

"Long recorded message then told the queue is too long and cut off"

¹ See our Mystery Shopper Report on GP telephone systems to hear more.

For those in employment, finding a time to call the practice was particularly hard.

"Nightmare to get through, I have to book time off work if I need to ring GP"

"I can't ring every day. I work at 8am... It's disgusting"

"I work full time so unable to just keep ringing as it can take up to an hour to get through to someone"

"It's not easy when you also have to travel to work at the time you have to phone to get an appointment"

Waiting for call backs caused further issues for some people.

"It's horrendous as I work full time and can't take a ring back call as I work with patients myself"

Some patients told us they gave up trying to get through, potentially delaying any urgent care or prompting them to seek help elsewhere, usually at Accident and Emergency.

"The receptionist refuses to add patients to the list unless it is an "emergency". My previous two phone calls have been about shortness of breath in pregnancy and a possible UTI. In both cases I had to attend A&E (inappropriately) due to failure of being able to get through to a GP"

"The majority of the time I give up and would use Google or just self-medicate"

"Can't be bothered to get in touch anymore and I really need a Doctor!"

Emotional Impact

We heard how some patients found the process of calling the practice to make an appointment to be particularly stressful.

"There is always a queue of at least 3 calls but often it is 8 or 9 calls and on some occasions the queue is closed and you are paying for the time you are in the queue. Then you have to wait for a triage call, for the doctor to decide if they need to see you and if you want to see them. Then you will face another set of questions. If you have difficulty talking on the phone then the whole process is extremely stressful and upsetting"

Contacting the practice online

For those patients who preferred to contact their practice using online systems such as 'askmyGP', 'My Health Online' or 'e-Consult', we asked them to share their experience of using these services.

220 people shared feedback about online services, with the majority quoting 'askmyGP'.



A word cloud of feedback about online services. The most prominent text is "Ask my gp" in large, bold, dark purple letters. Other phrases in various shades of purple include: "online for ordering", "askmygp and a prescription", "prescription one works", "repeat prescriptions", "ask my fp", "prescription service", "GP and My health", "Ask mygp", "Askmygp GP or Diabetic", "health online prescription order", "online platform", "health on line", "Myhealthonline", "prescriptions", "Online appointment", "stories of my gp", and "Gp and myhealth".

'askmyGP'

We heard how people's experience of the 'askmyGP' system was less positive than it was earlier in the year when we published our 'askmyGP' report². People told us they felt frustrated that the 'askmyGP' service was often unavailable.

"Appalling. askmyGP hasn't been available at this surgery for the last month"

"At first it was amazing but recently it's always off. On the note it states it's available between 8 and 11 but I've been on there at 8.05 and it is offline"

"The service is quite good when it is operating but you have to log on early as it is closed by late morning and on many days it isn't available at all"

"Awful, the service is regularly taken down for weeks at a time due to the backlog. Opens at 8:00am when available, capacity reached by 8:01am. No further appointments taken"

My Health Online

A smaller number of people told us they used 'My Health Online'. We heard how it was a good way for patients to request repeat prescriptions, but they could not use it for anything else.

² <https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/what-we-have-to-say/report-library/sb-chc-thematic-reports-2021/askmygp-report-may-2021-pdf/>

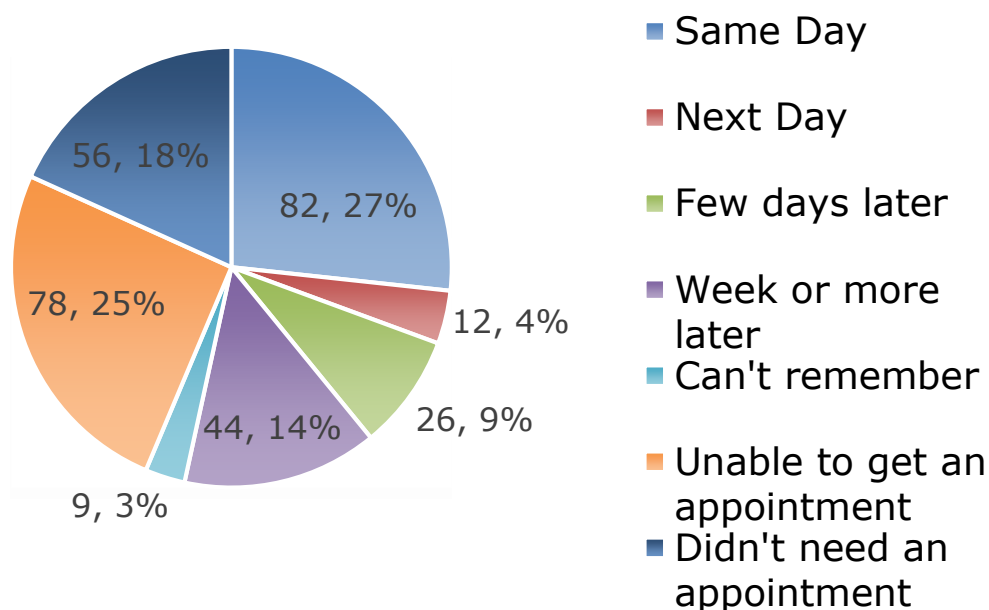
"My health on line is perfect for prescriptions"

"My Health Online only available for repeat prescriptions... no other service available"

"Ours only has repeat prescription ordering facility"

Appointments

After initially trying to book an appointment, we heard how some appointments did not take place until a week or more later while a quarter of people (75) told us they were unable to get an appointment at all.



While some patients were seen relatively quickly, we were concerned to hear that many patients found the process of getting an appointment difficult, if not impossible.

"I gave up trying as I couldn't get an appointment as each time I got through I was told they were full"

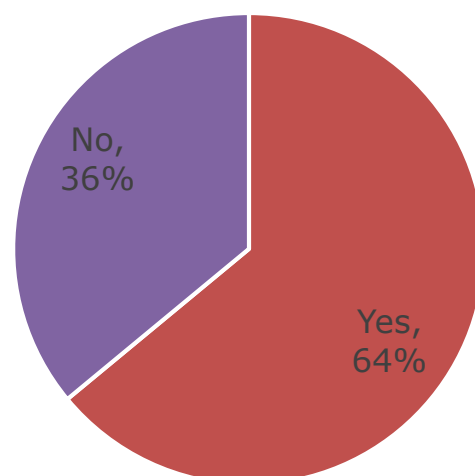
"No doctors, no appointments"

"Told to phone in morning when you eventually get through no appointments told to phone tomorrow and the same thing happens so gave up"

For those patients who were successful getting appointments, we asked them to answer a number of questions about their most recent appointment.

Convenience

184 people (64%) said the appointment time was **convenient** for them, with a third (104 people, 36%) telling us it was not.



Those in employment and with dependants found being unable to pre-book appointments or be given a set time to receive a call-back, to be particularly challenging.

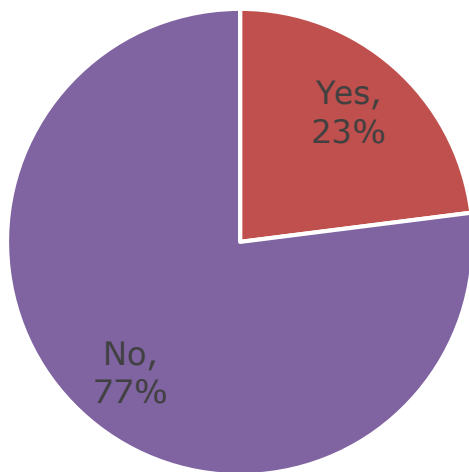
"You get a phone triage call at their convenience. No use if you actually have to work for a living"

"Not having a specific appointment time is challenging whilst at work"

"I want to book an appointment when convenient for me and not have to call on the day as I can't get out of work with an hour notice for my manager. It would be best if I could book an appointment in a few days' time or within 2 weeks of a request to make an appointment"

"Sister has to take day off work to call to make appointments, then a second one to facilitate them"

"The appointment given was between 9am and 6pm on the same day and the doctor happened to ring back at the one moment I was driving to collect my child from school. The rest of the day I had been home"



More than 3 quarters (229, 77%) told us they were not able to see a GP, nurse or health professional of their **choice** compared to 68 people (23%) who said they could.

A significant number of people shared feedback about their inability to see the doctor of their choice.

"You cannot request a particular doctor - you are given whoever is available"

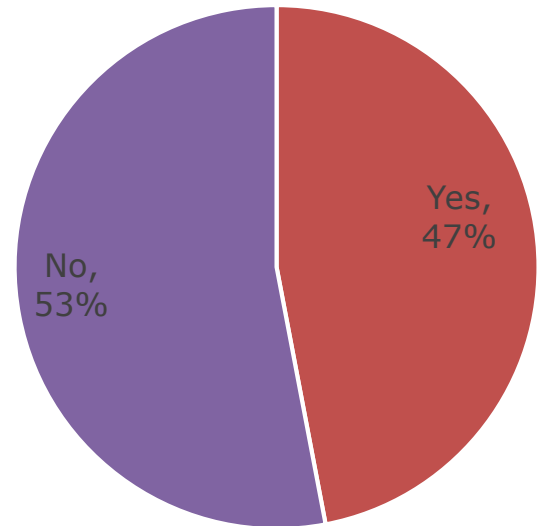
"Receptionist at the surgery often allocate to a different doctor which I find frustrating as there is a reason I asked for a specific person"

"Not being able to see the same GP puts you and the GP at a disadvantage. If you know the person and their medical history, plus family history, it helps the doctor and the patient"

"Can never see same GP twice, no continuity of care, no GP knows your history, most GP only work part time so you never know when to contact them for an appointment"

10-minute consultation slot

Just over half (159, 53%) felt that the **10-minute consultation slot** for appointments was not long enough to provide them with the care they needed.



Feeling “rushed”

While some people felt the 10-minute consultation slot was adequate for routine appointments, such as phlebotomy and B12 injections, this was not the case for those with more than one issue or with chronic or mental health conditions. Some people told us they often felt “rushed” at their appointment.

“Depending on the reason for appointment some times longer is needed. Particularly when mental health issues are involved”

“In a pressured timed appointment the focus is on the presenting symptoms not wider wholeness and wellbeing issues, including emotional and mental health”

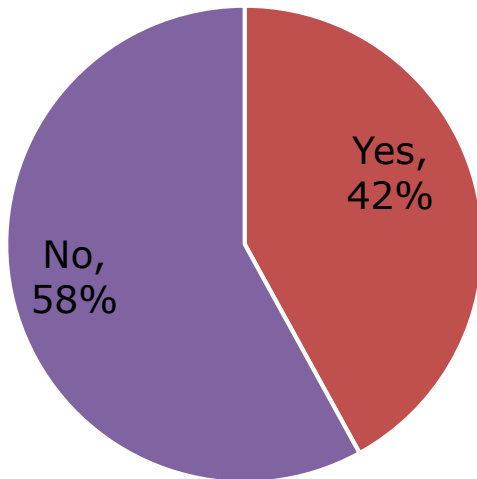
“Sometimes feel rushed and GP does not allow you to tell all concerns. Always come away thinking should have said that”

“10 minutes never long enough. Feels rushed”

“I don’t think you always get the ten minutes, it’s often cut short so you can’t explain full symptoms”

I can’t see how mental health can be assessed in ten minutes”

One medical ailment



124 people (42%) told us when they saw the GP, they were told that they were only allowed to discuss **one medical problem**.

Only being able to discuss one medical problem was frustrating for many people, requiring them to book further appointments.

"The frustrating thing is that the GP will only discuss or deal with one ailment. You have to make another appointment, again by telephone, unable to make one at the desk when exiting the surgery, and then go through same procedure again, GP calling to discuss ailment and arranging appointment. Something radically wrong with the system"

"Whilst engaging with the GP, for a very brief period on a minor ailment, I tried to ask advice on the secondary ailment but was stopped in my tracks and advised to make another appointment"

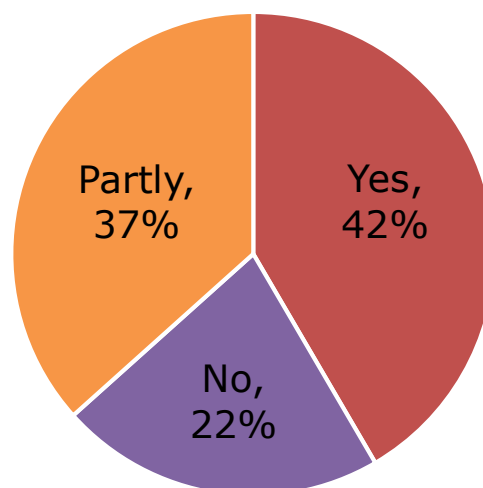
"Some people, myself included, do not bother a GP unless they really need to. Speaking personally, if I've waited until the last minute it usually means that there is more than one thing going on. To be told when you do eventually see someone that they can only discuss one issue and you have to make another appointment is ludicrous. Ailments are being missed and people are leaving things too late to be treated"

Others shared a very different experience.

"If I have one issue the doctors always ask if there's anything else I would like to speak to them about. No matter how long my appointment goes on, I don't feel rushed out. They take their time and are patient"

Meeting needs

Around 59% of people (179) told us their **needs** were either partly or not met at their last general practice appointment.



Mixed feedback was received, with many people restating the difficulties they have getting an appointment in the first place.

"The problem is seeing a GP. When you do, the service is excellent, very professional and needs fully met"

"Treatment fine when you do get to see a doctor. My complaint is making the initial contact"

"Would be nice to get an appointment. Might be able to answer these questions then!"

"Needs are met once you have actually get to speak to someone. The problem is booking any sort of appointment in the first place"

"My needs weren't met as I couldn't get a bookable appointment. I work and need to know what day and time I can see a doctor"

Remote GP appointments have not met everyone's needs. While convenient for some, others are worried that their health issues will not be accurately diagnosed.

"I don't think that skin lesions can be fully examined by sending in a photo"

"I requested to see doctor but was telephoned instead"

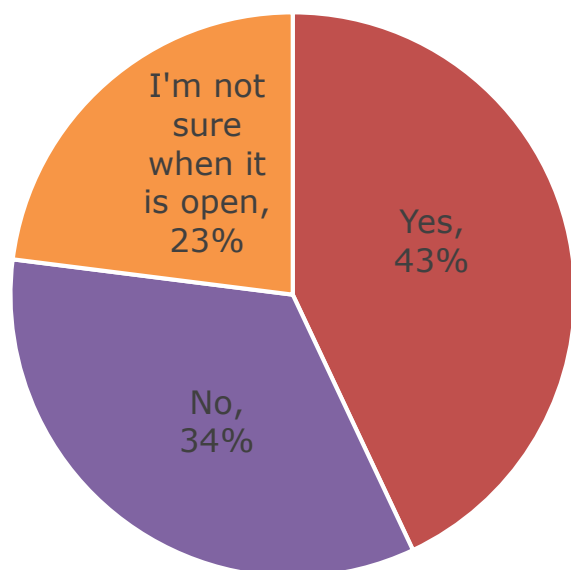
"Patient is elderly and housebound but GP reluctant to provide home visit"

Overall experience of booking appointments

We invited people to share their overall experience of **booking appointments** at their practice. 51 patients (16%) rated their experience as 'good, very good or excellent'. 44 patients (14%) rated their experience as 'fair'. A significant number of patients, 215 (69%), rated their experience as 'poor' or 'very poor'.



Practice opening times



133 people told us they were happy with their **practice's opening times**. Just over a third of people (104) told us they were not happy, while just under a quarter (69) were not sure when their GP practice or health centre was open.

Working people and parents of school-aged children in particular, found the opening hours and 'windows' to call, to be challenging.

"Appointments should be open to book at 9:30am as mum's and dad's find it difficult to book with school run"

"It would be good to have evening appointments available for patients who work full time so we can attend after work!"

"As a teacher, I am unable to have my phone on me during working hours for safeguarding purposes. However, I can only call the GP from 8:30am and again at 2pm to make an appointment - both times of which I am in work. I have called around these times and been refused an appointment - I feel I am being denied health care because of my job"

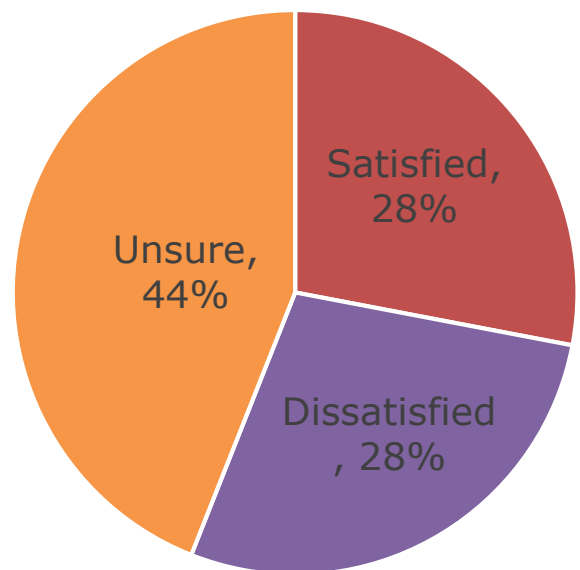
Others believed the restricted opening hours led to patients using the emergency services.

"Practice should be open at weekends to reflect needs of general public. Maybe this would in turn take pressure off Accident & Emergency (A&E)"

"When you work 8 to 5 it's awkward getting to GP. No good going to out of hours. GP's should be working rota evenings and weekends. That's why so many people end up in A&E, because they can't see GP"

Range of services available

Almost a third of people (87) told us they were satisfied with the range of services available at their practice. 87 people told us they were not satisfied. A large number of patients (137) told us they were **unsure** of the services available at their practice.



Communication

We heard how some people felt kept in the dark and struggled to find accurate information about services at their practice.

"I don't know how to find out what services are available. The information on the internet is not up to date. The surgery staff cannot give me information about the latest procedures at complimenting clinics/services such as blood tests etc."

"It is hard to know what services are available as we can never get into the practice to see any advertisements. There are little or no communications from the practice"

Of those that told us they were not satisfied with the range of services available, people want to see their practices offer:

- ⌚ Blood testing services (several patients noted that Gorseinon Hospital no longer offered blood testing services)
- ⌚ Mental health / well-being clinics
- ⌚ Ear syringing
- ⌚ Podiatry services
- ⌚ Stich removal / wound care
- ⌚ Ability to email the practice
- ⌚ Health check-ups, e.g. blood pressure monitoring
- ⌚ Increase contraceptive clinics
- ⌚ Quicker turnover of prescriptions
- ⌚ Roll out online services such as 'askmyGP' and increase use at those practices already using service
- ⌚ Additional GP's and nurses

Again, people reminded us that **accessing** GP services was the biggest issue.

"Again, doesn't matter what the range is as the access is so poor"

"The range of services is good but getting hold of an appointment for any service is atrocious"

They do seem to provide a range of services but if you can't access them, what is the point?"

Others were concerned that services were still heavily focussed on "covid" measures, with some services still unavailable for many people.

"Very limited services as far as I'm aware and I don't think usual service has resumed since covid!"

Since Covid, doors are kept closed. Not sure what happens inside anymore"

"Nothing seems to be running. You have to be an emergency to see anyone"

"Not meeting the basics at present"

Helpfulness of staff

We invited patients to tell us how helpful they find the staff at their GP practice or health centre. 67 said staff were 'very helpful'. The majority of people (159) told us the staff were 'fairly helpful', while 85 told us they were 'not at all helpful'.

We received mixed feedback as identified in the word cloud below, with a large portion of the feedback (116 comments, 73%) relating to GP practice receptionists.



Positive feedback themes identified by some people include, the helpfulness and friendliness of some medical staff and receptionists.

"All staff from receptionist, nurses and doctors are always polite and very helpful"

"Reception staff and GPS are great, practical and efficient"

"The nurses on the whole are friendly and sympathetic"

"My doctors are always helpful nothing is too much for them"

What was clear in the feedback received was people's negative experiences of staff were not generally reflective of all staff at the practice, but of a minority. The negative feedback related mostly to the perceived attitude of some practice receptionists and their poor phone manner.

"It all depends which one answers the phone and the mood they are in at the time!"

"It depends which receptionist you get to speak to. Some are difficult, others more understanding"

"Receptionists tend to be very rude and blunt on the phone to you as if you are wasting their time and they don't want to be there"

"The reception/telephone staff. They have little empathy or interest"

"Depends which member of staff you speak to. Mainly receptionists are helpful but there are certain receptionists who are rude and very unhelpful and I have even experienced one putting down the phone on me"

Delays requesting services

Almost 3 quarters of people (214) told us they had experienced problems or delays when requesting services in the past 12 months, such as making appointments (online and by telephone) with health care professionals at their practice, waiting for call-backs, referrals, blood tests, repeat prescriptions and test results. Some people shared with us how these delays affected them or their loved ones.



Some patients suffered emotionally because they could not get help.

"I have a few health problems and it's very difficult to get the help and advice I need. I feel abandoned by the NHS"

Unable to get through on phone and then speak to doctor for help. Anger hurt isolated"

One person told us about the impact a mistake had on their daughters' education.

"My daughter was diagnosed with autism in February - they lost the information and failed to update her records. This meant that she was unable to apply for exam consideration during her A levels. She already has mental health problems and this sent her anxiety sky high. And of course they repeatedly lose her prescription"

We heard the different ways of how delays in testing and treatment affected people and their loved ones.

"I had a delay in my smear test which came back abnormal"

"Haven't received follow up care for cancer treatment"

"I have had 3 smear tests cancelled lately and am still waiting on another to eventually get booked"

"I feel let down by the surgery in diagnosing my situation which could have avoided months of anguish trying to get an appointment"

"Ran out of medication. Unable to see GP, made me more ill"

"I've not been able to get a medication review in more than 12 months. They have caused wasted journeys and a lot of wasted time trying to organise my partners' health care, not to mention the stress they have given both of us"

"Told to go for covid test before GP would speak to us. We knew my husband had UTI as he self-catheterises. He had to wait for negative test result. Waited four days to get anyone to prescribe the antibiotics he needed"

Delays receiving medication

A number of people reported issues with prescriptions and shared the inconvenience this caused them. Issues included lost or misplaced prescriptions, unsigned prescriptions and delays receiving them.

"There is a delay with everything there! Can never find your prescription, lost blood forms, unsigned prescriptions 4 days after order"

"Prescriptions take forever"

"Mislaidd prescription, found same day but had to make 2 trips to surgery"

"Told prescription at pharmacy but not, resulting in a 30 minute drive to collect from [] to []"

"Difficulty getting repeat prescriptions even when sent 10 days or more before due"

"3 unsigned prescriptions sent to nominated pharmacy so couldn't be dispensed and had to be returned to the surgery for GP signature"

"Failure to complete prescription requests on time despite making them in good time & being told it was ready. Queued outside surgery for 1.5 hours on a very cold evening whilst staff sorted it out without any logical explanation being given. As I have recently failed to get through on the phone, I wrote to my GP & hand delivered the letter to the surgery in [**]. When I heard nothing, I contacted this surgery to be told that the GP was now on leave although he had not been when I delivered the letter. He did not see it because all letters are sent to [**] to be scanned onto the system for the doctors to view there. My GP could have read the letter on the day I delivered it but the admin system prevented this and delayed his response by at least a fortnight!"

Relying on emergency services

Some people believed the inability to get through to the GP practice or to get an appointment, forced some people to contact emergency services instead.

"Impossible to get through to the practice and get an appointment. To be told they only deal with medical emergencies is awful as that is no different to put of hours/999. It appears many residents are now ringing ambulances as they can't see a GP and the ambulance drivers are saying they are being called for non-emergency items but are providing the care that the GPs aren't"

"3-week delay in getting appointment - issue regarded as non-urgent ends up in A & E"

"In desperation called 111"

"Ended up in hospital. Simple as that. You call NHS for advice when you can't get through to a GP, they say go to A&E"

Challenges accessing GP services

More than 3 quarters of people (224) told us they faced challenges accessing GP services. The biggest challenges, as highlighted in the word cloud below and throughout this report, is contacting the practice by phone and accessing appointments.



Other challenges include:

- ☺ 'Small window of opportunity to call for appointments, tests, prescriptions
- ☺ Phone queues
- ☺ No pre-bookable appointments
- ☺ Only emergency appointments available – no routine ones
- ☺ Lack of doctors and nurses
- ☺ Lack of home visits
- ☺ Lack of face-to-face appointments
- ☺ Process of ordering repeat prescriptions
- ☺ Public transport issues
- ☺ Parking
- ☺ Staff attitude
- ☺ Physical access in to practice
- ☺ AskmyGp frequently 'offline'
- ☺ Reliance on technology creating barriers for some groups

We heard how some challenges led to 24 people (around 8%) being late for or missing an appointment altogether.

Accessing services during the pandemic

207 people (67%) told us they had **struggled to access** some services at their GP practice since the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020.

People's struggles were consistent with the issues identified in the report so far, with the major issues being:

- ⌚ Difficulty contacting practice by phone and online
 - ⌚ Booking appointments
 - ⌚ Accessing GP services
 - Many people told us they struggled to access regular treatment, health checks and medication

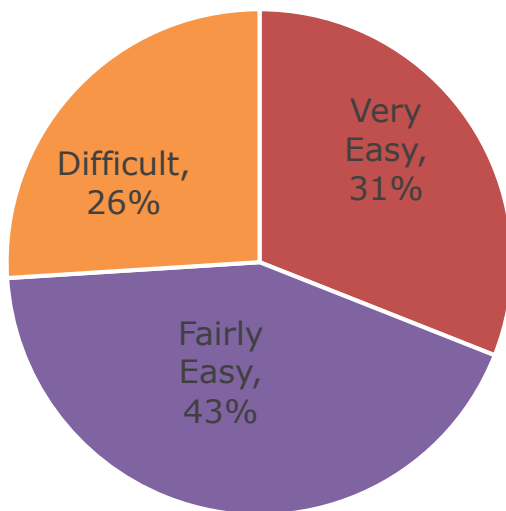
Future services

255 people (81%) told us they were worried that some treatments, services or support would be harder to access in the future at their practice, **after the pandemic**.

Out of Hours GP services

Nearly 3 quarters of people (216) told us that, if they needed to, they would know how to contact the out-of-hours GP service when their surgery or health centre was closed. However, nearly a third (31%) told us they would not know how to.

Of those that tried to contact the **Out of Hours service** in the last 12 months, we asked them **how easy** it was to contact them by telephone.



96 people told us it was 'very easy' or 'fairly easy'. 34 people (more than a quarter) told us it was difficult.

Negative feedback related mostly to waiting times to get through by phone and delays receiving call-backs.

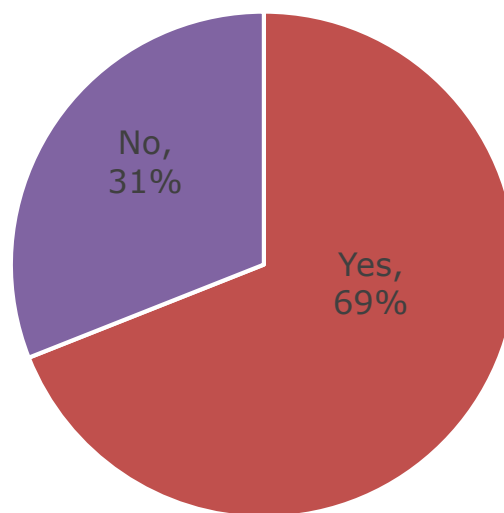
"My poor mother has suspected sepsis and we needed to see a Doctor at the surgery 12 hrs later the phone call came through"

"It took so long for an answer on the 111 number that I deemed it appropriate to call 999 and was taken to hospital"

"Very slow call back times"

"Can't get through, hours wait and then hours for a doctor to call you back, if you are unwell it's ridiculous"

Nearly 3 quarters of people told us they were satisfied with the **care or advice** they received when they used the out of hours service. 40 people (nearly a third) told us they were not satisfied.



We invited those people with recent experience of the Out of Hours service to share their feedback in more detail. 94 people provided feedback. A large portion of the feedback was positive, with compliments received for the efficiency of the service and the excellent help and advice.

"Excellent service, Doctor very understanding and professional"

"Staff very helpful with help and advice"

"Dad was unwell, water infection, amazing service, prescription ready and waiting via 111 at a local pharmacy"

One parent told us how grateful they were to the doctor working one evening, for his understanding and compassion at a very difficult time.

"On one occasion I called out of hours for my daughter as she was experiencing suicidal thoughts. Although we had all the right support in place she was not coping on this evening. The GP was fantastic and spent almost half an hour talking to us. There was nothing more he could do as all support was in place but, he gave us the time, patience, empathy and listening ear both myself and daughter needed. He made this situation 75% better through conversation; he appeared to have all the time in the world, which met both my daughter's needs and my emotional needs"

We were concerned to learn that some patients preferred to access the Out of Hours service instead of their own GP practice.

"Much better than surgery but should we have to resort to using this service?"

"GP surgeries are so bad in this area many elect to wait until they close to get a better service from an out of hours GP"

"I would rather wait until after hours now and contact the out of hours (OOH) service. Far easier and more helpful"

"As a carer for Neath Port Talbot Community Wellbeing team, you get more help with out of hours than own GP practice"

Others told us they used the Out of Hours service when they could not get through to their own practice.

"Wouldn't have needed it though if GP appointment had been available"

"I have waited to contact out of hours because I can't get through to my actual surgery. Not good I know"

"The out of hour's service has always been accommodating, including during Covid. If I have been unable to get an appointment at the surgery I have contacted out of hours and had no issues despite the pandemic"

Overall experience of accessing GP services

56 patients (18%) rated their experience as 'good, very good or excellent', with 71 patients (23%) rating their experience as 'fair'. Worryingly, the majority of patients 187 (60%) told us their overall experience of accessing GP services was 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Learning from what we heard

Our report explores people's experiences of accessing GP services.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, accessing GP services was a consistent theme in the feedback people shared with us, with booking appointments raised as a key issue.

Reports of problems contacting GP surgeries by phone have increased, with people telling us that phone lines are constantly engaged, they have to wait in long queues for their call to be answered or they are cut off. Some people report having to ring many times over multiple days to try to get through. Others told us they just “give up” despite a real need to see the doctor.

Working people and those with school-aged children found the window of opportunity to call the practice to book appointments, particularly frustrating. The absence of a precise time frame for call-backs caused further problems for people.

The issues reported to us highlight the profound impact of people not being able to access GP services when they need to. Some people struggled to get appointments for regular health check-ups, treatments and medication reviews, meaning they were unable to successfully manage their condition. Others, reliant on prescription medication to manage their condition(s), struggled to receive repeat prescriptions on time.

Despite the shift by some practices to using online systems, we also heard how the ‘askmyGP’ service was not working as well as it was

for people last year. People were frustrated that the service was regularly “offline”. Others wished that their GP practice would make it possible for patients to use online systems, such as ‘askmyGP’, as an additional way to contact their practice, so they could avoid the telephone chaos.

Particularly striking were the findings around the Out of Hours service (111). Some people felt that they had no choice if they needed a same day GP appointment but to contact NHS 111 or even 999 to see a medical professional. Worryingly, we also heard how some people’s preferred choice was to contact 111, thus bypassing their own surgery altogether.

With GP practices often being the first stop for patients for their health care needs, we were concerned to learn that some people felt “left in the dark” and perceived that their GP practice door was “closed” to them.

We heard how people want to see face-to-face contact restored and for normal services to resume. Remote appointments are a welcome extra for some patients but they do not meet everyone’s needs.

Feedback from people fortunate to get an appointment, highlighted the importance placed on being seen by the same GP, not being ‘rushed’ and being able to make appointments round daily commitments.

There were mixed experiences shared with us about people’s experiences with staff at GP Practices. Patients had a positive experience with staff when they were friendly, polite, and attentive to

people's needs and concerns. However, many people reported negative experiences with some front line staff members such as receptionists, often perceiving some of them to have a poor attitude and to be "gatekeepers" to their care.

Recommendations

We understand because of the long waiting times throughout the NHS, that patients have had to seek more help from their GP practice as hospital appointments and procedures continue to experience delays. We appreciate the pressures on primary care services at this time and their efforts in coordinating the vaccine rollout earlier in the year.

All our recommendations are based on patients' feedback, highlighting ways forward for practices, to ensure people's needs are effectively met when accessing GP services, now and in the future.

1) People are increasingly reporting difficulties contacting their practice by phone.

- i. GP telephone answering systems - We refer the Health Board to our, "Mystery Shopper report, Telephone systems" and would encourage the Health Board to review the operation of the telephone answering systems and work with GPs to identify systems that work well for patients.

2) Many people are struggling to make appointments

- i. People told us that they had attended A & E as they could not get an appointment with their GP

- ii. People want the option to book appointments in advance.

The 8am 'race' to get an appointment needs to be reviewed and a more equitable approach adopted. We leave it to the Health Board to determine how to achieve a person centred system.

3) Provide patients with a smaller window of time to expect a call back from the GP

4) We support people's calls to see 'askmyGP' and other online services rolled out to all practices and working as effectively as they were earlier in the year. This will help to:

- i. reduce demand on surgery phone systems
- ii. improve access routes for working people and those with school-aged children
- iii. Avoid unnecessary use of the emergency services

6. People's negative feedback about their perceived attitude of GP receptionists is increasing. Whilst we do acknowledge that the assessment of an individual's attitude during a telephone conversation is highly subjective, we would encourage practices and the health board to provide appropriate training for GP frontline staff

7. Review of accessing GP's:

- i. People have seen a switch from visiting their GP in person to a system of online triage tools and virtual appointments. The feedback suggests this switch has left some vulnerable groups in the community experiencing inequalities. This is consistent with the findings of our 'AskmyGP' report published May 2021:

- i. The Health Board should carry out an equality impact assessment (EIA) in relation to virtual access methods
 - ii. Develop an action plan to address inequalities identified by the assessment
 - iii. Share its action plan in relation to the EIA with the CHC
- 8. Feedback identified that some people are being directed to use online services when this is not their preferred method of communication.
 - i. Wherever possible, GP services should offer patients a choice over the type of appointment they would prefer
 - ii. When it may not be possible to do so, patients should be told why this is the case.
- 9. Patients are increasingly being directed to use GP websites for information. It is therefore important that websites contain relevant and up-to-date information:
 - i. The Health Board may wish to consider involving Patient Participation Groups to review information on practice websites, and to
 - ii. Check websites meet accessibility standards
- 10. Address issues in relation to repeat prescriptions, including delays and errors.
 - i. Strengthen the coordination between pharmacies and GPs
- 11. We note an increase in feedback from people about inequalities in accessing GP's. Practices should review the demographic data for their patients, to ensure people with additional needs, carer identifiers, language support needs, and disability support needs, are correctly recorded and identified.

12. We ask the Health Board to provide assurance to the CHC that the recommendation to GPs at 11 above has been progressed.

Thank you

We thank everyone who took the time to share their views and experiences with us about accessing GP services.

We would like to thank our partner organisations for sharing information and our questionnaire and for supporting us to access seldom heard groups.

We hope the feedback people have taken time to share influences healthcare services for patients, to recognise and value what is working well – and take action where they need to as quickly as they can to make things better.

Feedback

Swansea Bay CHC would love to hear what you think about this publication, and any suggestions about how we could have improved it, so we can use this to make our future work better.



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If you write to us in Welsh, we will answer in Welsh. This will not lead to a delay in responding to your correspondence.

**Swansea Bay
Community Health Council**