



healthwatch
Bexley

**Flu Vaccination
Under 65s with
Underlying Health Conditions
January 2021**

"I've had one before and had the worst flu and when I haven't had the jab I've been fine."

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Summary

This report presents the views of individuals aged under 65 with underlying health conditions, living in the London Borough of Bexley, regarding their thoughts and knowledge of the flu vaccine. Healthwatch Bexley worked with the South East London Clinical Commissioning Group (SEL CCG) Head of Communications and Engagement for Bexley to compile a structured survey which was used to engage with residents. A survey was designed to investigate the potential barriers for the uptake of the flu vaccine in the borough and we also conducted two focus groups. At the time this work was commissioned, local uptake rates were below the recommended levels across the borough. Healthwatch would like to thank all the residents who took the time to complete our survey and talk to us.

Recommendations

- All stakeholders should continue to promote the National flu vaccination programme annually in the run up to the flu season to increase awareness and act as a reminder to all groups eligible to get vaccinated.
- More research could be done before the next flu season, by the local authority, SEL CCG or Healthwatch to specifically identify which groups within the under 65 category may be less likely to be vaccinated and the reasons why. This would allow a targeted approach to the communication and promotion of the vaccine within these groups to encourage vaccine uptake. Ensuring posters, leaflets and social media communications are made available to the relevant local groups and targeted effectively. Including Easy Read for those with a learning disability.
- All stakeholders, including Primary Care should actively promote the fact that the vaccine is available as a vegan product (animal free product) in the run up to the next flu season. This message would need to highlight that this type of vaccine can be requested through their GP.
- In the run up to the next flu season, the local authority and SEL CCG could use targeted messages to address common barriers to vaccine uptake such as the belief that the vaccine gives you flu and makes you unwell. Information is needed to reassure residents that the vaccination is still safer than non-vaccination in most cases.

Introduction

Flu is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus that can lead to serious complications for those living with long-term health conditions. According to government statistics, as of January 2021 this year **46.8%** of people with a long-term health condition (under the age of 65 years) have had the flu vaccine. While vaccine coverage in this group is higher than it has been at this point compared to the last six flu seasons, it still lags behind coverage in other eligible groups. People aged 6 months to 65 years with one or more long-term health conditions, pregnant women and those aged 65 years and over are at greater clinical risk from flu. (GOV.UK, 2020)

Vaccination is more important than ever this year to protect vulnerable individuals from the flu during the Covid-19 pandemic. Public Health England launched the “Just the Flu” campaign in October 2020 focusing on the under 65s with underlying health conditions amongst other vulnerable groups. The aim was to raise awareness of the seriousness of the illness and encourage those who are eligible to be vaccinated. The campaign was promoted across England using digital and newspaper adverts, posters, social media and TV and radio adverts (Public Health England (PHE), 2020).

Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor, Jonathan Van-Tam, said:

“Flu can be deadly and it is easily spread in children and adults. The vaccine is the best way to protect yourself from becoming ill with the flu, especially if you are in a vulnerable group.

This winter with COVID still circulating, and the increased risk to life if you are ill with both viruses simultaneously, it is even more vital to get the free jab as soon as you can.” (GOV.UK, 2020).

Healthwatch Bexley were pleased to be asked by Communications and Engagement for Bexley (SEL CCG) to explore the reasons those aged under 65 years of age, with underlying health conditions did not have the flu vaccination. The key areas our research covered were:

- Awareness of the “Just the Flu” campaign.
- The rates of uptake of the Flu vaccination.
- Reasons for not having the Flu vaccination
- Concerns around Covid-19 and the safety of healthcare environments.

Methodology

The Healthwatch Bexley consultation period ran from 30th November 2020 to 8th January 2021. We worked with the Head of Communications and Engagement for Bexley (SEL CCG) to produce a series of qualitative and quantitative questions. Qualitative methods were used alongside quantitative methods to capture people’s views, as this method is more exploratory and allows participants to provide rich in-depth answers in their own words (NHS England, 2017)

To gain residents’ views, we promoted the survey using a package called “Survey Monkey” on social media platforms, via our website, by ‘word of mouth’ and also, through talking to community group leaders and asking them to promote to their service users. Through our contacts, the survey was

sent to community groups across the borough, including Mencap and The Speaking Up Group (Advocacy for All) and was also promoted on Bexley residents community pages on Facebook. Healthwatch Bexley met with Mencap and The Speaking Up Group (Advocacy for all) on Zoom.

Over the five-week consultation period, Healthwatch Bexley had responses from 66 people about the vaccine and gathered the views of 24 individuals from the two focus groups for people with learning disabilities.

Some questions invited respondents to comment and expand on their answers which resulted in many similar comments with a selection included in this report. Comments were selected based on their originality or as a representation of a commonly occurring theme, the most relevant and significant of which are shown to illustrate the statements made within the survey.

Limitations

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we are aware that these are unprecedented times and Healthwatch Bexley is constantly looking for new methods to engage with community groups, residents and hard to reach communities to gather their invaluable feedback.

The survey was promoted via digital methods and this may mean the views of residents without digital access may not be included. Healthwatch Bexley has been distributing information leaflets across the borough promoting what we do, our contact details and encouraging residents to talk to us.

This survey explores the views of a small sample of people and is not representative of all individuals under 65 with an underlying health condition in the London Borough of Bexley.

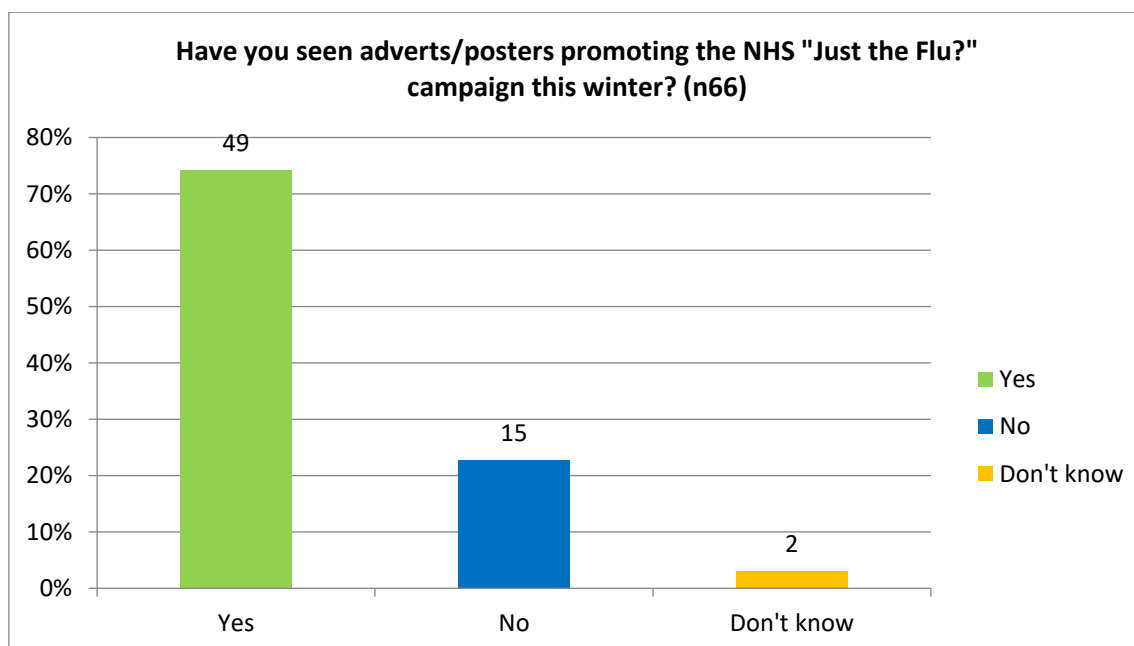
Breakdown of Responses

1. Do you live in London Borough of Bexley (n66)?

All of those who responded to our survey live in the London Borough of Bexley.

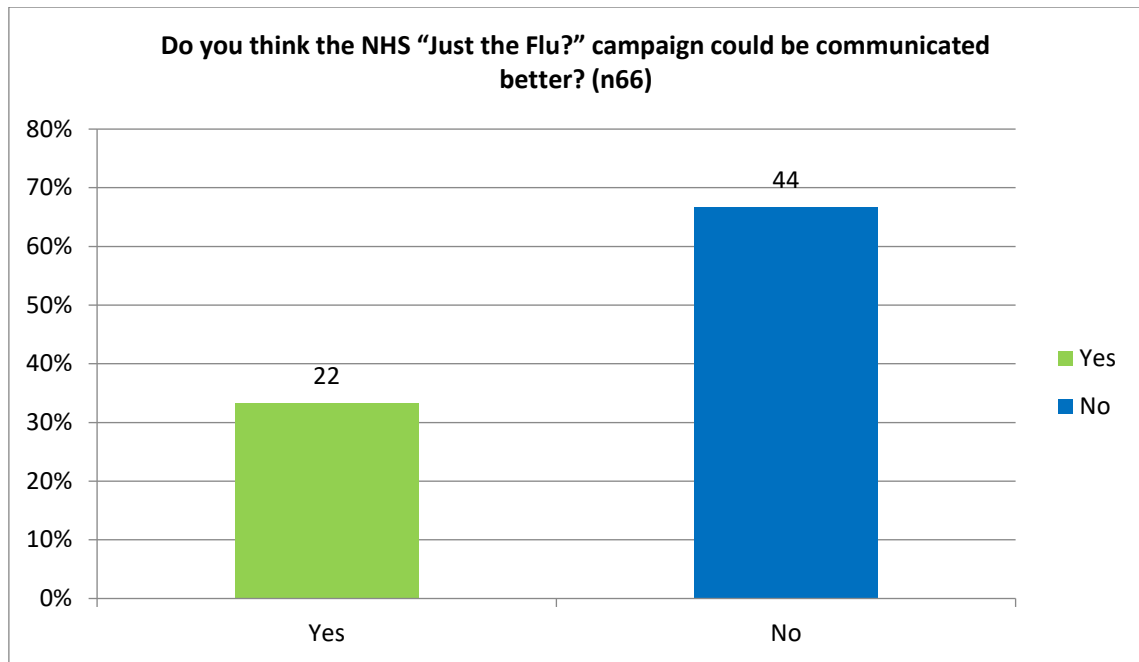
2. Have you seen adverts/posters promoting the NHS “Just the Flu” campaign this winter? (n66)

The “Just the Flu” campaign launched in October 2020. Encouragingly **74%** of those who responded had seen advertising. **23%** had not seen any adverts and **3%** were unsure.



3. Do you think the NHS “Just the Flu?” campaign could be communicated better? (n66)

33% thought the campaign could be communicated better. Encouragingly **67%** were happy with what they had seen. Some of the suggestions for a better communicated advertising campaign and views are shared below.



4. If yes, how can it be communicated better? (n19)

The respondents who shared their thoughts around improving communication made suggestions that included greater direct GP communication, receiving text and email reminders, and mentioned that normally reminders to get the flu jab would be seen at the surgery. Other suggestions were to be provided with information explaining the benefits of vaccination, more tv and supermarket advertisements, advertisements at bus stops, leaflets, supermarket advertising and using social media to raise awareness of the need to get vaccinated.

“Call every eligible patient. Write to them. Text them”

“By contacting everyone in the age groups to have it done”

“I knew there was a shortage and when I phoned my GP, they put me on the waiting list for one then phoned me when it became available again. I have mine later this week. GP surgery was great with their communication. Also got a letter reminding me to book one.”

“Social media campaign”

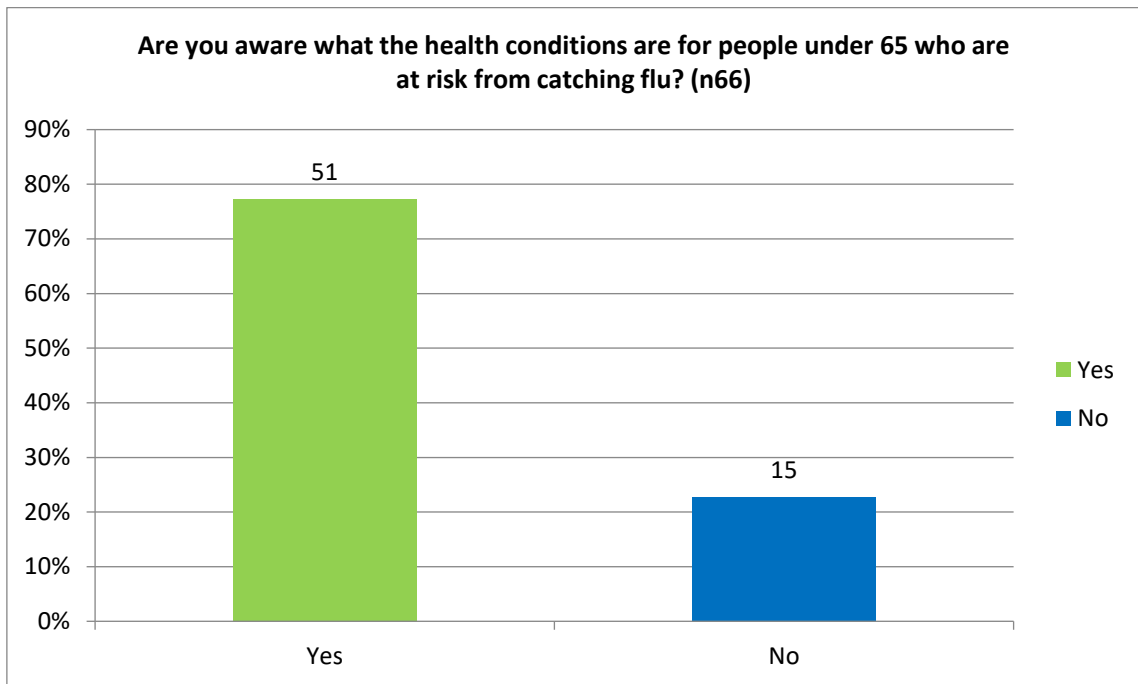
“More advertising you used to see it at surgeries but now you can’t visit them so maybe increase tv ads and supermarkets.”

“Some real stories.”

“Leaflets in doors, text messages to all.”

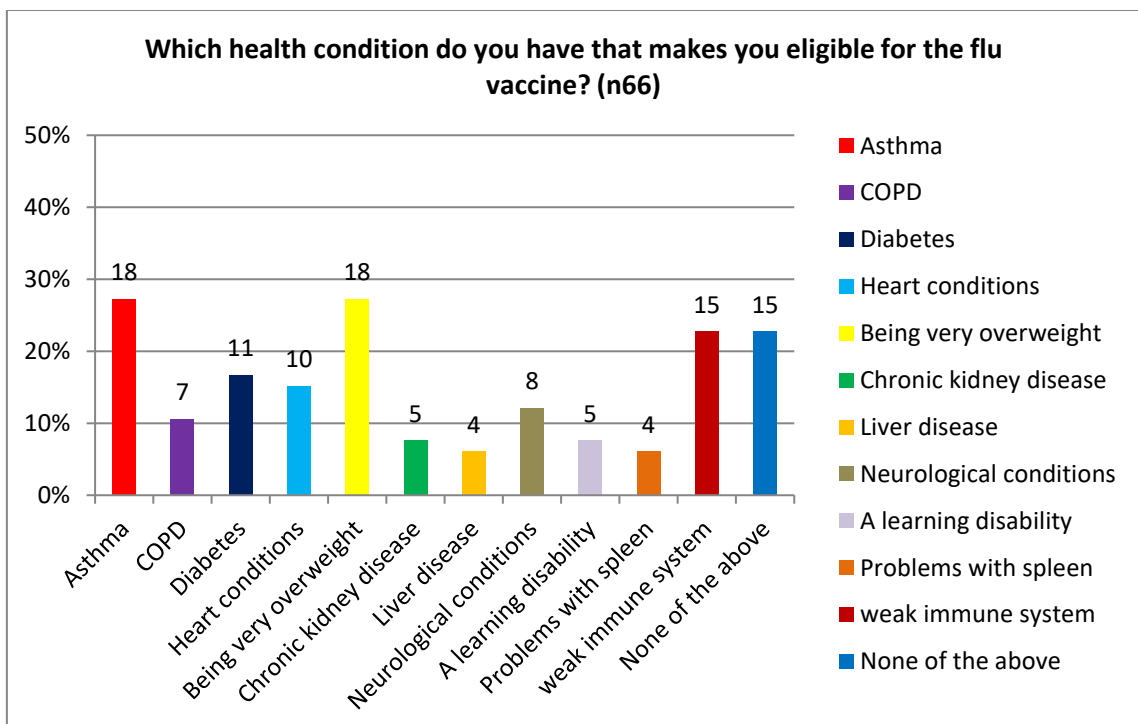
5. Are you aware what the health conditions are for people under 65 who are at risk from catching flu? (n66)

77% of respondents were aware of what the health conditions are for people with underlying health conditions, whilst **23%** in this vulnerable group were unaware.



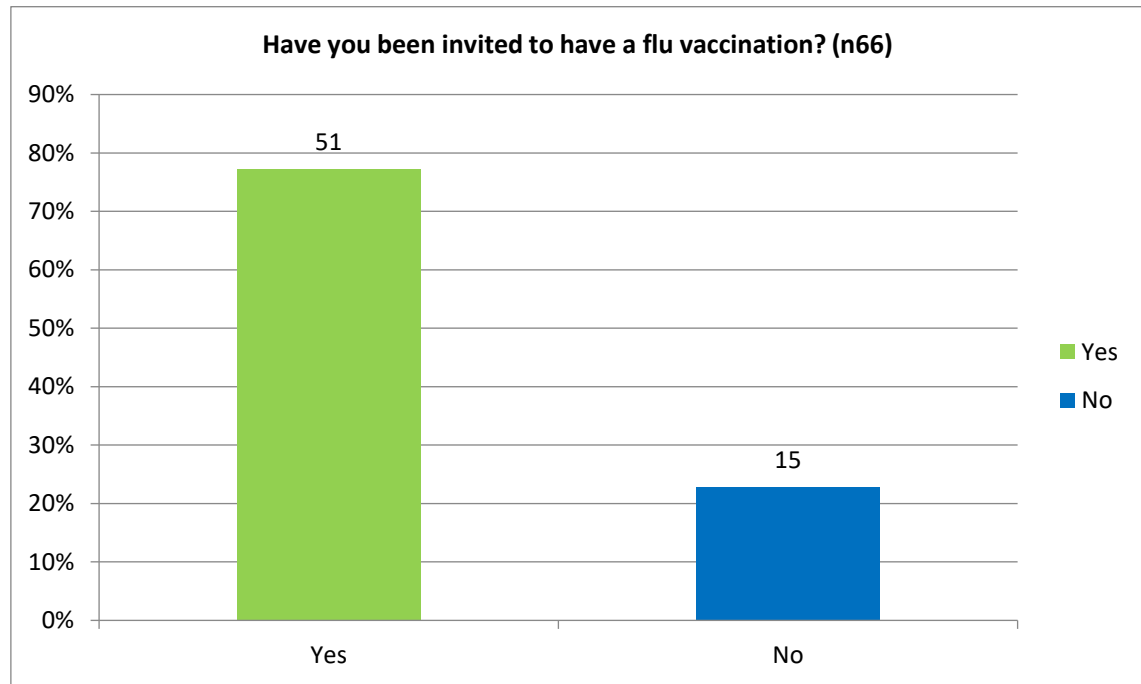
6. Which health condition do you have, that makes you eligible for the flu vaccine? (n66)

Sufferers of Asthma and individuals who are obese were among the two largest groups that responded to our survey. Within the Bexley borough, the obesity rates are above the national average. The percentage of adults aged 18+ and classified as overweight or obese in the Borough is **63.8%**, with the national average being **62%**. (LBB, 2021)



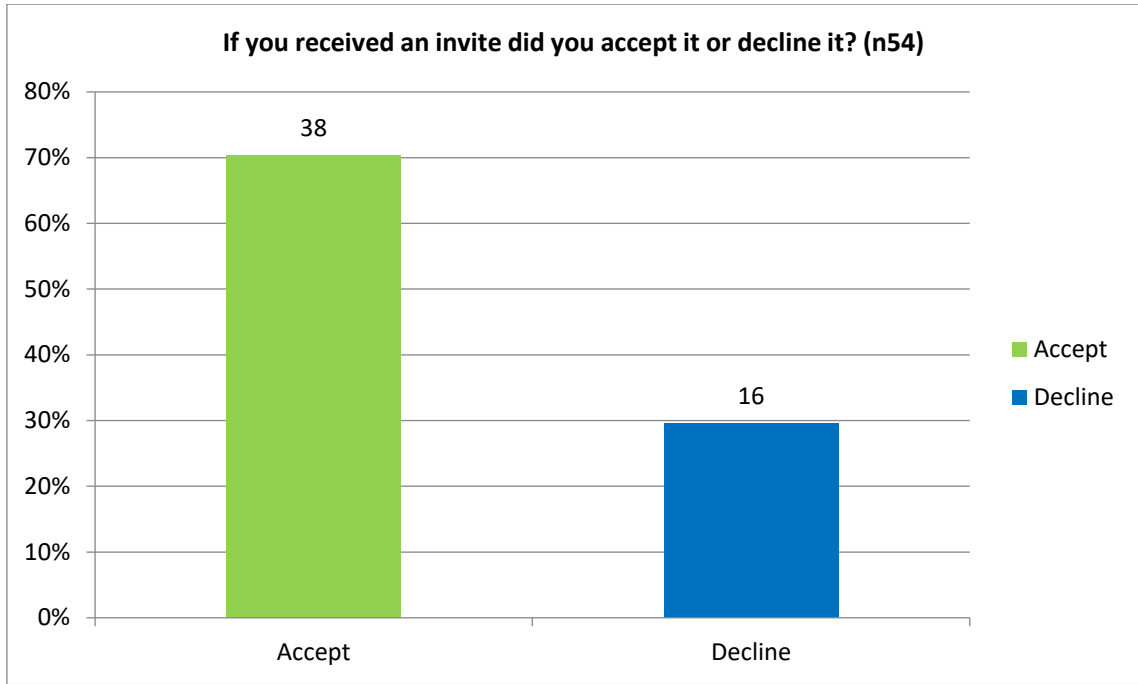
7. Have you been invited to have a flu vaccination? (n66)

77% had been invited to have a flu vaccination. **23%** had not been invited by their GP to have their flu vaccination. **64%** of those who had been invited have had it so far, some of the reasons for not having had the vaccine, despite being invited are explored below in question 10.



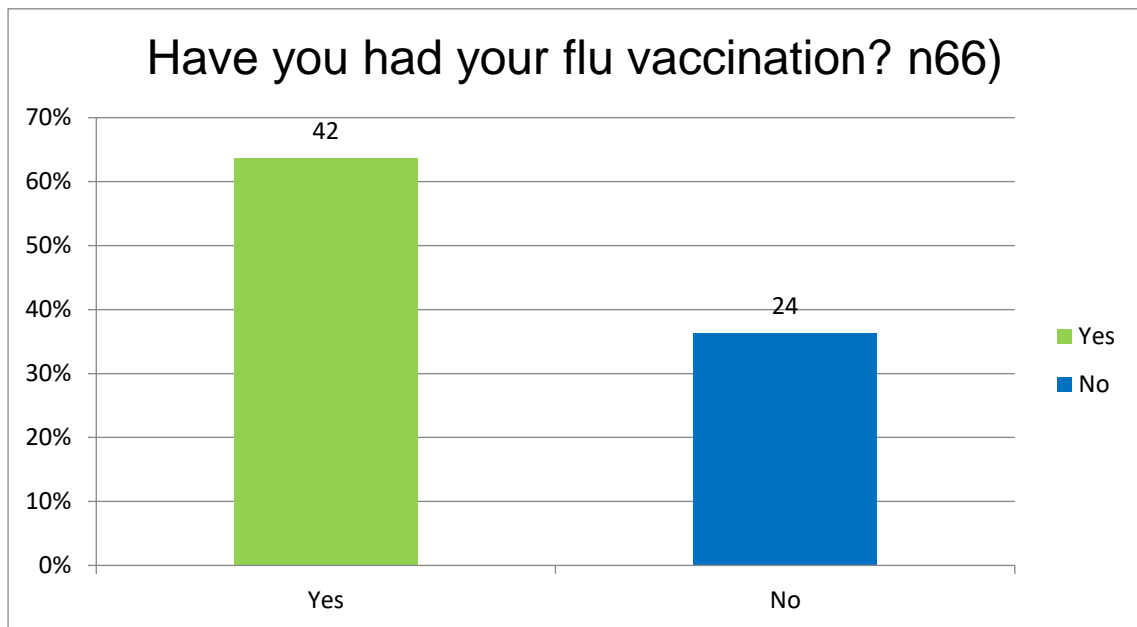
8. If you received an invite, did you accept/decline it? (n54).

51 of the respondents to question 7 told us they had received an invite to have their flu vaccine. 54 respondents indicated yes or no to question 8 regarding the acceptance of an invite. This creates an anomaly in the data as it would appear that 54 respondents had received an invite, not 51. Qualitative data was collected in question 10 to go alongside the quantitative data to explain why people hadn't had their flu vaccination. This is explored in question 10.



9. Have you had your flu vaccination? (n66).

64% have had their flu vaccination this year, whilst **36%** are yet to have it or have chosen not to be vaccinated.



10. If you decided not to have your flu vaccination please tell us why? (n66)

A common concern among the responses received was a fear of becoming unwell, either because the respondent believed they had had the flu in the past as a result of being vaccinated previously, or family members had become ill as a result of previously having had the flu vaccination and others did not want to have it as they did not want to mix with anyone due to Covid 19. Further reasons were having a needle phobia, being unsure as to whether or not they were eligible to have it, or waiting to be invited by their GP. In addition to protecting against Covid 19, wearing a face mask and social distancing were also mentioned as protecting from flu as well as Covid 19 and may explain lack of uptake in some individuals.

"I've had one before and had the worst flu and when I haven't had the jab I've been fine."

"My mum and dad have it every year and are ill for a week in bed after. I've had flu, got over it so I'll take the risk."

"Due to the fact that when I have had it previously I was very unwell after and I was bedbound for two weeks."

"When I had the flu jab when I was pregnant I got the flu not long after the jab and it was a lot worse than I ever got it before so I haven't had it since as I don't want to get the flu like I had before again."

"I wasn't aware why I was being offered it"

"I feel that as I am wearing a face mask and keeping my distance from other people, I am less likely to get it. I also so not want to have a reaction to the flu jab and then have the possibility of catching Covid on top."

"Not available on date offered. Waiting on a new date."

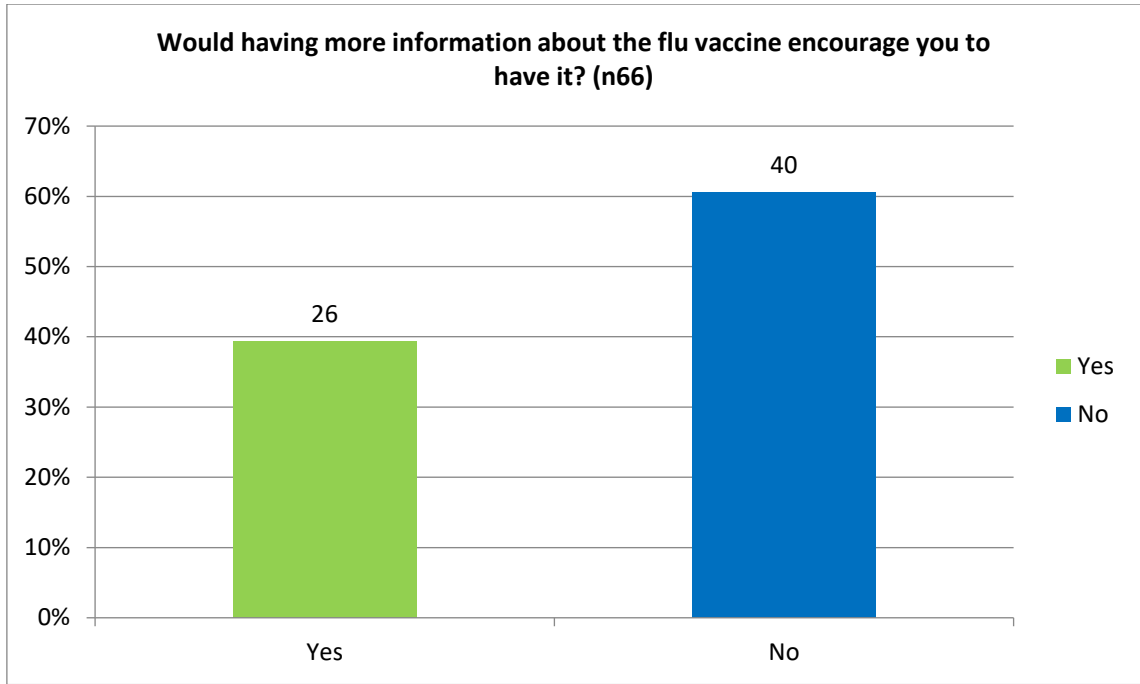
"Not mixing with anyone due to Covid – I have a weakened immune system – the last thing I will be doing is going to a germ haven GP surgery."

"I've had reactions to the flu jab several years in a row, my neurologist supported my not having it and the only time I was ill was with flu and developed pneumonia was the years I had the flu vaccine, I prefer to boost my immune system with supplements especially Vitamin D Zinc and Magnesium, I rarely get sick with a full activated immune system!"

"Trying to get an appointment is a nightmare. I would like to get it done, but struggle to get an appointment."

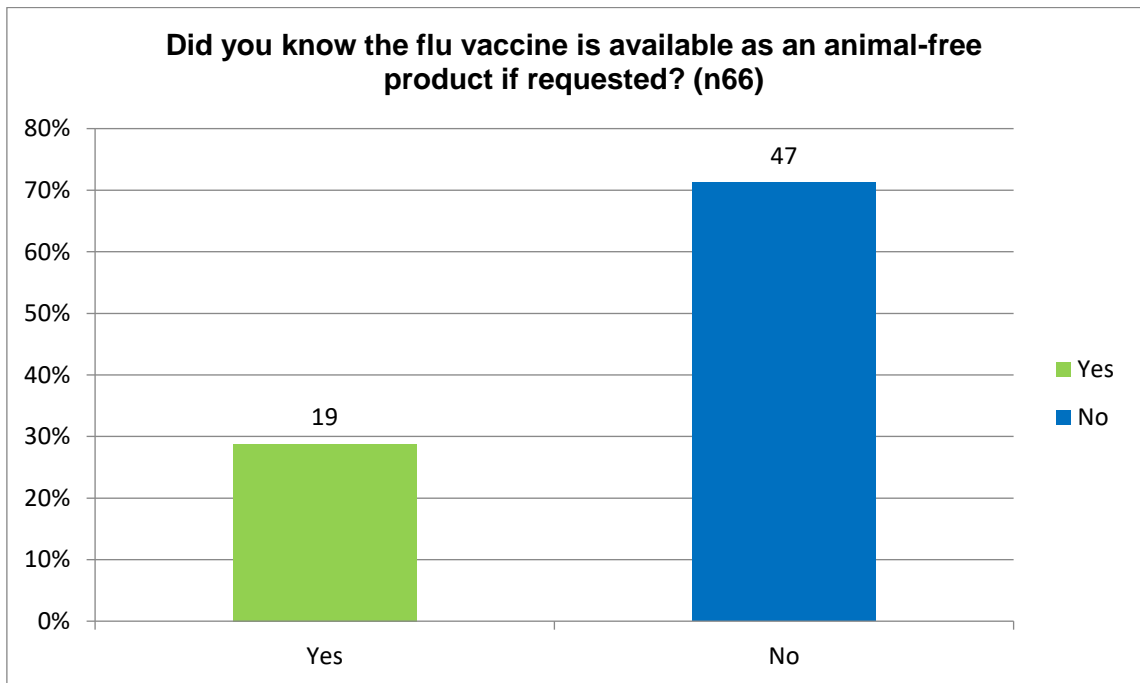
11. Would having more information about the flu vaccine encourage you to have it? (n66).

40% of people said having more information about the vaccine would encourage them to have it. **60%** told us it would not, indicating lack of information is not the main reason for lack of vaccine uptake (details in question 10). However, **40%** may be persuaded to have it if they had more information.



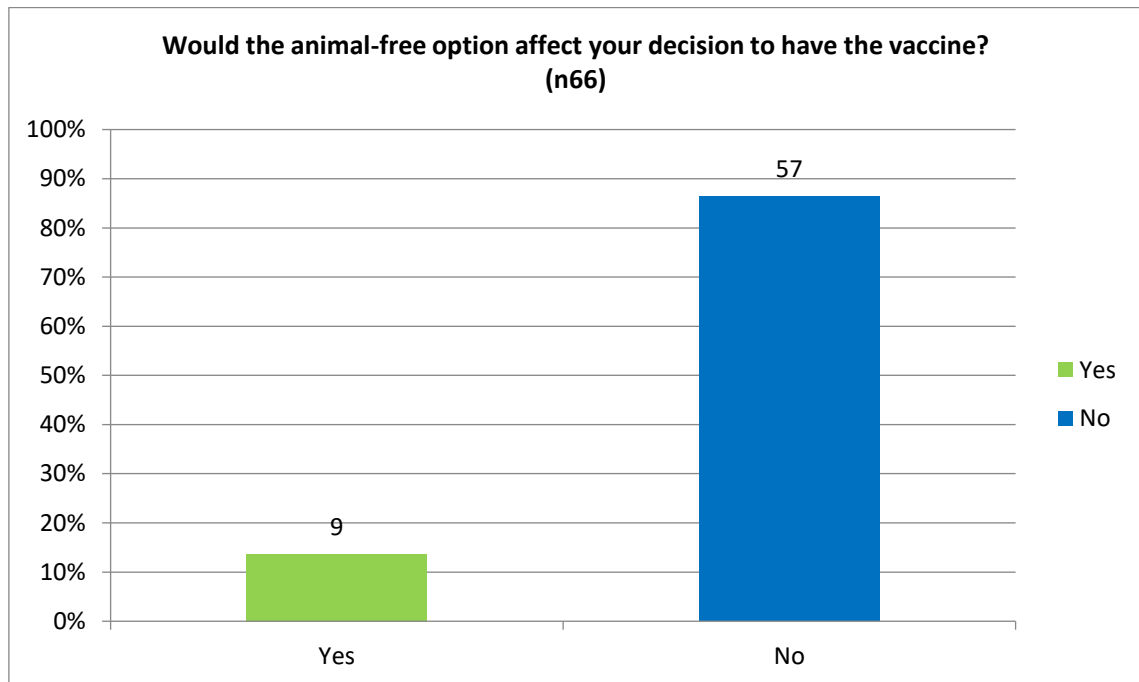
12. Did you know the flu vaccine is available as an animal free product if requested? (n66).

29% were already aware of this option, with 71% being unaware. The importance of this is explored further below.



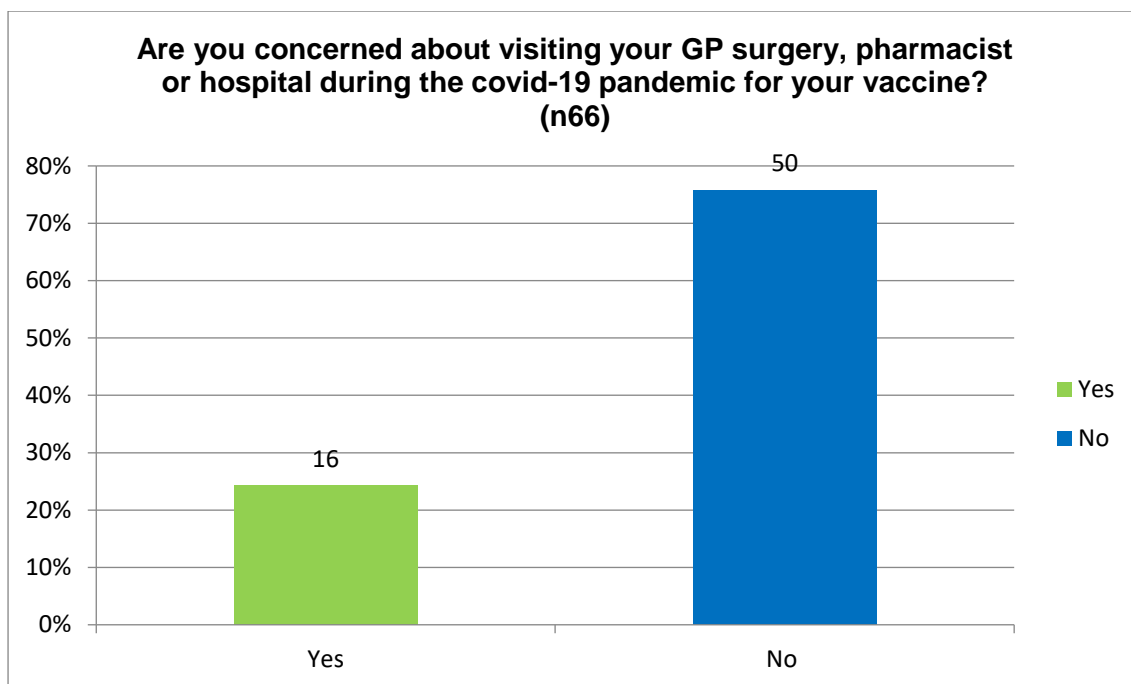
13. Would the animal free option affect your decision to have the vaccine? (n66)

Having an animal free option, was an important factor and may persuade 14% of those who did not know to have the vaccination. 85% said it would not affect their decision. The respondents who told us they had not yet been vaccinated or had chosen not to be vaccinated also told us the animal free option would not have an effect on their decision to have the vaccine. 22 respondents told us why they had decided not to have the vaccine, 8 of them were already aware of the animal free option, indicating their decision was not affected by the animal free option.



14. Are you concerned about visiting your GP surgery, pharmacist or hospital during the Covid-19 pandemic for your vaccine? (n66).

24% were concerned about visiting their GP during the Covid-19 Pandemic and 76% were not concerned. Qualitative data was collected to find out why and is explored in question 15.



15. What are your concerns about visiting the GP, pharmacy or hospital? (n15).

Just over half of the respondents who shared their concerns about visiting the GP, pharmacy or hospital mentioned Covid-19, including contamination or exposure to it. Not wanting to come into contact with sick people was also a factor as well as concerns about cleanliness and fear of coming into contact with others who are not wearing face masks. One respondent commented they were concerned about being lectured about being overweight.

“Coming into contact with other people or places increase the risk of catching Covid. I prefer to visit as few places as possible and therefore come into contact with as few people as possible.”

“Cleanliness. Sick People. Covid testing site next to GP surgery.”

“People not social distancing/wearing masks.”

“Contamination.”

“It’s the obvious place for sick people to go ... Covid symptoms may not be obvious ... I don’t even go to supermarkets; I’m definitely not going anywhere where sick people go.”

“I was worried I would be lectured on my BMI (the reason I’m eligible) when having the jab. I delayed booking my appointment because of this fear. Happily, this was not the case.”

16. Do you have any other comments to make about the vaccine? (n24).

24 individuals gave a response to this. These included having had the vaccination elsewhere, such as their pharmacy or at the Council offices, and having difficulty getting an appointment. A few were happy with their GPs, mentioning good organisation and good communication.

“I am capable of injecting myself. I would happily be sent a vaccine and give it to myself.”

“There were supply issues this year and my daughter is only just getting it this week. Communication from GP was not existent I had mine in September at pharmacy.”

“Pleasantly surprised how well my doctor’s surgery was organised. In and out in a few minutes. Totally reassured.”

“Text comms were good”

“I struggled to contact my doctors to get the jab as not answering their phone as I have the flu jab every year so I ended up having it at the council offices when it was offered.”

“I tried to get my vaccination for weeks as I work in a school and always feel very vulnerable until I get my flu jab, normally in October. All the local pharmacies had none in stock, and there was a sign on the door at the surgery saying to wait for an invitation. I eventually received a letter telling me to get the jab, so I went against what the sign said and called the surgery to be told I could have an appointment! The day after my appointment, I was telephoned by my surgery inviting me in for the vaccination. You couldn’t make it up!”

“There were supply issues this year and my daughter is only just getting it this week. Communication from GP was non-existent. I had mine in September at a pharmacy.”

Focus Groups

The Speaking Up Group (Advocacy for all) - 15 participants

We met with The Speaking Up Group who are a group of residents from Bexley and Bromley with learning disabilities and their carers. We met with them via Zoom and include here the views of some of the Bexley residents to having the flu vaccination.

We were told of barriers such as not having time to book, concerns about the vaccine making existing conditions worse i.e., having epilepsy, or support such as carers and parents not having booked yet as they did not have time to take them. Approximately 3–4 members of the group had not had the vaccine yet.

“Wanted to have it so I don’t get ill. I normally have it once a year.”

“No time to book I work in a school and appointments are at times I can’t go. I’m a carer for my mother so busy no chance to go”

“Won’t have it as epileptic, don’t want anything, want to not have as don’t want to be ill”

“Take tablets and medication at night time vaccine may affect epilepsy. Scared to have it”

“Dad had flu jab; we both went together. I’m a carer I had to stand round the corner”

“They come to the home and do us all on the same day, not sure when they are going to get to us”

Mencap – 9 participants

We met with some of the members of Mencap via Zoom and as with Speaking up group, we asked their views on the flu vaccination. Most of the group informed us they had already had their

vaccination or were intending to, whenever their carers could take them, or whenever they could get a suitable appointment. We work with Mencap regularly and we are aware that they actively promote vaccination and health checks among their members. This may mean they are not entirely representative of wider LD population as a whole because they receive regular support and information around good healthcare. Individuals with a learning disability who do not access similar groups might not have access to the kind of support and information provided by Mencap in respect of healthcare and staying healthy. As a result, other LD groups may not have such a high number of vaccination uptake among them.

Conclusion

This piece of work was carried out to understand the views of the under 65s with underlying health conditions to the flu vaccination and to understand barriers to its uptake.

A majority of respondents to our online survey had already had their flu vaccine as had a good number of the Speaking up group and the members of Mencap that we spoke to. A few of the respondents to our online survey who had been invited to have a flu vaccine were unsure why indicating that some individuals with underlying health conditions are not aware of the increased risks to their health if they catch the flu.

Of those who had not been vaccinated, a few were intending to have it and either could not make the time they had been offered or were experiencing difficulty in getting an appointment. Becoming ill after having the flu vaccine was a frequent concern, preventing some from having it coupled, in the current climate, with fear of catching Covid-19.

Within the qualitative data received from those who are yet to be vaccinated, their responses do not reveal a great deal of awareness of the seriousness of flu for individuals with underlying health conditions, or why they should be vaccinated. In particular, there was very little awareness of the benefit of preventing serious complications resulting from flu.

There were a few difficulties reported among some individuals who were unable to get appointments at a suitable time or at all or were still trying. However, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, a high proportion of people were still happy to attend GP clinics to get their vaccination. This is very encouraging as the effects of contracting flu and Covid-19 could cause serious health issues.

Recommendations

- All stakeholders should continue to promote the National flu vaccination programme annually in the run up to the flu season to increase awareness and act as a reminder to all groups eligible to get vaccinated.
- More research could be done before the next flu season, by the local authority/SEL CCG/Healthwatch to specifically identify which groups within the under 65 category may be less

likely to be vaccinated and the reasons why. This would allow a targeted approach to the communication and promotion of the vaccine within these groups to encourage vaccine uptake, ensuring posters, leaflets and social media communications are made available to local groups and targeted effectively. Including Easy Read for those with a learning disability.

- All stakeholders, including Primary Care should actively promote the fact that the vaccine is available as a vegan product (animal free product) in the run up to the next flu season. This message would need to highlight that this type of vaccine can be requested through their GP.
- In the run up to the next flu season, the local authority and SEL CCG could use targeted messages to address common barriers to vaccine uptake such as the belief that the vaccine gives you flu and makes you unwell. Information is needed to reassure residents that the vaccination is still safer than non-vaccination in most cases.

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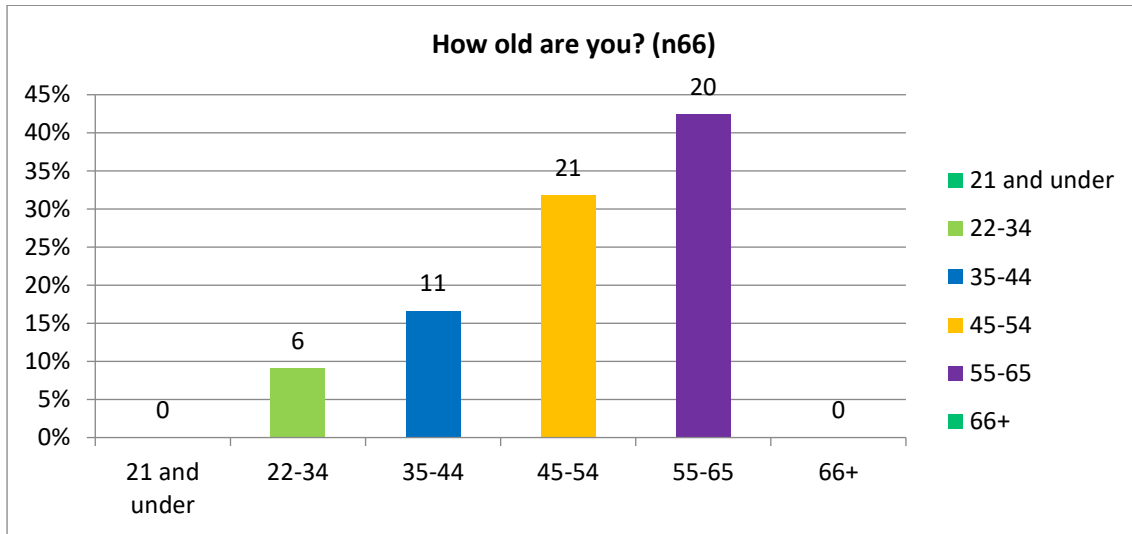
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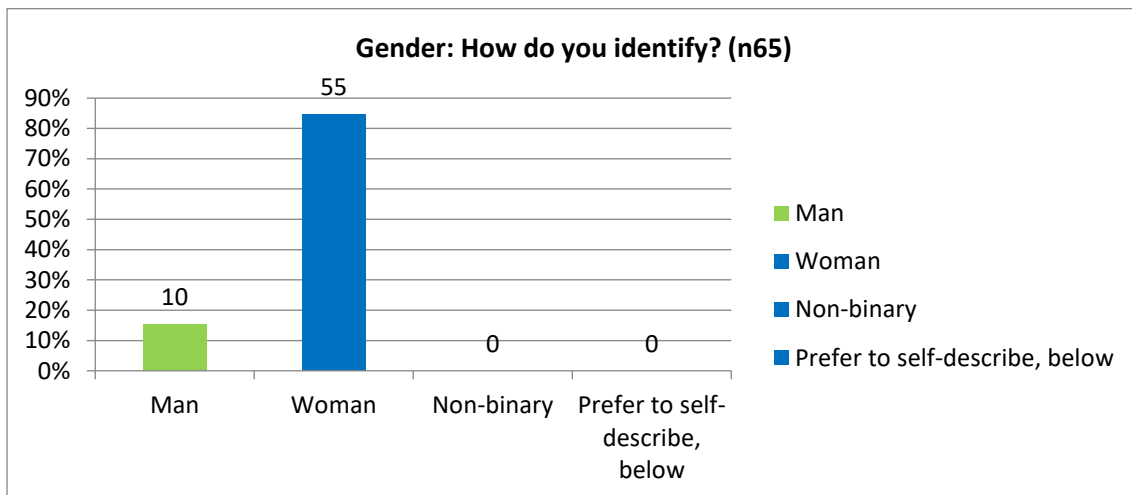
Appendix 1

Demographics

17. Age



18. Gender



19. Ethnicity (n52)

