



# Accessing GP services in Rotherham

A report into how Rotherham residents access GP services

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## About us

We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Rotherham. We are here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

Our sole purpose is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf. We focus on ensuring that peoples' worries and concerns about current services are addressed and work to get services right for the future.

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## Summary:

Healthwatch Rotherham decided to undertake a report looking into how Rotherham residents accessed GP services. We chose to do this due to the changes to services due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and a number of enquiries we have received from people experiencing issues with how they access their GP surgery.

An online survey was used to gather 227 responses from a wide age range of participants (under 18 through to 80+ years). The survey ran for 3 weeks and examined how people booked appointments, appointment types offered and any accessibility issues faced.

The findings were then analysed. We found that when booking appointments, people struggled to get through on busy telephone lines which is time consuming and inconvenient. The most popular methods of booking appointments were via telephone and the Rotherham Health App.

When looking at appointment types, we found that the majority of patients prefer a face to face appointment over a telephone appointment.

We had responses from the deaf community, who state that telephone appointments are physically impossible for them as they cannot hear and rely on seeing a face to communicate effectively. Additionally, those who are hard of hearing have found that there are a lack of BSL interpreters and a general lack of resources to support them at GP surgeries.

One of the most common issues we found was around the timing of telephone appointments. Many respondents commented that they are not given a specific time for their appointment, simply just morning or afternoon. This is particularly inconvenient if you are at work and need to schedule some time to take a personal call. People also complained that the Rotherham Health App frequently did not work and left them unable to book appointments.

For those who did need access to Easy Read documents, we heard that GP's were not providing this service, leaving patients with inaccessible information.

Recommendations from the report included: Having a mixture of online appointment services as well as via the telephone, appointment time flexibility, specific telephone appointment slots rather than vague time frames, more Easy Read document availability, ensuring the Rotherham Health App is regularly maintained and ensure there are sufficient resources for those who are hard of hearing.

The key take-homes from this report are Rotherham residents wanting **flexibility** and **choice** when it comes to their health.

## Introduction:

The ways in which patients accessed GP services and appointments drastically changed when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The majority of appointments were moved to the telephone to keep healthcare professionals, staff and patients safe from Covid-19. Despite healthcare professionals working incredibly hard during these exceptionally difficult circumstances, the healthcare system was put under enormous strain and is still struggling now.

This has resulted in long wait times for appointments, fewer face to face appointments and a difficulty in booking appointments. This has left many patients feeling frustrated and let down by their GP surgeries. At Healthwatch Rotherham, we have noticed an increase in GP surgery complaints to us and have had numerous comments from Rotherham residents about their

difficulties in accessing their GP surgery, so we decided to conduct a report looking into any general themes/issues that may be occurring, and what practices can do to improve the patient experience.

### **Method:**

Due to the on-going Covid-19 pandemic, we used an online survey to contact Rotherham residents about their views and experiences in accessing GP services. We hope in the future to do more in-person engagement including focus groups and interviews to try to capture the experiences of harder to reach communities.

We promoted the survey using Facebook and Twitter, as well as sharing this with other service providers in the local area, who kindly shared this with their clients, contacts and on their social media. We ensured that if anyone struggled to complete the survey, they could telephone us and we would assist them in completing the survey to ensure they did not miss out on sharing their experiences.

The survey ran for 3 weeks, opening on Monday the 14<sup>th</sup> of February and closing on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022. The survey had 227 responses from participants of all ages, allowing us to consider the experiences and opinions of different age groups.

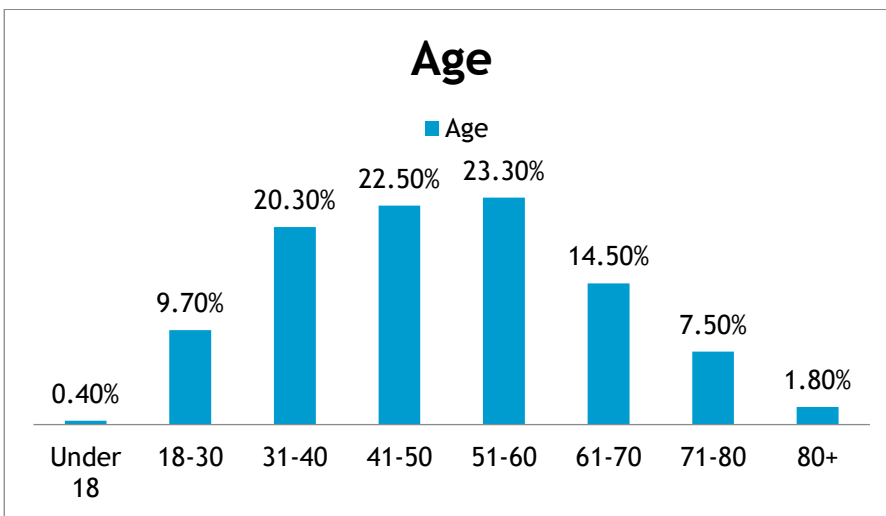
The survey examined how people booked appointments and what appointments they were offered, vs what appointment type people actually wanted and what their booking preference was. We also wanted to see if there were any accessibility issues people faced, such as documents not being available in Easy Read, lack of translators or communication issues. We specified that any experiences or opinions given were from the past 12 months, to ensure the information given was up-to-date and accurate of how GP services currently are.

The survey findings were then analysed, and where possible, turned into graphs to display the data in a visually clearer way. The data was quite lengthy and often repetitive, so many of the answers were grouped and themed by similarity.

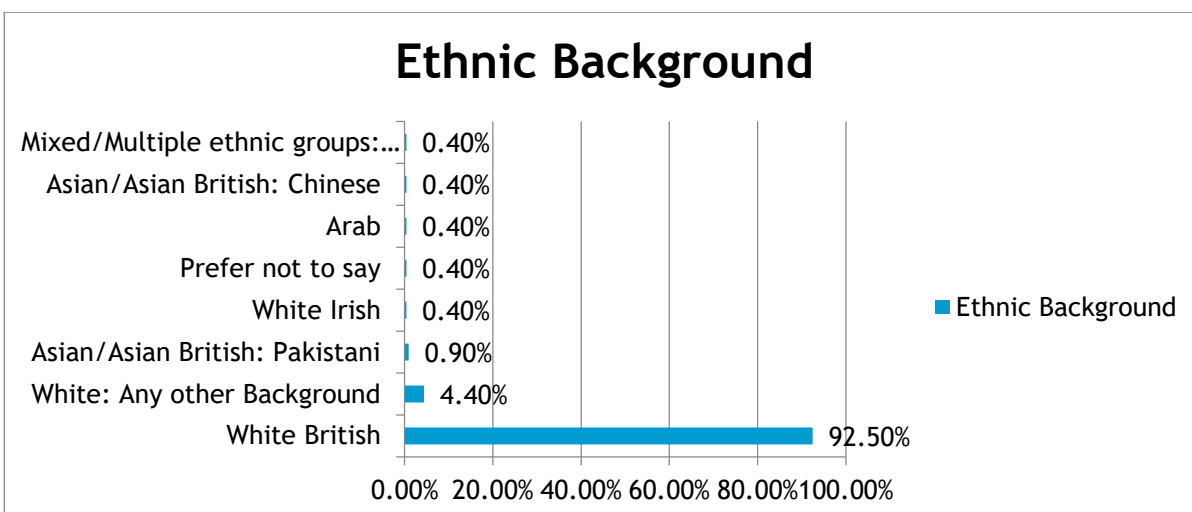
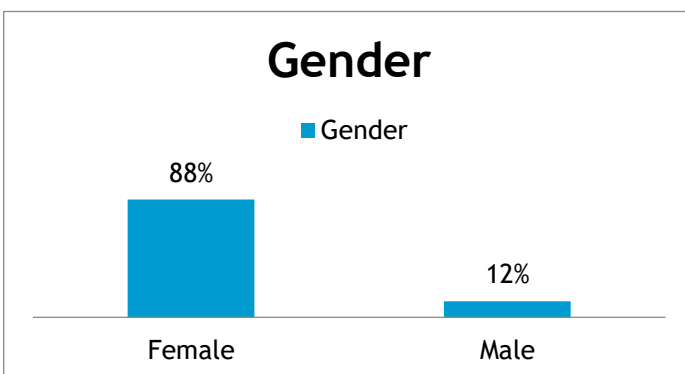
### **Findings:**

The findings were analysed and are presented below. Due to the large amounts of qualitative data collected, common answers have been grouped into themes.

**Demographics:**



Participants of all ages completed the survey, allowing us to examine how accessibility issues affect different age brackets and differences in their experiences of booking appointments.



The experiences of minority ethnic groups are underrepresented in our survey sample. Our sample is largely White British (92.5%), followed by White: Any other Background (4.4%). In our strategy for future surveys we aim to engage with diverse communities to represent the voices of our local community.

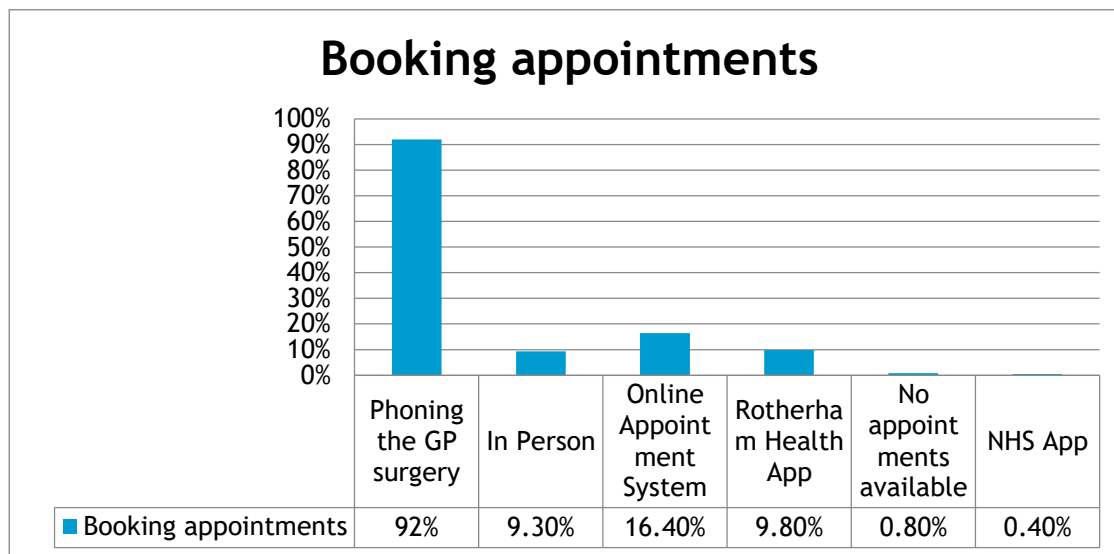
The first section explores how people book appointments with their GP surgery.

## Booking appointments:

Participants were asked about their booking methods when obtaining an appointment at their GP surgery. We advised that participants only complete these questions if they have tried to make an appointment in the past 12 months, to ensure the data is still relevant.

The questions below allowed for multiple answers, which is why the below data adds up to over 100%.

### How do you book appointments at your GP surgery? (In the last 12 months with any healthcare professional at the practice)

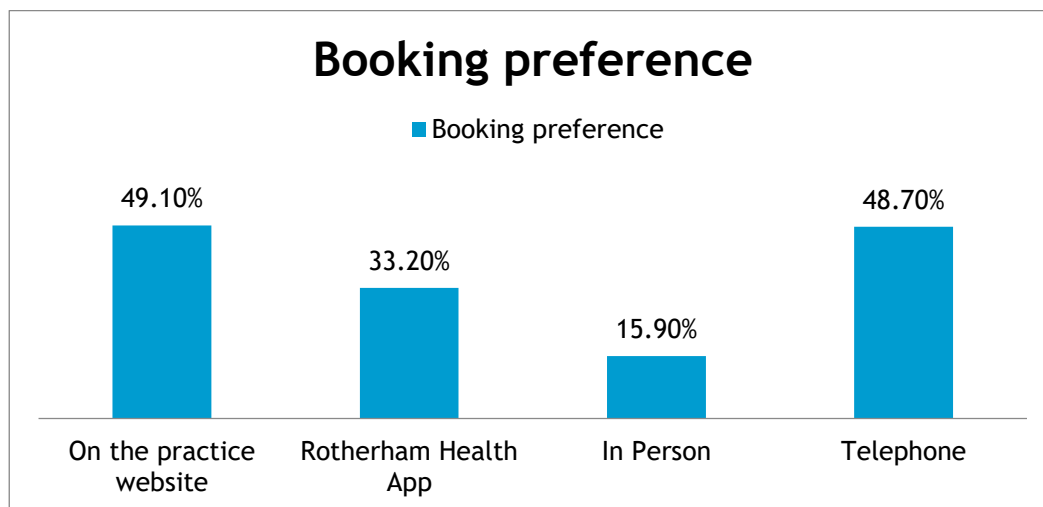


An overwhelming 92% of participants phone their GP surgery to book a medical appointment. Just 16% of participants use an online appointment system to book, with 9.8% additionally using the Rotherham Health App.

The most popular method to book appointments was to phone the GP surgery, with 92% of participants using this method within the past 12 months. The second most popular method was the online appointment system, with 16.4% of participants using this system to book appointments.

Relatively few participants used the Rotherham Health App (9.8%) or visited the GP surgery in person (9.3%) to book appointments. The NHS App is not a popular method to book appointments, used by less than 1% of participants.

**If you had the choice, how would you prefer to book an appointment with a healthcare professional?**



Despite 92% of participants using the telephone to book their medical appointments, only 48.7% of participants stated this as their first preference to book an appointment. Roughly half (49.1%) of respondents would prefer to book an appointment online, via the practice website. In addition to this, 33.2% of respondents also stated a preference for the Rotherham Health App.

We then filtered the data by age to see if there were any differences in how different age groups preferred to book appointments.

Of those aged 18-30, 78.2% would prefer to use the practice website or the Rotherham Health App to book an appointment, rather than over the phone or in person. The remaining X% would prefer to book appointments over the phone or in person.

18 out of the 23 respondents who were aged 18-30 stated that they would prefer to use the practice website or the Rotherham Health App to book an appointment as opposed to the telephone or in person. 8 of the 23 respondents aged 18-30 would prefer to use the telephone or go in-person to book an appointment.

Of those aged 71+, the preferred method was to book appointments over the phone (63.6%), whilst some preferred to book appointments in-person (27.2%). Digital methods were less popular amongst this age group, with only 2 respondents opting for booking appointments online using the practice website.

It is evident that those in younger age groups prefer to use digital methods to book medical appointments, whilst those in the older age groups prefer to use more traditional methods of the telephone or in-person. There is a risk that moving appointment systems and GP surgery updates to solely online could lead to the digital exclusion of some groups.

**For your preferred method of booking an appointment, why is this the best option for you?**

We then asked participants why they chose this booking option. We wanted to see why people prefer one method over another. Ultimately, we hope our work can feed into GP practice decision-making to ensure that patients can book appointments in a way that is most convenient, appropriate and accessible for them.

The data has been analysed and categorised below. Many of the answers were similar and have been summarised and grouped for ease.

**Practice website:****Convenience:**

- Quick and easy.
- I can access a website from a device with internet at a time convenient to me
- I don't have to keep ringing for a non-urgent appointment
- Booking online takes away the anxiety of making telephone calls
- I'm autistic and find it hard to make phone calls
- Easy to fit around work as I am not spending time on hold like via telephone
- Using the practice website can free up the phone lines for emergencies to get through quicker

**Telephone:****Technology issues:**

- IT equipment for booking online can be unreliable
- It is more personal and better for older people who are not computer savvy
- I do not always have internet data so this is more convenient for me
- I am not very good at using computers or my mobile so this is better
- I do not have access to a device to book appointments

**Personal touch:**

- I prefer to speak to someone rather than booking online
- Can explain issue and listen to the different options available
- Ability to speak to the receptionist who can discuss my needs with me and signpost me to the appropriate healthcare professional

**Type of appointments:**

- Sometimes need 2 appointments to work together such as a blood test and a doctor, which is easier to book via telephone
- There is a possibility of same day appointments being available

**Rotherham Health App:**

- Quick and easy
- More choice of doctors
- Can do it at any time
- Do not have to queue at 8am for an appointment
- I am deaf so using an app is more accessible than ringing up

For those who prefer using online services to book appointments, such as the practice website or the Rotherham Health App, the main reasons were convenience and simplicity. Many people struggle to get through on the phone to make appointments, and having an online service means people can book appointments at a time that suits them.

There is also a key theme around accessibility. Those with learning disability, mental health or other conditions may find it more difficult to communicate or understand information. It is



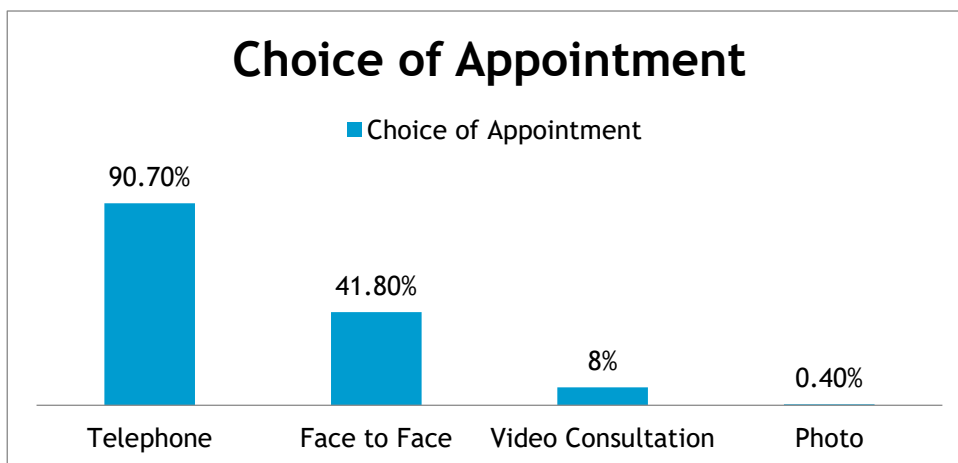
therefore important that GP practices provide services and access to services in a format that is suitable to them. Our feedback suggests that those who may face additional communication challenges for example those with autism, anxiety or hearing loss, prefer to book appointments online.

For those who prefer the telephone, the main reasons were not having access to technology or internet. Other people find it easier to talk to the receptionist so they can signpost them to the appropriate healthcare professional. It is important for services to remember that whilst moving services online can be beneficial and more convenient for many, it is essential that people can still talk to a receptionist or medical professional via telephone or in-person to book appointments to ensure certain groups in society are not being excluded for not having internet access.

**Choice of appointment:**

We then decided to examine what appointment types patients are currently being offered at their GP surgery, and whether what they are offered matches their preference.

What choice of appointment are you offered at your GP service? (With any type of healthcare professional at the practice)



Other comments:

- “I don’t get a choice, they just decide”
- “I am deaf and can’t use the phone”
- “None, get told to go to A&E instead”
- “Don’t know as have not been able to get an appointment”
- “Can never get an appointment”

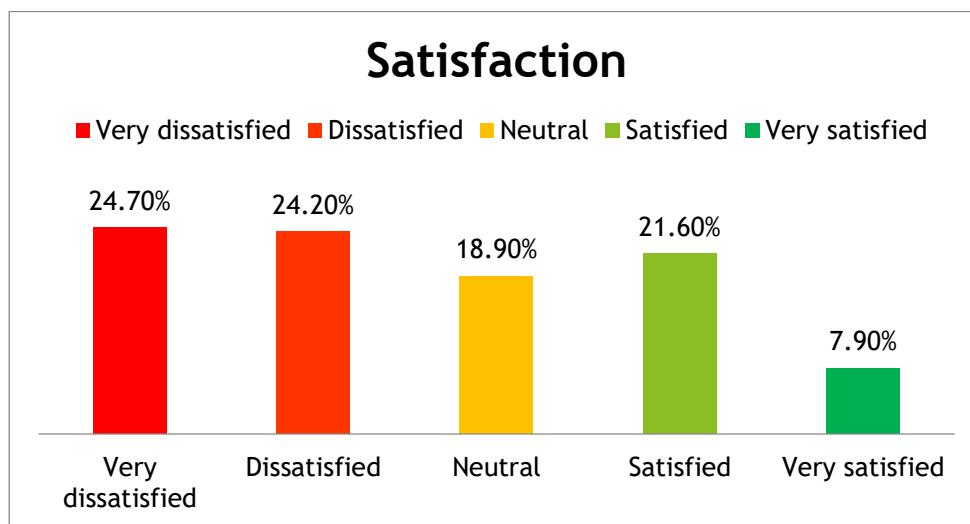
When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, many organisations and services, including GP services, had to change how they saw patients to prevent the spread of infection. This resulted in the majority of appointments moving to telephone appointments, with face to face being offered as and when necessary. As we slowly emerge from the pandemic, we are still seeing a large number of GP surgeries mainly offering telephone appointments to patients.

Telephone appointments are still offered to nearly all patients when booking an appointment (90.7%), whilst face to face appointments are still not the norm and are offered to less than half

of patients, despite restrictions easing and people expecting GP practices to return to pre-pandemic ways of working. This is backed up by the following questions as people are clearly dissatisfied with this and would like face to face appointments.

The findings below show how satisfied people are with this offering, and what appointment type works best for them.

**How satisfied are you with the choice of appointment type offered to you?**

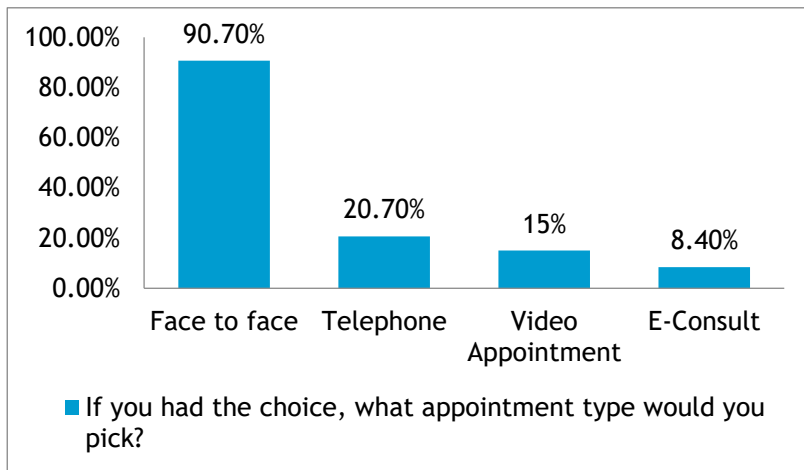


Other comments:

“All appointments now go to telephone triage first but this then means waiting for a call back for hours, only then to be told by the doctor to go to the surgery”

Nearly half of respondents (48.9%) are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the choice of appointment offered to them. We then asked Rotherham residents to tell us what appointment type they would choose and why. This allows service providers to see what patients want from their healthcare providers and what they can do to aid these preferences to ensure patient satisfaction.

**If you had the choice, what appointment type would you choose to take?**



**Other comments:**

“Depends on what is necessary for my care needs”

“I like phone appointments but these are not always suitable”

“Depends on what the appointment is for. If it is for an initial consultation I feel this should be face to face, for the majority of case review appointments I feel this could be over the phone”

“I think lots of appointments can be done over video or telephone, which makes for a much more time efficient service for everyone, but face to face is also incredibly important for those who need it, so it should be an option and it is really important that the person has a say in this”

Face-to-face appointments were the most popular choice (90.7%), followed by digital appointments, either through video or e-consult (23.4%) and telephone appointments (20.7%). Overall, people feel that face-to-face is the most appropriate appointment type, however it does depend on what is best suited to the patient’s needs. Some respondents stated they would be happy with a telephone appointment if it was for something minor such as a case review, but face-to-face if they felt it needed an examination.

**Why would you choose this option?**

**Face to face:**

**Communication:**

- More information can be transmitted face to face, including emotions
- I have sensory issues and autism and find phone calls very stressful. I can’t always remember what someone has said without a face to aid the memory
- I am deaf and cannot hear on a telephone
- You feel you are being listened to more in a face to face appointment
- It is easier to explain issues and show the doctor rather than describe it over the telephone

Reassurance:

- I feel that problems are more likely to be picked up by the doctor if they can see me
- You can be physically examined face to face
- I feel more reassured with a face to face appointment
- You cannot accurately diagnose everything over the telephone
- Face to face appointments give me peace of mind
- It is a better service and I feel more confident when the doctor can actually see you
- Symptoms can be missed over the telephone

For those who chose face to face as their preferred appointment type, there was a variety of reasons why. Many found that communication is easier face to face, as they can physically show the GP their issues and explain in a clear and concise way. Participants feel more listened to at face to face appointments and that any problems are more likely to be picked up at a face to face appointment as opposed to over the phone. Additionally, those with sensory issues as well as physical disabilities have commented that they find phone calls difficult as they are unable to hear on the telephone due to hearing issues, or that telephone calls are stressful and results in them forgetting what has been said.

Video appointments:

- Like to be able to see the face of the person I am speaking to
- I have anxiety so do not like leaving the house for a face to face appointment
- No need to leave home, less anxious about being overwhelmed
- Can see who you are talking to and would not have to risk infection by leaving the house as I am vulnerable
- Video appointment feels more like a consultation as opposed to a telephone call which felt more like a box ticking exercise
- Transport issues with face to face appointments that video consultations can prevent

Similarly to telephone appointments, with video appointments respondents like to be able to see the face of the person they are speaking to, to aid communication. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, people have become more anxious about leaving their house, but still want a personal connection with their doctor. Video appointments can accommodate that and can allow the patient a form of face to face contact from the comfort of their own home.

Telephone:

- Easier than visiting the surgery
- Not everything warrants a face to face appointment
- Saves time
- Anxiety in public places, severe anxiety so do not leave home
- More likely to be able to speak on the phone for 10 minutes rather than taking half a day off of work for a face to face appointment

For those who prefer telephone appointments, the main reasons were time and convenience. Having telephone appointments as an option means people do not need to take time off of work to attend appointments or leave their homes if this is not required.

### Other:

Many answers stated that it was dependent on their needs. People are happy with a telephone appointment for something minor but many would appreciate a face to face appointment if they require a physical examination as this is more reassuring for them. People feel they can explain things better to a doctor face to face, as well as physically showing an issue if necessary.

The overwhelming opinion of the participants is that choice is the most important factor. Patients do not want to feel forced into an appointment type that is not suitable for their needs.

### **Accessibility issues:**

#### Booking appointments:

#### What, if any, accessibility barriers do you face when trying to book an appointment with a healthcare professional? (In the last 12 months)

#### Telephone:

##### Busy telephone lines:

- Having to phone at 8:30am to be constantly trying as it is engaged, I am at work at this time.
- Cannot get through to my GP practice by telephone. The number constantly rings out then cuts off.
- Phone at surgery is cut off before you get through, even if you have been waiting in a queue for over 10 minutes. Appointments are taken up by online users so there aren't any left for people who have to phone

##### Getting an appointment:

- Timing for appointments, I work 9-5 and struggle to get any early or later appointments
- Have been trying since before Christmas to get an appointment, but can never get one. When I ask if I can pre-book they have not got any available and they are all gone for 8:20am
- My GP practice has suspended online booking which means patients have to ring multiple times a day and are being left on hold for long periods

#### Online/digital:

##### Difficulty in obtaining appointments:

- The Rotherham Health App does not let me book appointments
- Hard to book appointments online as they book up really quickly

#### Appointment screening issues:

##### Screening not done by GP/nurse:

- Screening is done by the receptionist and not the doctor/nurse

**Type of appointment:****Lack of choice:**

- You're only given one choice - over the phone or nothing
- Can't get a face to face appointment, only telephone or video available
- You can't have a face to face appointment without a telephone call first. You have to ring the surgery and the slots fill up too quickly

**Long wait times:**

- Making a telephone appointment can be a wait of weeks. Face to face can be the same day
- Have to wait on average 3 weeks just to get a telephone consultation

**Accessibility/communication issues:**

- Masks stop lip reading
- I am deaf so cannot hear on the telephone.
- I need more notice for appointments to allow me to arrange transport.
- Being deaf and having to book via telephone is not accessible or acceptable when I cannot get an appointment online. In the surgery where masks are worn, I cannot hear my name being shouted - I have almost missed the appointments because of this, despite telling reception that I'd like my name on the display board.
- Lack of access to BSL interpreters

**Accessibility issues when obtaining appointments:**

**If you obtained an appointment (whether that be via phone, face to face etc.) were there any accessibility issues you faced that made the appointment difficult for you?**

**Communication Issues:**

- I am always given a telephone appointment. I cannot see the face or the body of the person. This means I miss out on vital communication clues.
- No interpreter available and GP won't pay for or book one. Wants family to interpret but no privacy. A basic human right to discuss issues privately
- My partner is registered blind and could not see the sign to buzz to enter the surgery so could not have easily gone to the surgery himself
- Repeat telephone appointments, when it's on my record I'm deaf. I struggle to understand majority of the doctors' accents as I am always given a different GP every time.

**Online issues:**

- Sending me a link for a zoom consultation was hard as my phone was not able to do this
- Trying to send a photo of ailment is difficult and does not show issue correctly
- Video conference did not work, still needed to see a doctor face to face even after this consultation

**Vague telephone appointment time:**

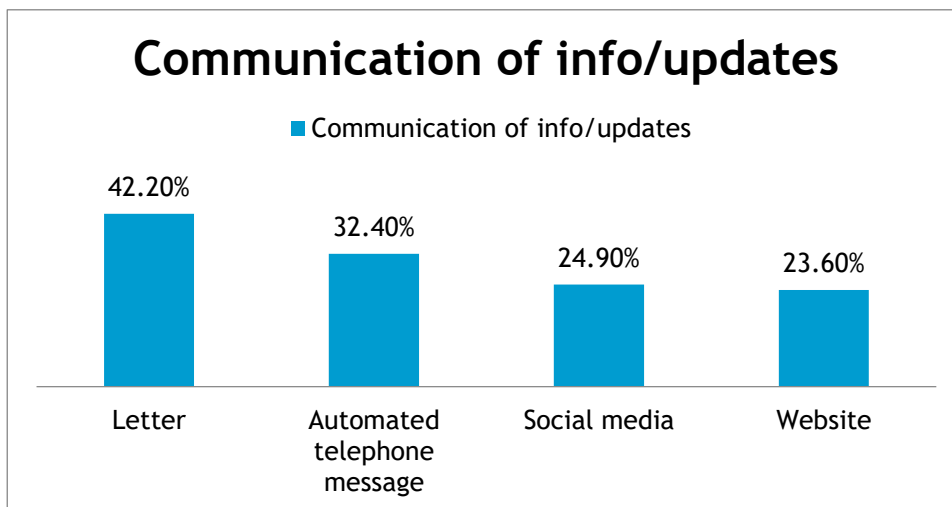
- Phone appointments not good as they say they will ring at one time and do it at another. Not convenient when at work
- Not flexible enough when working, cannot speak on the phone as no privacy at work
- No specific time given for telephone appointment which shows a lack of respect for my time.
- Waiting for a call for a private number that may or may not be the GP increases my anxiety levels
- Did not take place when scheduled, over an hour late which caused work issues

**Other issues:**

- I had earache and needed an ear examination which could not be done over the phone, but I had a telephone appointment

**Communication between patient and GP practice:**

**How would you prefer your GP surgery to communicate information/updates to you?**



**Other data:**

- Text message: 38 people
- E-mail - 33 people

**What elements of your GP practice do you find inaccessible? (if any)**

People told us that they find it difficult to book appointments and to access digital systems such as the Rotherham Health App or GP booking system.

We also heard that there is a lack of services for deaf people and a lack of information provided in easy read format.

**Improving accessibility:****How could your GP practice improve accessibility?****Appointments:**

- Let you be able to book non-urgent appointments on the phone rather than only been able to book same day appointments.
- More face to face appointments
- Make more appointments for those who work by extending opening times or having more accessible time slots such as early morning/evening/weekend.

**Accessibility:**

- Have automated doors to enter GP surgeries
- Be able to place flag on a patient record to show they need extra help on arrival to doctors.
- Have a translated telephone service.
- Offer text or email contact methods for deaf people.
- Improve the phone lines
- Text services to book appointments and guaranteed interpreter

**General comments:****Do you have any other comments regarding accessing your GP?****Positive:**

- They've been great. No complaints from me.
- Waiting time down to 5 minutes since the phone system upgraded and updated
- I prefer the new system of telephone appointments
- They are working very hard and doing their best in difficult circumstances
- I'm very happy with the service I've received from my GP practice
- I think I'm very lucky that it isn't overly hard to get an appointment. I really like my GP practice.

**Negative:**

- If services are changing, the general public need to know the new process for health care delivery. Notice boards can be used in the surgery, pharmacy and library to inform the public where to go if they have certain complaints. Also encourage some patients to self-manage in the first instance. Many people pose unnecessary demands on GPs and their staff.
- The Rotherham health app doesn't work and doesn't allow you to book appointments
- It has never in my experience been so difficult to access a GP and I am not sure how older and/or less IT savvy patients manage
- Receptionists should not be discussing patient's conditions or problems in front of other patients. It is unprofessional and against GDPR.



## Easy Read:

Easy read is a method of presenting written information to make it easier to understand for people with difficulty reading.

Only 5.6% would like or have accessed Easy Read information. Worryingly, we have heard that GPs are not providing information in an accessible format.

## Conclusions:

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many incredibly difficult challenges to everyone, particularly the health sector. Whilst Covid rules and guidance are relaxed as time progresses, Covid-19 cases are still rife in the community, and many GP practices have kept their Covid rules in place to protect staff as well as patients.

It is clear from our findings that the majority of patients prefer a face to face appointment over a telephone appointment.

Additionally, with telephone lines often extremely busy and unable to cope with the demand, booking appointments is also incredibly time consuming for many. Patients have reported waiting over an hour just to speak to a receptionist, to find all the appointments for the day had now been taken. Taking away online appointment services on practice websites means that patients have no choice but to use the telephone line, often at inconvenient times such as during work hours.

We have had numerous individual responses from the deaf community, who state that telephone appointments are physically impossible for them as they cannot hear and rely on seeing a face to communicate effectively. Additionally, those who are hard of hearing have found that there are a lack of BSL interpreters and a general lack of resources to support them at GP surgeries.

One of the most common issues we found was around the timing of telephone appointments. Many respondents commented that they are not given a specific time for their appointment, simply just morning or afternoon. This is particularly inconvenient if you are at work and need to schedule some time to take a personal call.

It is apparent from the findings above that people want more flexibility and choice of how they access medical appointments. The Rotherham Health App, if an alternative to telephone appointment booking, should be regularly maintained to ensure patients can access it successfully. By taking away online services, GP practices risk excluding a large portion of Rotherham residents who simply do not have the time to wait in a virtual queue at 8am each morning. Additionally, removing telephone services altogether will then exclude those who do not have access to a device with the internet. A mixture of both online and telephone services with additional appointment flexibility allows people to make their own choice as to how they access healthcare at a time that suits them.

Similarly, residents want a mixture of digital and physical communication methods between themselves and the GP. Large numbers of respondents wanted a letter or an automated telephone message on the practice's telephone system to keep them updated of service change. Others prefer to find this information on the practice website or their social media pages.

The key take-homes from this report are Rotherham residents wanting **flexibility** and **choice** when it comes to their health.

## Recommendations:

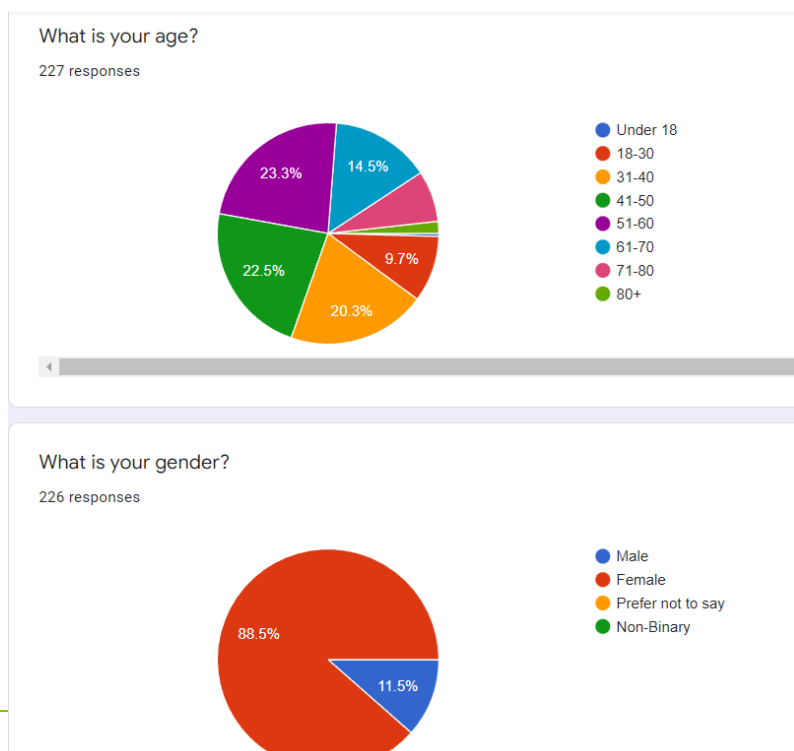
- A mixture of online appointment booking on practice websites, as well as via the telephone booking system
- Be more flexible with appointment times where this is possible and where staffing levels allow. Offer early morning and evening appointments as well as weekend appointments for those who work during the week.
- Offer patients specific timed telephone appointment slots rather than 5 hour time frames so they do not accidentally miss the appointment call
- Allow patients to book non-urgent appointments in advance via the telephone and not just same day urgent appointments
- Clearly advertise that documents can be made available in Easy Read, and provide this to patients when requested
- Ensure the Rotherham Health App is regularly maintained and patients are able to use its services successfully. A ‘secret shopper’ style group of volunteers could be set up to ensure the app is user friendly.
- Offer more resources for those who are hard of hearing, such as reliable interpreters, alternative contact methods such as text or e-mail, and face to face appointment offerings rather than telephone appointments.

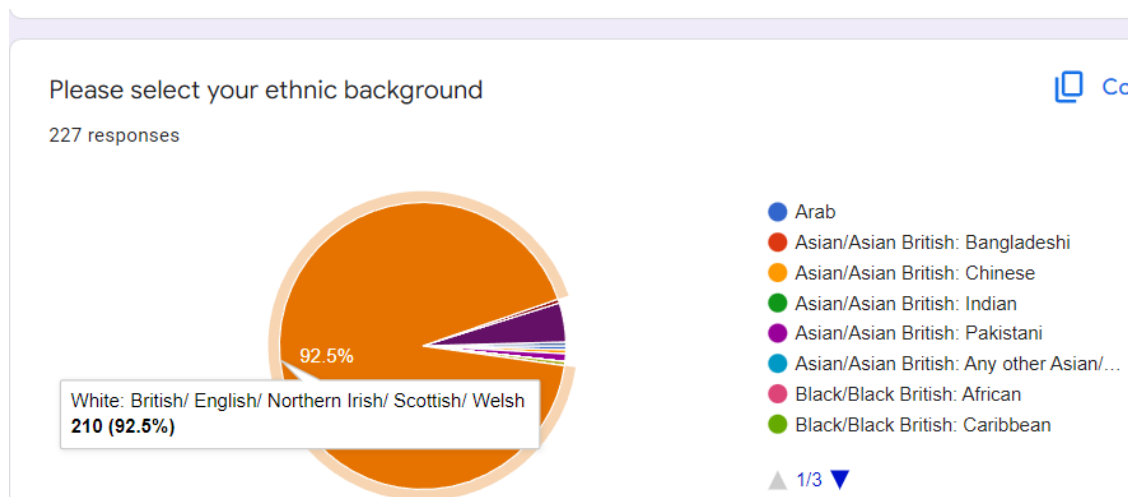
## Acknowledgments:

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete the survey, and for their useful and detailed responses. We would also like to thank those who shared it with colleagues, clients and partners.

## Appendix:

### Survey questions:





4. How do you book appointments at your GP surgery? (In the last 12 months with any healthcare professional at the practice)
5. If you had the choice, how would you prefer to book an appointment with a healthcare professional?
6. For your preferred method of booking an appointment, why is this the best option for you?
7. What choice of appointment are you offered at your GP service? (with any type of healthcare professional at the practice)
8. How satisfied are you with the choice of appointment type offered to you?
9. If you had the choice, what appointment type would you choose to take?
10. Why would you choose this option?
11. What (if any) accessibility barriers do you face when trying to book an appointment with a healthcare professional? (In the last 12 months)
12. If you obtained an appointment (whether that be via phone, face to face etc) were there any accessibility issues you faced that made the appointment difficult for you?
13. How would you prefer your GP surgery to communicate information/updates to you?
14. What elements of your GP practice do you find inaccessible? (if any)
15. How could your GP practice improve accessibility?
16. Do you have any other comments regarding accessing your GP?
17. Do you use Easy Read to access information given to you by your GP surgery?
18. Does your GP surgery provide you with information in Easy Read format when requested?
19. If no, how do you access information in an Easy Read format?