



# The doctor will see you now

A look at booking an appointment with your GP in Somerset

**healthwatch**  
Somerset

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# About us

Healthwatch Somerset is your local health and social care champion. We make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve health and social care.

We're completely independent and impartial and anything you say is confidential. We also offer information and advice to help you to get the support you need. Our service is free, simple to use and can make a real difference to people in Somerset.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure that NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and use it to improve standards of care. This report is an example of how your views are shared.

Healthwatch Somerset is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We cover the unitary local authority area of Somerset Council.



# Introduction

## Project background

In early 2020 we carried out engagement investigating the most effective and ineffective parts of accessing GP services in Somerset. Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of Covid-19, the work was restricted because of the significant impact on GP surgeries.

Despite the limited results, our report '[Access to primary care GP surgeries in Somerset](#)' was published in December 2020 and provided some useful key messages including:

- A number of people were not satisfied with the length of time it took to answer the phone when they called the surgery.
- Some people told us they were not comfortable being triaged by reception staff.

During our '[People's experiences of using GP websites to access information](#)' report in 2022 we noted that 28 of 177 people had told us they found it hard to make an appointment. A further 16 out of 177 people said they had difficulty getting through on the phone.

There is variety of current national and local evidence highlighting challenges in booking face to face appointments at GP surgeries that has been published since the end of Covid-19 related restrictions. Sources include:

- [Healthwatch National Reports Library](#)
- [The Health Foundation](#)
- [NHS Digital](#)
- [GP Patient Survey](#)



Between 01/04/2022 and 31/03/2023 we recorded approximately 250 pieces of feedback about GP services in Somerset. At least 121 of these entries were about access or booking an appointment.

We wanted to explore the process of booking a face-to-face appointment at GP surgeries in Somerset.

Survey questions can be seen in Appendix 1.

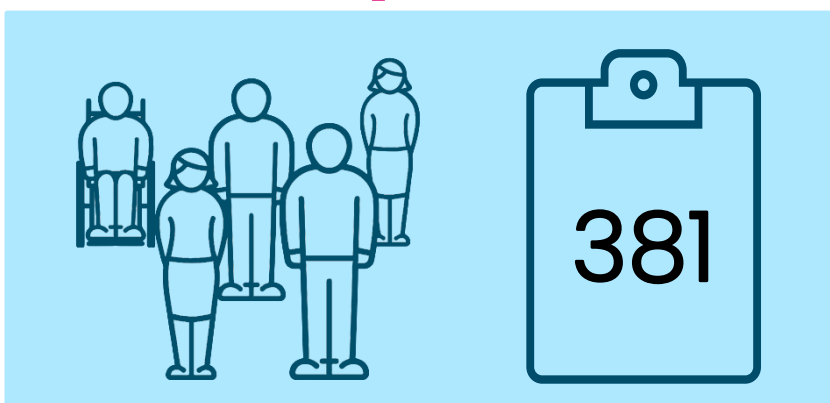
## Key messages

- More than half of those trying to book an appointment contacted their surgery by telephone.
- There are still long waits involved in booking and scheduling appointments.
- 38% of telephone calls connected to a receptionist/administrator within five minutes.
- The triage processes and execution vary between GP surgeries and is unclear to some people.
- Many people received an appointment with a GP/Doctor after they were triaged.
- Some people are happy to use digital technology for appointments when suitable and available.
- Most respondents said continuity of care for the same condition was very important.

# What we did

- We produced a public survey to investigate the appointment making process at GP surgeries in Somerset. The survey could be completed online, over the phone, on paper, and at face-to-face events between 24 October 2023 and 31 January 2024.
- We attended 18 events to promote the survey and record responses.
- On three separate occasions the survey was promoted on different local radio stations.
- We promoted the survey through our three social media channels on 13 separate occasions. (This figure does not include shares and re-posts).
- Over 45 posters were distributed around the county for display and over 150 emails were sent to individual contacts from organisations and groups.
- Our volunteers and board members actively promoted the project through their networks, distributed posters, and supported us at some events.

# Who we spoke to

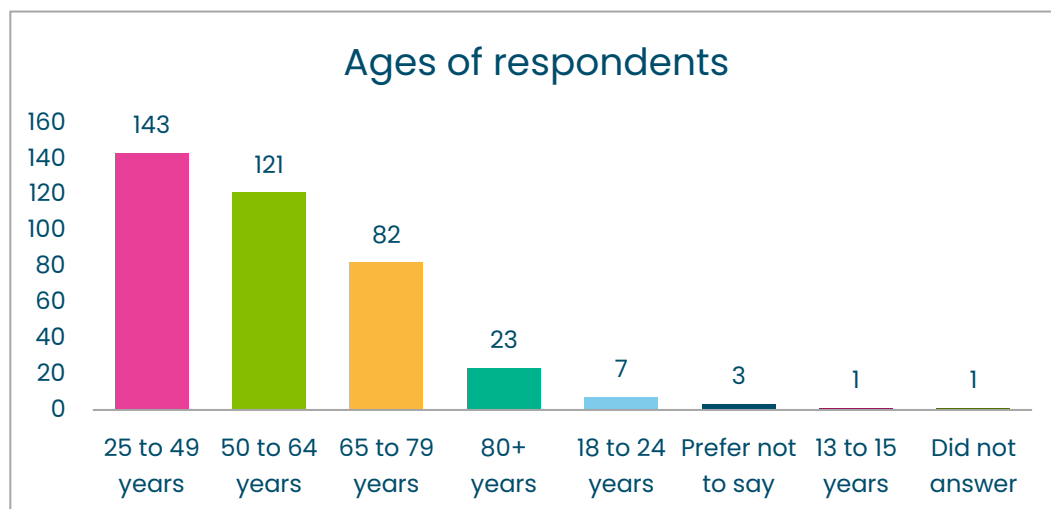


We had 381 responses to our public survey, 372 of those people tried to make an appointment with their GP in the past 12 months.

For information about which GP Surgery people were registered with please see Appendix 2.

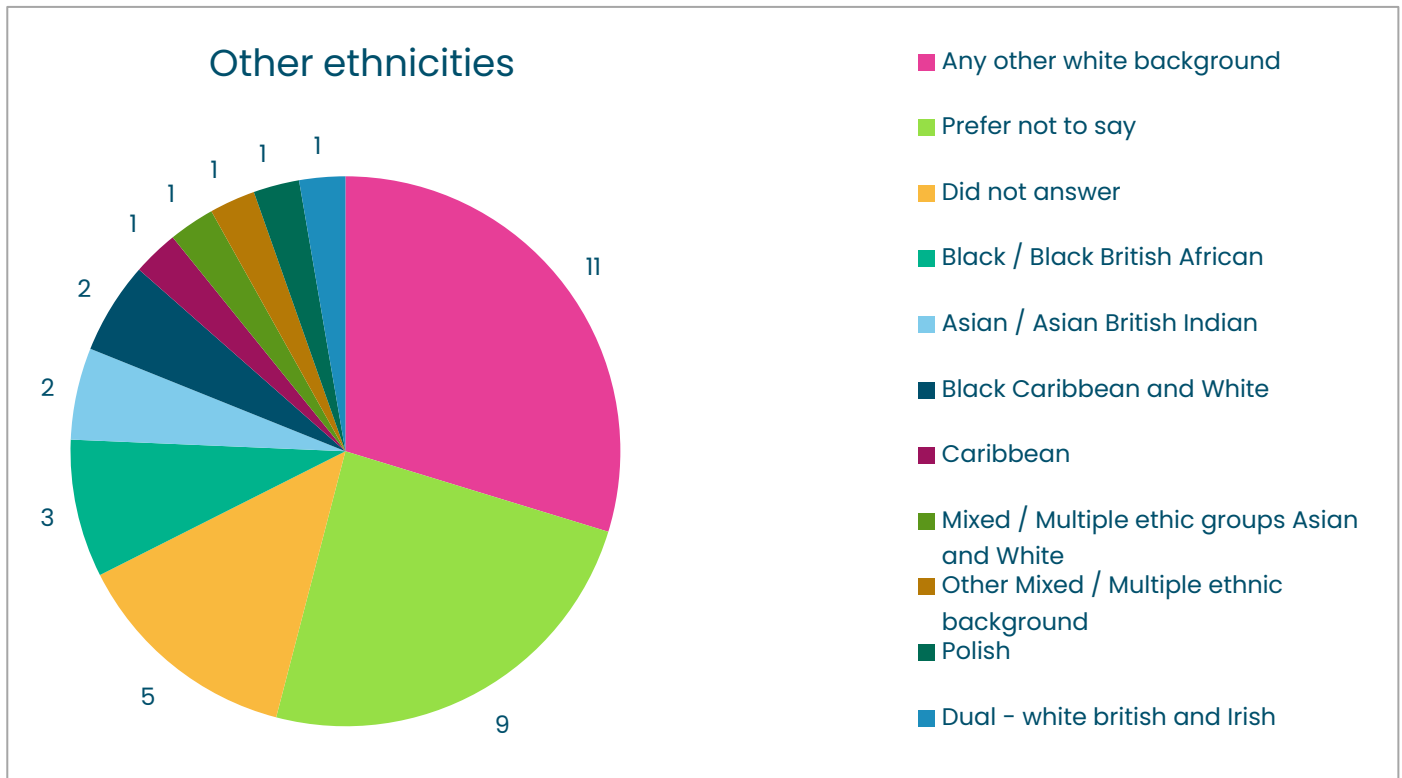
## Age

Most people told us their age. Three people preferred not to tell us, and one person did not answer the question.



## Ethnic groups

There were 344 people who identified as White-British, all other responses are shown in the chart below.



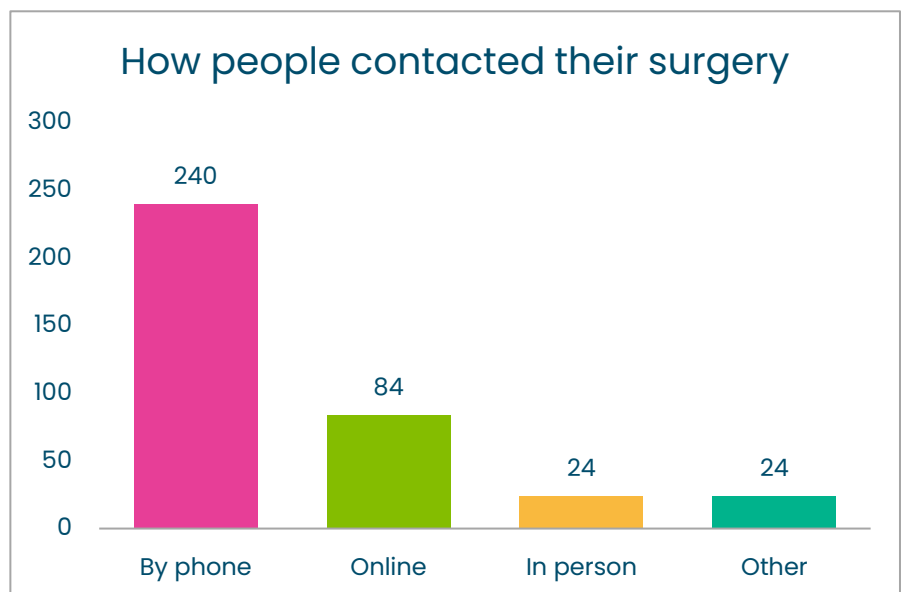
## Other demographics

A total of 74 people identified as unpaid carers, 16 people told us they were veterans/ex-military personnel, and one respondent was a young person (16-25) who is leaving or has left care.

# What people told us

## Contacting the surgery

- 311 people made appointments for themselves, 24 for their child, 23 for an adult family member, and 14 people told us they tried for someone else.
- 14 of the 24 responses who said 'other' tried several methods of contact.







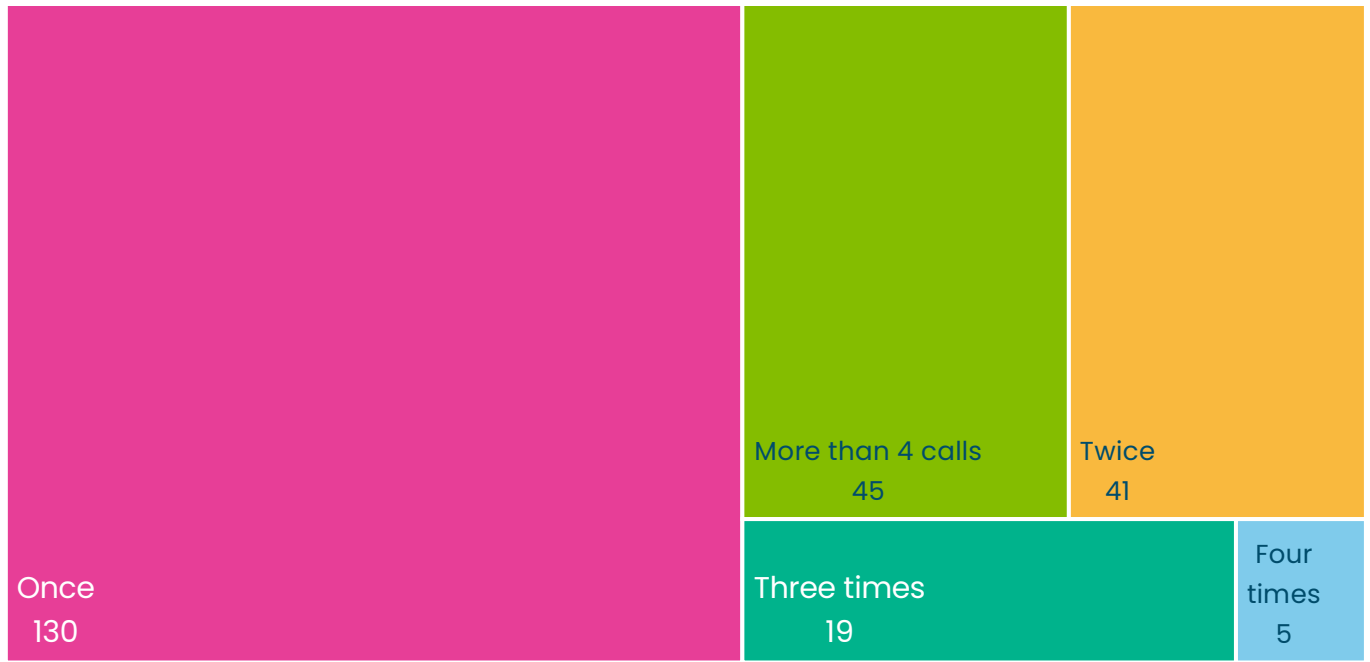
"I had to go into the surgery to book the appointment as I could never get through on the phone."



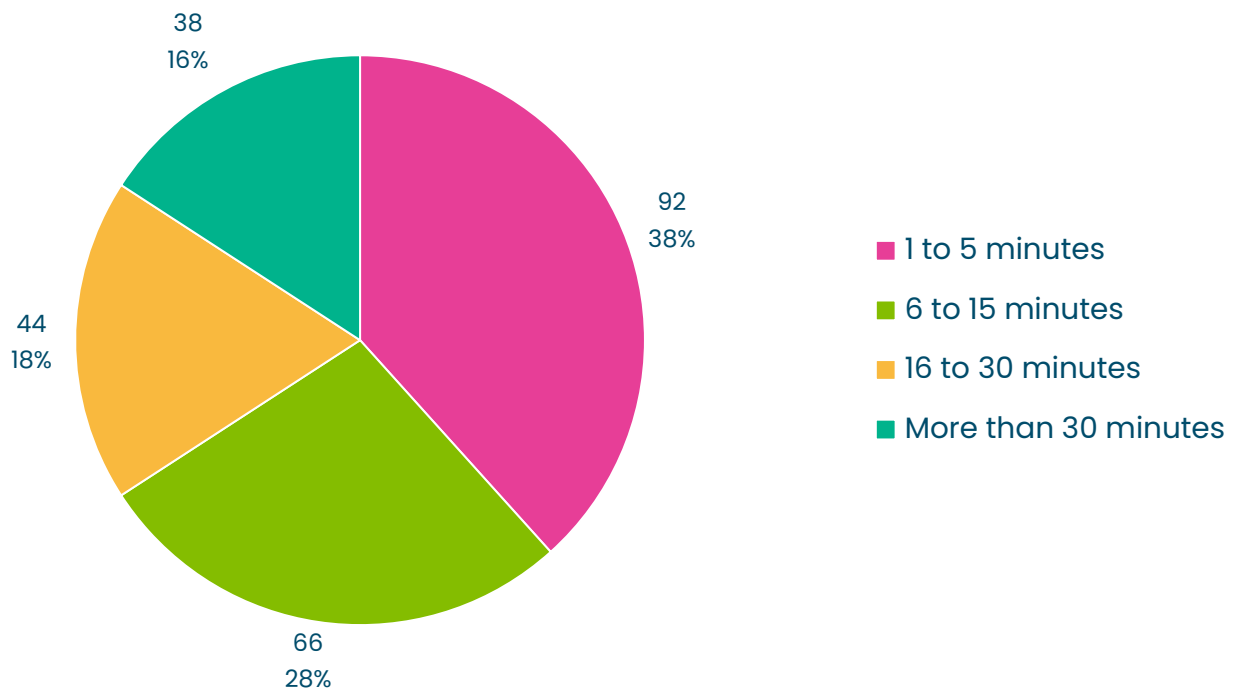
"Very helpful, answers phone promptly and quick appointment."



### How many times people called before they spoke to someone



### How long people waited before their call was answered

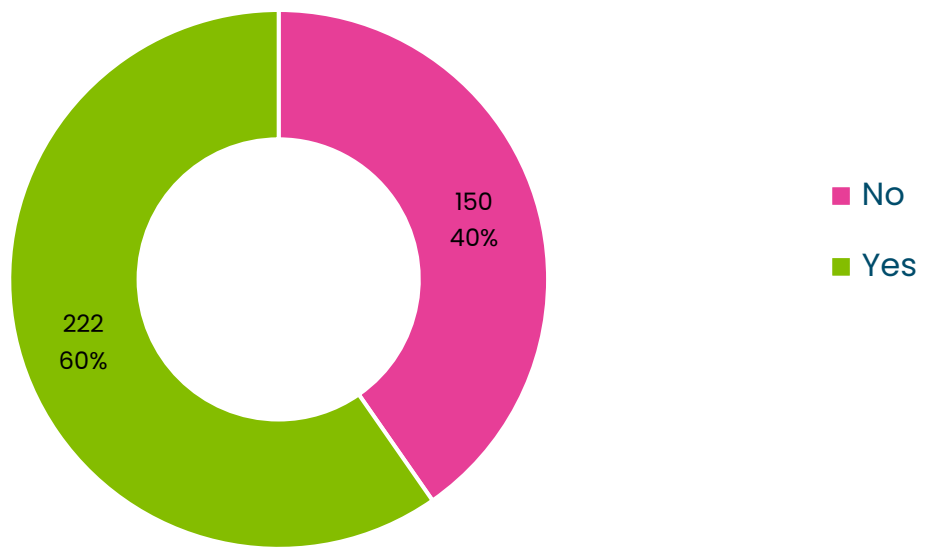


## Triage

We wanted more information about experiences of triage, so we used the following explanation before asking questions:

Triage is a process to help to sort patients based on their needs. Triage is essential when you may be dealing with hundreds of patients a day, all with different needs, requests, and health backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

### Are you comfortable to be triaged by an administrator/receptionist?



Of the 150 who said 'no', 144 people told us why they were not comfortable being triaged by an administrator/receptionist, results indicated:

- The most frequent comment was that an administrator/receptionist was not a trained medical professional.



"They have no medical knowledge and have no professional registration regulations. A tick box check list is not a suitable method of triage!"



- The second most frequent comment was people did not like sharing intimate information.



"Somethings are really personal especially as it's about my mental health. It's hard enough to try and explain to a doctor."



<sup>1</sup> Description created from [E-Consult blog – What is triage?](#)





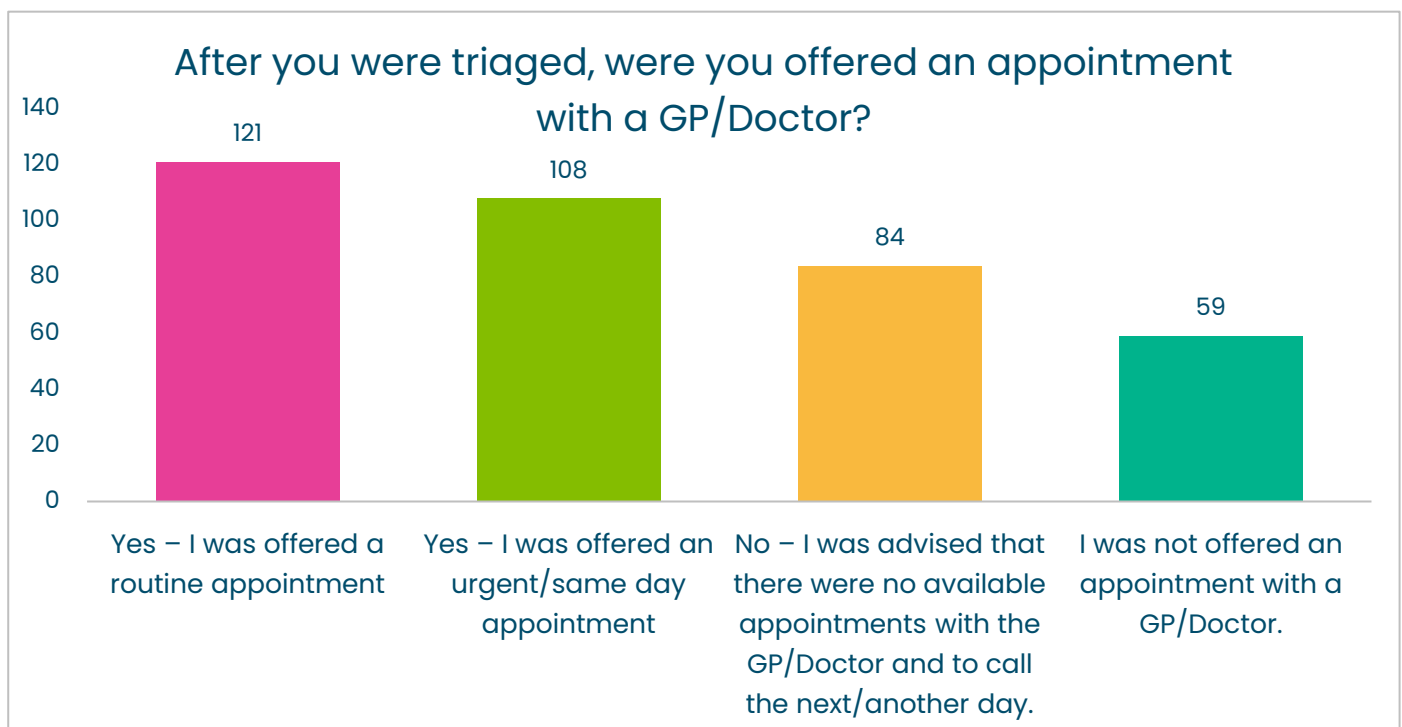
“If I send in a request on My GP at my practice a doctor emails me/ phones me and if necessary arranges a visit. I prefer this method, it works very well.”



Further results can be seen in Appendix 3.

## Appointments

- 85 people shared with us how long it took for them to get an urgent appointment, and out of those, 24 decided to seek medical help somewhere else.

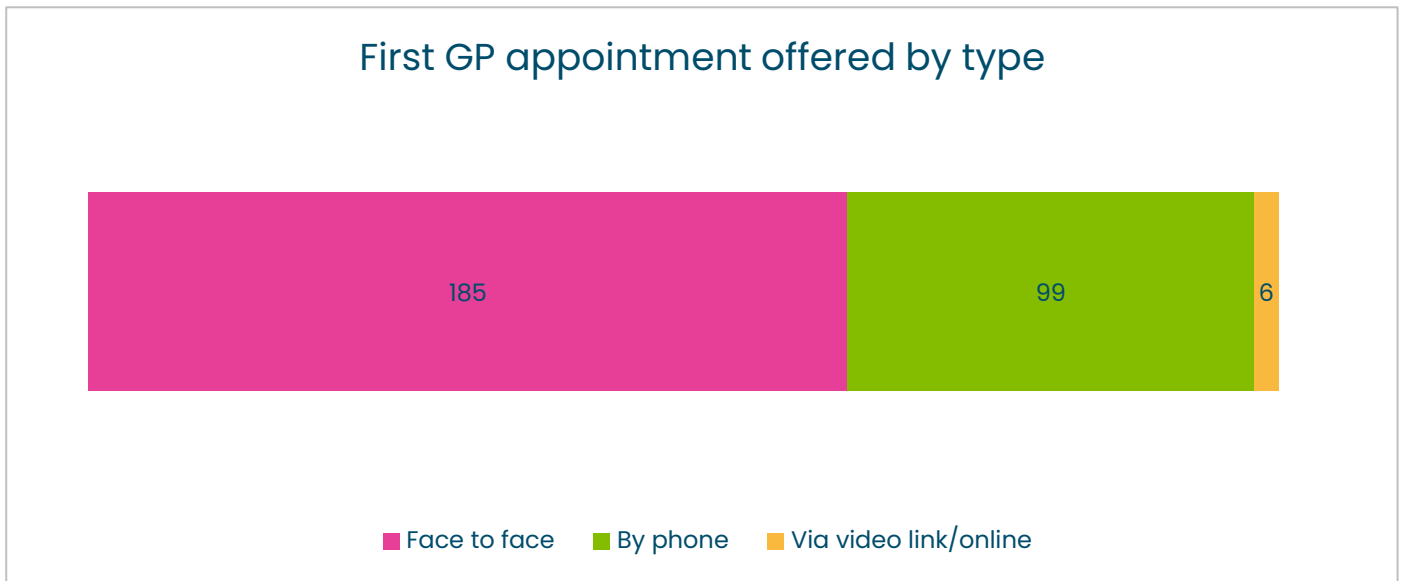


- 25 out of 85 people called between one to two days before they were offered an urgent/same day appointment.
- 11 people went to a Minor Injuries Unit (MIU) to receive medical attention/advice.
- 33 people who were not offered an appointment with a GP/Doctor, were offered an appointment with another health professional at the surgery.
- 18 people who were not offered an appointment with a GP/Doctor said they were not offered further support or advice.

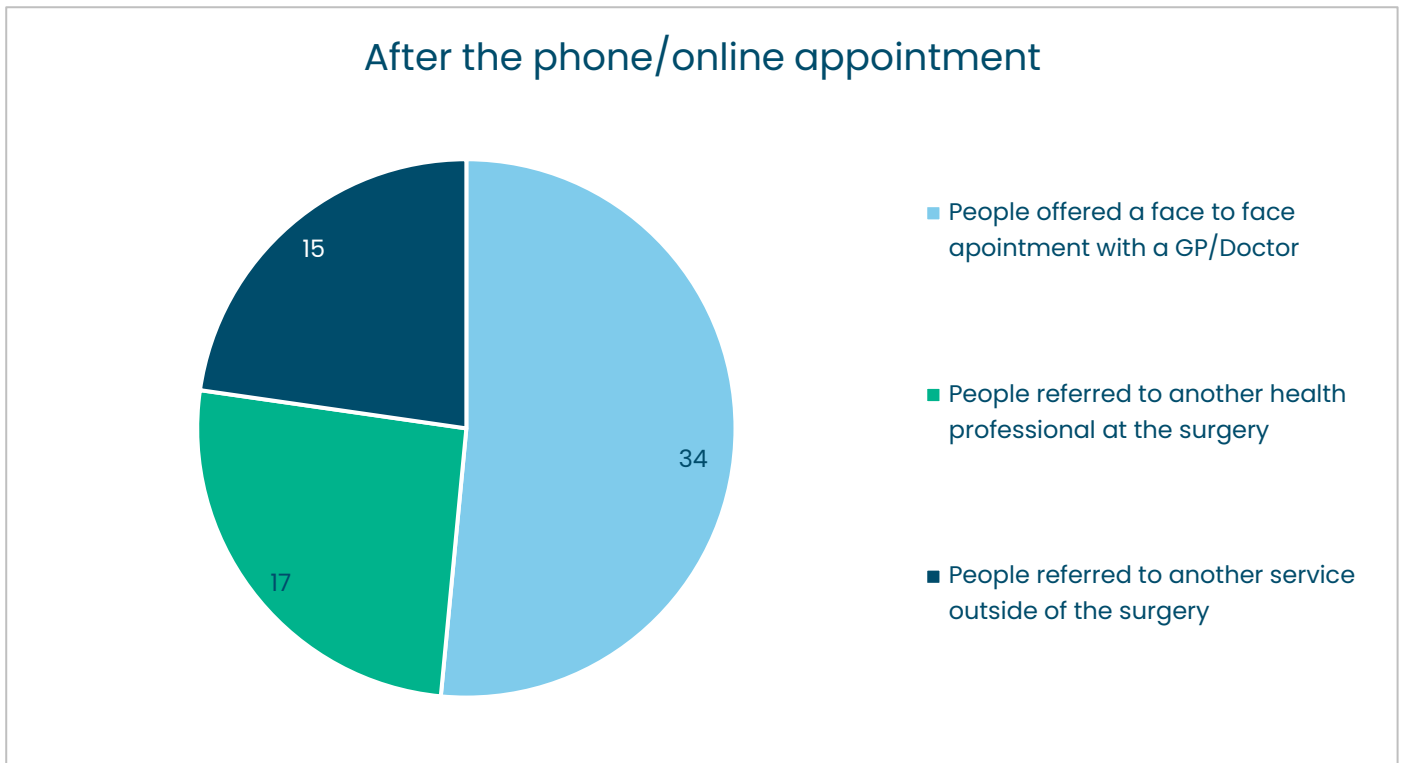


Further results can be seen in Appendix 4.

We wanted to know what type of appointment people were offered with their GP/Doctor after they were triaged.



We asked people who had a phone/online appointment with their GP/Doctor what happened next.



- 38 of 104 people did not need a face-to-face appointment after their phone or online consultation with a GP/Doctor.

When asked if the referral resolved the person’s issue 46 said no it didn’t, 28 said that it did.

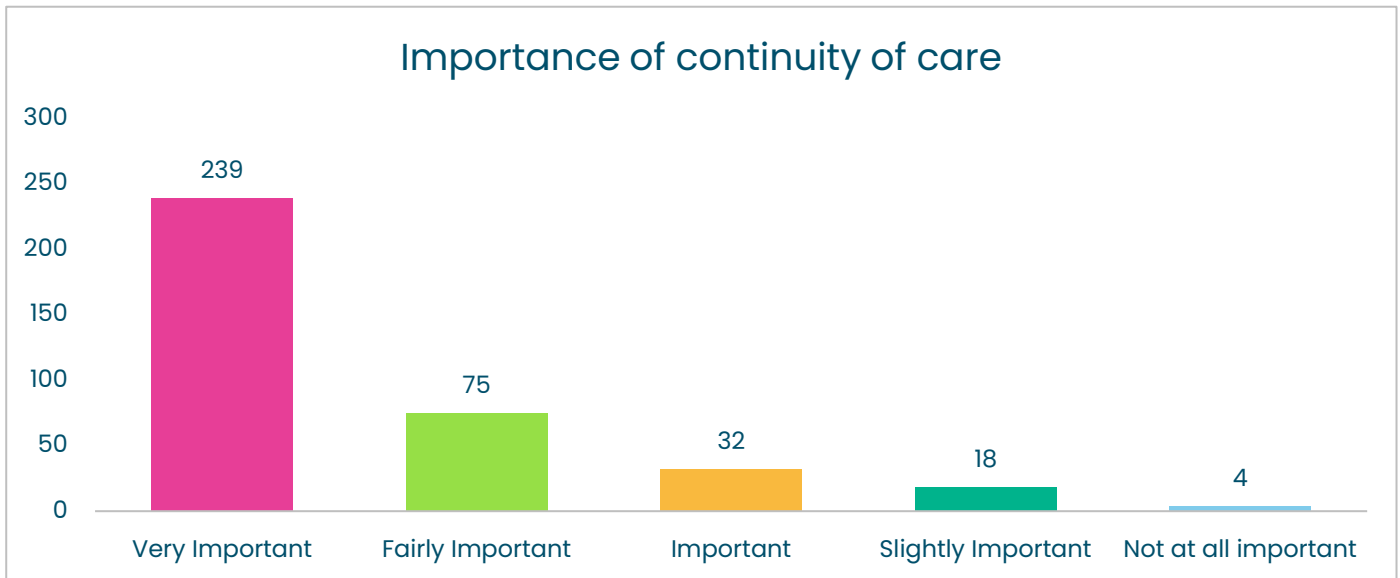
The results of the referrals can be seen in Appendix 5 and 6.

## Continuity of care

When people see different health professionals there should be a continuity to their care. We provided the following explanation and asked people how important the continuity of care for the same condition was to them.

Continuity of care is the experience of care over time. It could mean seeing the same healthcare professional each visit, having a good therapeutic relationship with your healthcare professional, and/or having a co-ordinated experience if accessing more than one service for the same condition.

368 out of 381 people answered the question.



### In their own words

We received 291 additional comments with feedback about making GP/Doctor appointments in Somerset. A breakdown of themes can be seen in Appendix 7.

- 190 of 291 comments contained one or more negative themes.
- 85 of 291 comments contained one or more positive themes.
- 24 comments were mixed containing both positive and negative themes.
- 69 comments were neutral, many of these were either opinion rather than experience or suggestions for improvements.

The strongest positive theme was satisfaction with the GP surgery, this was present in 62 of 85 positive comments, 39 of these were noted as very good.

“I have never had an issue getting a GP appointment at French Weir. They have been an excellent surgery for my family and I.”

## 1. Waiting times

Long waits were the strongest negative theme, 51 of 190 comments indicated long waits for appointments, 32 of these comments indicated people were waiting over two weeks for an appointment.

Difficulty connecting and long waits on the telephone were mentioned in 39 comments.

“Sometimes it's impossible to get an appointment with a doctor and have had to wait a month which is crazy.”

“It can take an hour to get through, and by the time you get through, they say all appointments are gone. Diamond Health Group don't offer the option of booking online....”

## 2. Appointments

Comments revealed several themes around appointments, some of which are demonstrated below.

- 35 of 85 comments indicated that people did not have any difficulties making an appointment at their GP surgery.



“I've always been able to access my GP on the same day, I have the choice of telephone, email or face to face contact and my choice has always been followed...”

- 40 of 190 people said they had difficulty getting, or could not get, an appointment with their GP/Doctor.



“It is incredibly hard to receive an appointment with Ariel Healthcare.”

- 33 of 190 people had problems booking routine appointments and/or tests at their GP surgery.



“Can never book a routine appointment with My GP always fully booked up to 6 weeks in advance next lot of appointments don't open for while by time get there most [of] them gone to.”

 "I would prefer it if it was possible to make routine appointments rather than only having same day emergency appointments only." 

- 31 of 190 people could not get a face-to-face appointment with their GP/Doctor.

 "Only offered appointments with nurse or HCA (although they have been very helpful). Sometimes you just want to see a doctor." 



- 15 of 85 people said same day/urgent appointments were available at their GP Surgery.

 "Always professional and able to offer same day appointments whenever required. Never experienced any issues with this surgery." 



### 3. Surgery staff

Several themes about surgery staff were revealed in people's comments.



- 20 of 85 people complimented staff at the surgery, 4 of these mentioned reception/admin staff.

 "I am happy with the service offered by my GP surgery. Staff are always polite, helpful and understanding. Thank you." 

- 29 of 190 people mentioned negative experiences with reception/admin staff.



 "I understand the need to gatekeep the appointments system. However reception/triage personnel should be appropriately trained in a) customer care and b) triage assessment and the recognition and respect that a person (whatever the age) is extremely unwell and/or in significant pain. I have been responded to by different reception staff, on the same day, with nonchalance, arrogance, determination not to give you an appointment regardless of the patient's circumstances and frailty, and a sense of not caring a jot because they are merely doing their job." 

- 26 of 190 comments indicated ineffective or unsuitable triage.



 "There is no demonstration of an understanding of mental health needs at all when trying to see your doctor! Administrators are NOT trained to triage mental health patients." 

#### 4. Technology



- 11 of 85 people said they were happy with online systems.

 "Askmygp is extremely valuable and I have not had difficulties using this service." 

- 19 of 190 comments suggested some form of exclusion due to digital processes.



 "I am not sure that going online is an appropriate way of getting a GP appointment. Some people do not like going online. Describing your condition/symptoms for some people is challenging. Therefore this process is a barrier for some people. Who then may not be able to get an appointment and their condition may deteriorate leading to possible admission to hospital, as symptoms are not managed well." 

- 13 of 190 comments mentioned that digital appointments were unavailable for various reason.

 "Most annoyingly it says you can book an appointment online - WHICH YOU CAN'T. If you could I would happily do that and save so much time waiting on the phone." 

#### 5. Other comments

- 19 of 69 people included suggestions for improvement in their comments.

 "There needs to be different ways to book appointments. I can't always hear on the telephone clearly. Email would be better." 



"We need to make services more accessible for our elderly patients, with regular yearly reviews and easy access if things deteriorate during this period."



"The chronic shortage of GPs causes wide variations in the availability of GP appointments even within Primary Care Partnerships. A new NHS GP contract should encourage the sharing of resources, including GPs themselves, amongst the PCN members."



- 43 of 69 comments contained opinions not based on their experience of booking an appointment.



"I think a huge amount more work needs to go in in Somerset to level up to some sort of minimum standard of offer from GP'S in Somerset."



"Why not manage resources centrally and ensure high quality care at first point of contact, with clear streaming pathways and effective management of clinical demand - right person, right place, right time."



- 9 out of 69 comments were neutral or about other services.



"We only have so many and have to triage but the patients don't seem to understand and we get a lot of abuse. So I know this survey is about patients but please highlight how hard it is the other side of the desk"



- 3 out of 69 comments expressed concerns about capacity due to planned housing in the area.



"There is an 8 week wait for routine appointments. The local paper reported some time ago about 1500 new homes coming to Bridgwater, and that Somerset health care had not requested extra monies stating that even after these houses were built they still had capacity for over 2000 more patients. This does not make sense."





# Summary

Since our 'Access to primary care GP surgeries in Somerset' report in 2020 we have continued to hear about long waiting times when people telephone their GP surgery. Over several years we have also documented experiences about the difficulties some people have trying to book an appointment and/or they are not comfortable being triaged by reception/administrative staff.

The evidence we gathered during this project once again highlights the issues people have told us about in previous reports. The recommendation made in this report will reflect these ongoing themes and previous report recommendations.

We are aware that GP Surgeries in Somerset are experiencing high demand with limited resources and that the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic is still being felt. Disruptions have occurred due to the formation of the Integrated Care Systems (ICS), Somerset Council becoming a unitary local authority, and changes at government level.

We hope the findings of this report will be seen as an opportunity to improve elements of accessing GP surgeries that continue to require improvement.

## Recommendations

- Reduce call waiting times; suggestions include:
  - Improving and increasing availability of booking online appointments.
  - Increased reception/administrative staff at peak times.
- Consider creating contact centres for each Primary Care Network (PCN) as a single point of contact for the surgeries. This would improve continuity of triage and appointment allocation with potential to reduce financial overheads.
- Regular support for and monitoring of staff members who perform triage to improve continuity, training, delivery, and efficiency for patients.
- Demonstrate improved communication and understanding for patients surrounding:
  - Triage processes and outcomes.
  - Appointments with other healthcare professionals within the general practice teams.
  - PCN level Enhanced and Extended Access Appointments.
  - Local support available to those who are digitally excluded through lack of confidence, knowledge, or finance.
- All GP surgeries should offer in person, telephone, and online access to services and appointments to help suit patient needs.
- All GP surgeries should have the ability to book routine appointments in advance.
- Surgeries should consider a dedicated mental health triage option.

# Stakeholder response

**NHS Somerset: Michael Bainbridge,  
Associate Director of Primary Care**



“NHS Somerset welcomes the latest Healthwatch report on GP access.

Our job is to plan, fund and monitor the quality of health services so that the people of Somerset live healthy lives for longer with timely access to healthcare services when needed.

Patients and communities are at the heart of our work, because it is only by listening carefully that we will understand what we need to change.

Healthwatch plays an important role in bringing the experience of patients into our strategy for primary care. We work closely with Healthwatch and will be developing an action plan on GP access in response to this report.”

## **Healthwatch Somerset Board**

“A really good piece of work well done.

We feel that there is still a fair amount to do regarding people not able to use the internet; we still have a lot of complaints from patients about lack of ease to get an appointment.”

# Thank you

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to provide their views and experiences throughout this project and the organisations who supported us.

Additional thanks are given to our dedicated volunteers, without their support we would not have been able to achieve such comprehensive coverage of Somerset County or to reach such a wide-ranging audience.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Survey questions

\* Questions have set options to choose from.

† Questions ask for free text input.

1. Have you attempted to make an appointment with a GP/Doctor at your surgery for yourself or someone else in the last 12 months? \*
2. Please tell us the name of the GP surgery where you tried to book the appointment. †
3. Who were you attempting to make an appointment for? \*
4. How did you contact the surgery to make the appointment? \*
5. If you contacted the surgery by phone, how many times did you call before you were able to speak to someone? \*
6. How long did you have to wait before someone answered your call? \*
7. Are you comfortable to be triaged by an administrator/receptionist? \*
  - If no, please tell us why. †
8. After you were triaged, were you offered an appointment with a GP/Doctor? \*
9. Please tell us how many days you called before you were offered an urgent/same day appointment.
  - If you went elsewhere to receive medical attention, please tell us where.
10. What type of appointment were you offered with the GP/Doctor?
11. After your appointment with the GP/Doctor via phone or video link/online, were you then offered a face-to-face appointment.
12. Please tell us which health professional at the surgery you were referred to.
13. Please tell us which service outside of the surgery you were referred to.
14. If you were not offered an appointment with a GP/Doctor, were you offered an appointment with another type of health professional at the surgery?
15. Please tell us which health professional at the surgery you were offered an appointment with.
16. Please tell us which service outside of the surgery you were referred to.
17. Did the referral resolve your issue?
  - If not, please tell us why.
18. How important is continuity of care for the same condition to you?
19. Are there any comments about making GP/Doctor appointments in Somerset that you would like to share or recommendations you feel we should highlight?

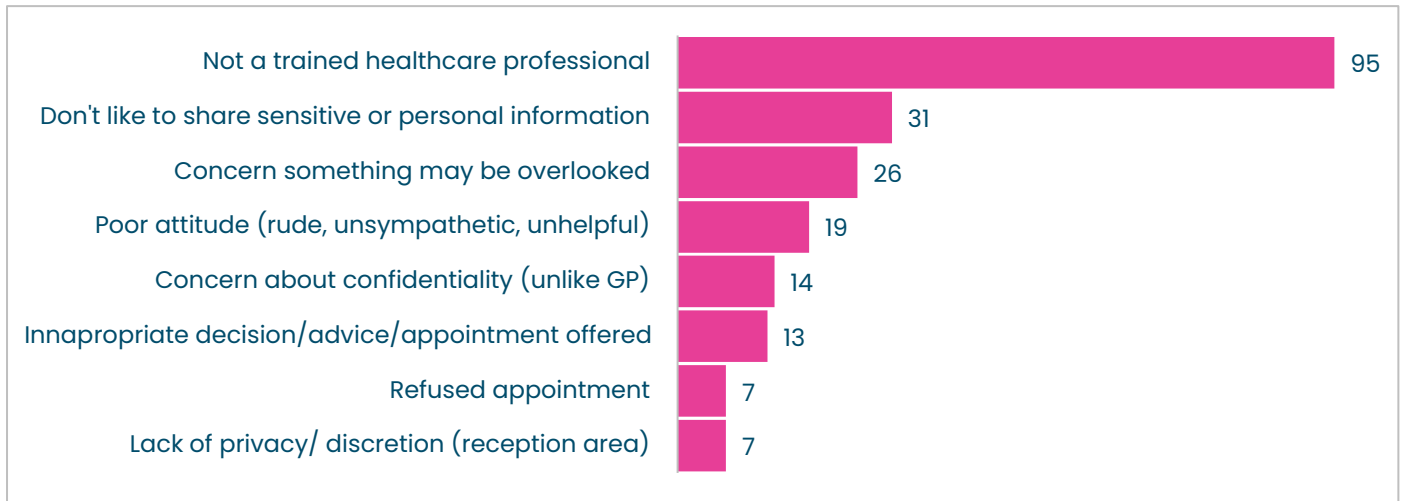
## Appendix 2: Registered GP Surgeries of respondents

NoP – Number of people

GP Surgery	NoP	GP Surgery	NoP
Ariel Healthcare	15	Millbrook Surgery	1
Axbridge Surgery	1	Minehead Medical Centre	9
Beckington Family Practice	4	North Curry Health Centre	4
Burnham Medical Centre	6	North Petherton Surgery	8
Buttercross Health Centre	6	Oaklands Surgery	3
Cannington Health Centre	8	Park Medical Practice	2
Cheddar Medical Centre	4	Penn Hill Surgery	7
Church View Medical Centre	1	Polden Medical Practice	9
College Way Surgery	15	Preston Grove Medical Centre	5
Cranleigh Gardens Medical Centre	14	Quantock Vale Surgery	2
Crewkerne Health Centre	5	Queen Camel Medical Centre	7
Crown Medical Centre	11	Redgate Medical Centre	5
Diamond Health Group	9	Ryalls Park Medical Centre	3
Dunster & Porlock Surgeries	10	Somerset Bridge Medical Centre	5
East Quay Medical Centre	22	St James and Orchard Medical Centre	13
Exmoor Medical Centre	3	Summervale Surgery	5
French Weir Health Centre	8	Taunton Road Medical Centre	18
Frome Medical Practice	9	Taunton Vale Healthcare	7
Glastonbury	1	The Meadows Surgery	1
Glastonbury Health Centre	8	Vine Surgery Partnership	4
Glastonbury Surgery	9	Warwick House Medical Practice	7
Grove House Surgery	2	Wellington Medical Centre	9
Hamdon Medical Centre	1	Wells City Practice	4
Highbridge Medical Centre	9	Wells Health Centre	2
Langport Surgery	9	West Coker Surgery	4
Lister House Partnership	3	West Somerset Healthcare	5
Lyngford Park Surgery	6	Wincanton Health Centre	7
Martock Surgery & South Petherton Medical Centre	9	Did not answer	16

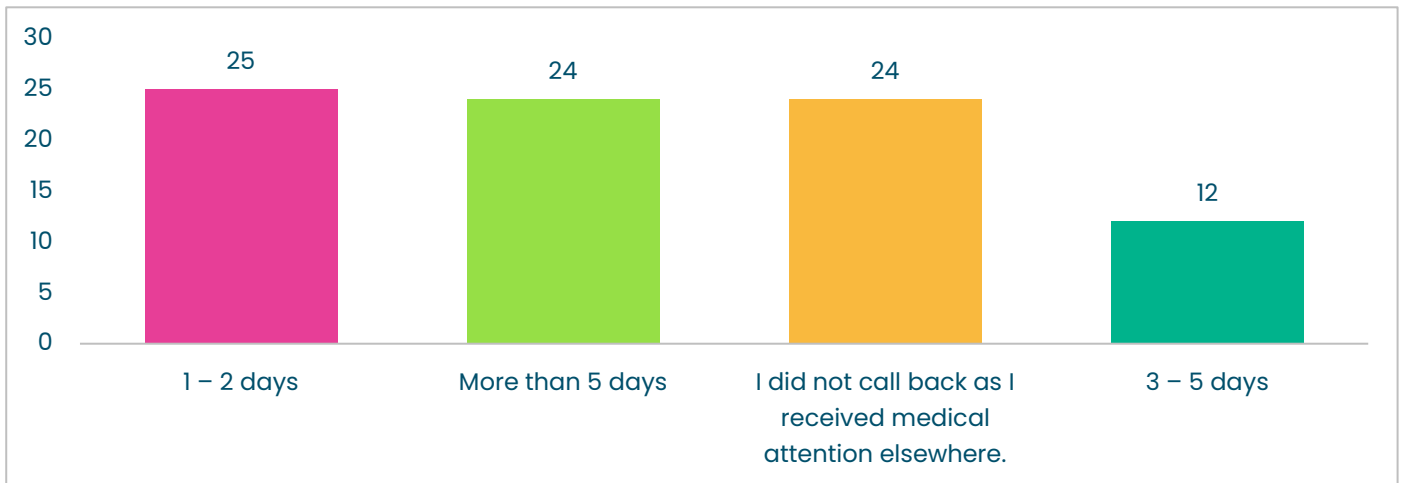
### Appendix 3: Triage

Number of comments by theme why people are uncomfortable when triaged by a receptionist or administrator:

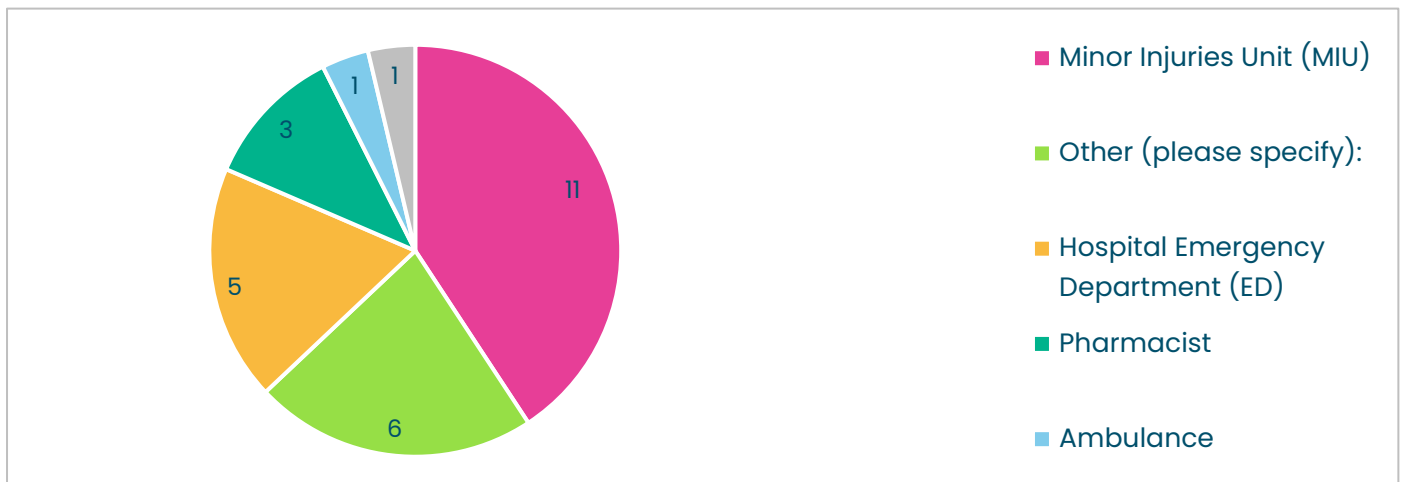


### Appendix 4: Appointments

Number of days people called before being offered a same day/urgent appointment:



Where people went to receive medical attention instead of calling back for an urgent/same day appointment:



**Other:**

Chinese doctor

used MDT team/ referred to other service/ a and e

Contacted my private hospital specialist

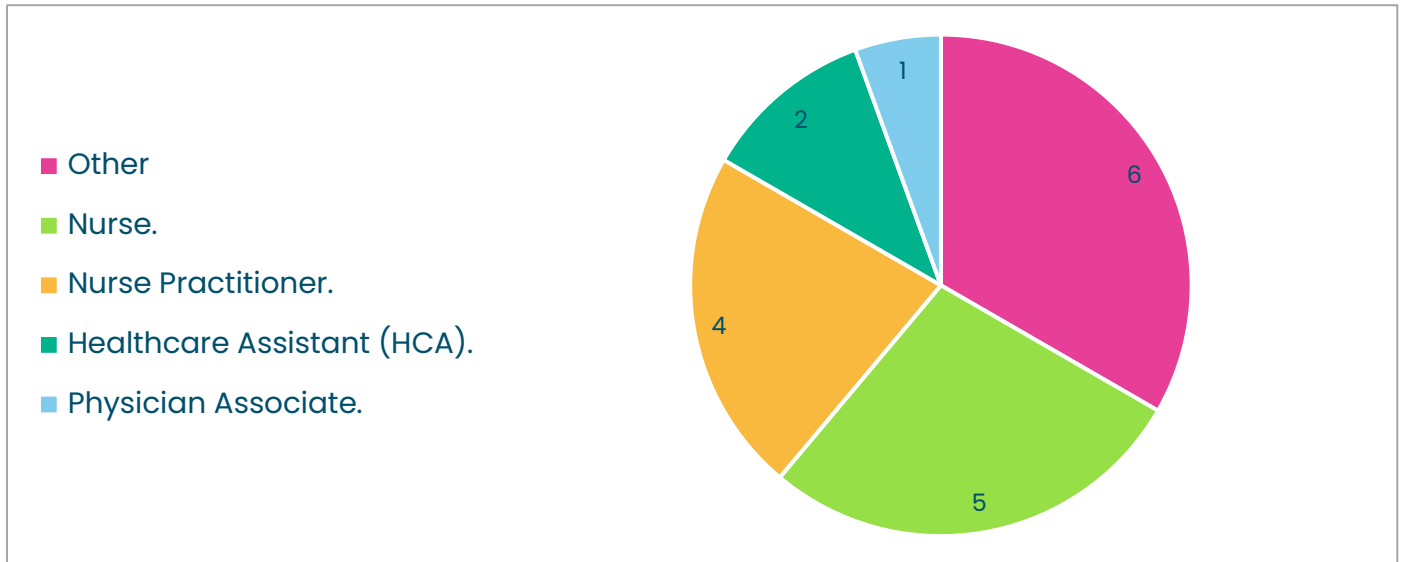
I spoke to Rethink Mental Illness for assistance as Mindline was equally poor.

No

I had to go online to try and access an appointment

**Appendix 5: Referrals after triage**

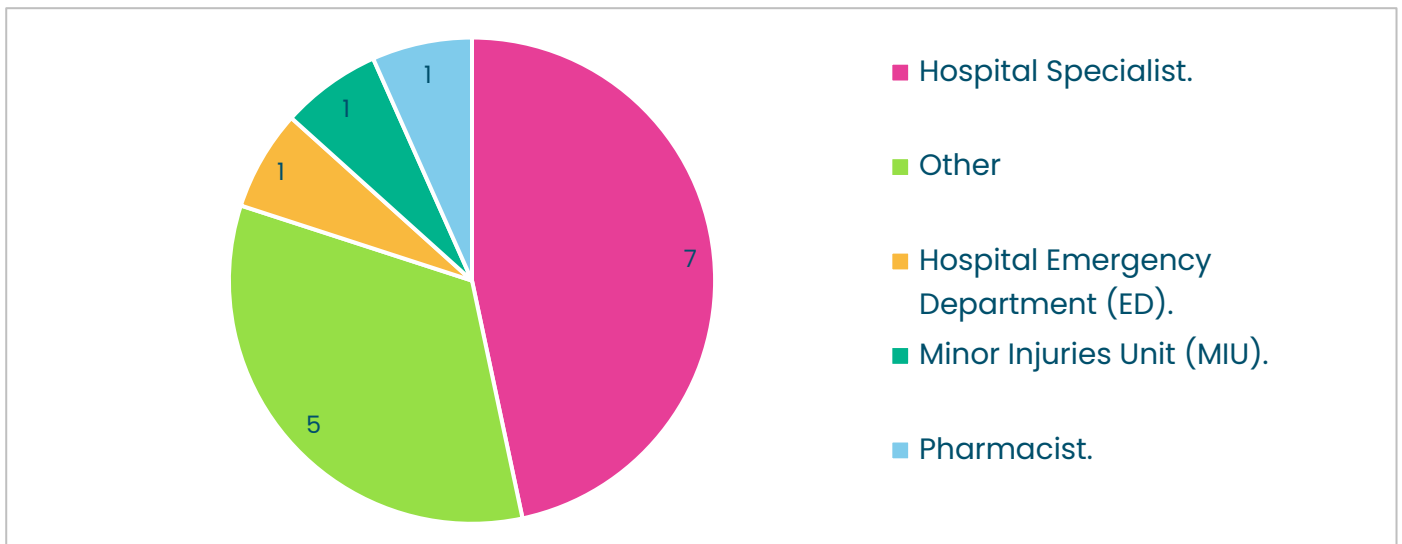
**Referrals to health professionals at the surgery:**



**Other:**

Offered a triage appointment by phone not sure who with	Receptionist
Previous answer is wrong, I responded to a missed call and was refused my appointment	No been able to book appointment yet, no available appointments until the end of November
Nurse, health and wellbeing,	South Somerset NHS Foundation Team

**Referrals to service outside the surgery:**



**Other:**

Lymphoedema clinic

Another surgery in the area that deals with 24 hour heart monitoring.

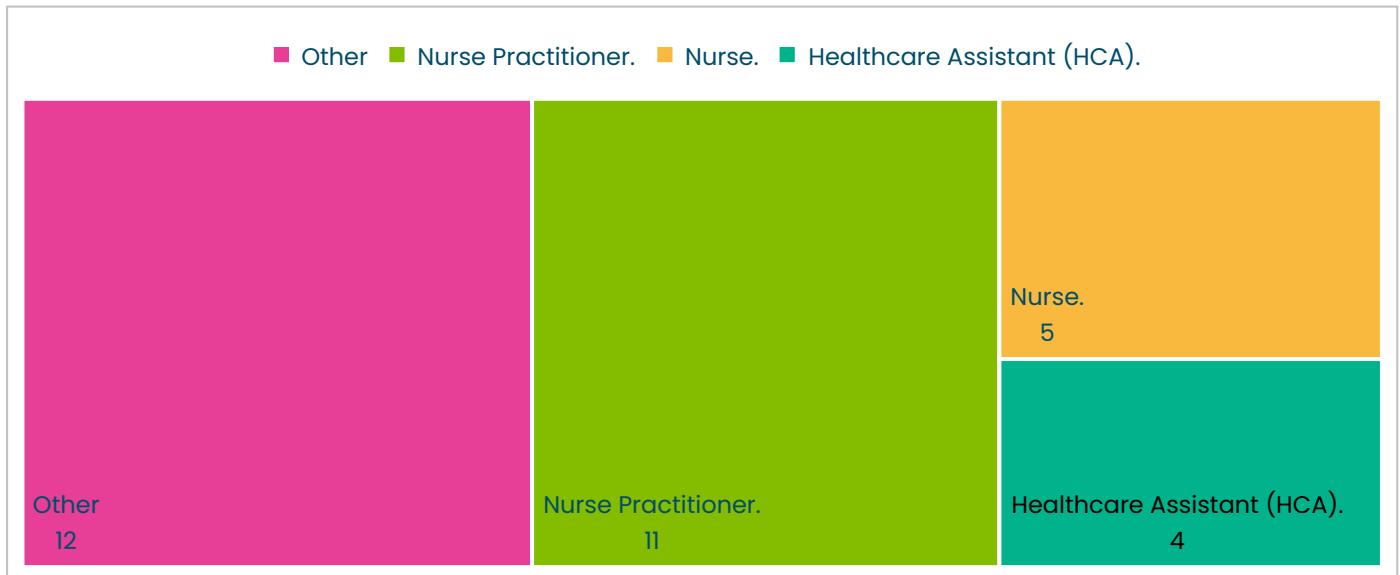
Oasis Clinic

South Somerset NHS Foundation Team

Young Minds website

**Appendix 5: Referrals after appointment with GP**

**Referrals to health professionals at the surgery:**



**Other:**

Scan ultrasound

Paramedic

I did not get to see a doctor - I was seen by a nurse practitioner who referred me to the hospital for further screening without referral to a GP

in practise physiotherapist

ANP assume assist nurse practitioner

Physio

I was told that the GP would triage the request on the info i sent to admin and would then decide on the appropriate action

Physiotherapist

Mental health link worker

Filled form - repeat prescription given without check-up/appointment

Physiotherapist

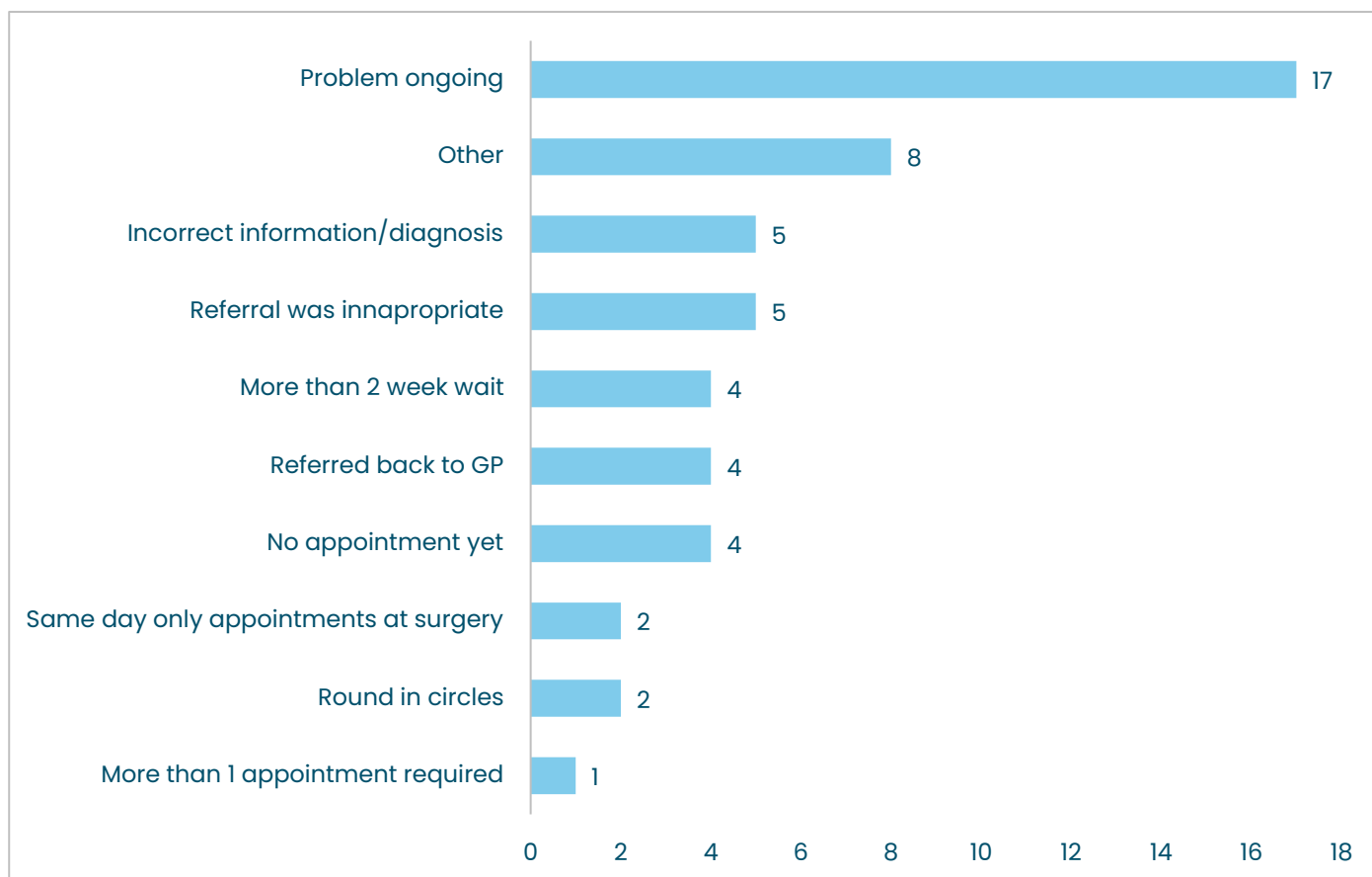
Musculoskeletal team

**Referrals to service outside the surgery:**

Service	Number of people
Other.	6
NHS Mental Health service.	2
Pharmacist.	2

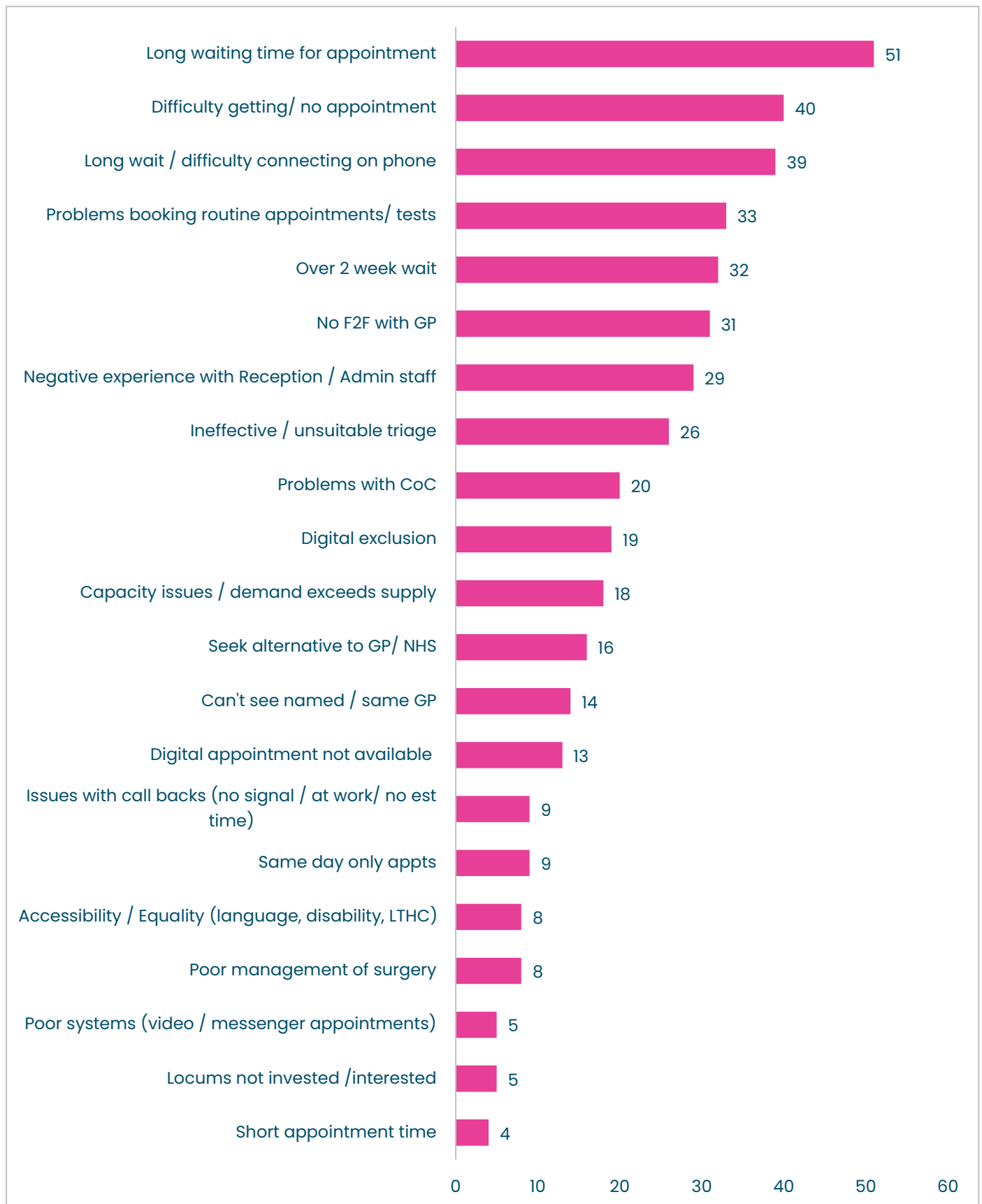


## Comments about why the referral did not resolve the issue:

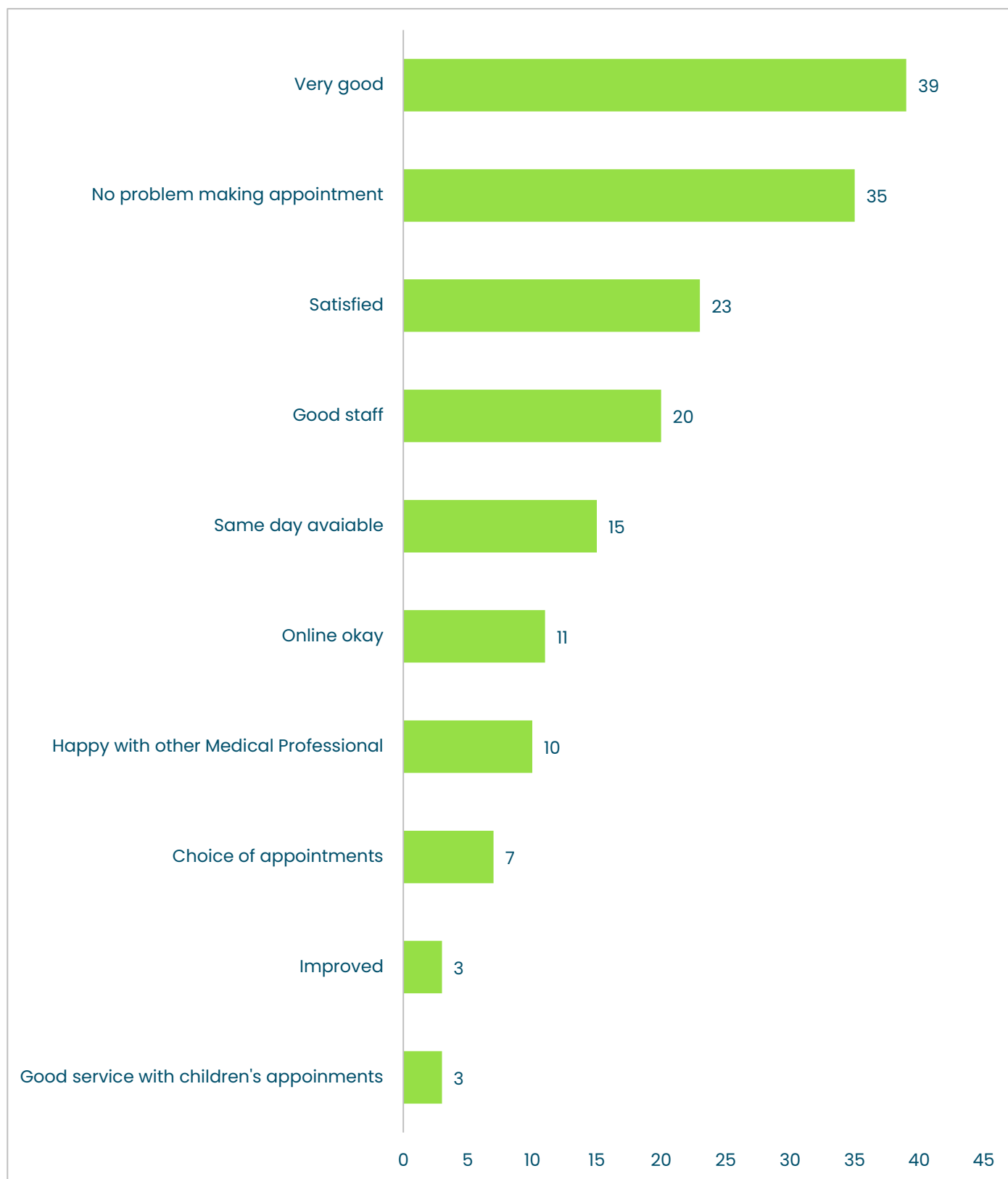


## Appendix 7: Comment themes

### Negative themes



## Positive themes:



## Website links in this report

Page 2	<a href="#">'Access to primary care GP surgeries in Somerset'</a>	<a href="https://www.healthwatchsomerset.co.uk/sites/healthwatchsomerset.co.uk/files/HWS%20access%20to%20Primary%20Care%20Final.pdf">https://www.healthwatchsomerset.co.uk/sites/healthwatchsomerset.co.uk/files/HWS access to Primary Care Final.pdf</a>
	<a href="#">'People's experiences of using GP websites to access information'</a>	<a href="https://www.healthwatchsomerset.co.uk/report/2022-10-27/peoples-experiences-using-gp-websites-access-information">https://www.healthwatchsomerset.co.uk/report/2022-10-27/peoples-experiences-using-gp-websites-access-information</a>
Page 3	<a href="#">Healthwatch National Reports Library</a>	<a href="https://nds.healthwatch.co.uk/reports-library">https://nds.healthwatch.co.uk/reports-library</a>
	<a href="#">The Health Foundation</a>	<a href="https://www.health.org.uk/">https://www.health.org.uk/</a>
	<a href="#">NHS Digital</a>	<a href="https://digital.nhs.uk/">https://digital.nhs.uk/</a>
	<a href="#">GP Patient Survey</a>	<a href="https://gp-patient.co.uk/">https://gp-patient.co.uk/</a>
Page 7 Footnote	<a href="#">E-Consult blog – What is triage?</a>	<a href="https://econsult.net/blog/what-is-triage">https://econsult.net/blog/what-is-triage</a>

## Image attributes

Cover	Smiling doctor using stethoscope.	<a href="https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/side-view-smiley-doctor-using-stethoscope_34728786.htm#page=7&amp;query=doctor%20reception&amp;position=37&amp;from_view=search&amp;track=ais&amp;uid=8559d2f0-930e-4c59-abcb-edd777ff0f5c">https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/side-view-smiley-doctor-using-stethoscope_34728786.htm#page=7&amp;query=doctor%20reception&amp;position=37&amp;from_view=search&amp;track=ais&amp;uid=8559d2f0-930e-4c59-abcb-edd777ff0f5c</a>
Page 3	Smiling male doctor looking in open mouth of young girl.	<a href="https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/doctor-examining-little-girl-with-her-mother-medical-office_854513.htm#from_view=detail_also">https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/doctor-examining-little-girl-with-her-mother-medical-office_854513.htm#from_view=detail_also</a>
Page 8	Male doctor receptionist talking on phone while woman waits to be spoken to.	<a href="https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/nurse-talking-phone-side-view_32486228.htm#fromView=search&amp;page=1&amp;position=24&amp;uid=ac2fb3a0-7685-4c90-ab9-a12d2fc80a10">https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/nurse-talking-phone-side-view_32486228.htm#fromView=search&amp;page=1&amp;position=24&amp;uid=ac2fb3a0-7685-4c90-ab9-a12d2fc80a10</a>



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