



# Do I Want To See A GP?

May 2022

## Do I Want To See A GP?



**Information & Guidance Team Project  
For Suffolk & Northeast Essex Integrated Care System  
March - May 2022**

## Contents

1.0 Introduction .....	3
1.1 Healthwatch Essex .....	3
1.2 Topic blurb.....	3
1.3 Acknowledgements .....	3
1.4 Terminology .....	3
1.5 Disclaimer .....	3
2.0 Purpose .....	4
2.1 Engagement methods .....	4
3.0 Key Findings and Recommendations .....	4
4.0 Conclusion.....	20

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Healthwatch Essex

Healthwatch Essex is an independent charity which gathers and represents views about health and social care services in Essex. Our aim is to influence decision makers so that services are fit for purpose, effective and accessible, ultimately improving service user experience. We also provide an information service to help people access, understand, and navigate the health and social care system.

### 1.2 Background

Healthwatch Essex were approached by Suffolk & North East Essex to undertake a series of projects focussing on the lived experiences of people in the area in relation to their health, care and wellbeing.

### 1.3 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Essex would like to thank the public who engaged with us and our network of stakeholders and partners who supported in sharing the project.

### 1.4 Terminology

Babylon GP - Online GP website service

IBD - Irritable Bowel Disease

PCN - Primary Care Network

PPG - Patient Participation Group

UTC - Urgent Treatment Centre

OOH - Out of Hours

Triage - the preliminary assessment of patients or casualties in order to determine the urgency of their need for treatment and the nature of treatment required.

EWMHS - Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service

### 1.5 Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings and observations carried out on specific dates and times, representing the views of those who contributed anonymously during the engagement visits. This report summarises themes from the responses collected and puts forward recommendations based on the experiences shared with Healthwatch Essex during this time.

## 2.0 Purpose

The aim of this project is to explore people's experiences of GP services in northeast Essex.

### 2.1 Engagement methods



#### Surveys

A survey was created and distributed via our network of stakeholders and partners, as well as on our social media platforms and a dedicated page on our own website.



#### Interviews

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of GP services we conducted a number of one-to-one interviews with participants.



#### Case Studies

To further understand the experience of GP services we gathered details of lived experiences from members of the public.

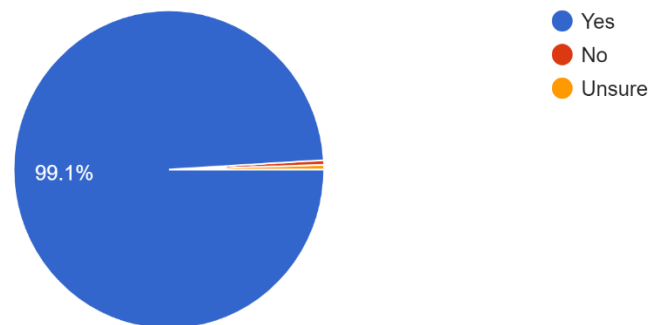
## 3.0 Key Findings and Recommendations

### 3.1 The Survey

In order to better understand the issue of GP services in northeast Essex, we circulated a survey which garnered the following data.

1. Are you currently registered with a GP surgery?

211 responses



Our initial question focussed on whether the respondent was already registered with a GP surgery, of which from 211 responses 99.1% stated that they were. In our second question we asked for respondents who selected 'no' or 'unsure' for Question 1 to elaborate on why this was. One respondent stated that they 'can't get on a list' since moving into the area from another part of Essex. Another stated that they were unsure as to whether they were registered with a GP but did not expand upon why this was.

In Question 3, we asked if respondents had experienced any challenges in getting an appointment with a GP when they have needed one, and if so, what were they? In total we received 191 responses to this question, with 34 stating that they had experienced no problems at all. Those who stated that they had experienced challenges cited the following reasons:

**Lack of available/prompt/appropriate appointments:**

“Can't get an appointment full stop.”

“I was told there was only telephone appointments available, and my problem wasn't suitable for a telephone appointment.”

“The main difficulty lies in actually seeing a GP in the surgery as they only offer a phone back service.”

“They want to diagnose you over the phone and only see you if they feel it's needed, which in my experience is never.”

“No available appointments. I'm constantly told to phone back tomorrow but it's the same problem then.”

“It took me six weeks to get a GP appointment last year as it was felt that I only needed a telephone consultation, and I actually needed an examination. Also, my 98-year-old mother has needed to see a GP for approximately three months - she is housebound and still has not had a visit.”

“I needed mental health help, and was told there were no appointments, I was told to call the next day and see if there was one then and it would be a call back not a face-to-face appointment if I did get one. I was just left for the day with no support”

“My surgery only offer on the day appointments, but I am very busy and need to be able to book these things in advance.”

“I don’t understand why it is not allowed to pre-book an appointment, not everyone can spend an hour waiting on the phone at 8am, especially if they work or have to travel.”

**Difficulties with the booking systems:**

“Long wait on the phone to get through to make an appointment and often none left or just emergency ones by the time I get through.”

“Long waiting times on the phone. Lack of advance booked appointments for non-urgent ailments. Long waits (3 hours!) sitting at the surgery for 'open appointments' for urgent appointments.”

“We are now forced to call at 8am, even for a routine appointment that could be booked well ahead. This creates a massive barrier if you can't sit and spend 20 minutes waiting on the phone at that time of day. If you try and call later, they tell you that you have to call again the next morning! This is an even bigger problem for my husband.”

“I have also had trouble getting through on the phone. I had to book private appointments for myself and my daughter (who needed urgent surgery). I tend to go privately now as it is easier.”

“My GP is not offering face to face assessments. I struggle to speak and hear on phone.”

“You can’t get pre bookable appointments and have to queue for over an hour to talk to reception only to get cut off.”

“You can’t get through on the phone, it takes multiple calls - sometimes over 100 just to get through and when I do there are NO appointments available!!”

“Before Covid you could not pre book an appointment, you had to call on the day which was impossible. Post Covid they are still not seeing anyone in person.”

“It’s very hard to speak to anyone or to get through triage.”

“No appointments were available for four weeks, with me having to call back daily to see if the appointment book was open.”

“You can no longer book appointments online at a convenient time (online booking has been disabled since the pandemic at my surgery) - you have to call but can’t get through then or book an appointment at a convenient time.”

“Trying to get an appointment is ridiculous, even getting past the receptionist is a fight. You have to wait for a call back and getting a face-to-face appointment has been near impossible as they try to solve it over the phone. I don't feel confident in this.”

“It’s near impossible to get through on the phone and when you finally do (up to an hour later) there are no appointments left and you’re told to ring again the next day to get stuck in the same cycle.”

“It takes a long time to get though on the phone and then GP appointments are triaged so you don't always get offered one, and they are almost always by telephone.”

“You can only book appointments over the phone, at 8am-10am Monday to Friday but I work during these times. I don’t feel that I should have to take a day off work just to book the appointment.”

“You can only ring for an appointment, but the phone is permanently engaged!”

“I have to start telephoning the surgery at 8am. Many times, the line is engaged. When I get through after many attempts there is a very long message about Covid etc. It’s not a service it’s more of a mission.”

“Long queue waiting times on the telephone are standard (sometimes 40+ minutes). By the time you get through very few appointments if any are available, and you always have to have a call back - sometimes with call back time anywhere between 8am and 8pm. This is particularly difficult when working as you should be able to talk to a health professional in privacy. You are very often unable to get a face-to-face appointment at all. Reception staff are often ill informed (give wrong information) and unhelpful - they should receive better training with strategies for dealing directly with patients. The vast majority of people contacting surgeries have health worries or need advice and should be treated with understanding.”

“Waiting on a phone listening to the ever-increasing answerphone message which costs me financially, only to not have it answered or to be told there are too many callers and to ring back. Or ringing for an appointment first thing in the morning to be told all the appointments have already gone, when I couldn’t even get through. Before now I have redialled and redialled to get through, always engaged, the most was 87 times (it shows on your mobile) and then to be told that I need to ring earlier is a hugely frustrating experience.”

“Getting through to reception is a nightmare, you are left too long on hold with anxiety inducing music and then waiting for a call back with a healthcare professional who may not be appropriate for the issue. They will only call back once and won’t give a rough time meaning that I’m scared to do anything in case I miss the call (toilet, meal preparation, etc.)”

“When the call connected, I was number 48 and it took one hour and twenty minutes to finally speak to someone. Only allowing telephone appointments is not a fully accessible way of operating and while I am able to sit with my phone on speaker waiting for over an hour many older or disabled people are not.”

“It took me 178 attempts to get connected to book an appointment.”

“It’s so bad we’ve given up despite having referral letters from hospitals to say we need to see our GP’s.”

**Issues with staff attitudes:**

“Receptionists being rude and not listening.”

“Doctors not wanting to do face to face appointments is a big problem.”

“You wait forever in the phone queue only to then have to try and get past the receptionists!”



“If I ever manage to get through a shirty receptionist says that all appointments are gone and to try the next day (or Monday) and the same thing happens every morning ad infinity. If you say it has become urgent, they just tell you to go to A&E!”

“I’m really not happy with receptionists making medical decisions.”

“If you do not explain clearly the reason for wanting to see a doctor the receptionist will do his/her diagnostics and you do not get to see one, you get rerouted in the system.”

“Much depends on the GP; they ring you and do an initial consultation by telephone and then bring you to be seen if necessary. I have had one GP whose first words were “tell me in one word why you want to be seen.”

**Dissatisfaction with the quality of service offered:**

“The telephone triage system makes it very difficult as you don’t know when the doctor will call you back. In particular trying to get an appointment for my teenage children who are at school all day is a nightmare. One doctor told us to wait until the child was ill enough to be off school - which is not a reasonable approach to healthcare in my opinion.”

“Ongoing, they seem to more often than not refer me to 111 or A&E rather than see me themselves.”

“I have a had a bad experience with my GP from 18 months ago, I have used NHS England to discuss this matter, the concern was not really resolved to a satisfying standard. I still feel concerned that my GP is not available for face-to-face appointments and feel the receptionists often discard patients. This may be how they are instructed to deal with people, or maybe they feel entitled to behave this way? Either way I feel that patients are not being treated as they were pre pandemic... struggling to understand why as all other services seem to have been returned to normal.”

“You call and they say a doctor will call you back, but the doctor doesn’t call. Repeat again and again. I am now saving to pay for a private GP appointment.”

“We have had ongoing mental health issues with our child at home and have been unable to have a face-to-face appointment with a GP for over a year. All conversations have been via telephone and with different doctors. We were promised weekly catch-up talks whilst awaiting a referral to EWHMS, but this was not received.”

“You have to ring at exactly 8am on the day you want an appointment. It’s ridiculous. I have a new-born baby and can’t clock watch like that, plus I don’t always want an appointment on the day, but an advance appointment for something more long term. I couldn’t even get an appointment or get through to the surgery when I had mastitis a few weeks back. I had to ring 111, who then got my GP to call me back hours later.”

“The only way to get an appointment sooner than waiting for one month is going to open access, sitting in a crowd and often (despite asking to see a doctor) being seen by the nurse. This has resulted in me having to go again and wait being exposed to a crown in a small not well-ventilated space.”

“We have had problems over the last few years as too many houses have been built in the area putting pressure on the GP surgeries.”

“There are not enough appointments. It took six weeks to register with my new surgery when I moved area because of their processes. It didn't make any difference to them that I was five months pregnant with existing health conditions.”

“When I needed to see a doctor only telephone consultations were available then I never received the call that was booked, had to use the 111 OOH GP service. The telephone consultation was marked as completed on the NHS app by the GP despite the call never taking place.”

“Our surgery makes you wait all day for a telephone call then a decision to be made whether you need to see a doctor.”

“There are very limited bookable GP appointments and when there are some, they are weeks away! Patients are basically told to attend the Open Access morning surgery between 8-10am, which isn't easy when there's a school runs to do, and I only work mornings - I hate the Open Access system as the whole morning is simply taken up with just waiting! It's also impossible to simply get a message to a GP, without attending 'Open Access' for 1-2 hours. During the Pandemic, we were offered telephone consultations the same day, which was fantastic and, if you needed to see a GP, then you were asked to pop in later that day! Sadly, this is no longer an option! “

“I had a late miscarriage during the pandemic that resulted in hospital treatment. Six weeks later I tried to get an appointment with my GP as I had some questions, and my mental health was very low. I was refused a same day appointment and told I would need to wait four weeks. The triage nurse was quite short with me and kept telling me I needed to phone the ward I had been treated on, which I felt was inappropriate as I knew the ward was very busy.”

“It seems the norm now to get a call back from a GP that you don't know; I find this quite disconcerting and not always comfortable.”

“The system is disrespectful and stressful (to staff and customers) and since Covid triage even when you get through the service is even more inefficient. It isn't appropriate to be told 'tell me your story and I'll tell you who you can see and when'.”

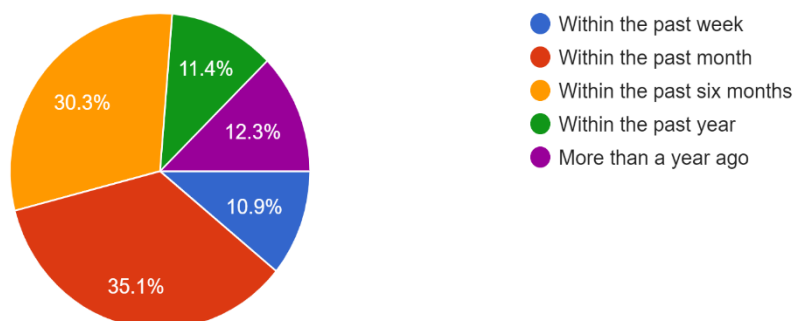
“Why are there no appointments outside of normal working hours for those of us who work?”

“During the pandemic when our surgery on Mersea Island were doing phone consultations, only seeing patients, if necessary, my husband had four telephone consultations. Despite having difficulties eating and drinking and finally needing to go onto a liquid diet in addition to losing about two stone in weight, they failed to make an urgent referral and initially thought it was acid reflux. Eventually we had no option than to go to A&E. He was subsequently diagnosed with oesophageal cancer. When he arrived at A&E the doctor said he was lucky he came in as he was not getting enough fluids and could have died.”

We then asked in Question 4 when the respondent last had an appointment with a healthcare professional at the GP surgery.

4. When did you last access a healthcare professional at the GP surgery?

211 responses

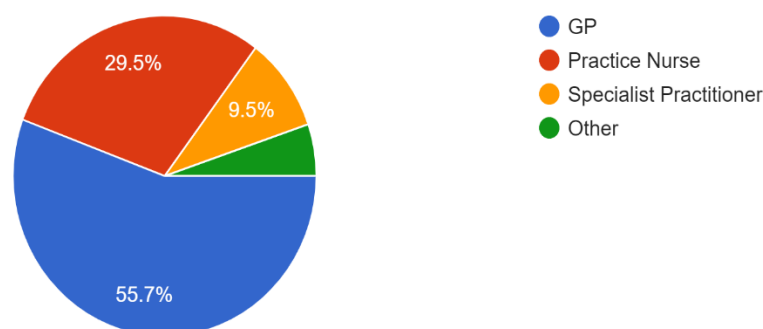


Of the total 211 responses received, the majority consisting of 74 individuals had done so within the past month. A further 64 had done so within the past six months and 23 within the past week. Less frequent consultations however were had by the 24 who had consulted a healthcare professional at the surgery between six months and one year ago, and 26 who had not done so in excess of one year.

Following on from this, we then asked respondents with whom their last healthcare appointment had taken place with from their surgery.

5. Was this appointment with;

210 responses



Of the 210 responses, 117 had had the consultation with a GP, 62 with a Practice Nurse and 20 with a Specialist Practitioner. 11 respondents indicated that their consultation had been with another type of healthcare practitioner.

We expanded upon this by then asking the respondent if they had been satisfied with this arrangement. Of 192 responses to this question, 119 affirmed that they were satisfied in feeling that the appointment was with the appropriate healthcare professional. Conversely, 91 stated that they were not happy and dissatisfied that the appointment was, in their opinion, not with the appropriate healthcare professional. 74 respondents stated that they

would have preferred to have seen their allocated healthcare professional face to face rather than hold the consultation over the telephone. Some also expanded further on the reasons for their answer, including;

“I had to go to GP to get a referral to a consultant - the UTC at Colchester Hospital should have been able to make this referral. The way that the service is set up is about money and purse strings and not about people and patient care.”

“It was ok, but I felt like I was being rushed from the outset.”

“I was never given the option to see someone, it was on the phone or nothing.”

“The nurses are always accessible and more often than not easier to deal with.”

“The nurse was great, but she felt I needed to see a doctor. I was then offered a telephone appointment with the doctor. Why can't a doctor physically see me now?”

“Having access to phone appointments is great for me as I work full time.”

“I felt the visit was rushed, this doctor saw me for the first time and didn't ask for my history and didn't seem to have the time to ask me more. I was told to wait until three months have passed and come back although my symptoms could be related to one of my many ongoing issues. That was not asked or explored.”

“I was triaged and given a telephone appointment at 8am; by 5.45pm nobody had contacted me, and the surgery lines were shut.”

“I was happy to speak to the GP but all in all it took me about four weeks to get that appointment and all I needed (which I told the reception) was a five-minute call with someone. Doesn't feel like an efficient system to me.”

“The doctor is rude and dismissive on the phone and in person!”

“I just really wanted to see someone face to face because I was so worried, but nobody seemed to understand that.”

“The reception staff are very good at allocating you to the right person, although if you want to see a named GP or you disagree, you have to 'explain/justify' why.”

“I feel that instead of being sent from one person to another I could have been dealt with by the GP on one visit - therefore saving the practice time and freeing up appointments for others.”

“It does feel like the aim is to prevent you from actually getting anywhere near a GP from the moment you dial the surgery.”

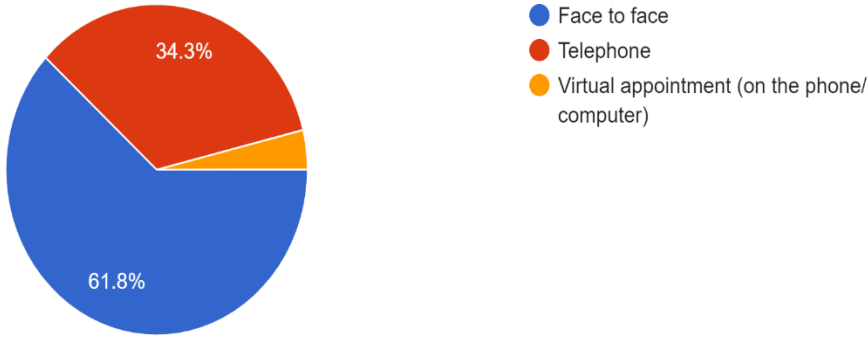
“The nurse could not get rid of me quick enough, couldn't even be bothered to take my blood pressure even though I'm on medication for high blood pressure.”

“I would have preferred a face-to-face meeting to show the doctor my problem rather than sending some photos.”

“I am uncomfortable with telephone talks with doctor as I feel it is restrictive and I feel that I have not been thoroughly heard. Also, my doctor has changed every couple of years so there is no continuity.”

In Question 7 we asked the respondent by what medium their last healthcare consultation took place.

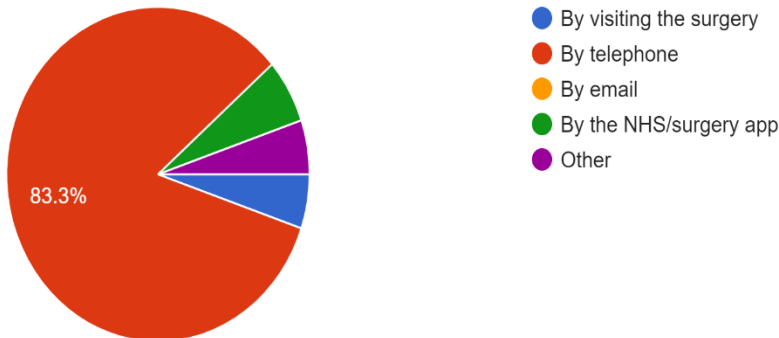
7. Did this interaction take place by;  
207 responses



Of the 207 responses received, 128 stated that their last interaction was held face to face, whilst 71 had a telephone consultation. The remaining eight respondents were given a virtual appointment.

We then asked how the respondent arranged this appointment.

8. How did you book this appointment?  
210 responses

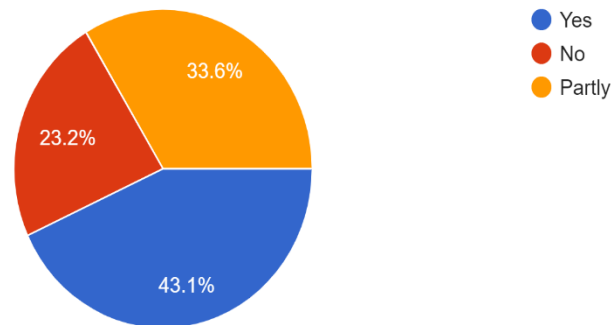


Of the 200 responses received to this question, a resounding 175 had booked the appointment by telephone, with just 13 doing so via the surgery or NHS app, 11 by visiting the surgery and 11 via other means.

We then followed this question up by asking if the respondents were satisfied with the various aspects of the process.

9. Were you satisfied with your appointment, including the booking process and care provided?

211 responses



Of the 211 responses received, 91 stated that they were satisfied, 71 were partly satisfied and 49 were not satisfied. In order to understand this further, we asked respondents to explain why they gave this answer. Responses included:

“I got through to the surgery quickly, had a phone appointment an hour later and then a face to face the same day. Very good service and I was pleased it all happened so quickly.”

“When you actually get to speak to a clinician, the care is fine- it’s the access that’s difficult.”

“All at my practice are kind and considerate.”

“On the occasion in question I got a telephone appointment first with the GP, who asked me to come to the surgery for a face-to-face appointment. I was happy with the care I received, but at the same time I am conscious that I had to go through an extra step in order to see the GP compared to pre-pandemic.”

“I phoned for an appointment to be told at 8.20am when I finally got through that all appointments had gone, and I had to ring 111. I rang them and after answering loads of questions they said I would have a call back - which was from my GP (who didn’t have any appointments left at 8.20am) and he agreed I needed to see him in person. The system was crazy, and it took all day to get to see the GP.”

“How can a doctor feel for lumps or test for pain over the phone?”

“Although I was happy to have been off work for eight weeks, it was all on my word with no health checks. I have never actually met the doctor in person.”

“At Creffield Medical Centre the receptionist was absolutely fantastic, his attitude and manner was outstanding. I have BPD and this man made a massive difference to my mood.”

“I don’t like the fact that I have to make an appointment on the day I want the appointment, I’m a single parent working full time and to give my work/livelihood very little notice before having to leave the office is frustrating and I don’t want to put that at jeopardy.”

“I was referred to 111 in order to get a referral back to my GP for antibiotics. Where is the sense in that?”

“You are made to feel as if you are a nuisance when calling for an appointment even though my health issue required a nurse appointment.”

“The call was perfect and caring, but I had to fight to get it!”

“I had a blood test in May 2021 and was advised that the results were abnormal, and I would receive an appointment offer in the next two weeks to have a follow up blood test. I waited three weeks and contacted the surgery myself to book this in. The appointment was made in an appropriate timeframe after contacting the surgery, however I felt that I had been 'forgotten'.”

“I have a long-term health condition treated by medication and I've had no review for two years. I also have another chronic condition I've been suffering with and need a diagnosis and probably medication too but cannot get an appointment with a GP.”

“On the whole, the GP's and nurses are fantastic at the surgery and are helpful and knowledgeable, making me feel at ease - although there's definitely some I prefer more than others! However, there's been another occasion where results have gone astray, and it took weeks to sort out - it was so stressful, and I was in tears on the phone to the secretary.”

“Once I was called back by a GP, things were good, but the long wait and intimate 'grilling' by the receptionist was a traumatic experience as she was asking far too personal questions regarding the reason for my need to speak to the GP... far over and above the basic reason which I did not mind sharing. Once I was called back by a GP, things have been very positive.”

“I was told by text message to look at a website. I was not offered the option to speak with the GP.”

“I just feel that the surgery is 'ticking boxes' and not looking at my overall health.”

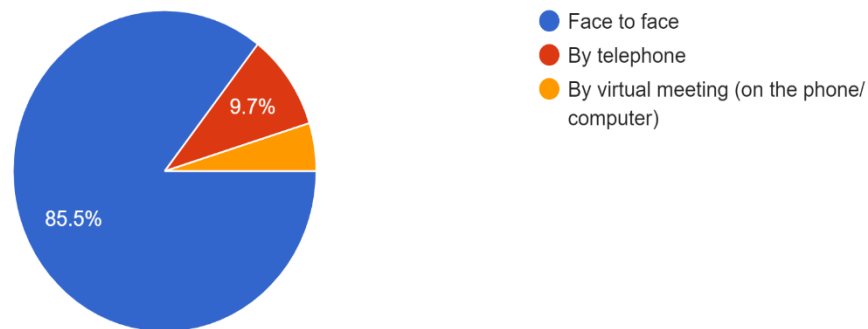
“I had "too many issues for one appointment", but they are all connected.”

“I was told I was close to being diabetic and I was being referred to a specialist team, but I did not hear from them for over six weeks, and this was a phone call which I had difficulty in understanding. I am still waiting for further information.”

We then asked respondents how they prefer their healthcare appointments to take place. Of 207 responses, an overwhelming 177 said that they prefer their healthcare appointments to be carried out face to face. Twenty stated that they preferred a telephone consultation and ten preferred the option of a virtual consultation.

11. How do you prefer your healthcare appointments to take place?

207 responses



### 3.2 The Interviews

We followed on from the survey by carrying out a number of one-to-one interviews with members of the public. Some examples are detailed below.

#### Interview 1 - Bernie

“My GP story is simply about how long you have to wait to get an appointment with a named GP. My practice has got four and there are two of them who I’m happy to see about this particular knee condition and I booked in on the twelfth of March and the first day they could offer me with any named GP was the fourth of April and I really did think that that was an unacceptable wait, it is very long. I mean I’ve got my Bupa package; I’m entitled to have video consultations on Babylon GP, and it would happen in forty-five minutes, and it really does get me that the NHS isn’t as efficient. I don’t know if it’s a resourcing issue within practices or what but there seems to be a lot of surgeries that are very hesitant about going back to face to face appointments. And just accessing any kind of appointment, the process of getting through, you know, the telephone, the app, the receptionists is another gauntlet and then people aren’t getting to see the GP that they know. Very often it’s locums or a different person every time, you don’t feel that they’ve got that continuity of somebody that really knows you as a person and your health.

One of the sad things is when my practice did the merger, they got rid of the practice manager who was very good. You could speak to her about any issues in a non-confrontational way and she would be very helpful. I’m on their patient participation group so you know, I do get to interact with them but only when they want it, you know, if they want feedback they ask the patient participation group, but since the merger, that’s all really disappeared, I mean there haven’t been any meetings of the PPG since the merger and you know, now there’s no longer a practice manager there’s no one very obvious to talk to about issues like this.”

#### Interview 2 - Kamilla

“We’re registered with Fronks Road surgery in Dovercourt and it’s just notoriously always been very difficult to get an appointment. It’s like you can’t pre-book anything with a doctor. You ring up on the day with everybody else to try and get an appointment and nine



times out of ten, by the time you get through there's no appointments left. Which is incredibly frustrating, even if you phone up and say it's not urgent, but can I book something in for a week or so's time, they just don't do it. So, it just makes it incredibly difficult to try and access any sort of care because you can't... Your whole life revolves around phoning up in the morning to book an appointment which is just daft. I had a really bad accident in November last year and as a result of that I needed to have my dressings checked a couple of days after I came out of hospital and trying to get that organised with them was incredibly difficult. They were still not seeing people in person as far as they could avoid it. I eventually got booked in with a nurse and she was incredibly rushed, wasn't overly careful or mindful of the fact that I was in quite a lot of pain. It was sort of like, let's just rip these things off and that'll be that.

And when we went into the surgery, it was clear that it was still not open for face-to-face visits. It was like sitting in a... The surgery's strange anyway. It's like a converted house. So, you were basically sat in an empty room with one chair. There was nobody else there and you had to phone to be let in when you got there. To be honest, I'm now at the point where I'd rather not bother going to see someone because they just make it really difficult. Also, last year I tried to get a form filled out for private medical insurance so that I could be referred. They wouldn't do it... I couldn't email it to them. The only way that they would do it is if I physically took it in and then they said it'll be about a month for us to fill it in, and it's like well, why does it take you a month to fill in a form?

Some things are just very difficult to do over the phone and I just feel like even trying to get an appointment is hard. The fact that you can't pre-book an appointment, to me, is craziness. You're phoning up with everybody else that's urgent, but then I also then feel bad because I'm like, well, I'm not urgent anyway. This could wait, I just need to see someone and then I'm potentially taking an urgent appointment away from somebody who does need to see somebody that day or that week. It just feels very backwards. It just doesn't seem to be very well planned.

The only way you can make an appointment is by phoning up at eight o'clock and then trying to wait on hold until you get through and book something then. You can't pre-book. I can't phone up at two o'clock in the afternoon and say, can I pre-book an appointment for your next available slot with the doctor. You can't do that. The only thing I think you can pre-book is like a pill check or something. That, they will do. But to be honest, it got so difficult trying to get an appointment within the timeframe of needing a repeat prescription that I've ended up just buying it privately online, the pill, because it's just too difficult to get an appointment. I can afford to pay for it and it's more convenient for me and I'm willing to pay the price to do that, but yeah, if you can't... I just feel sorry for elderly people or people that have got mental health issues that really need to see somebody when they need to see them, or somebody that is genuinely really, urgently ill. The service is just really bad."

### Interview 3 - Faith

Faith and her husband have been registered with Lawford Surgery in Manningtree for 20 years.

Faith is currently undergoing treatment for cancer, but her husband is in very good health.

Her GP is helpful, and she is always able to see him when necessary or when she wants to.

When appropriate she sees the nurse, who is extremely kind and capable.

“The GP nurse has been an absolute hero.”

The last time her husband wanted an appointment he phoned the surgery and got one (face to face) later that day.

The last time Faith called; she got an answer the second time she tried.

“I got a call back one hour later from the nurse to assess whether I needed to see the doctor or not and got an appointment for 40 minutes after that.”

She emails her repeat prescription request to the surgery and then collects from the pharmacy a few days later.

“It’s really easy and convenient”

She doesn’t use any of their digital services because she is very happy with the service she currently gets and sees no reason why it would need to change.

#### Interview 4 - Pauline

“It’s just impossible to get through to the surgery, so I found that if I went on their website, there’s a little thing for leaving messages so it can be a bit embarrassing if you’ve got a personal health problem, but if it’s just... I had a bad back, I’ve had a bad back... one always thinks that one’s bad back is going to go tomorrow or the next day. But it didn’t, so I just messaged and said, “please can you help me, I’ve got chronic back pain” and so a nurse practitioner rang me and said, “first of all, before I say any more, you have not got chronic back pain, you have got acute back pain.” Well, I was using ‘chronic’ in the colloquial sense, not in the medical sense, so I don’t know why she felt the need to be so corrective about the words I chose!

Anyway, she actually asked me about it and said that she’d see me at the surgery, which was very kind, so I went to the surgery, and she examined me and said, “I know exactly what it is, I’m sorry I can’t help you” because I’ve got IBD so it means I can’t take anti-inflammatory drugs. I didn’t know that, she told me that and I’ve had it a long time, but I did not realise I couldn’t take anti-inflammatories and she said, “I just can’t help you”. I feel very upset that we haven’t got the option of seeing a doctor. I did ask if I could pay to see a doctor at the practice but they she said it wasn’t possible. You just feel frightened to say anything in case they think you’re being abusive, but I said, “please don’t think I’m meaning anything awful by asking you this question, but is it possible to see a doctor now at the surgery, is there a doctor that you can see?” and the receptionist said, “oh yes, you can but we put you on the list and then the physicians look at it and if they think you need to see a doctor then yes, then you’ll see a doctor” so I just thought, “okay, that’s kind of an impossible question with an impossible answer, isn’t it?” because it’s their decision whether they think you’re ill enough to see a doctor. You may feel you are, but they may not feel that your problem is as bad as somebody else’s is on the list.”

#### Interview 5 - Anil

“Every time you phone up the surgery you get a call from a GP and if then you need to see a GP face to face, or maybe some other clinician face to face, then you do and it’s all the

same day. I've got absolutely no problem with the surgery whatsoever. It's excellent. Compared to what it was like when ACE had it. It was absolutely awful. These guys have turned it round in two and a half years now. What I tend to do, and my wife does as well, we go online to make an appointment at say 7 o'clock in the morning if you're not feeling too good or whatever, you go online, make an appointment. I think the last time I did it I think I went online, I don't know, about half past eight I think, I got a call back about half past nine and I was standing in front of a doctor at about 12 o'clock.

You can't be quicker really. I actually had an earlier appointment, and I had a phone call from the surgery saying -- I think it was a half past 10 appointment -- they said, "we're running late, we're moving everything back, can you come in about 12 o'clock ish?" So that's what I did. So, they phoned me, so I didn't even have to hang around the surgery. When you go there compared to what it used to be the reception staff look and seem happy. When you talk to them on the phone, they're cheerful, helpful. You get call backs. You get quite a lot of text messages about whatever's happening. I find that communicating with them via the website there's an email icon on the website, you can go on that, leave a message and then you get an email back or a phone call back same day. Although it does say it could be 48 hours, I've never known it take that long. I'm really, really happy with it. Compared to friends I've got in various parts of the country it's almost like having a private GP surgery. I can't quite see how they'd improve it to be honest.

I know they fight very hard to get GPs I would imagine, but you don't always need to see a GP anyway. Whenever I've thought I've needed to see a GP, which is not very often I must admit, I have. They've got various clinics and I think they because they're in with a few other surgeries now they've got... they're part of -- what is it called? A PCN? They've actually got all sorts of services. They've got diabetic clinics, COPD, all that sort of stuff. There seems to be a fair selection of individual clinics and then on top of that, I think most places have got it, we've got the minor eye care which friends of mine have used actually. I think for the small town which we are in Frinton, I think we're doing pretty well with our doctor's surgery and all our clinical facilities etc."

#### Interview 6 - Judy

"My husband had felt generally unwell for a few weeks but felt he needed to be checked out by the GP. He was unsuccessful for two days running but was then given a telephone appointment on the Friday which resulted in a face in face within the hour. He then had bloods and an ECG on the Monday morning. He was called whilst out with the dog about 6pm that evening saying if he has chest pain overnight, he must go to A&E and that he will be called the next morning by the GP.

This call happened as planned and resulted in an urgent cardiology appointment the next day. He was admitted directly from the appointment to the acute cardiac unit and then got transferred to Basildon cardiac centre as he was unstable and required an angiogram. He is now home.

In response to your questions, I find it astonishing that we are still unable to book further ahead than the same day with surgeries. I work as a Nurse Specialist at the hospital but have to wait for a day off to ring at 8am to try and get an appointment. Often unlucky, I then have to wait for another day off. Sometimes it doesn't require a same day appointment hence wasting an urgent appointment on an important but not urgent issue.

Many of us are trying to be proactive about our health and try to and prevent bigger issues arising, however it is difficult to have these discussions. Also ringing at 8am but needing to redial 50 plus times before an answer can be really stressful especially when you are then told there are no appointments at the end of the process.

Ideally surgeries would open longer hours and more days a week. Most appointments are still by phone then if needed a face to face. I think this is useful as they can do more calls and triage quicker. Regarding quality of service at the surgery, it is generally good.”

### 3.3 The Case Studies

In addition to these interviews, we also gathered a number of case studies for additional insight into the lived experiences of the people of the area.

#### Case 1 - Lewis

“When it comes to mental health it can be a struggle to get an understanding GP. Recently I was having a horrendous spell and was so distressed I asked for a call from a doctor. I said I needed something to calm me down just temporary, so he gave me diazepam and then said he couldn’t give any more as they are addictive. I accept this but it felt like his attitude was that I was quite an inconvenience which made me worse. I know they are not specialists but feel it’s absolutely vital to at least show some compassion. It is a human thing to do. More training is needed I think for engaging with people with mental health difficulties. We do not choose to be this way so please stop treating us as an inconvenience.”

#### Case 2 - Gilly

“I feel often I am sent to see a nurse without being consulted in advance. This has resulted in longer waiting times to get diagnosed, have tests done, etc. due to lack of relevant experience. For example, I was seen by a nurse about suspected perimenopause who told me I should ‘get on with it’. I insisted and have seen a GP several weeks after and was diagnosed very quickly and referred to a menopause clinic. I feel this inefficiency left me with very uncomfortable symptoms for longer than was necessary.”

#### Case 3 - Chloe

“GP’s do not have enough time to talk and assess, that makes me feel like a time waster, so I only ever talk about the most important issues and even then, do a lot of online research to see if i can avoid going to the surgery and bothering the staff. Attempting to get an appointment can take an hour of constantly hitting redial. It shouldn't take so long to get registered with a new surgery when you move area. It is unsafe. Because this happened to me, I had to access A&E for help, when a GP appointment would have done. The walk-in clinic in our area did not have nurses qualified to assess pregnant woman - hence having to go to A&E. Such a waste of resources.”

#### Case 4 - Barry

“I understand the immense pressure on GP surgeries at present (with the NHS completely underfunded and staff not paid appropriately for the work they do) and do feel that it is sometimes more appropriate and time/cost effective to have a telephone consultation. However, my personal experience is that it is easier to get an appointment with an out of

hours GP/at an urgent treatment centre than with the GP, and I fail to see how this can be the best use of resources and organisation.”

#### Case 5 - Mina

“One of the reception staff made me feel so insignificant, I was pleading with her for an appointment, I explained what I needed the appointment for - these days you seem to have to reveal everything to reception for them to decide whether or not you're worthy of one. I left in tears. I don't use the GP often; I'm not a regular visitor and you always hope when you do need them, they'll be there for you. Mine was not an urgent case so I can only feel sorry for those who are and had to go through the same horrible process to get an appointment. On the contrary a family member at a different GP also needed an appointment at the same time as me, rang up, got straight through and was offered either face to face or telephone appointment three days later, this surgery is in the same town as mine - why can't it be that easy for everyone!”

#### Case 6 - Angela

“My surgery used to be welcoming and I felt looked after. Now, it is completely different. Receptionists are friendly and helpful, but it feels so different. Like patients are biohazards, to be kept out whenever possible, and it seems to me that virtual and telephone appointments carry so much risk. I believe too that there is way too much emphasis on prescription medication and not enough emphasis on lifestyle/diet changes to treat conditions.”

#### Case 7 - Jim

“I prefer to book online because it is convenient to my schedule. I would be happy to self-triage to the appropriate health care professional if I understood what they do and what conditions they treat. I think there should be early and late and weekend appointments where face to face appointments are required (requested). For virtual meetings these should be offered when convenient to customers including before, after work and lunchtimes. I book my holidays, pay my council taxes, switch internet providers without going near a phone queuing system -- would like that same experience to book an appointment with my GP (or any appropriate health care professional).”

## 4.0 Conclusion

Our engagement with the people of northeast Essex focussed on the initial question ‘Do I Want To See A GP?’ and garnered in excess of 200 responses. Whilst a significant number of individuals are generally satisfied with the service provided by their GP surgery, many took the opportunity to express their concerns and dissatisfaction around a number of issues. The issues raised mainly centred around the availability of appointments, which was frequently felt to be insufficient, particularly to see a GP, and the system for booking an appointment, which was felt to be convoluted and not person centred. Staff attitudes were another often mentioned bone of contention, particularly around the manner of receptionists and those involved in surgery triage systems, and quality of service provided, including inefficient referrals and diagnoses.

It is clear that the Covid19 pandemic had a huge impact on GP service provision, with many respondents stating that they were sympathetic to the pressures on the NHS and appreciative of the adaptation and continuation of services. However, it was also clear that many felt some surgeries were overly reticent to 'get back to normal', with particular issue around the lack of face to face appointments, which a large percentage of respondents felt could not be adequately replicated in a telephone consultation.

The impact of the digitisation of services, such as the dependence on the telephone system for booking appointments and high proportion of consultations still being carried out virtually or via the telephone, must also highlight the risk of those individuals not digitally connected not having equitable access to primary care services. Similarly, parallel issues will be faced by a significant number of those with sensory impairment, learning disabilities, mental health issues and other conditions which fare best in face-to-face interactions.

