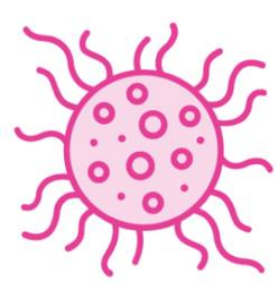


How are you doing?

An online survey to understand what women of Luton are experiencing in health and care in relation to the menopause in Luton

**Menopause survey:
2021 - 2022**



Introduction

As defined by NHS England, the menopause is when a woman's periods stop and she can no longer become pregnant (1). It is a natural sign of aging and usually begins around 45 – 54 years old. This is due to a reduction in the production of oestrogen (a sex hormone) from the ovaries and stops the ovaries releasing an egg each month. Whilst menopause is a natural part of a female aging, there can be instances where the menopause can begin prematurely, called 'early menopause', which can be due to illness or medically induced. It is thought a woman spends on average a third of her life post menopause.

Signs and symptoms of the menopause are both physical and mental. These can come and go for any time from a few months, to 15 years, including perimenopause (2). There are symptoms that are more commonly associated with the menopause, such as night sweats, hot flushes and hair loss. There are less talked about symptoms including brain fog, fatigue, urinary issues and intimacy issues.

Officially, the menopause ends when a female has not had a period for 12 consecutive months, although it is believed that symptoms can last up to 12 years post the last period.

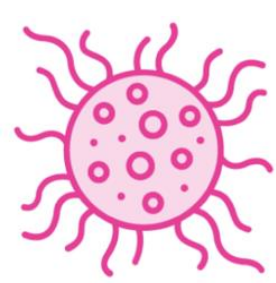
According to a briefing paper by Public Health Luton, there are an increasing number of women who are within the workforce who are experiencing the menopause, and there are significant impacts to their working life (3). Although not a specific protected characteristic, menopause could be covered by The Equality Act 2010 in relation to age, disability, gender reassignment and sex (4).

There has been an increase in case law in relation to menopause in the work place. Several people have been discriminated against and treated unfairly in the work place, up to and including dismissal, based on symptoms of the menopause for them (5).

- Menopause is a biological stage in a woman's life when menstruation stops permanently due to the loss of ovarian follicular activity. It occurs with the final menstrual period and is usually diagnosed clinically after 12 months of amenorrhoea [[NICE, 2019](#)].
 - In the UK, the mean age of natural menopause is 51 years, although this can vary between different ethnic groups.
- Perimenopause, also called the 'menopausal transition' or 'climacteric', is the period *before* the menopause when the endocrinological, biological, and clinical features of approaching menopause start. It is characterized by irregular cycles of ovulation and menstruation and ends 12 months after the last menstrual period [[NICE, 2019](#)].
- Postmenopause is the time after a woman has not had a menstrual period for 12 consecutive months [[NICE, 2019](#)].

Image from NICE [NICE | The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence](#)

1. [Menopause - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)
2. [Overview | Menopause: diagnosis and management | Guidance | NICE](#)
3. Briefing Paper: Menopause – Lisa Hudson (Public Health Manager, LBC)
4. [Overview | Menopause: diagnosis and management | Guidance | NICE](#)
5. Menopause at work: cases round-up, IDS Emp. L. Brief 2021, 1141, 24-31



Methodology

Some professionals in Luton felt there was an increase in conversations internally about the menopause and how this is a taboo subject. In August 2021, Healthwatch Luton were approached to be part of a Menopause Working Group, to look at what people’s experiences are of menopause in Luton, what works well and what needs to be done to improve services and experiences.

During the first meeting there were discussions about how the experiences of individuals could be found to understand what is needed to further support residents of Luton. It was agreed that Healthwatch Luton would create a survey that would look at the experiences of treatment and care of individuals who had been or were going through the menopause, and what they felt they needed more support in.

Survey

The survey was made live late 2021 and was open for six weeks. There were nine questions that were free text for individuals to offer their personal experiences. Questions were also asked for demographic purposes.

Participants

There were 85 responses for the survey, 81 of which answered the gender question. All identified as female. The age range was from 35 years old to 70+, with almost a third (27) between 50 and 54 years old.

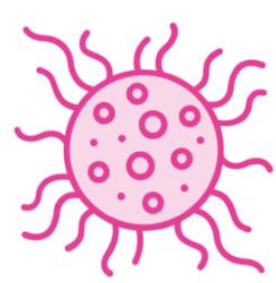
Just over 75% (62) of respondents were aged between 45 and 59 years of age.

Individuals were asked what their employment status was. Almost 35% (28) were employed part time, 58% (47) were employed full time and 6% (5) were retired. There was one person who stated ‘disabled’.

Individuals were asked information about their financial status. 82 of the respondents answered this question.

Age range	Number
35 – 39	1
40 – 44	7
45 – 49	14
50 – 54	27
55 – 59	21
60 – 64	6
65 – 69	5
70+	1

Financial status	Number
I have enough for basic necessities, and at least a fair amount of disposable income, that I can save or spend on leisure	34
I have enough for basic necessities, and a small amount of disposable income, that I can save or spend on leisure.	35
I only have enough for basic necessities, I am living pay check to pay check.	12
I don't have enough for basic necessities, I am struggling to make ends meet.	1



Themes/Headlines

Stigma

The subject of the menopause appears to still be a taboo subject. There is not enough conversation about menopause and the different symptoms people can have.

Knowledge

It was felt there was not enough knowledge by professionals and employers alike, as well as individuals not knowing what to expect. There was a lot of research independent of medical professionals needed to understand the menopause and how it affected them.

Understanding

People felt that there was not enough understanding from their peers, workplace, friends and family about the menopause and how it was affecting their daily lives. Workplace challenges and capacity concerns have affected the careers of women and relationships have been affected.

Equal access

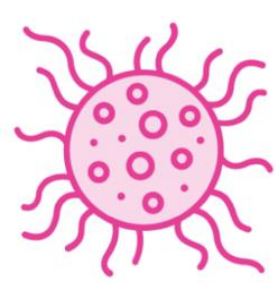
Depending on where people live in the county, there is a disparity of the services available. Luton sits within the BLMK ICS, however, those who live in Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough have access to a menopause clinic within Bedfordshire, which is not available to those who live within Luton local authority boundaries.

Working

A high number of women felt their working life was affected by the menopause and there was not enough support in the workplace for them. It was felt there was a pressure to reduce hours or retire due to the effects of menopause on the individuals.

Medication

HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) isn't easily available and the side effects aren't widely discussed or known. There could be more treatment options to manage the symptoms or conditions associated with menopause.



Survey results

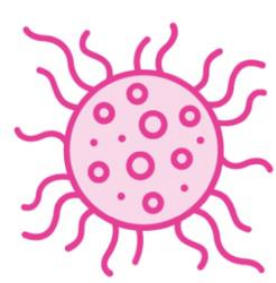
Most of the questions were free text questions, allowing individuals to place comment on their own experiences for their answers.

Are you going through the menopause?

The first question asked if individuals had been or were going through the menopause. Of the 84 who responded, two stated 'no', eight were 'going through' the menopause or perimenopause currently and four were unsure. There were three mentions of the perimenopause.

“possibly, the not knowing is currently the problem for me” – female in her 40s

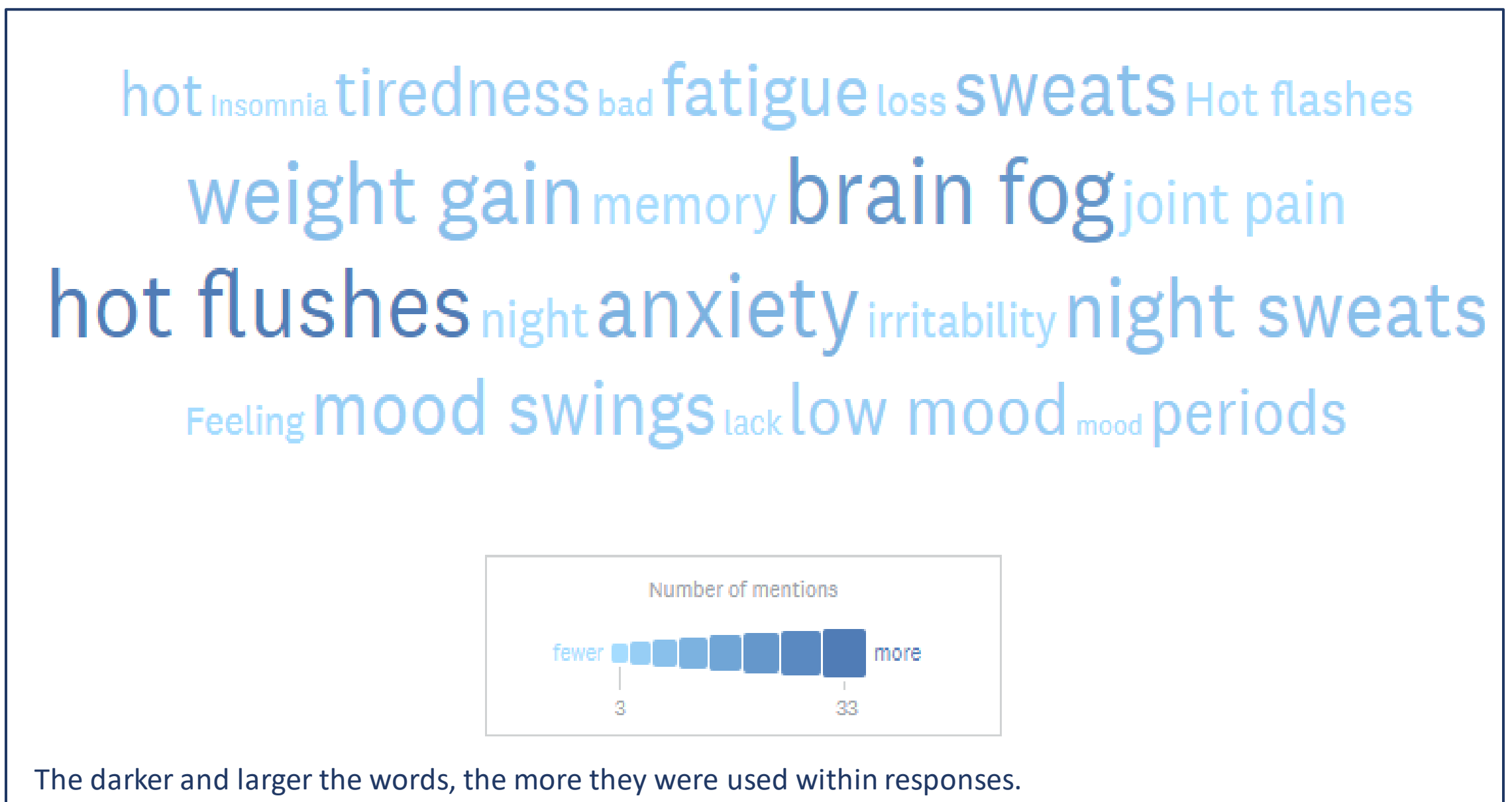




Survey results

Symptoms

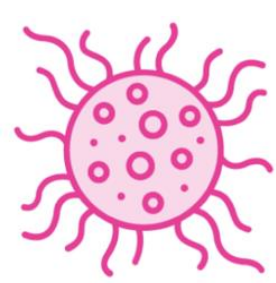
Individuals were asked what their most prominent symptoms were that they attributed to the menopause. There were a lot of different symptoms mentioned and some were repeated by a high proportion of women. Sexual dysfunction including libido changes, genitourinary concerns, vaginal atrophy and menstrual changes. Mental health impact such as anxiety, depression, low mood, irrational thoughts and tearfulness. Physical symptoms mentioned included hair loss, weight gain, hot flushes and day sweats, joint pain, heart palpitations, bloating and dry skin. Some individuals reported brain fog, anomic aphasia, fatigue/exhaustion. A lack of resilience to stress and having to take extended leave from work due to symptoms were mentioned. Sleep disturbances, insomnia and night sweats were mentioned.



The most common symptom reported as hot flushes, with 52% (44) people noting it. Almost 30% (25) mentioned brain fog, and 15% (13) people mentioned anxiety. Fatigue, tiredness and exhaustion were mentioned by 19% (16) of people and sleep disturbances, insomnia and night wakening were noted by 13% (11) people. Anxiety, depression, mood swings and irritability were mentioned by almost 49% (41) people.

“I’m trying to manage my symptoms without medication” – female in 50s

When asked if they were medicated for their symptoms there were 83 responses. Around 77% (64) said no. There were two people who mentioned herbal supplements, including sage tablets, and 20% (17) who said they were medicated. Two people mentioned medication for antidepressants and one for vaginal dryness.



Survey results

Support

Individuals were asked what support they felt they needed in relation to the menopause. This was a free text option and almost 99% (84) respondents completed this question.

One of the most common things mentioned was 'understanding', which was mentioned by almost 23% (19) of people. It was understanding of the menopause ('knowledge in the wider world'), understanding of the symptoms ('understanding the debilitating effects'), understanding of the wider effects of menopause ('disturbed sleep so tired at work'), and it was understanding by family, friends, colleagues and professionals.

“Being part of a menopause community and being able to share experiences and not feel alone, more accessible information, support around diet and natural remedies, more open discussion in the workplace and not feeling its something to hide or be ashamed off, having a workplace menopause policy, employers recognising that some women need time off work” – female, late 40s

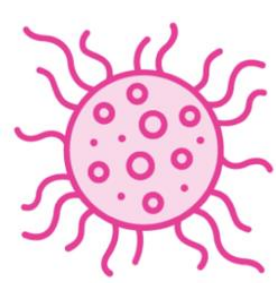
The word 'support' was mentioned in relation to support in the work place, support from friends and family. One person mentioned they felt lucky to have support from their friends and colleagues at the time of their menopause.

“I came away feeling as if I had imagined my symptoms” – female, early 40s

'Information' was mentioned by just over 10% (9) people. They felt there needed to be better information available from professionals and in relation to treatments. Just under 10% (8) people mentioned HRT. There is a desire by some to have it and not being able to, there is a wait for those who have been able to get it, and there is a concern of lack of knowledge about HRT and it being prescribed.

There were a few people 5% (4) who stated having someone to talk to or to listen to them would help them. One person mentioned a specialist menopause professional, not just the GP to support them. 8% (7) specifically mentioned their working environment and 'flexible hours' and one person mentioned a 'considerate boss' would support them. One person mentioned they would like 'to be taken seriously' about the menopause.

There were some people (9%) who stated there was nothing more in terms of support they felt they needed, however, one of these people stated it was because they were now retired and they felt there was a need for more support in the workplace.



Survey results

Other effects

Individuals were asked what effects the menopause had on them and their lives, outside of the physical (reproductive) menopause symptoms. There were 83 (97%) responses to this question. The option was a free text box which meant individuals could add as many effects they felt were reflective of their experiences.

“I’ve had give up work & struggle with anxiety & brain fog” – female

There were almost 12% (10) who mentioned work as another effect. People felt that they struggled with work life balance, things they had previously found within their capacity were harder to do, they were tired at work and also had to reduce hours or ask for flexible working. There were even some who stated they had to give up working due to their experiences of the menopause. One person mentioned they were ‘ridiculed’ at work due to the menopause, and another felt unable to discuss their menopause experience at work.

People reported mental health effects of the menopause. Some reported feeling ‘useless’, ‘alone’, ‘unsure of themselves’ and ‘more emotional’. A common feeling was around ‘mood’ and ‘irritability’.

“Mentally feel going mad” – female, late 30s

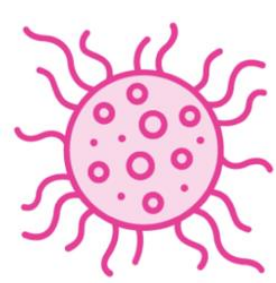
Around 7% (6) stated their personal relationships were affected by the menopause. Tiredness was mentioned as being an issue that has effects on other parts of the life of individuals. The social aspect of life suffered; individuals reported a lack of confidence, trouble with fitness, motivation and feeling like ‘unable to do much on some days’.

“Not feeling connected to my husband” – female, early 40s

It was mentioned by one person how their other coexisting conditions, namely diabetes, was affected by the effects of menopause on the body and managing this became different. One person mentioned they ‘felt older’ now they were coming through the menopause, and other was ‘less mobile’ since beginning the menopause.

“I have been sad and emotional, and it has taken time to accept this change, especially as I do not have children. I needed to talk about this to understand the loss and grief this has given me. I have been very reliant on those close to me who have supported me. I think I should have accessed talking therapies but at the time was unsure who to ask, especially as I would want a female Muslim therapist who would understand the cultural nuance of my situation” – female, early 50s

There were some 13%(11) who felt there had not been too much effect on their life outside of the physical symptoms, with one person stating they had ‘made sure it hadn’t’ made an impact.



Survey results

Information

Individuals were asked what they knew now, that they felt they would have liked to have known before going through the menopause.

Just over 20% (17) felt that there needed to be more information about the symptoms. There are myths that reflect hot flushes and libido, but there is not enough information about the extent of the other symptoms, particularly the mental health effects and relationship effects the menopause has. There were mentions of the length of time the menopause is experienced and knowing about the peri-menopause. There was a mention of knowing what symptoms were, so individuals were able to monitor and speak to their GP about them to 'connect the dots'.

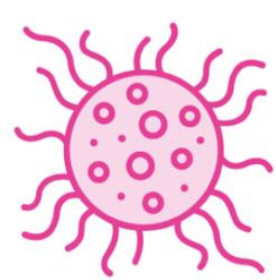
“All women are expected to experience this at some point, however, there is little to no education regarding this. More research should be done into this area, I believe that primary care have a lack of knowledgebase in how to treat symptoms . Also, the association with HRT and poor side effects needs to be addressed. Talking Therapy support should be provided as this is an emotional health issue as well as a physical issue” – female, early 50s

Other people mentioned it was 'unpredictable' and that it needed 'recognition'. It was considered by one person as similar to being pregnant and the knowledge and support should reflect that. It was felt it was something that should be talked about and something that people should ask for help and support with were common themes amongst responses. 'It is not something that should be stigmatised' and it can 'cause people to feel suicidal' were comments made also.

“That the menopause is a normal life course event for women, but that it significantly affects them - it is not just about getting a bit hot and flustered. Women should not have to apologise for the menopause or feel they have to laugh at themselves or put themselves down because of it. Menopausal women are getting older and wiser and they are amazingly strong” – female, late 50s

It was felt knowing what information and support is out there is useful and also that it happens at a younger age than people believe it to, so individuals should be prepared.

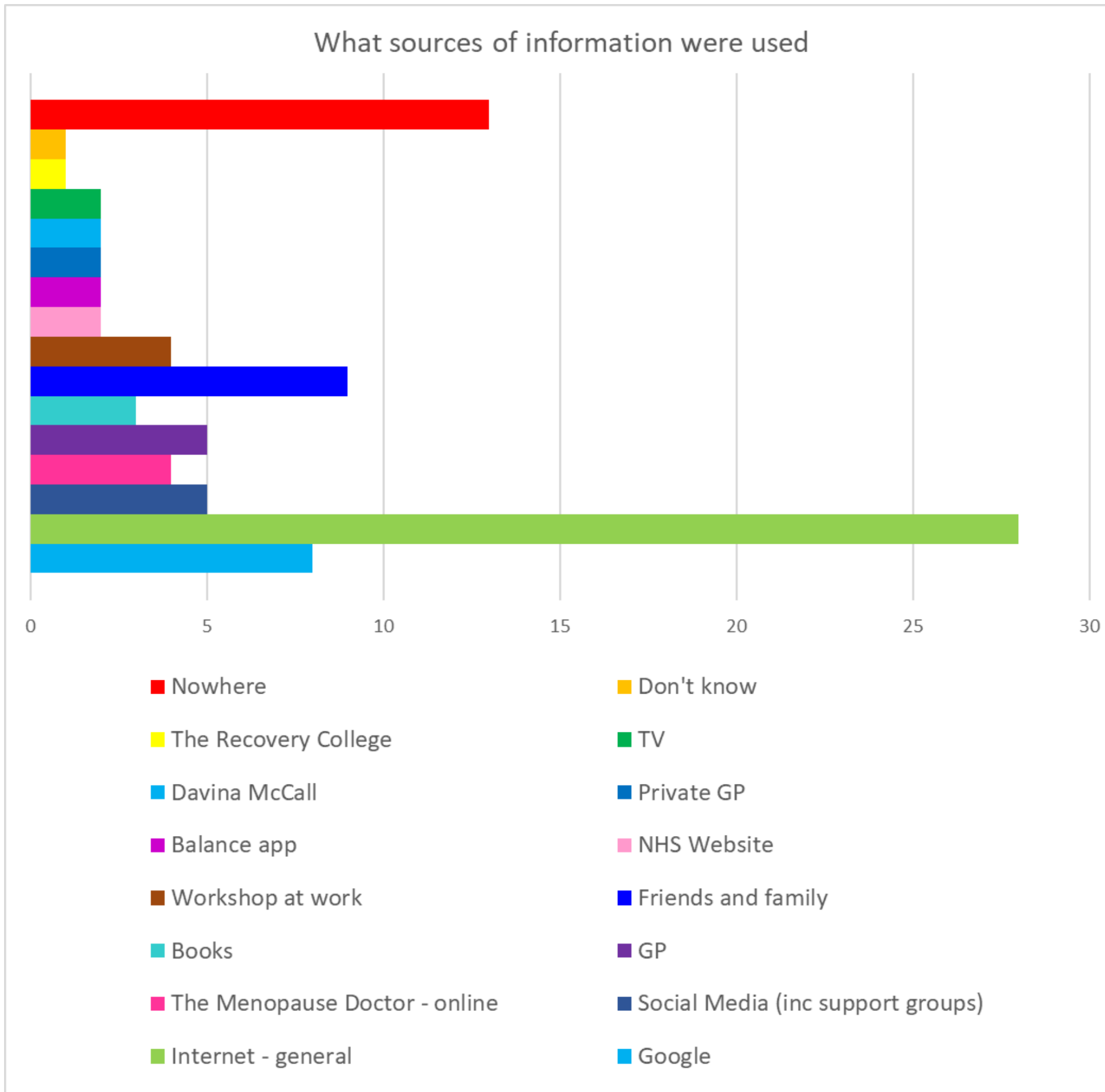
“It is manageable with the right information and support” – female, late 40s



Survey results

Individuals were asked where they found information about the menopause and if there was enough information for them. Some individuals included more than one response or resource for their information about the menopause.

What sources of information were used



The most common response was the internet in general (33% - 28) with 'nowhere' (15% - 13) second.

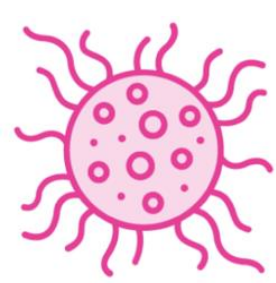
A lot of people have turned to media based sources for their information, with mentions of the Menopause Doctor – Dr Newson online (5% - 4), and social media (6% - 5) blogs such as 'A vogel menopause blog' and podcasts including 'Menopause whilst black'. People mentioned TV and more specifically Davina McCall.

Just over 10% mentioned friends and family, with one person citing their mum as a source for them.

One person mentioned they had created a workshop for colleagues, and three more mentioned their information had come from a webinar/seminar at work.

Of the information people found and if there was enough of it, almost 54% (45) said 'no', with just over 20% (17) saying 'yes', with others commenting about the access to the information being an issue, or the information not being tailored to individuals.

“However I think it is a little too late for a lot of women and needs to be taught as part of sex education the same as periods” – female, early 50s



Recommendations

Information

It was clear from the responses received that having information is a priority. It would be a recommendation of this report that the local system ensures there are sources of information available to all areas of the diverse community in Luton.

Access to treatment

It is apparent that depending on the knowledge of the medical professionals involved in a person's care, reflects the level of care and treatment options they have. This is also something that is dependant of where they are registered. It would be a recommendation of this report that all individuals who are going through the menopause, or believe they are going through the menopause, are able to access the same treatment.

Knowledge

The professionals in Luton need to ensure they are most up to date in the knowledge they have surrounding menopause. The recommendation of this report is that there is a champion within PCNs who would be able to support women going through the menopause and to specialise in this area.

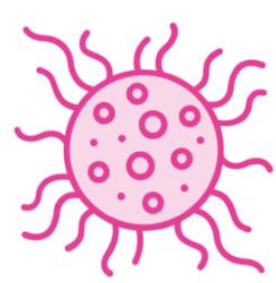
There is a need for culturally specific information for individuals of the wide communities within Luton. It would be a recommendation of this report to garner interest in different information for different communities to make the information available be inclusive to all of the Luton population.

Training

There is a need to ensure more training is available for individuals to better treat and better understand peri-menopause and the menopause. It would be a recommendation of this report for the wider system in Luton to access training in this area.

Awareness

It would be a recommendation of this report that there is more awareness within workplaces and organisations about the effects of the menopause on individuals. This report would encourage organisations to have a Menopause in the Workplace Policy or Guidance.



Evaluation

There is not enough information available about the menopause in Luton. Because of this, the survey was an open text survey, where individuals were able to write what their answers were. This meant the analysis was lengthy and the results were based on total individuality. It might be, that if there were set answers to choose from, people might have been prompted or would have had thought triggers and may have answered differently.

Residents and practitioners need to have a wider breadth of knowledge about the menopause in Luton.

This report should provide the evidence to support anecdotal feedback and general views within Luton about how the menopause is affecting the experiences of women in Luton.

It would be good to use this survey as a baseline, to review menopause in Luton again in agreed timeframe.

What next?

- Healthwatch Luton will remain part of the Menopause Steering Group within Luton
- Healthwatch Luton will carry out Listening Events with a focus on the menopause
- Healthwatch Luton will produce recommendations for the wider system in Luton in relation to the menopause
- Healthwatch Luton will continue to share information, advice and awareness of the menopause in Luton

