

Ear Wax Removal – Patient Survey Report



November 2024

Executive Summary

Background

Healthwatch Sutton has received anecdotal feedback that accessing ear wax removal services in the Borough is not uniform or universal. People's potential ability to access free services is dependent on a variety of factors outside their control.

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) published a report 'Access Blocked' in 2023 that found that two-thirds of respondents were told that ear wax removal is no longer free on the NHS and a quarter of respondents could not afford a private service. The RNID follow-up report, 'Blocked Ears, Blocked Access: The crisis of NHS ear wax removal' showed that South West London (SWL) Integrated Care Board (ICB) was one of only 7 out of 44 ICBs nationally that does not commission a universal service at all.

Methodology

Healthwatch Sutton created a short online survey to capture a snapshot of experience in the Borough. This was promoted through our mailing list of 1700 local residents and through our social media channels. In total 87 responses were received in spring 2024.

Key findings

- Over 85% of respondents who tried to remove the ear wax themselves using ear drops were unsuccessful (Question 3).
- Access to free treatment is confusing and inequitable. Of those respondents that received treatment (excluding those unable to access any and those that used ear drops successfully), 44% had treatment at their GP surgery, 14% at the hospital and 41% had to pay privately to have the earwax removed (Question 4).
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents who paid privately paid between £26 - £75 with a further 20% spending over £76 (Question 5).
- 15% of respondents didn't have treatment because they couldn't afford it. 51% said they could just about afford it (Question 6).
- The impact of ear wax build-up on people's ability to hear also impacts on mental wellbeing; 5% cited isolation from family and a further 5% cited depression or social problems (Question 1).

Comments made show the frustration that some respondents felt with difficulties around access and cost. Conversely, those that were able to access services free through the NHS were satisfied.

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☑ It is very frustrating that the GP will no longer offer earwax removal - not so much for me but for my child who also has problems with earwax. Olive oil doesn't cut it!

☑ My doctor us trying I feel to push everyone towards private. Which is ridiculous when most are on benefits. They used to do it but not anymore. I had to pay 60 at Specsavers.

☑ It's a disgrace that I have to pay

☑ Micro-suction should be available on the NHS in my opinion. It is a quick, easy and effective treatment.

☑ Excellent treatment from my GP's nurse who removed ear wax

☑ Very fast from referral to appt when wax removed.

☑ The staff that dealt with my hearing problems at St Helier were very helpful and polite.

☑ The nurse explained everything very well and answered all my questions. A superb efficient service. Well done.

Recommendations

- Look to SWL ICB to provide a universal service to SWL residents.
- Work with local key stakeholders within the NHS in Sutton (including Sutton Primary Care Networks (PCNs)) to investigate the potential to provide a free service to all residents. This could be a pilot for a potential SWL-wide initiative.
- Ensure that NICE guidance is adhered to by the NHS in Sutton in particular GP surgeries.
- Work with GP surgeries to ensure that all those that have attempted to clear the ear wax themselves unsuccessfully are able to access a free NHS service.

Ear wax removal survey report

Introduction

Anecdotal feedback received from people in the London Borough of Sutton showed that access to NHS services to remove ear wax is not uniform or universal. There is a large variability in the way that ear wax removal services can be accessed and the costs that individuals may incur. Healthwatch Sutton agreed to carry out a more detailed investigation into people's experience, with the intention to capture clear evidence concerning access and the impact of chargeable services.

National Picture

Data around ear wax removal services is sparse. In 2023, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) published a report 'Access Blocked: The impact of cutting NHS ear wax removal services.'. This report analysed the findings of a survey they promoted in the summer of 2022. This showed that:

- 66% of respondents had been told ear wax removal was no longer available on the NHS.
- More than a quarter of survey respondents could not afford to get their ear wax removed privately.
- 71% of respondents resorted to attempting to remove ear wax themselves, although two thirds did not feel confident doing this.
- After trying to remove ear wax themselves, only 20% of respondents said their problems went away, whilst 55% of people noticed no change in their condition.

A follow-up report 'Blocked Ears, Blocked Access: The crisis of NHS ear wax removal in England' looked at the commissioning picture across England. This investigated the commissioning arrangements for each of the 44 Integrated Care Boards (ICB). It broke down each ICB's arrangements into 7 categories from 'Full commissioned as per NICE guidelines', the most comprehensive (18 ICBs nationally), to 'Not commissioned at all (7 ICBs). South West London (SWL) ICB that commissions the services for the London Borough of Sutton is listed as not commissioning an ear wax removal service at all.

Over an extended period of time, many GP practices have stopped delivering an ear wax removal service. Advice given to people who contact these practices, mainly advises to contact private companies who will carry out the procedure for a charge (commonly between £50 - £100). Ear wax removal services are still available free of charge at some GP practices and also through specialist audiology services mostly carried out by hospitals.

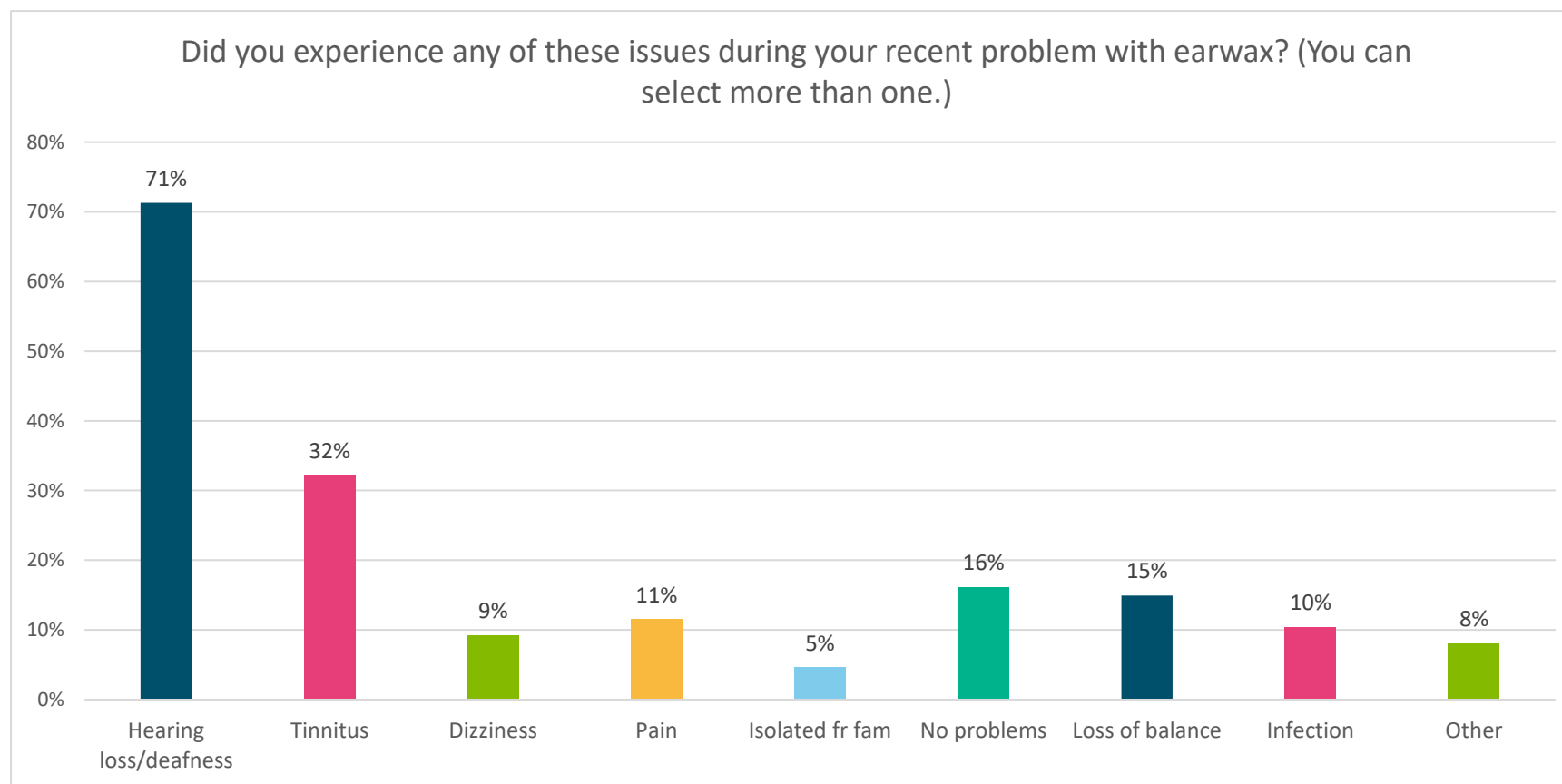
Methodology

This project was set up to be delivered quickly to produce a snapshot of the experience of people in the London Borough. The most practical way to achieve this was to create a simple online survey that could be shared with our mailing list of approximately 1700 local individuals. Many mailing list subscribers may not have had recent experience of earwax impacting on their hearing and as such felt unable to respond. In total 87 people completed the survey. It was also promoted through our online channels and may well have been shared with friends of family members of the people who are directly in receipt of our communications.

Detailed responses

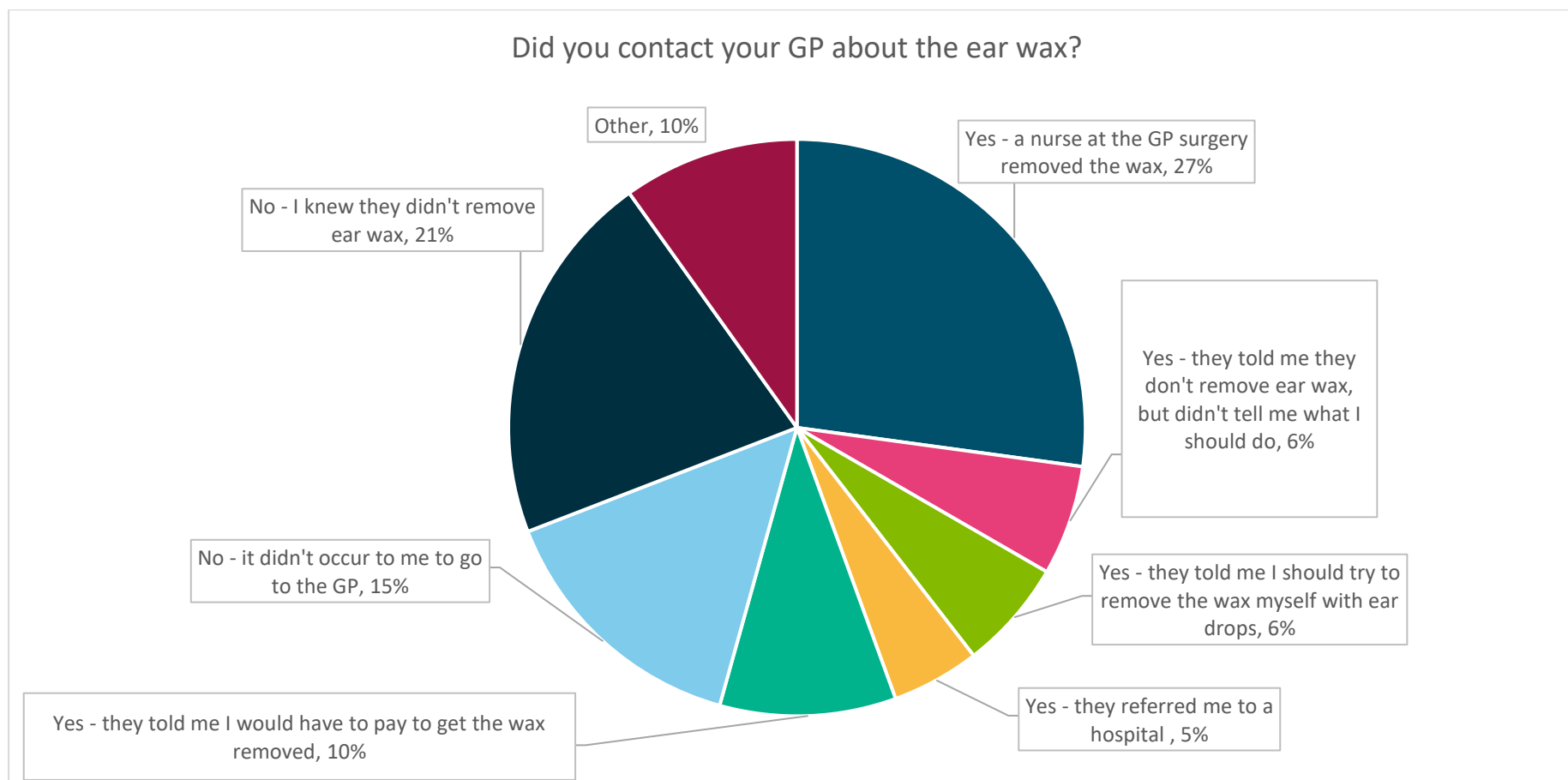
In total the report received 87 responses.

Question 1 - Issues experienced



Others included: depression (x3), itching, loose wax, social problems and missed phone calls. Many of these demonstrate the psychological impact of hearing impairment/loss.

Question 2 - Going to the GP

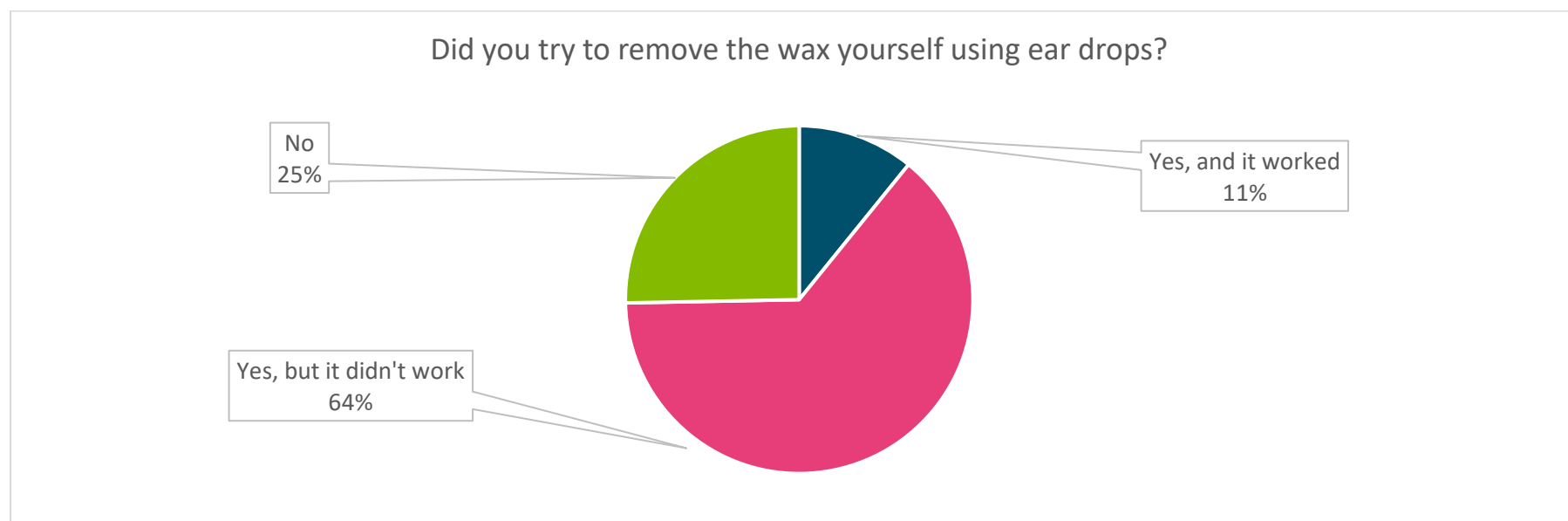


1 in 5 respondents were already aware that their GP did not provide an earwax removal service and a further 1 in 10 found this out by calling their GP surgery. A further 15% people didn't even consider their GP practice as an option. Conversely over a quarter of respondents were able to access this service at their GP practice. A small percentage of respondents, 1 in 20, were referred to the hospital.

Other responses:

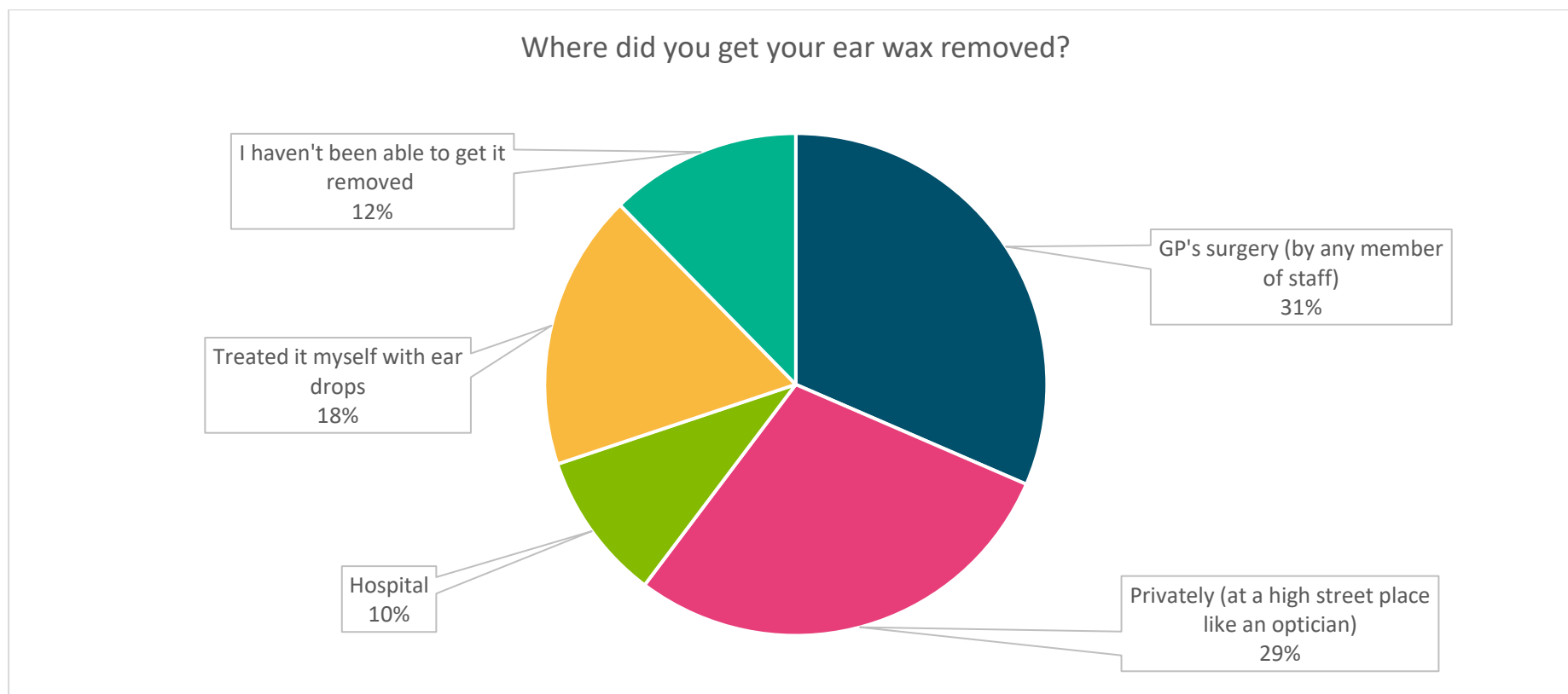
- St Helier audiology told me to go to Specsavers
- My GP treated me
- Went to the clinic in Worcester Park Boots
- They said £60 at Specsavers
- Contacted audiologist at St Helier
- Didn't seem concerned
- I was told they don't remove ear wax and I had to go to a private service

Question 3 – Self-treatment



Success at personally removing earwax was very limited. A quarter did not attempt this. Of those that tried, (excluding the 'No' responses) over 85% were unable to remove the earwax themselves.

Question 4 – Which service removed your earwax

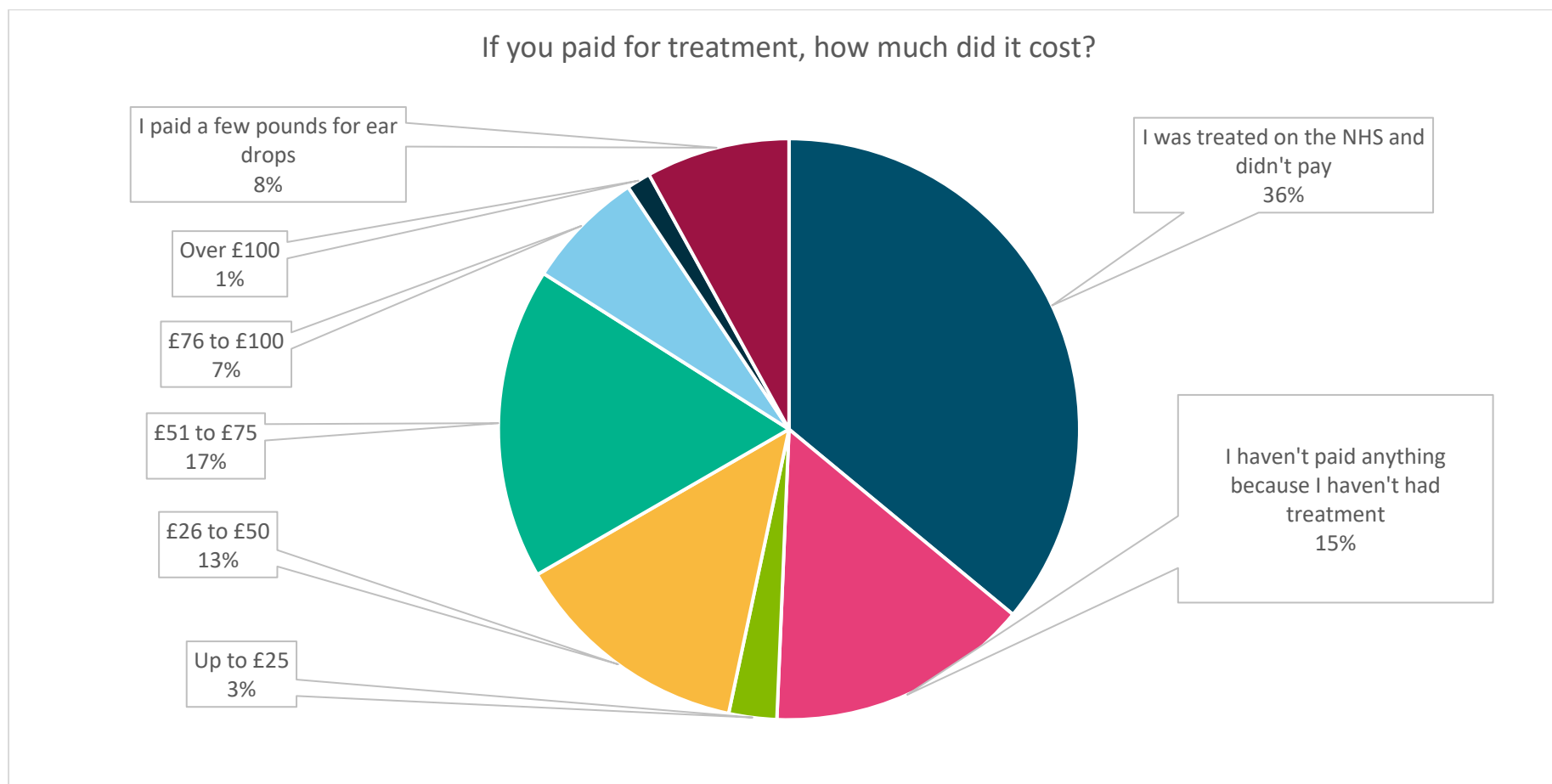


Of those respondents that received treatment from an earwax removal service, 44% had treatment at their GP surgery, 14% at the hospital and 41% had to pay privately to have the earwax removed.

Other responses:

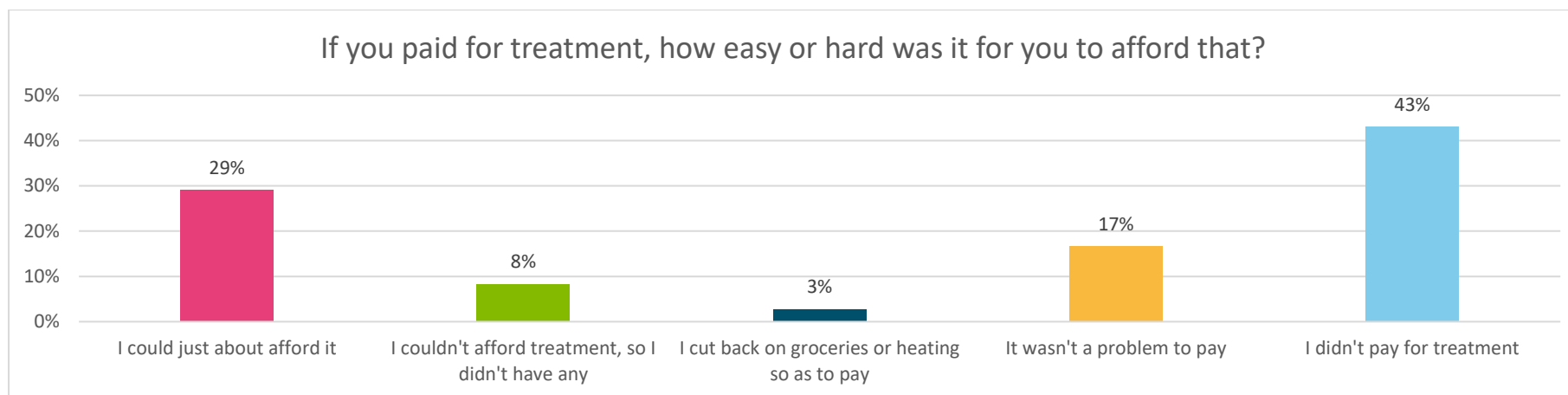
- Removed at my home by specialist
- Audiologist
- Specsavers

Question 5 – Treatment costs

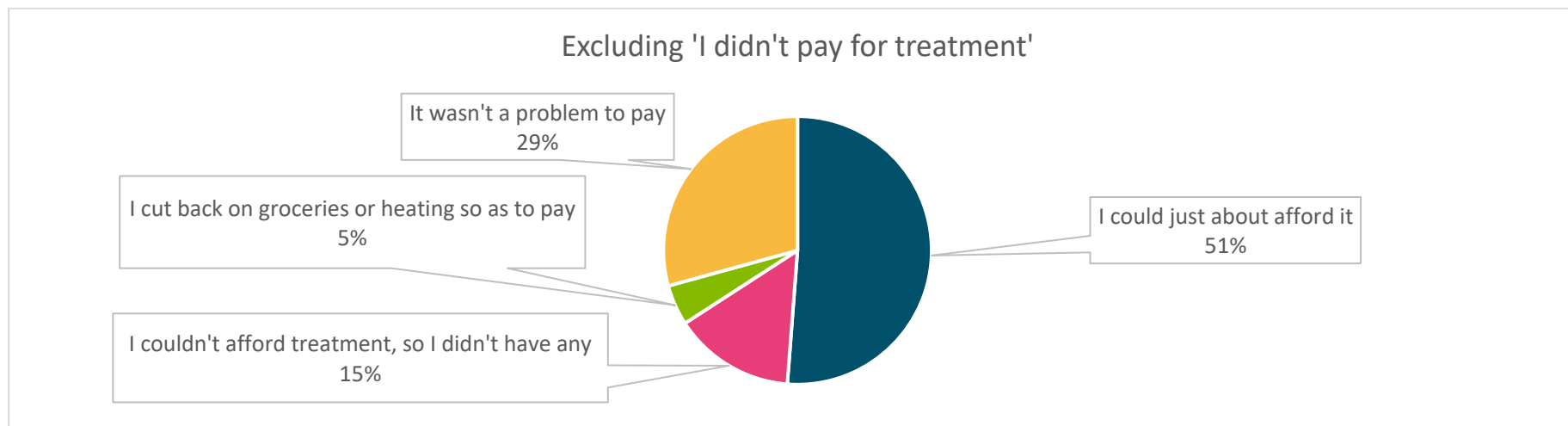


More than half of respondents (51%) had incurred no costs for treatment either because they had received it free on the NHS or hadn't received any treatment. Of those that had received treatment through a service (excluding ear drops) the vast majority (73%) spent between £26-£75, with a further 20% spending over £76 and 7% spending under £25.

Question 6 – Ease of payment

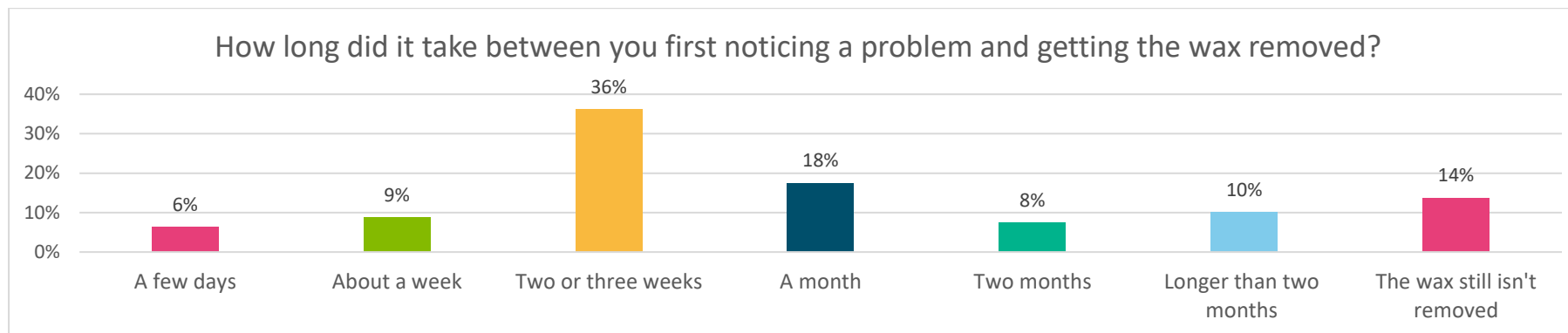


Over 4 in 10 people didn't have to pay for treatment. Of those that did, ability to afford treatment varied.



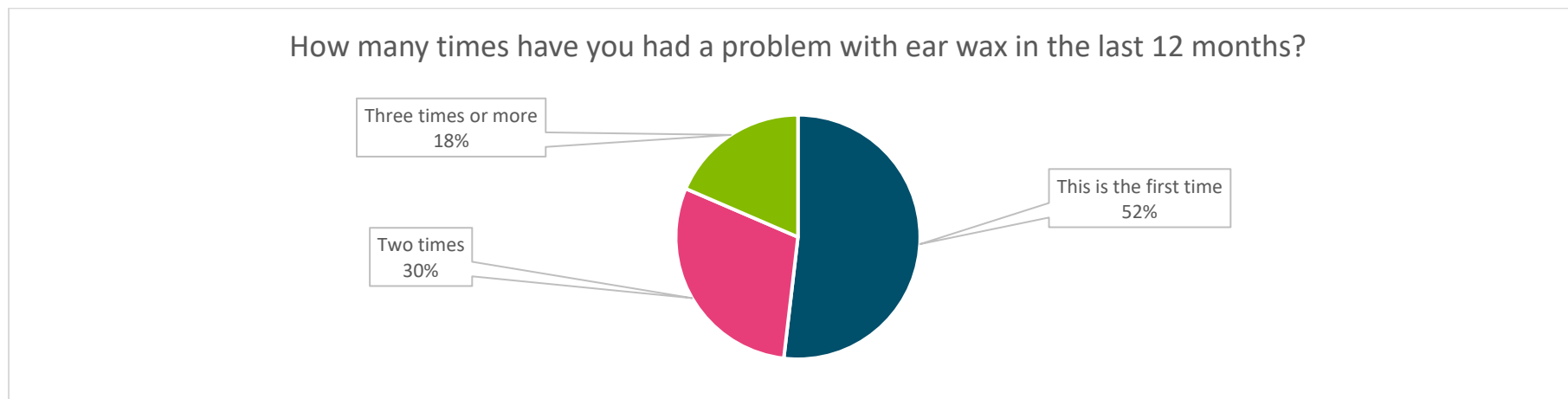
15% of people, didn't have treatment at all due to cost. 1 in 20 had to cut back on basics to afford it. Approximately half could just about afford it with only 15% saying they had no problem paying for it.

Question 7 – Time to treatment



14% of people had been unsuccessful in removal and still had an earwax problem. Of those that had been successful, 17% had the earwax removed within approximately one week, 62% within approximately one month and the final 21% took two months or more.

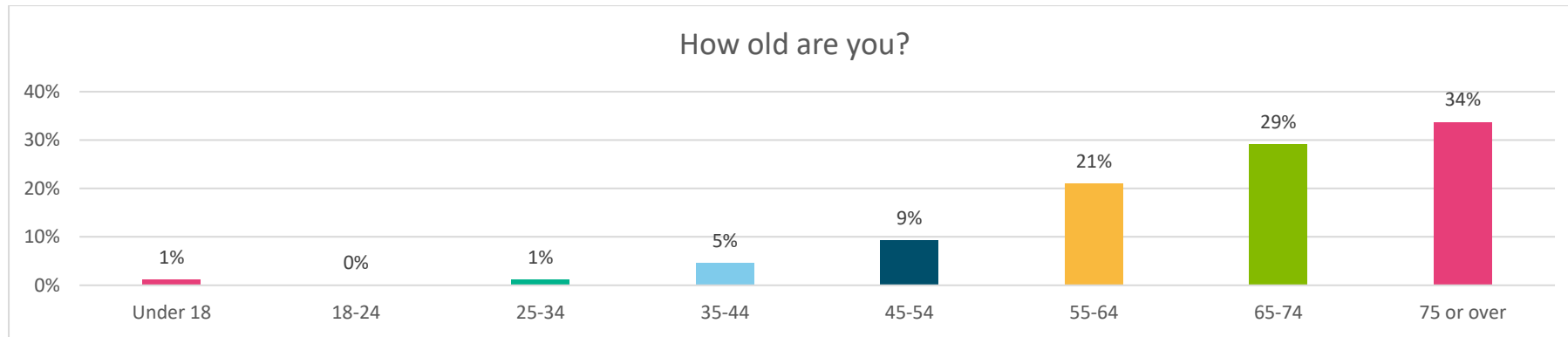
Question 8 – Frequency of earwax issues



About half of respondents were experiencing earwax issues for the first time in 12 months, however, 30% of people had experienced this 2 times and approximately a fifth had experienced this 3 times or more.

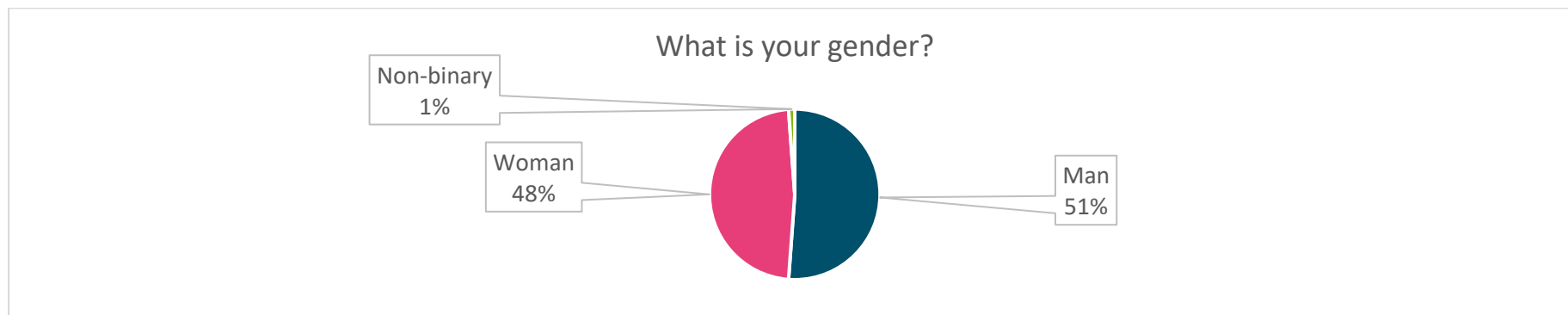
Questions 9-12 - Demographics

Age



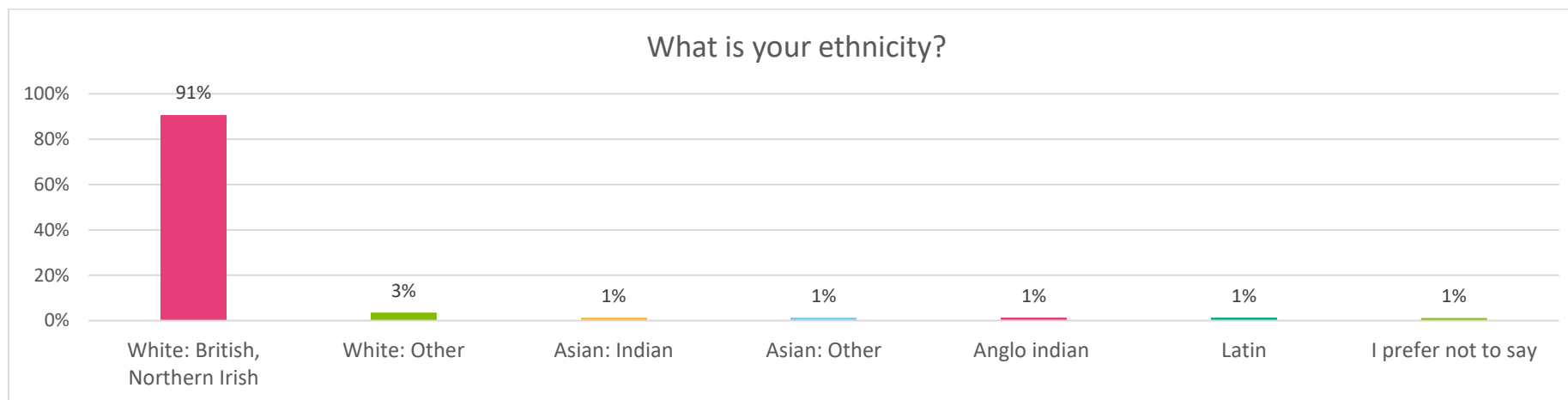
In nearly all cases, the percentage of respondents grew for each age group of respondents up to 75 or over. In part, this may be reflected in the demographics of our mailing list that elicited the majority of responses. However, this may also reflect the likelihood of experiencing earwax issues.

Gender



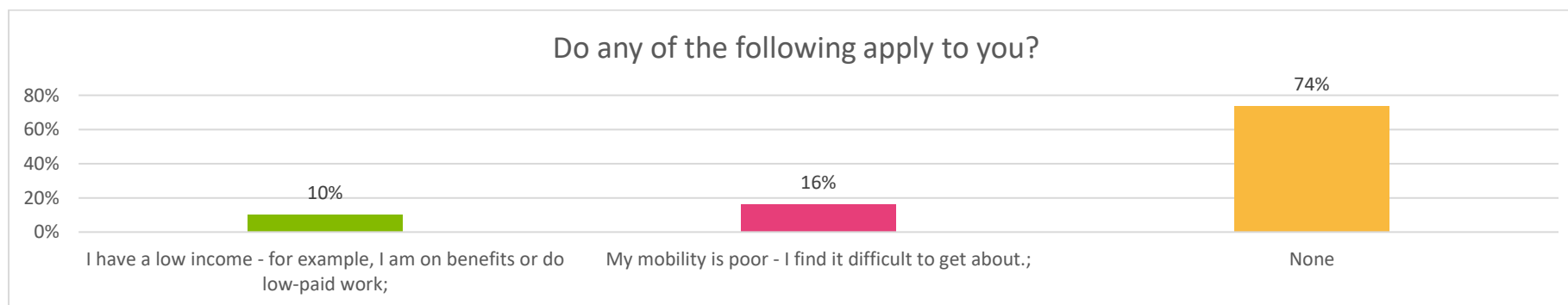
Gender responses were fairly evenly divided between men and women with a small (1%) representation from Non-binary people.

Ethnicity



Respondents were primarily White: British, Northern Irish. The ethnicity of respondents does not reflect the overall population of the London Borough of Sutton, however, does more closely reflect the demographics of the predominant age groups of the respondents in the Borough.

Other characteristics



Other comments

Confusion or poor communication about what NHS services are available or how to access them

- Whenever I take my three-year to GP due to fever or ear pain they examined her and conclude with she has lots of wax in ear so they can't examine her ear properly. But they don't remove it. I don't really know if we can book an appointment to remove ear wax in GPs [surgery].
- I was put off going to the doctor's for treatment as I was told I would have to pay £50. Others said they didn't pay at their doctor's. My partner didn't pay, he knew they would say soften it first so he did. The rumours are stopping people getting treatment and so is the price. was it because of our age we finally didn't pay or has our surgery dedicated staff for it.
- The GP surgery told me they didn't do it but I was seeing the nurse for a different reason and arranged it directly with her.
- I also attended the routine hearing aid clinic at the hospital to see if they could help. This led to me being referred to consultant with a 3 month plus wait list & being advised to have micro suction done privately.

Frustration about GP services (access to them or quality of them)

- It is very frustrating that the GP will no longer offer earwax removal - not so much for me but for my child who also has problems with earwax. Olive oil doesn't cut it! As a result I've ended up using drops which I am not sure are suitable for my child in order to maintain their hearing. Although tbh it's very difficult to get a GP appointment at all so I'm not sure that having the service in theory would make it accessible in practice. I have been advised by someone in allied health to change GP because ours has no appointments.
- "Where as at one time it was quite easy to get it looked at via the GP it now seems to be a totally different picture where it is quite difficult to get a) someone to look in your ears b) a long process of referrals to a specialist. Ear wax is or should not be so difficult to deal with
- It's too difficult to make an appointment when working. I have to call in the morning when I am at work not after work.
- Given up trying for doctors appointment just putting up with the problem 🙄
- Last time I got ears syringed by a nurse in my ~~GP surgery (while they still offered the service - years ago), she was so inept I got the tinnitus in my left ear which has never gone. Don't much trust the NHS now, unless they use more modern and gentle procedures which work and don't wreck one's hearing.

Unhappy at lack of NHS treatment or need to pay for private treatment

- I find that many of the issues I've gone to my GP for lately I've been told they won't/can't help and I have to pay for the treatment privately
- I should not have to pay this is not right
- My doctor us trying I feel to push everyone towards private. Which is ridiculous when most are on benefits. They used to do it but not anymore. I had to pay 60 at Specsavers.
- I think the nurse in my GP surgery should do it - 15 years ago they did now they don't
- It's a disgrace that I have to pay
- "I had no option but to use a high street optician offering vacuum suction for ear wax removal about 18 months ago as my local GP surgery no longer offers this service. I paid £55 and signed a form at the opticians which did say I may suffer from tinnitus for a period after the procedure.
- Micro-suction should be available on the NHS in my opinion. It is a quick, easy and effective treatment and seemingly would not cost a lot to provide.
- I used to use my GP to remove ear wax. It was a great, professional service, but unfortunately this service is no longer available.

Reluctance to go to GP because don't want to burden the service

- I'd like to see more information on DIY ear wax removal. I'm reluctant to go to the GP as appointments are in short supply, but don't want to go private...

Happy with the service they received from the NHS

- Very fast from referral to appt when wax removed.
- The staff that dealt with my hearing problems at St Helier were very helpful and polite.
- The Dr was very good and explained to me about tinnitus
- The GP examined my ears and referred me to the nurse, advising me to put olive oil in for two weeks before seeing her. The wax was then removed in a matter of minutes, painlessly.
- Finally, I had my ears syringed by washing several times at my GP surgery conducted by a nurse prior to using the high street optician, with no aftereffects, which was a very quick and comfortable experience. Please bring it back so others may be saved from this disconcerting, rather debilitating and probably unnecessary condition."
- Excellent treatment from my GP's nurse who removed ear wax

- I have needed to have ear wax removal every two or three years for a very long time. I feel very lucky that my GP surgery still offer this as many do not and friends of mine have had to pay for it to be done at, say, Specsavers. I will always put drops in my ears, morning and evening, for 10-14 days before my appointment in order to soften the wax.
- As was new to the area, I needed to find a qualified person relatively close to my new home to remove wax from both ears. The service was good.
- The Nurse was very good
- The nurse explained everything very well and answered all my questions. A superb efficient service. Well done.
- The practice nurse did a fantastic job and explained the procedure as it was administered

Other health issues (including hearing loss) as well as ear wax

- The ear wax removal made no difference to the tinnitus, and I am next going for an MRI.
- Not had a problem with earwax but just been diagnosed with AF
- Was seen at the hospital eventually and now have hearing aids
- I was told I had to have my ears checked before I could be seen by Audiology at the local hospital and provided with hearing aids.

Had another solution they were happy with

- The Hospital see me every six months to remove the ear wax.
- I go to the hospital once a year for treatment as I have had two operations in the past and have to go to the hospital for my ears to be syringed so am in the system which is good for me.
- I now bought a medically approved ear flush system and have used that on one occasion and it seemed to work well enough that I did not need further immediate treatment.
- It is a recurring problem about every 18 months. I always use oil daily, so it is easy for the GP's nurse to remove the wax but I'm not sure the DIY approach delays the need to visit the GP. Last time the nurse found an infection, so the wax was masking the more important problem.

Other comments

- I had a painful ear infection approximately 18 months ago. I was seen by a GP, given antibiotic ear drops and told that I would be referred to hospital to have my ear washed out to ensure all the infection is removed. The ear drops eventually cleared the infection. I did not have any contact from the hospital until six months after I was referred.

- The procedure was not comfortable as the vacuum touched my ear drums several times making me jump. I subsequently developed tinnitus a few weeks afterwards which lasted a few months, but it seemed to fade for a while but about a year ago it came back with a vengeance. I now need my ears syringing again and my GP advised using ear drops.
- I had my earwax removed at Specsavers. It took two visits to get rid of it.
- I started using different objects to isolate the noise from different neighbours that had in the past since came to London the situation worsened when I started working at night, normally people are unrespectful slamming the doors when leaving home or making a lot of noises, and my ears caught infections and I start suffering from them and having problem due to direct need for periodic examination to my specific work I almost lost the possibility to get my permanent job.

Key findings

- Over 85% of respondents who tried to remove the ear wax themselves using ear drops were unsuccessful (Question 3).
- Access to free treatment is confusing and inequitable. Of those respondents that received treatment (excluding those unable to access any and those that used ear drops successfully), 44% had treatment at their GP surgery, 14% at the hospital and 41% had to pay privately to have the earwax removed (Question 4).
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Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Sutton would like to thank all the local residents that took part in our survey that made this report possible.