

# Online GP Services: Patient Views and Experiences

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# Online GP Services: Executive Summary

Healthwatch Hertfordshire was commissioned by the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) to gather insights from Hertfordshire residents about their experiences of using online GP services. Given the drive towards the digitalisation of GP practices, it is crucial to understand the experiences of patients and to hear from residents about how services could be improved.

**In total we heard from 500 Hertfordshire residents.**

## Key Findings

Most respondents told us they used online GP services and noted some positive experiences, valuing the efficiency and convenience of the system. Despite this, **51%** would not recommend using online GP services as a first point of contact, indicating there are still improvements to be made.



**Availability:** Many respondents reported only being able to access online services during opening hours, with some noting requests were sometimes closed-early in the day. Respondents wanted greater availability so people with work and other commitments could submit requests.



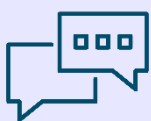
**Booking appointments:** Most respondents were unable to book appointments online or were limited to the type of appointment they could book. Respondents wanted more appointment types to be made available to reduce the need to call or visit their GP practice.



**Functionality:** Half of the respondents found online GP services easy to use, while the remaining half found navigating the system frustrating and felt forms were repetitive and irrelevant. Some felt the system was impersonal and inefficient, and wanted it to be more straightforward and user friendly.



**Accessibility:** Many respondents were concerned about the accessibility of online GP services and the impact digitalisation may have on those who struggle to use technology and their independence. Respondents emphasised the importance of equal access and exercising patient choice.



**Communication:** While half of respondents found their GP practice to be responsive, others reported inconsistencies and ignored requests. This unpredictability discouraged many from contacting their practice online. Patients wanted automated acknowledgements of their requests with clear response timelines to better plan their care.



**Integration:** The duplication of online platforms confused some respondents, and uncoordinated records risked creating gaps in medical information. Some said receptionists were unaware of the online services on offer, limiting the support they could provide. Respondents wanted consistent messaging and guidance about which platforms and services to use for their needs.



**Choice:** Many respondents did not have control over how to contact their practice, the type of appointment, or which clinician to see – which is particularly important when considering accessibility and reasonable adjustments. Some respondents could only reach their practice online, raising concerns for those at risk of digital exclusion.

# Recommendations

Recommendations were made to the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) Primary Care Committee to take forward. A summary of these recommendations is provided below.



Increasing the **availability** of online GP services



Enabling patients to **book appointments** online



Improving the **functionality** of online GP services



**Integrating** platforms to simplify the use of online GP services



Enhancing patient **choice** and the **accessibility** of online GP services



Improving **communication** between patients and GP practice staff

Healthwatch Hertfordshire will monitor the recommendations and hold Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) to account. We will feed back to patients to let them know what changes and improvements have been made.

**Struggling to access your GP practice? We can help you.**

Read our [website article](#) for more advice or information.

You can also contact Healthwatch Hertfordshire for support by:

 **01707 275978**

 [\*\*info@healthwatchhertfordshire.co.uk\*\*](mailto:info@healthwatchhertfordshire.co.uk)

 [\*\*Webform\*\*](#)

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## About Healthwatch Hertfordshire

Healthwatch Hertfordshire represents the views of people in Hertfordshire on health and social care services. We provide an independent consumer voice evidencing patient and public experiences and gather local intelligence to influence service improvement across the county. We work with those who commission, deliver, and regulate health and social care services to ensure the people's voice is heard and to address gaps in service quality and/or provision.

## About the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System

The Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System (ICS) was established as a statutory body on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022<sup>1</sup>. Integrated Care Systems are geographically based partnerships that bring together providers and commissioners of NHS services with local authorities and other local partners to plan, coordinate and commission health and care services<sup>1</sup>. The Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS is made up of two key bodies – an Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Integrated Care Partnership (ICP).

### **Integrated Care Board (ICB)**

The Integrated Care Board (ICB) is an NHS organisation responsible for planning and overseeing how NHS money is spent across Hertfordshire and West Essex, with the aim of joining up health and care services, improving health and wellbeing, and reducing health inequalities. The board of the ICB includes representation from NHS trusts, primary care, and from Hertfordshire County Council and Essex County Council<sup>2</sup>.

This report will be sent to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB Primary Care Transformation Committee to support with the improvement of online GP services.

### **Integrated Care Partnership (ICP)**

The Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) is made up of representatives from different organisations involved in health and care. This includes NHS organisations, local authorities and the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector. The partnership is responsible for developing an Integrated Care Strategy which will set out the priorities for Hertfordshire and West Essex for the next 10–20 years<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [How Will Integrated Care Systems Work? | The King's Fund](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Integrated Care System \(ICS\) – Herts and West Essex ICS](#)

# Hearing Patient Views about Primary Care in Hertfordshire and West Essex

Healthwatch Hertfordshire and Healthwatch Essex have been commissioned by the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) Primary Care Workstream to undertake a series of engagement projects. The aims of the engagement projects include:

- Gathering lived experiences to feed directly into the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS Primary Care Workstream.
- Supporting and enabling the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS to achieve wider participant engagement.
- Engaging patients and the public on programmes covering key priorities and areas of importance at a regional and local level.
- Making recommendations to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS Primary Care Workstream so improvements can be implemented.

Using patient and public feedback, this engagement project will focus on improving the relevant services within different areas of primary care by making recommendations to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB Primary Care Transformation Committee.

From August – October 2024, the Director of Primary Care Transformation at the ICB has requested that Healthwatch Hertfordshire explore how Hertfordshire residents use online GP services and how they could be improved.

## Aims

The purpose of this research was to gather insights from Hertfordshire residents about their experiences of using online GP services. The aims of the engagement include the following:

- To explore public experiences of using online GP services
- To understand how people use online GP services to book appointments
- To explore what people tend to use online GP services for
- To identify how online GP services could be improved

## Methodology

To achieve these aims, a single methods approach was adopted. An online survey was created to capture the views and experiences of people across Hertfordshire about accessing GP services online.

Due to the aims and nature of this engagement, we did not hear from many people who did not use or have access to technology. This research serves as a starting point to highlight the needs and challenges faced by patients who wish to access online GP services.

The engagement period ran from August – October 2024. The survey was promoted via social media and shared with the NHS, other statutory services, and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector across Hertfordshire to distribute via their networks, contacts, and social media channels.

In total we heard from **500** residents through the online survey. We would like to extend our thanks to the organisations and people involved in supporting this report.

## Background

### Key points:

- There has been a drive towards the digitalisation of GP practices, which for some patients has offered greater choice, convenience and flexibility.
- However increased pressure on primary care services has forced some GP practices to limit the range of services they can offer online, and provision across GP services can vary significantly.
- Despite the commitment to implement online GP services, there are barriers which may prevent some people from accessing them which can also exacerbate health inequalities.

In the last 10 years there has been a drive towards the digitalisation of GP practices. In 2014, the government required all GP practices to offer online booking and repeat prescription ordering with the intention of this being available to 95% of patients by 2015<sup>3</sup>. By 2015, 91% of patients were registered with GP practices that offered online booking, and 88% had access to online repeat prescription ordering<sup>3</sup>. This increase in digitalisation initially eased pressure on GP telephone systems, reduced potentially “unnecessary” appointments for routine queries, and gave patients greater choice, convenience, and flexibility<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> [Patient Access to General Practice: Ideas and Challenges from the Front Line](#)

Recent years have continued to see a rise in the demand for online GP services, and a shift in how patients contact their GP practice<sup>4</sup>. This was driven largely by the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated the need for these services<sup>5,6</sup>. During the pandemic, GP practices were advised to use online systems to hybridise access and enable patients to contact their GP practice via traditional and digital routes. This was reflected by the 8.5 million NHS App downloads and 4.4 million registrations between 2019–2021, as well as 71% of patient requests initiated online in 2021<sup>5</sup>. Patients used online systems to make requests, including checking symptoms, ordering repeat prescriptions, updating personal details, requesting test results, and being triaged for in-person or remote appointments.

The use of online GP services can be more convenient, efficient, and improve accessibility. This includes enabling patients to contact their GP surgery with a medical or administrative query, book appointments, order repeat prescriptions, and request test results without having to call or visit their GP practice, which can be challenging and problematic for some. For example, patients with long-term conditions, regularly taking 5 or more medications, or those who are hearing impaired or deaf were 67% more likely to book appointments online<sup>7</sup>.

However, increased pressures on primary care services have forced some GP practices to limit the range of services they can offer online, meaning that functionality and provision can vary significantly. Equally, many GP practices have now had to close their online GP services outside of operating hours or switch the system off entirely to manage the volume of requests received. This is despite NHS England emphasising that practices should not switch off online forms outside of core hours, as this can erode the convenience of being able to make online requests at any time.

Despite the nationwide commitment to implement online GP services, there are barriers to consider which may prevent some people from being able to access them. As of 2023, online GP services are offered in 99.7% of practices in England<sup>7</sup>. However, some patients may need to request access to use the service if they do not already use the NHS App, and adoption remains low (about 50% in May 2023)<sup>7</sup>. This potentially creates a barrier for prospective users of online GP services.

Accessibility issues may also arise for patients who struggle to use technology, such as the ageing population which continues to increase<sup>8</sup>. Use of online GP services generally increases with age (24% of 18–24 year olds and 49% of 55–69 years olds) before dropping

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<sup>4</sup> [Access to and delivery of general practice services - Health Foundation.pdf](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Use and usability of GP online services: a - ProQuest](#)

<sup>6</sup> [The impact of Covid-19 on the use of digital technology in the NHS](#)

<sup>7</sup> [The impact of digital technologies on the UK Healthcare](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Examining GP online consultation in a primary care setting in east midlands, UK | BMC Health Services Research](#)



back to 24% among patients over 70<sup>9</sup>. This suggests that digital exclusion can create a barrier to access for older patients.

Digital exclusion is also a significant risk for seldom heard and marginalised groups, and could be a potential barrier to access, as 12 million people in the UK 'lack basic digital skills'<sup>10</sup>. It is suggested that non-white patients and those with lower incomes are less likely to use online GP services, 'due to reduced access to the internet, computers and smartphones' and reduced awareness<sup>11</sup>. For example, patients who were black, Asian, and of mixed ethnicity were less likely to order repeat prescriptions online<sup>7</sup>.

Some people may also encounter language barriers which could prevent them from accessing online services<sup>12</sup>, while others may find it helpful to speak to a receptionist<sup>3</sup> and do not view web-based services as a replacement for traditional interactions<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, it is important to prevent those who use online services from gaining an unfair advantage to accessing face-to-face appointments<sup>5</sup>. Because of this, it is crucial to understand the needs of different groups who may be less likely to use online healthcare services in order to improve overall service delivery and avoid exacerbating existing health inequalities<sup>37</sup>.

There is clearly plenty of opportunity for the use of online GP services as we continue to move towards digitalisation within the NHS, however, these opportunities come with risks. Many of these risks may impact the most vulnerable in our society and exclude them from accessing the care and support they need.

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<sup>9</sup> [Journal of Medical Internet Research – Investigating Patient Use and Experience of Online Appointment Booking in Primary Care: Mixed Methods Study](#)

<sup>10</sup> [The Digital Patient: Transforming Primary Care?](#)

<sup>11</sup> [What helps patients access web-based services in – ProQuest](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Locked Out: digitally excluded people's experiences of remote GP appointments](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Patients find online GP services "cumbersome," survey finds](#)

# Key Findings

## Demographics

### Age of respondents

- 25-34 years – 5%
- 35-44 years – 12%
- 45-54 years – 20%
- 55-64 years – 21%
- 65-74 years – 23%
- 75+ years – 17%

### Ethnicity of respondents

- White British – 79%
- Ethnically diverse groups – 16%
- Prefer not to say – 5%

### Area respondents live

- Borough of Broxbourne – 6%
- Borough of Dacorum – 6%
- District of East Hertfordshire – 8%
- Borough of Hertsmere – 6%
- District of North Hertfordshire – 10%
- City of St. Albans – 12%
- Borough of Stevenage – 4%
- District of Three Rivers – 3%
- Borough of Watford – 37%
- Borough of Welwyn Hatfield – 6%

### Gender of respondents

- Woman – 72%
- Man – 25%
- Prefer not to say – 3%
- Prefer to self-describe – 0.2%

### Caring responsibilities:

- 16% are a carer

### Disability:

- 15% have a disability

### Long-term conditions:

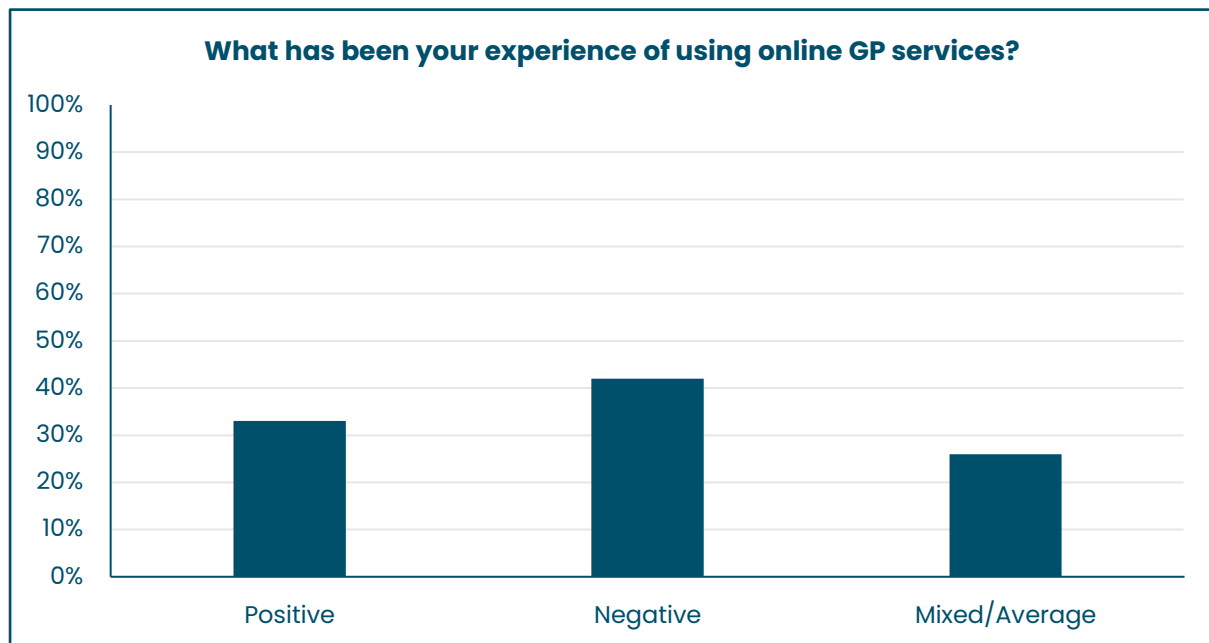
- 34% have a long-term condition

## Using Online GP Services

**Two thirds of respondents used online GP services to contact their GP practice, despite most people preferring to visit in person or contact by telephone. The majority used online GP services to either book an appointment and/or to order repeat prescriptions. Experiences of using online GP services varied significantly between residents and over half would not recommend it as a first point of contact.**

### Respondents reported mixed experiences with online GP services

The majority indicated that they felt negatively about the current services available (**42%**), while a third had positive experiences (**33%**) and over a quarter said their experiences were varied (**26%**). Interestingly, there were no significant statistical differences in experiences of online GP services among different demographic groups.



*Percentages are representative of a total number of 429 respondents.*

For those who had positive experiences with online GP services, this was often because they found them convenient and easy to use. Some respondents also commented that their GP practice was efficient and responsive when dealing with their requests.

***“Efficient, sometimes it means I don’t even need an appointment.”***

***“Excellent addition to service and saves so much [time] waiting around on the phone.”***

***“Been good so far, I have had medical issues and they were triaged and dealt with on the same day within hours.”***

For those who felt negatively about using online GP services, they were often frustrated at the restrictive and limited functionality which made it difficult to use and/or inaccessible. Others stated that the current lack of available services meant that it was not suitable for their needs.

***“Irritating and frustrating. If the doctor is asking me to get a blood test I would expect to be able to book one.”***

***“Painful, drawn out and frequently give up.”***

***“Awful. I get frustrated as the website is really clunky and the print is really small for people who are sight impaired and have to use [their] phone[s]. I don’t have easy access to a computer.”***

Respondents with mixed experiences shared that for simple requests, using online GP services typically worked well. However, some found it to be inconsistent, restrictive, and time consuming. As a result, some preferred to contact their practice using other means.

***“It has been hit and miss. Sometimes a reply is same day, other times it can take 3 days.”***

***“Generally satisfied with the result but may not be suitable for more complex requests.”***

***“Sometimes it’s a pain, other times it is helpful. Annoying that it can only be submitted during opening hours.”***

***“Needs very detailed information which is time consuming to type – would be quicker to explain over the phone.”***

Respondents were also asked whether they would recommend using online GP services as a first point of contact, to which **49%** (n=237) said they would, while **51%** (n=242) said they would not. These findings show that patients clearly want to be able to use online GP services, but current barriers and challenges need to be resolved.

### **Two thirds of respondents used their GP practice website to contact online**

Respondents used various routes to contact their GP practice online. Over half used their GP practice website (**66%**) while **43%** used the NHS App or another third party app. **13%** avoided contacting their GP practice online and used other means including telephone, SMS, email, in-person, and by letter.

A further **13%** said they did not contact their GP practice online. It is worth noting that the number of people who do not use online GP services may be higher, particularly as this

engagement focused on the use of online GP services. As a result, the number of patients who contact their GP practice using other means may also be higher, as these individuals might be less likely to engage with this topic.



*Percentages are representative of a total number of 494 respondents.*

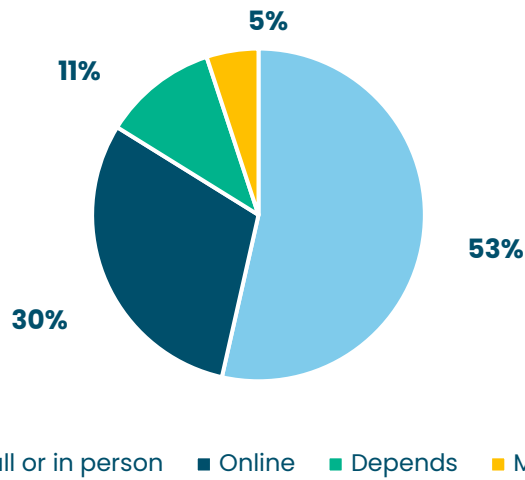
### **Over half of respondents preferred to call or visit their GP practice than use online GP services**

Although **49%** of respondents said they would recommend using online GP services as a first point of contact, over half said they preferred to call or visit their GP practice rather than use online GP services (**53%**).

Almost a third (**30%**) preferred to contact their GP practice online, while **11%** said their method of contact depends on their needs, and **5%** did not mind and/or liked to have the option to choose.

The findings indicate that respondents may be more inclined to use online GP services if they were improved, and as shown, others simply want to be able to choose the method of contact.

**Do you prefer to call or visit your GP practice in person rather than use online?**

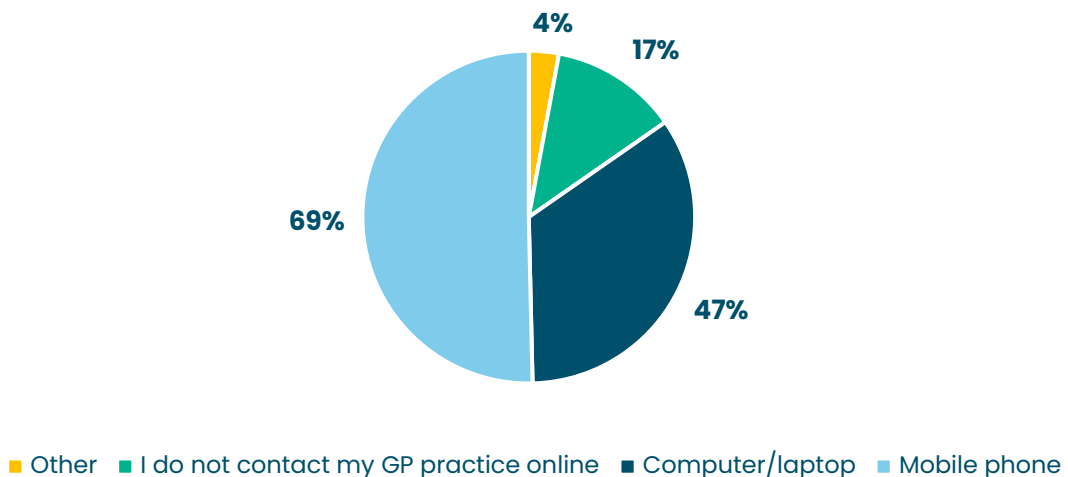


*Percentages are representative of a total number of 475 respondents.*

**Most respondents used their mobile phone to contact their GP practice online**

Respondents were asked what devices they used to contact their GP practice online. Most used a mobile phone (**69%**) followed by a computer or laptop (**47%**) and **17%** stated that they do not contact their GP practice online. A small percentage (**4%**) said they used other means of contact, including tablets, telephone or SMS, and letters.

**What device do you use to contact your GP practice online? Please select all that apply.**

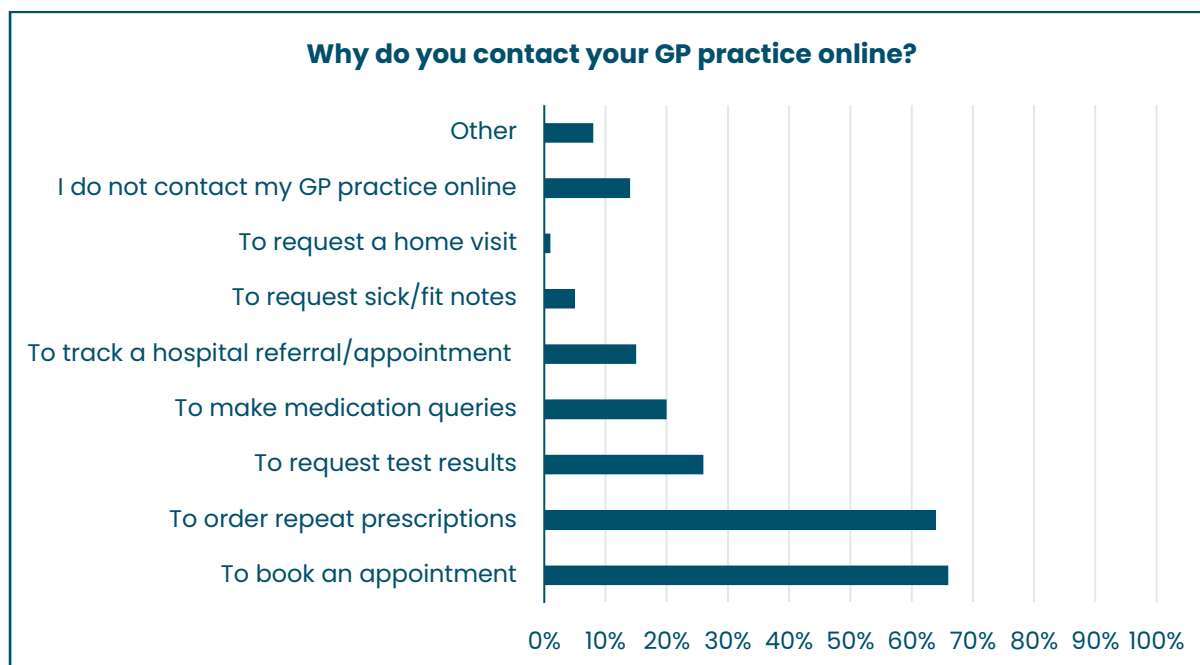


*Percentages are representative of a total number of 495 respondents.*

## Two thirds of respondents used online GP services to book appointments

Booking appointments and ordering repeat prescriptions were the main reasons respondents contacted their GP practice online (**66%** and **64%** respectively). Over a quarter used online GP services to request test results (**26%**). Medication queries were the fourth most common reason respondents contacted their GP practice online (**20%**), followed by tracking hospital appointments and referrals (**15%**). A small number used online GP services to request sick or fit notes (**5%**) and home visits (**1%**).

**8%** indicated that they contacted their GP practice for other reasons, which typically included administration queries and booking e-consultations. Interestingly, **14%** said they did not contact their GP practice online. Of this percentage, the majority said this was because their GP practice did not provide any online services.



*Percentages are representative of a total number of 494 respondents.*

As shown above, ordering repeat prescriptions was one of the most utilised services (**64%**), which suggests it widely available at GP practices across Hertfordshire. While ordering repeat prescriptions was not discussed at length, most described finding the process as generally straightforward, and many noted that it was the only online GP service they used. Interestingly, respondents often compared their positive experiences of repeat prescription ordering with other services that were more challenging to use.

***“Only used [online GP services] for repeat prescriptions – no problem with this service.”***

***“Repeat prescription online service works perfectly.”***

***“The only thing that works more efficiently for me so far has been the repeat prescription service.”***

***“It’s great for repeat prescriptions but not great for appointments.”***

Other respondents described repeat prescription ordering as inconsistent and compared challenges to other issues with online GP services, such as miscommunication or administrative delays. Suggestions for improvement centred around functional changes, such as streamlining the current process, improving communication, and ensuring online systems were working.

***“Poor service. Prescription items are missed off or changed on repeat prescriptions all the time, so you end up having to ring them anyway.”***

***“I like the online repeat prescription requests. It makes it a lot easier when it works. I have had an issue with an order saying my prescription request had been actioned, but when I went to the chemist to pick up the prescription, it had not been sent through. Took a second request to get my prescription.”***

***“Repeat prescriptions are good when working but there is no explanation provided anywhere on how the system works and what you need to do when.”***

The next few sections of this report will explore the key issues respondents faced when using online GP services.

## **Availability**

***Almost a quarter of respondents suggested the availability of online GP services needs to be improved, commenting on the limited operating hours and the difficulties this created in trying to access the support they need.***

When asked if their GP practice allowed online submission of medical queries or consultation requests, **30%** (n=147) of respondents reported being able to do so all the time, while over a third could submit queries some of the time (**36%** n=180). **11%** (n=54) were unable to submit queries at all, and **23%** (n=114) were unsure. This indicates that some GP practices may not offer this service, and some respondents do not utilise online GP services for this purpose, and were therefore unable to comment.

***“Good experience but it is not always possible to contact them due to a cut-off point at the surgery.”***



***“I would only recommend contacting the surgery online if you're free at 8AM and can type quickly.”***

***“I have found it easy to use. I do ensure I submit my query around 08:00 as occasionally when enquiring later, I am told that all appointments have been made, please try later after 14:00 which was then successful.”***

Many respondents faced difficulties accessing online GP services because they were either switched off when they reached capacity or were unavailable outside of their practice's operating hours. This significantly impacted the overall convenience, efficiency, and effectiveness of online GP services, particularly for patients who would benefit from contacting their GP practice outside of typical opening hours due to work and/or other commitments.

***“Online is difficult for people who can't complete the form during the short window it's open.”***

***“I cannot submit consultation forms online outside of 9-5 Monday to Friday as the system won't let you, so it's really no benefit to me at all.”***

***“What is the point of a system that doesn't allow people to submit queries and appointment requests during all hours that is responded to in office hours?? The system is intentionally set up to make things as difficult as possible for something that can literally save lives. It's beyond appalling.”***

Unsurprisingly, almost a quarter (**24%** n=120) of respondents expressed a need for the availability of online GP services to be improved.

A key suggestion was to make online GP services available 24/7, with the understanding that requests may be acknowledged or responded to the following day. Removing this barrier to access could benefit patients who are unavailable during practice hours, which is especially important for those with other commitments (such as work/caring responsibilities) that already limit their availability.

***“I am also frustrated that the online service is only available during surgery hours. This is an unnecessary restriction. It would be far better to let people submit forms out of hours and have a message to say that the form will be reviewed when the surgery opens.”***

***“There definitely needs to be an improvement in how often the online triage closes and how early in the day - it is very worrying when you go to access the form and it is closed especially, if you have had to work yourself up to contacting the GP about something.”***

***“Rather than being office hours be 24 hours to do an e-consult. If I'm sick, I'd rather not have to still get up early to put a request in. Or for requesting renewal of prescriptions to have to do it in work hours (not sure if that is still the case).”***

## **Booking Appointments**

***A third of respondents are unable to book appointments using online GP services, and many are restricted in the types of appointments they can book. Often this resulted in patients having no choice but to call or visit their GP practice to arrange an appointment.***

As mentioned, booking appointments was the most common reason patients used online GP services, and was the area most frequently highlighted by respondents as needing improvement. Some shared positive experiences, noting online booking was fairer, more efficient, convenient, and responsive than calling or visiting their GP practice in person.

***“Good for appointment booking, as this is much faster and easier than hanging on the phone waiting. And I can do it when they are closed.”***

***“I really like the online system for booking appointments. It's a fairly easy to complete and you get a response really quickly. It seems a fairer way of allocating appointments by need.”***

***“My experience of using online services has been very good, if I request an appointment I get a call back from the surgery to make one.”***

However, some respondents noted that appointments were either routinely unavailable, or unable to be booked in advance due to limited availability. As a result, respondents often had no choice but to call or visit their GP practice in person to arrange an appointment, potentially leading to increased pressures on receptionists.

***“In my experience it does not work well. When trying to book a smear for instance it was giving me options of days and times that were not suitable as such short notice and would not allow me to choose alternative dates. In the end after a lot of back and forth I called the GP surgery, and they were able to book at a day and time that suited. This was frustrating and a waste of time.”***

***“You quite often cannot book appointments online as none are available.”***

***“I would like to be able to reliably book repeat appointments. The current system is like The Hunger Games.”***

***“Often when you try to book an appointment in the future there are simply no appointments or it blocks you.”***

Importantly, a third of respondents said they are unable to book appointments using online GP services (**33%** n=165). This underlines the discrepancies in the online services available at different GP practices. Many said they were previously able to book appointments online, however this was no longer possible, with some explaining that this change occurred after the COVID-19 pandemic. A small number of respondents were unaware that their GP practice could even offer online bookings.

***“I have no idea how to do this – I have tried to book appointments online but it says it doesn’t allow it for my practice.”***

***“When did become a thing and how do you find out more? I had no idea some people could do this? I have a child with disabilities and it would be incredibly useful to be able to book appointments time online rather than sit on hold in a phone queue for 30 minutes!”***

***“We can not really do anything online at our GP surgery. I have to order repeat prescriptions through EMIS [and] we cannot book appointments.”***

Additionally, a large number of respondents said they are limited in the appointments they can book, with many only able to request specific types of appointments, such as with a nurse or for planned care. These restrictions often force patients to call their GP practice to access the services they need.

***“Use is not the issue. It’s the limited range of services on offer.”***

***“I tried to book a cervical screening online, but they don’t offer that option and you have to call. Would be great to set up a platform where you can request routine services like this rather than same day appointments.”***

***“I would like to be able to book appointments online but [they] are limited to certain types of appointments.”***

For respondents who can book appointments online, they suggested that they need to be made routinely available and bookable in advance. This could encourage more patients to use online GP services, which in turn may reduce the number of patients waiting to speak to a receptionist by phone or in person.

***“I rarely make appointments, but would like the ability to book online, even if it’s a month in advance so I can plan my work around it.”***

***“Appointments could be available online as they are over the phone, and also be available further ahead than only one week, so that I would not need to phone several times within a very restricted timeframe just to book an appointment.”***

Respondents also emphasised that online GP services should enable patients to book a wider range of appointments, as for many, appointment types available to book online are extremely limited – again meaning they have no choice but to call or visit their GP practice to get the care they need.

***“Online services are VERY limited. Appointments need to be bookable online.”***

***“Would be great to set up a platform where you can request routine services like this rather than same day appointments.”***

***“I tried to book a cervical screening online, but they don’t offer that option and you have to call. Would be great to set up a platform where you can request routine services like this rather than same day appointments.”***

For respondents who do not have the option to book appointments online, they simply wanted to have this choice.

***“Please make appointments bookable online!”***

***“I want to book appointments online but this option is not available.”***

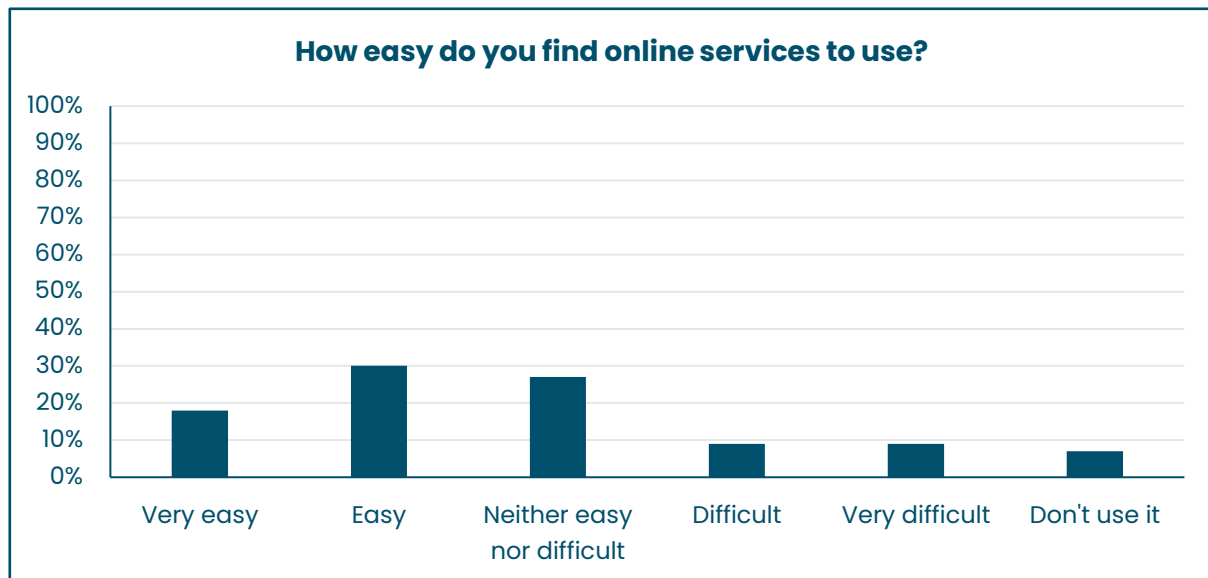
***“I’d like to be able to make an appointment. Used to be able to do this before the pandemic.”***

## Functionality

**Respondents generally found online GP services simple to navigate, however many found the process of completing online forms difficult and the forms inherently restrictive, resulting in patients receiving worrying and/or incorrect medical advice.**

### Although almost half of respondents found online GP services easy to use

Functionality was another key concern for respondents when using online GP services. Respondents were asked how easy they find online GP services to use. Nearly half reported finding them easy or very easy to use (**48%**). These respondents shared that they view online GP services as user-friendly, simple to navigate, and straightforward. They also tended to have a more positive experience if their concern was less urgent and/or complex.



*Percentages are representative of a total number of 489 respondents.*

***"It has been excellent, mainly because Bridgewater Surgeries deal with everything really efficiently and the online service helps them to do this."***

***"Very good. Online form submitted - appointment at practice arranged. Follow up excellent."***

***"It has always been excellent, they usually call next day and are very helpful. It is excellent if your condition isn't an emergency."***

However, **18%** found online GP services difficult or very difficult to use, and over a quarter felt they were neither easy nor difficult (**27%**). These respondents shared that they often

found online GP services complicated and inconvenient, citing issues with the interface, navigating the system, or the system not working at all.

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***“Interface is awful. Impossible to use. Resulted in a telephone conversation whilst I was teaching, at a highly inconvenient time.”***

***“I have tried several times to use the online system and cannot seem to get past the registration page. Each time I have given up and telephoned instead. Very frustrating and I haven't found it clear at all.”***

***“It only works well intermittently, and often needs a phone call - and 10+ minutes of hold time - to resolve.”***

Other respondents described the interface as “impersonal” and not “user-friendly” which often deters them from using online GP services as their first point of contact.

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***“The online consultation closes when they have had too many enquires. Sometimes by 9am, then you have to wait until the next day. It is not user friendly and is very impersonal.”***

***“It's just so 'cold' and impersonal in my opinion.”***

### **Over a quarter of respondents found it difficult to complete the online forms**

Answering questions and completing the forms required was problematic for some patients. While **41%** reported finding the questions easy to complete, over a quarter of respondents found the process difficult (**28%**) and **30%** neither agreed nor disagreed. This suggests that respondents tended to have mixed experiences.

A common concern for respondents was the length of the online forms, which they felt often contained repetitive and/or irrelevant questions. Respondents often found this to be time-consuming, and some even felt it was easier to wait to speak to a GP practice over the phone.

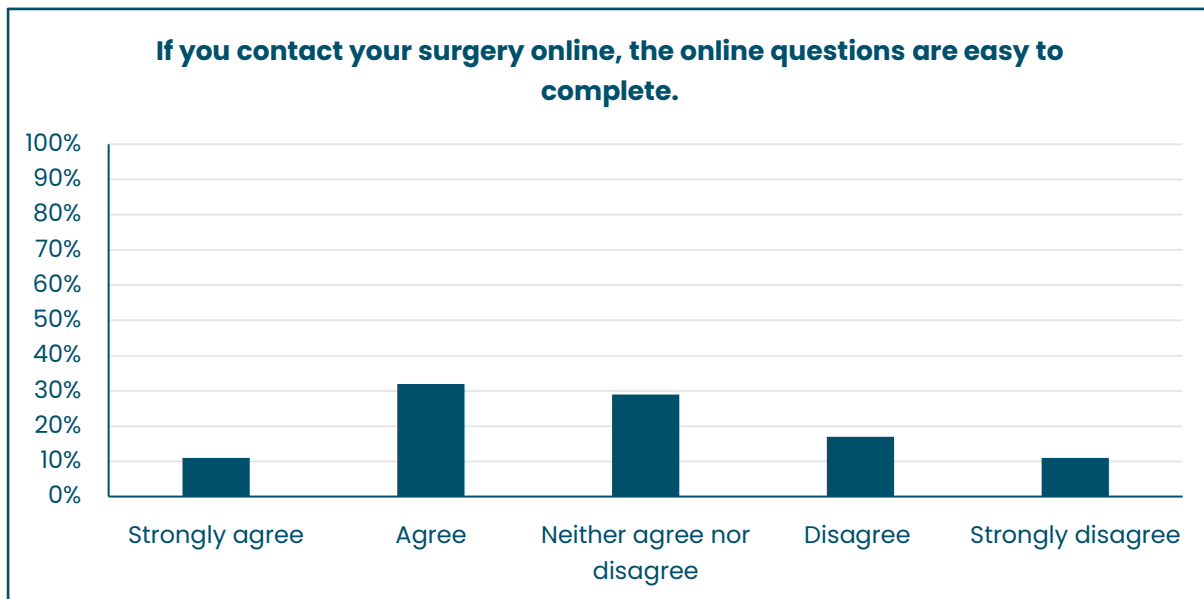
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***“It's long and tedious with repetitive and irrelevant questions.”***

***“When you are ill and not functioning well, the mere process of switching on your PC early enough in the morning before all the appointments go and then having to fill in multiple pages, answer a number of questions when you are dealing with pounding headaches, searing pain and/or vomiting and other symptoms is uncaring and a huge challenge. This is particularly true when you are a vulnerable person with limited***

***technological capability on a good day. The system is screening out the people it most needs to assist in favour of the "worried well" and the fortunate (economically and educationally)."***

***"It is very time consuming so the burden of wasting time by waiting for a phone to be answered has been replaced by wasting time by answering a heap of irrelevant questions online (the latter of which is likely to be very difficult for more vulnerable people)."***



Percentages are representative of a total number of 477 respondents.

Other respondents noted that the options available within the online forms can be restrictive, making it difficult to include the right information and to describe symptoms. Some also stated that the tick boxes made this harder to complete, as they are confined to pre-existing options.

***"The categories are not comprehensive, so you have to find the closest category and the questions are often irrelevant."***

***"You have to go through 4 million irrelevant questions to book a simple appointment. You have to choose what it is in regard to from limited options. For example there is no option for gynae related issues, so you have to select something different."***

***"The online form has options for some medical conditions i.e. Asthma, Back problems - but doesn't come close to covering all of the illnesses that people need. No option for 'other' so you have to click something that's vaguely relevant and type in the notes what it is you're actually talking about."***

***“The e-consult is not user-friendly – it’s a one size fits all model and when I used it recently it did not allow me to explain the issue properly – when I did speak with a GP I explained this and the GP’s response was that e-consult is not ideal!”***

Several respondents said that the restrictive nature of the online forms has resulted in them receiving incorrect and/or worrying medical advice, with some directed to NHS 111 and/or A&E despite describing minor symptoms. A few respondents described having to “play” the system to avoid being sent to NHS 111 and/or A&E for a minor condition.

***“The series of questions often ends up going down a more serious path – for example asking about head trauma when I’ve got migraines!!! It can be frustrating.”***

***“More options of what you can talk about on there so that you don’t have to complete long questionnaires about something irrelevant. concerning symptoms automatically stop the process and say that you should call 999, however they’re every day and typical symptoms of my condition so I have to tick no and then type in the box to explain.”***

***“The automation in online triage is inadequate and too often reverts to call 111 instead of actually offering contact. I end up “gaming” the questions to get the appointment I actually need.”***

To improve the functionality of online GP services, some respondents suggested that the interface needs to be more user-friendly and easier to navigate. If there is to be a drive towards digitalisation, then respondents emphasised that it is important that systems are straightforward and simple to use.

***“Greater clarity [needed]. If you want people to use online, it must be clear and easy.”***

***“There is a directed messaging system but it is not obvious to navigate – the workflows need to be designed properly.”***

***“There should be a contact button on the front page in flashing text. I work in IT and am under 45 and if I struggle to find it, less technically savvy people will find it impossible. It’s also not clear that the NHS app can be used as an alternative.”***

***“Simpler format and questions that guide those who are not IT literate.”***

Likewise, many respondents wanted the online forms to be more streamlined to reduce the occurrence of repetitive and/or irrelevant questions and the time taken to complete them. They also emphasised the need for online forms to be less restrictive to enable



patients to share their concerns and/or symptoms in more detail, rather than being confined to pre-selected options.

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***“Needs to be simplified, too long winded, loads of irrelevant questions.”***

***“Clearer multiple choice and options to explain (‘please specify’ or ‘other’) to be able to explain ‘out of the ordinary’ occurrences.”***

***“More options for what the consultation is regarding, it’s a bit restrictive, more direct options to ask for prescriptions, appointments, call backs etc.”***

***“The online request for an appointment doesn’t give you the options you require – there should be a generic one where you fill in your request rather than having to choose an option from a drop down, as they don’t have all the requests you may require.”***

Improving pathways to diagnosis was also important to respondents, who argued that the current system can provide incorrect information and/or worrying results. This can cause patients to be signposted to NHS 111 or A&E despite describing minor symptoms.

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***“Better navigation and also it asks you to describe your symptoms and then gives you a random illness. For example, I typed in Menopause and it came up with how to treat knee pain.”***

***“Me and my daughter were unfortunately let down earlier in the year when we had a chest infection – we ended up at out of hours both times. If the online hadn’t signposted us inappropriately and they have spoken to me on the phone and listened to me a GP appt would have resolved the need for out of hours.”***

***“If a patient declares they are male, to then ask if they are pregnant is not very intelligent.”***

## Integration

***The lack of integration posed challenges for some respondents, commenting that the duplication and disconnect between services and platforms made them reluctant to use online GP services entirely.***

Lack of integration was also identified as a functional issue of online GP services and was discussed by a number of respondents. Duplication of online platforms and services (such as the NHS App and GP practice websites) was confusing for some patients attempting to navigate the online system

Issues raised by respondents regarding integration included uncoordinated records leading to potential gaps in medical information, and confusion for patients around which platform they should use. Additionally, some stated that receptionists at their GP practice did not seem to be working in tandem with the online GP services, leaving them unable to provide appropriate support to patients.

***“It appears to be a complete mess. There is a practice website/patient access and the NHS App. Too much duplication, not enough integration.”***

***“Still feel not joined up and very inconsistent. Staff seem puzzled when asked questions relating to digital. Not their fault I suspect, just not sufficient training and time to do so.”***

***“Processes used by the surgery change a lot. Automated telephone instructions for the website do not always match the options on the website.”***

Respondents suggested that improving the coordination and integration across platforms would improve their experience. They also argued that there needs to be consistent messaging about what services and support are available across various platforms to avoid confusion and/or miscommunication.

***“Better use of NHS App to populate data already held. The app is a farce; it does not give a full history of NHS interface.”***

***“It would be easier if the surgery would open up the blocked channels via NHS App.”***

***“Be more joined up so you are clear what you can do where. There are messages on the phone saying you can book appointments online but there are never any available on the NHS app. I don’t understand the way repeat prescriptions are supposed to work. It is***

***unclear who to go to, to chase late ones and how you collect them earlier before a holiday etc. not sure what you do at the end of the year to renew them for another year.”***

## **Accessibility**

***The accessibility of online GP services was a concern for many respondents. They shared that an increasing reliance on online GP services may impose greater health inequalities and unequal access to care, often impacting those who are already more vulnerable.***

Accessibility was a common issue among respondents, as many found online services difficult to use. This suggests that the challenges faced by those who are digitally excluded are even more significant.

Many highlighted that technology can be particularly challenging for the ageing population who may not feel confident using technology or have access to computers, tablets, or mobile services. Additionally, patients who are digitally excluded are likely to be overlooked regarding their ability to access GP services online. Many also argued that reliance on online GP services may compromise privacy, confidentiality, and independence, as those struggling to use technology often have to rely on the support of their friends, family, and loved ones, disclosing their health information to them.

***“Not easy for people digitally excluded though. My elderly parents don’t know how to use online.”***

***“Very effective, but the older generations (e.g. my mother-in-law who is 92) rely on family to complete online requests. We know several neighbours that do not have family nearby and they advise it is difficult for them to contact a doctor.”***

***“My mother is 90 and has no mobile or internet. I now have to contact when needing to liaise with surgery. This questions confidentiality if she wanted to keep information on her health between her and doctor or social worker. (Taking her independence away).”***

***“Think this is still very difficult for older people – I have to help my dad as [he finds] it very difficult or he just has to wait for ages on the phone – think anyone over 70 should have a much simpler way of contacting [their] GP.”***

Respondents also highlighted how the interface and online forms are not accessible, presenting challenges for patients who may have conditions or additional needs and making it more difficult for them to use online GP services independently.

***“The size of the print is awfully small and not readable on my phone as I have macular degeneration. It’s not easy.”***

***“They are not accessible to everyone, there’s no visuals/easy read for those with learning disabilities or an option for those with visual impairment.”***

***“I was in the doctors waiting room and a patient came in and reported a problem with his medication. The receptionist told him he had to complete an online request. The patient reported he couldn’t read or write. The receptionist again told him to do it online! After some time he was told to go home and phone in to the doctors. The system can sometimes be crazy.”***

Accessibility includes a range of considerations to ensure everyone can access their GP practice online, and many adaptations can be put in place to improve the experience for patients with additional needs. As a result, many respondents suggested that GP practices need to prioritise accessibility.

Some respondents said it is important that patients can exercise choice and are given the option to contact their GP practice using their preferred method – whether visiting in person, by phone or using online GP services – and enabling them to have access to the care and support they need.

Others said that online GP services need to be made more accessible, with examples including streamlining online forms, increasing the font size, using more visuals, and providing an Easy Read option.

A few respondents suggested that GP practices should offer training and education sessions to help patients learn how to use online GP services, should they want to.

***“For me it is very easy, but there may be others that it is not, and some education sessions would be good.”***

***“Tuition should be given to non-computer users about exactly how to use online services. Many people have no-one to help them with this.”***

***“The system is screening out the people it most needs to assist in favour of the “worried well” and the fortunate (economically and educationally). The system designers need***

**to sit with some vulnerable patients to identify their needs and then adapt the systems to meet them.”**

**“Easy read or more pictorial information/directions.”**

## Communication

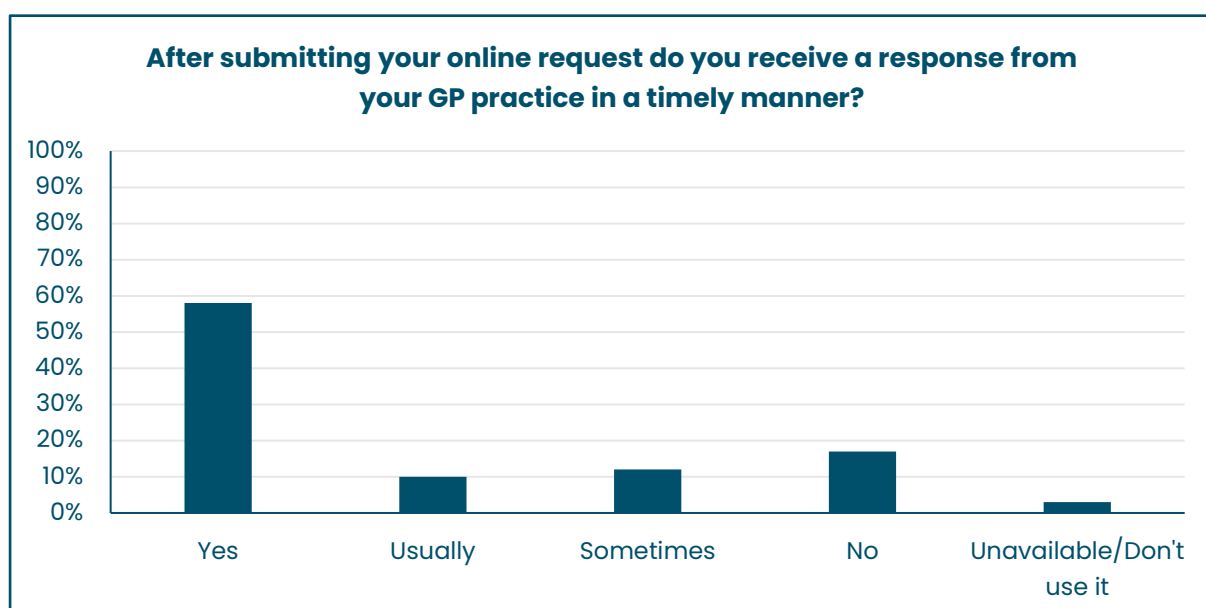
**Over half of respondents received prompt communication from their GP practice after using online services, however some residents experienced delays and/or inconsistency in communication.**

Communication was another key issue mentioned by a significant number of respondents. **58%** said their GP practice responded quickly to their online requests after they had been submitted. These respondents shared that their GP practice was responsive and efficient in managing their online requests, with many receiving a response within a few hours or within the same day.

**“Staff are very responsive and answers or solutions come back quickly.”**

**“It has been efficient and answered by text promptly. A one-to-one appointment is offered or if less serious with a GP phone call consultation.”**

**“When I completed an online form recently about a (possibly) urgent matter, the response was very rapid and I was seeing a GP within 45 minutes of submitting the form and then had a hospital appointment with 2 working days (when I was assured that there was no sign of breast cancer but it had been appropriate to be checked).”**



*Percentages are representative of a total number of 436 respondents.*

A smaller number of respondents said they usually received a timely response (**10%**) and **12%** said they sometimes received a timely response, but this was unpredictable. **17%** said they did not receive a timely response.

Of these respondents, some shared that they often experienced delays, waiting several days for a reply, while others said the communication was inconsistent. Some did not receive any acknowledgement that their request had been received.

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***“Mainly ok, but not always sure if information has been received.”***

***“You are never sure how long it will take to get an answer if at all.”***

***“Not great because it doesn’t always work. It takes forever to hear back when there is an issue and all you want is a repeat prescription. This then adds on days to the request.”***

A few respondents reported that they did not receive any acknowledgement that their request had been received and were worried or frustrated because they were not aware of when they should expect to be contacted. Others said they did not receive a response from their GP practice at all.

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***“I am told someone will ring and they don't, if it is a GP Registrar who knows nothing about you, ignores what you have already submitted and you have to start again.”***

***“You don’t know how long it will be before you get a response, so it isn’t a true replacement for being able to phone the surgery.”***

Other respondents experienced poor communication from their GP practice, sharing that they were “sent in circles” from the GP practice to the online GP services. They commented that their GP practice will ask them to complete an online form, only for the online form to tell them to ring the GP practice which they found counterproductive, frustrating, and time-consuming for both patients and staff.

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***“I phone the surgery. A recorded message tells me to fill in the online e-consult form. That tells me I should phone the doctor.”***

***“It seems to have made appointments much more difficult to get. I hardly ever get an appointment within two weeks. The surgery does not accept GP appointments at all unless the online system has been done first. Sometimes that system sends a message saying “Make a face to face appointment” but when I call to make one, I am told I must***

***fill in online first and then I have to try and persuade the receptionist that I have been told by the system... etc.”***

***“I’ve tried calling before and have got an automated message telling me to book an appointment online. I’ve then hung up and tried but the website hasn’t worked so I’ve had to phone back, join the back of queue, and then not get an appointment because I was late. I would use the online services more if I had faith that they worked and my message will be dealt with but I don’t so I would prefer to call.”***

***“It can be very frustrating when you complete [an] online request. [You] are told to book a review then ring in and spend ages explaining to the admin person on the phone that you have already completed an online form and can book a review - 20 mins on the phone going round in circles being told I needed to complete an online form which I had already done and been told by doctor that I could book a review.”***

In addition, some respondents mentioned receiving phone calls from their GP practice without warning, while others felt that the scheduled time to expect a call back was not precise enough. Respondents shared that this can be anxiety-inducing and frustrating for patients, particularly if they are not in the position to talk about their medical issues over the phone. Others said that without warning, patients can miss the callback, often meaning they need to restart the online submission.

***“I feel the telephone consultation service leaves a lot to be desired. Being given a 4 hour window for the doctor to call is far too long. If you go out you run the risk of getting a call when you are in the middle of a public space with no opportunity to find somewhere private to discuss your problem. I have also found that the call actually comes before the allotted time slot.”***

***“It takes time to submit the form (accurate description, maybe taking photos), then wait for a response and then a telephone call from the GP. I have tried missing the calls (two made in a row) while driving and having to start the process over. I therefore try to time contact to when I have several quiet days.”***

***“Whilst there is a phone queue at 8am, you can get more immediate feedback than submitting a form and waiting an undisclosed amount of time for a response.”***

***“Only problems I have is in the past when I have selected a preferred method of contact and times when I am not available, this is often ignored and it will usually be a phone call even if I requested a text or email and it will often be at a time when I can’t answer***

***my phone, as I have specified on the form. I work in a school and often my phone is not available to me.”***

Most communication improvements focused on patients receiving responses within a reasonable amount of time. Respondents also suggested sending patients an automated response to inform them that their request has been received, and when they should expect a response.

Some respondents recommended that GP practices should provide a precise window for callbacks to avoid calls being potentially missed and/or the patient not being the position to talk about their health concerns.

***“A guaranteed response or an online acknowledgement would be helpful. It is like shooting an arrow into the air without knowing if it has landed.”***

***“It would be helpful if the surgery could advise a two hour window for call back.”***

***“[Receiving a] quicker response and knowing what day and time the doctor will call me back.”***

## **Choice**

***Some respondents are only able to contact their GP practice via online services and emphasised the importance of enabling patients to exercise choice. Others found online GP services limiting by not allowing patients to choose the type of appointment or clinician.***

Choice was a significant concern for respondents. Many stated that they were not able to choose how they contacted their GP practice, the type of appointment, or choice of clinician. The limited choice available further suggests that the overall functionality of current online GP services is lacking.

When respondents were asked why they contacted their GP practice online, some stated that online GP services was the only way they could access their GP practice. This was particularly concerning as current online GP services have been described as restrictive, impractical, and/or difficult to navigate. Respondents felt frustrated that they were forced to use online GP services, and would prefer to contact their GP practice by phone or in-person. In terms of accessibility, this may also prevent those who are digitally excluded and/or have additional needs from accessing the care and support they need.



***“Mostly because they won’t allow any other method; it’s quite frustrating.”***

***“I think it is really bad that this is the only option available. It will be interesting to see what happens when there is a computer outage or hack.”***

***“Online is the only way now to get through to a GP.”***

Respondents also expressed dissatisfaction at not being able to choose the clinician or appointment type. This could be distressing for some patients who have developed relationships with certain clinicians (particularly important when considering accessibility and reasonable adjustments). The lack of choice may also result in delays to care and treatment if the appointment or clinician is unsuitable for their needs.

***“They don’t always give me an appointment with the requested Doctor - they fob me off with PAs.”***

***“Ok but don’t always get appointment with person in role requested.”***

***“I want to contact and see my GP in person. I do not want to see a pharmacist or a physician assistant: I want to see a doctor.”***

Many respondents wanted to choose how they contacted their GP practice, instead of online services being standardised or the only available option. This is an important consideration as online GP services can exclude certain groups and populations. Additionally, the ability to override what is suggested by the online system could help to ensure the patient’s required treatment is received.

## Summary

This research aimed to explore patient views and experiences of using online GP services in Hertfordshire. The findings show that while most respondents used online services, the majority also felt improvements could be made. Improving online GP services is essential, and it is crucial for these services to be patient-centred, given the diverse and changeable circumstances, conditions, and needs of patients.

It was clear that most people felt the **functionality** of existing online services required improvement. Respondents were frustrated by complicated interfaces which often took longer to navigate than calling their GP practice, and found online forms restrictive, containing irrelevant and/or repetitive questions which at times signposted patients to the wrong sources of support. Online systems were also described as counterintuitive and sometimes prevented people from accessing care altogether. As a result, many resorted to calling or visiting their GP practice and chose to avoid online GP services due to their previous experiences, especially for complex requests. Therefore, respondents emphasised the need for simpler, clearer, and more user-friendly interfaces.

The limited **availability** of online services posed challenges for many respondents. People were unable to submit online requests out of hours, restricting the use of online services for those with commitments during this time. Therefore, providing 24/7 access to online GP services would ensure that all patients can access healthcare online at times that are most convenient to them.

**Booking appointments** was a key concern for respondents. Although booking appointments was the main reason respondents used online services, various challenges were present. This included restrictive appointment types and poor scheduling which often led to delays, and some patients had to call their practice to complete their bookings. Some were unable to book appointments online at all, with some stating that this had been the case since COVID-19. Because of this, making appointments available for all patients to view and book online is a crucial component of effective online GP services.

Many respondents were concerned about the **accessibility** of current online services, particularly on behalf of others who may struggle to use technology. Accessibility is an important consideration for all patients, but the lack of accommodations for disabled or digitally excluded patients was concerning, as it could hinder their access to care, particularly for those who already struggle to call their GP practice. Establishing patient-led initiatives such as training sessions, providing materials in easy read with visuals and offering ad-hoc support from GP practice staff is essential for ensuring equal access to online GP services.

Concerns were raised about online **communication** with their GP practice. While over half reported receiving timely responses to queries, many noted that communication was inconsistent or non-existent. This was a deterrent for many – especially when online services were often unavailable – leaving patients uncertain about whether their messages were received or to expect a response. Therefore, acknowledging each patient query and responding promptly is crucial for maintaining continuity of care and encouraging patients to use online GP services.

**Choice** was a complex issue for respondents, especially for patients whose GP practices offered no alternative contact methods. Others felt they lacked agency over their health, as they were unable to express a preference for the clinician or appointment type. Therefore, allowing patients to choose between in-person, telephone, or online appointments is crucial for patients to feel they have control over their care. Additionally, enabling patients to select how they contact and receive communication from their practice is essential, especially for those who may struggle with technology or have additional needs.

The lack of **integration** of online platforms and services posed challenges for respondents. Duplication of services and a disconnection between online and in-person services often caused patients to avoid using online services altogether. Integrating platforms and ensuring receptionists can support patients is vital for patients to use online GP services with confidence.

## Recommendations

The findings of this report have highlighted a variety of ways to improve online GP services for patients in Hertfordshire. Suggestions provided by respondents have also informed the recommendations listed below.

### **Increasing the availability of online GP services to ensure individuals can submit requests at times that are most convenient for them. This could be achieved by:**

- Ensuring online GP services are available to access throughout the day to enable patients to submit requests regarding their care and treatment. 24/7 online access could be considered if there are no patient safety concerns.
- An automated response acknowledging receipt of patient requests which provides an estimated response time.

### **Enabling patients to book appointments online and allowing greater control over their booking. This could be achieved by:**

- Making appointments available to book online at all GP practices once the patient has been appropriately triaged.
- Increasing the types of appointments available to book online to reduce strain on telephone lines.
- Providing a calendar for patients to view a clinician's available appointments and enable them to plan appointments around their commitments.

### **Improving the functionality of online GP services and forms to prioritise user experience. This could be achieved by:**

- Auditing existing website layouts and online forms and focusing on the needs of patients and their feedback to ensure their needs are prioritised.
- Simplifying the interface and layout of online GP services to make them easier to navigate.
- Ensuring practice staff have awareness of the online system so they can support patients as necessary.
- Making online forms less restrictive and allowing patients to provide additional information in online forms as they would over the phone.

### **Integrating different platforms and services to simplify the use of online GP services. This could be achieved by:**

- Enabling patient information to be cross-referenced and shared between platforms to streamline access to care and treatment.
- Increasing patient awareness of which online services are available at their practice and how to access them.
- Making it clear which tasks patients can be completed online without the need to contact their GP practice.

**Enhancing accessibility for patients with a focus on those with additional needs or at risk of digital exclusion. This could be achieved by:**

- Auditing current provisions and asking patients to identify how online systems and services could be improved to accommodate their needs.
- Simplifying current routes to online services that may deter people from using online GP services.
- Offering in-person training sessions and online guides using accessible materials including easy read, videos, and images to get patients accustomed to using online services.
- Ensuring online GP services and forms are available in accessible formats.

**Improving the online communication between patients and GP practice staff. This could be achieved by:**

- Ensuring all requests are responded to within a reasonable amount of time that is comparable to the service received by contacting the practice by telephone.
- Guaranteeing a response to all online queries and providing a live estimate advising patients when they can expect to receive a response. If their request is time-sensitive, advising them to contact the practice over the phone to receive support sooner.

**Enhancing the choice available to patients using online GP services. This could be achieved by:**

- Providing multiple pathways for patients to contact their GP practice.
- Allowing patients to express a preference for the type of appointment and clinician when booking appointments online.
- Allowing patients to choose how they are contacted by their GP practice and express a preferred a callback time.
- Creating a schedule that allows patients to contact their practice by telephone at various times throughout the week, ensuring that those who are unable to contact their GP practice at 8 AM are not excluded from calling.