



'I was seen straightaway'

North Somerset residents' experience of the Pharmacy
First service

June 2025

healthwatch
North Somerset

Contents

Contents.....1

Introduction.....2

About Healthwatch.....2

Headline survey statistics.....3

Equalities statement.....4

Background.....4

Purpose.....7

Engagement methodology.....7

Our findings.....8

What pharmacists have told us.....16

Demographics.....18

Recommendations.....23

Stakeholder responses.....24

Acknowledgements.....24

References.....24

Introduction

The project was identified as a priority by the Healthwatch BNSSG Prioritisation Panel in 2024 and chosen because it has a strategic alignment with local system development.

A survey asked for feedback from those people who had engaged with Pharmacy First services to explore service users' experiences and highlight both good practice and room for improvement

Healthwatch North Somerset received 109 responses from people who used Pharmacy First services in North Somerset 2024-2025

Healthwatch North Somerset follows the 'Healthwatch England 'Code of Conduct for Public engagement, evaluation, audit, and governance.'

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch North Somerset's statutory duty and remit is to provide a voice for people who use health and social care services.

We give people an opportunity to have a say about their local health and social care services and we report these experiences to influence service providers and improve outcomes.

Healthwatch is committed to promoting equality and diversity and tackling social exclusion in all our activities. We aim to ensure equitable access to our initiatives and projects.

We have a representative on the Health and Wellbeing Boards, Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and at the Integrated Care Partnership and Board. We feed issues back to local care providers and nationally via Healthwatch England and the Care Quality Commission.

Headline survey statistics

- 62% of survey respondents knew about the services from their GP surgery, 9% from the pharmacy and 8% press promotion
- 83% of survey respondents were referred from their GP surgery
- 78% of people that were referred to Pharmacy First thought that the service that referred them clearly explained why they were doing this
- 65% of the survey respondents reported that they attended Pharmacy First with one of the 7 conditions named
- Over 90% of the survey respondents reported being seen on the same day
- 16% of the survey respondents said they were unhappy with the level of privacy
- 67% of our respondents stated that they were satisfied with the service they received from Pharmacy First.
- 85% of our survey respondents said that they would rate the service overall at the level of between somewhat helpful or extremely helpful
- 60% of respondents who had used the service said that they would definitely recommend it to family and friends

Equalities statement

Healthwatch North Somerset is committed to promoting equality and diversity and tackling social exclusion in all our activities. We aim to ensure equitable access to our initiatives and projects.

We include people's lived experiences in our work and identify and mitigate against barriers to enable people to become involved in our research. We address the participation needs of those who share one or more protected characteristic, or those that experience hidden discrimination, or are part of an 'invisible minority.' We provide access to communication support to adjust for people's needs and proactively assist people in attending events and meetings we hold.

Healthwatch North Somerset are actively connecting with existing patient, service users and voluntary sector organisations to reach into, and develop relationships with, diverse communities, and especially with people whose voices are often overlooked.

Background

National context

The Pharmacy First service, launched in January 2024, allows community pharmacies to provide care and treatment for 7 common conditions, this includes enabling patients to get certain prescription medications directly from a pharmacy, without a GP appointment. The conditions include earache, sore throat, and urinary tract infections, aiming to address health issues before they get worse and forming part of a long-term preventative measures approach.

Why was Pharmacy First introduced?

The provision concentrates on better access for service users by freeing up GP appointments for those who need them most, whilst allowing people faster and more convenient access to appropriate healthcare.

Pharmacy First was introduced to alleviate the burden on NHS GP appointments at surgeries, particularly during the winter months. The government website states,

"By reducing the number of patients with common conditions, needing blood pressure checks or oral contraception visiting a GP, Pharmacy First aims to free up 10 million GP appointments a year by next winter for more complex diagnosis". (Ref.1)

The government website also states that:

“Four in five people in England can reach a community pharmacy within a 20-minute walk and there are twice as many pharmacies in the most deprived communities, making access to care quicker and more convenient”.

Nationally 10,000 pharmacies have signed up to Pharmacy First, which is over 95% of pharmacies in England. (Ref.2)

Community pharmacies previously offered access to support for healthy eating, exercise, stopping smoking, monitoring blood pressure, contraception and flu/covid vaccinations. Pharmacists can also now provide blood pressure checking services and an oral contraception service.

Same-day consultations with a pharmacist for many other minor illnesses can also be arranged via people's GP practice.

Additionally, pharmacists can provide the following:

- dispense medicine on prescription
- dispense repeat prescriptions without the need for people to visit their GP
- give advice on treating common ailments like coughs and colds
- help people manage long-term conditions such as diabetes and asthma
- give advice on medication, including if people are taking medicine for lots of different conditions
- give advice on staying healthy
- give sexual health and contraception advice
- provide treatments for common ailments like head lice and athlete's foot.
- The 7 conditions pharmacists can manage within the Pharmacy First service are:

Condition	Age range
Acute otitis media	1 – 17
Impedigo	1 year +
Infected insect bites	1 year +
Shingles	18 years +
Sinusitis	12 years +
Sore throat	5 years +
Uncomplicated urinary tract infections	Women, 16 – 64

There are two routes for services users:

Either patients can access the service via referring organisations after diagnostic consultation including general practice, urgent and emergency care settings, and NHS 111 or patients can access a pharmacy consultation by attending or contacting the outlet directly without the need for referral. The pharmacist is then able to offer self-care advice and where appropriate provide certain prescription only medicines without the need to visit a GP.

Pharmacies have private consultation rooms and patients can be seen for these services without always needing an appointment. Information can be shared, and the pharmacy will send a notification to the patient's GP within 48 hours.

Pharmacists train for 5 years in the use of medicines and managing minor illnesses and can spot cases within the attending cohort who need to be referred to GP or emergency services.

Local context

Community pharmacy

The BNSSG Integrated Care System Joint Forward Plan, 2024 – 2029 states:

"We aim to transfer lower acuity care away from both general practice and NHS 111 by increasing pharmacy participation in the community pharmacist consultation service, while ensuring that the patient is seen in the right place according to their clinical needs. This includes an ambition to expand direct access and self-referral where GP involvement is not clinically necessary. We also aim to transfer all patients requiring further supplies of their oral contraceptive, along with moving over 50% of patients' annual blood pressure checks, to community pharmacy via the two nationally commissioned services. (Ref.3)

The above report also states that:

"BNSSG is one of the top users of the Clinical Pharmacist Consultation Scheme within the country and, due to local services in place to provide medication under Patient Group Directives (PGDs) for some minor conditions, is well placed to deliver the national Pharmacy First scheme in 2024/25".

Purpose

This project aimed to collect responses to a survey from people in North Somerset and invited them to tell us their stories of using the Pharmacy First service in their own words.

Healthwatch North Somerset received 17 comments concerning pharmacy care within the last twelve months. Much of this was positive in nature but some concerns related to queues, waiting times, and confusion regarding the correct health service route to care.

Research suggests that 90% of patients who sought guidance from a community pharmacy within the past year reported receiving good advice (Ref.4) but says little about the local picture and how people described experiences in their own words

Whilst Pharmacy First undoubtedly aims to lighten the burden on GP surgeries, we were interested in investigating how well known and received this is amongst service users in the area and whether certain groups or individuals were able to benefit more than others

Engagement methodology

Our objectives involved creating a survey that could be accessible to many individuals, including translating the survey if required. We intended to reach individuals who are marginalised or felt less communicated with and capture their experiences of the pharmacy services as we are aware that inequalities around communication can exist.

We did this by partnering with local pharmacies and organisations who work in these communities and taking printed surveys to local events. Additionally, we raised awareness about the survey through our social media channels, community engagement opportunities, and through key contacts in the local authorities, community, and local healthcare providers. We aimed to have a cross section of responses for the survey and gave equal publicity weighting across all three areas.

After the survey we analysed the responses and spoke to professionals and asked for their opinions and thoughts concerning the service and the challenges and benefits it poses.

We asked for stakeholder responses which form part of the report and formulated recommendations and next steps.

Our findings

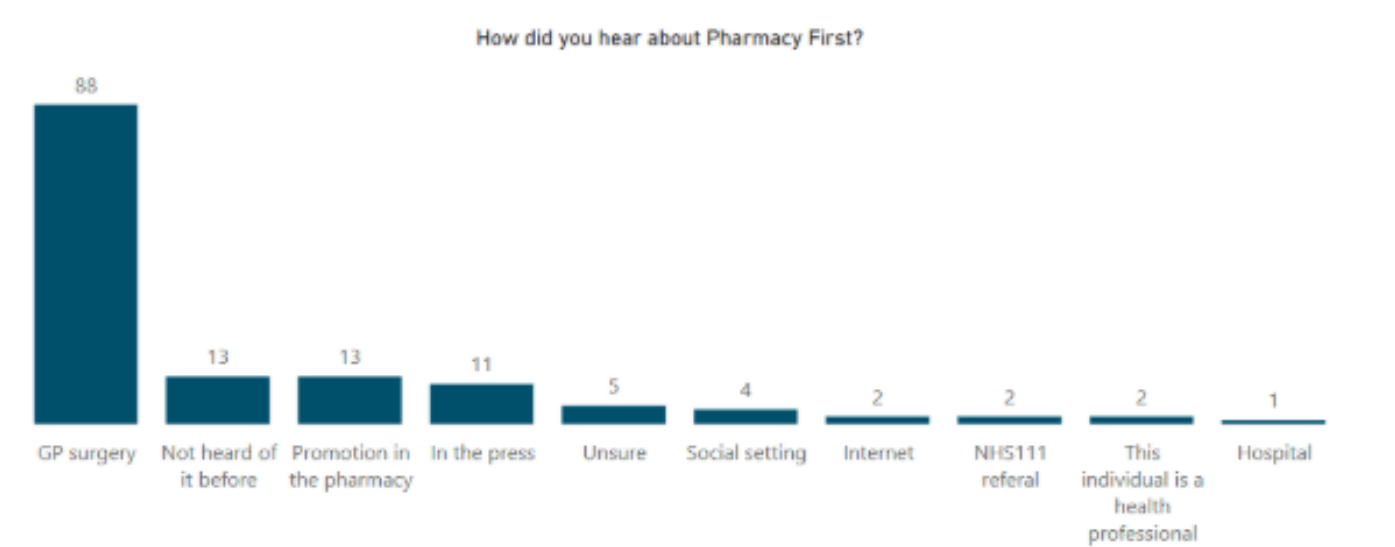
The survey

In total there were 150 full or partial responses to our survey asking individuals to share their experiences of Pharmacy First. The demographics of the individuals that responded can be found in Appendix 1.

Awareness

As shown in Figure 1 below, when asked how they had heard about Pharmacy First, the majority (62%) said that they had been told about it at the GP surgery, followed by 9% saying that they had seen information about it in their pharmacy and 8% had seen information about it in the press.

Figure 1

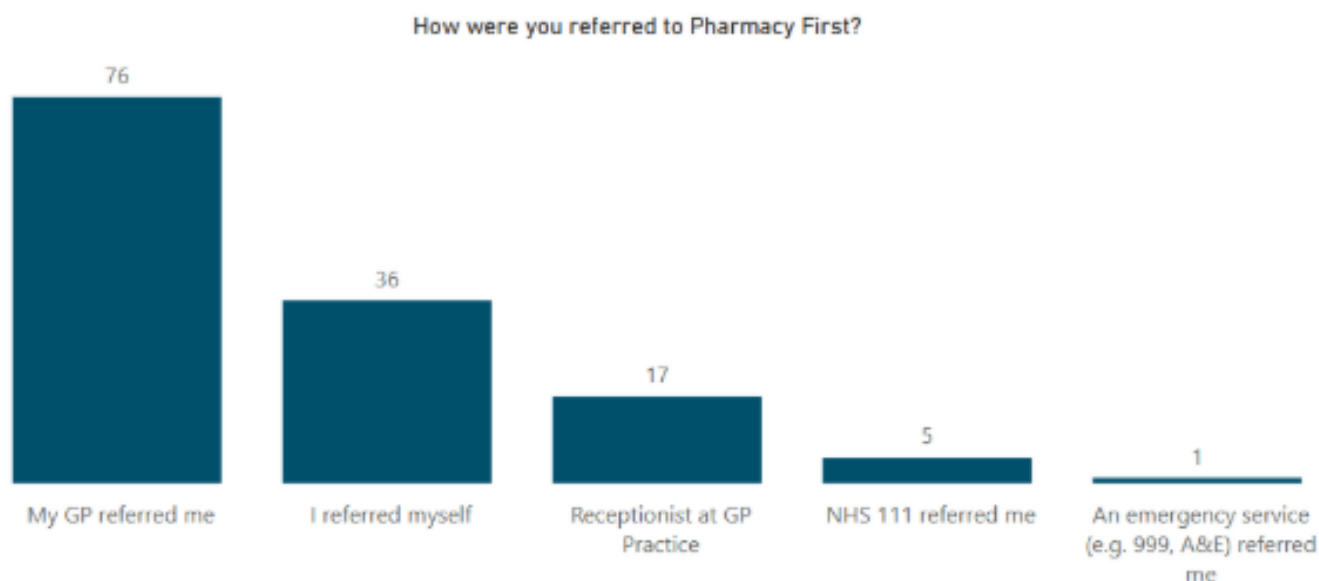


‘Helped despite being very busy and clearly understaffed’

Referrals

Most of our respondents were referred to Pharmacy First by a healthcare professional. The majority were via the surgery that they had attended regarding the symptoms. This was by either a GP or a receptionist at a Medical Practice (83% in total) with 27% referring themselves to the service and only five people being directed through NHS 111 calls or contact.

Figure 2



Referrals were also made in the opposite direction from pharmacy to GP.

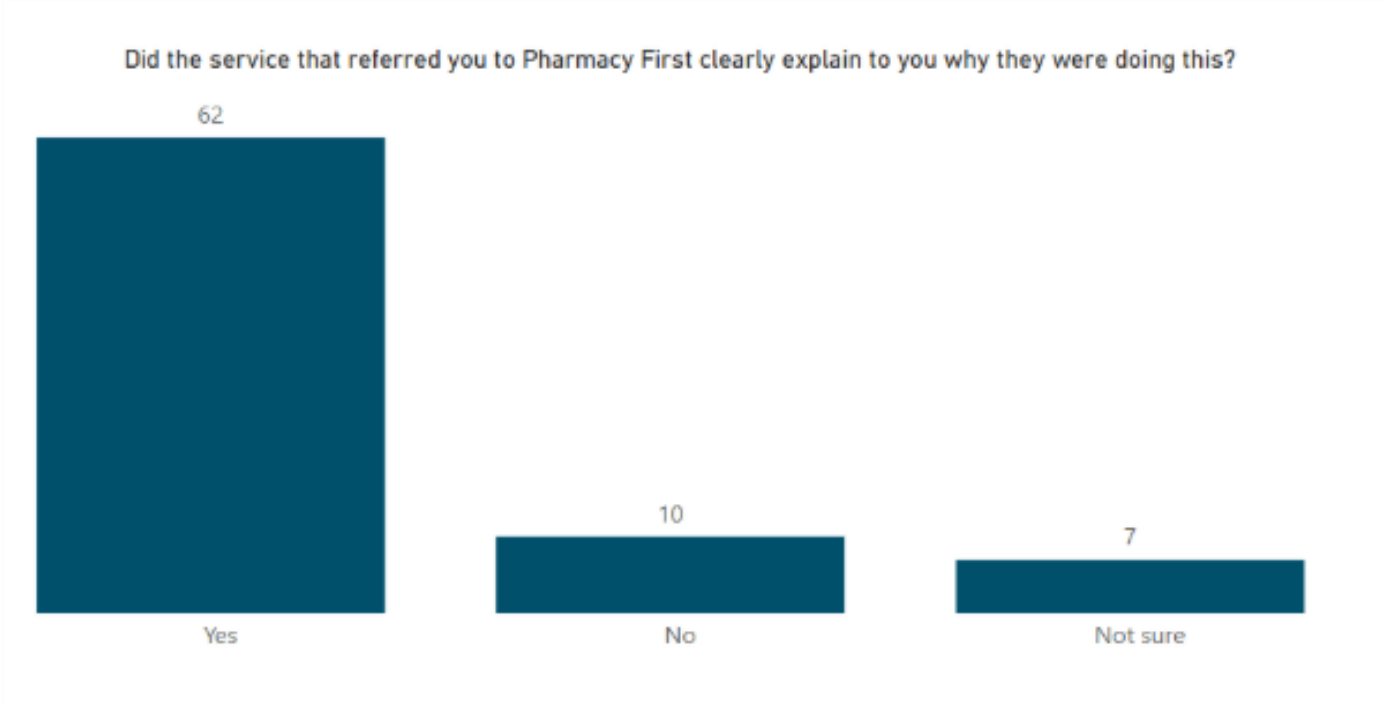
'The pharmacist was very helpful and got me an appointment with the GP as they couldn't help with my problem'

'She didn't know what it was but got me in to see a doctor right away'

Explanations

We asked people if they understood why the GP surgery/NHS 111 was asking them to visit the surgery to seek treatment and 78% of people that were referred to Pharmacy First thought that the service that referred them clearly explained why they were doing this, with only 13% saying that they did not receive a clear explanation (see figure 3).

Figure 3

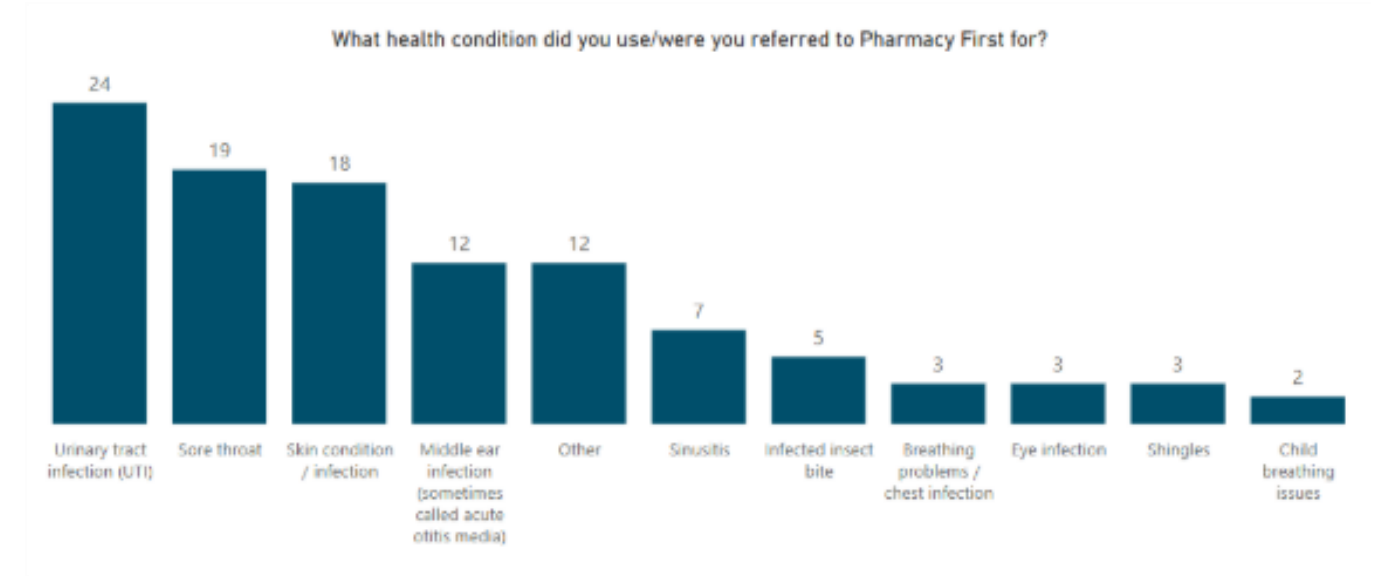


Symptoms

‘Went through all my symptoms and issued me with penicillin’

65% of the survey respondents reported that they attended Pharmacy First with one of the 7 conditions that Pharmacy First can offer advice to patients, and supply medication for (some prescription only medication) The full list of health conditions respondents say that attended with can be seen in figure 4.

Figure 4



Many respondents reported feeling that their symptoms were treated with in-depth knowledge and expertise

'At the consultation she was knowledgeable, reassuring, professional and friendly and I completely trust her advice'

Waiting times

'I was seen straightaway'

'Very supportive and prompt appointment (literally within an hour) with an empathetic practitioner who was able to prescribe medication I needed'

We asked people how long they had to wait to be seen under the scheme and we were told by over 90% that this was less than a day. This is positive support for the use of the service as at Healthwatch we receive a significant amount of feedback relating to GP waiting times and difficulties with making appointments.



'The pharmacist called me immediately following her receipt of the referral to invite me to come in at my earliest opportunity and check I knew the opening times'

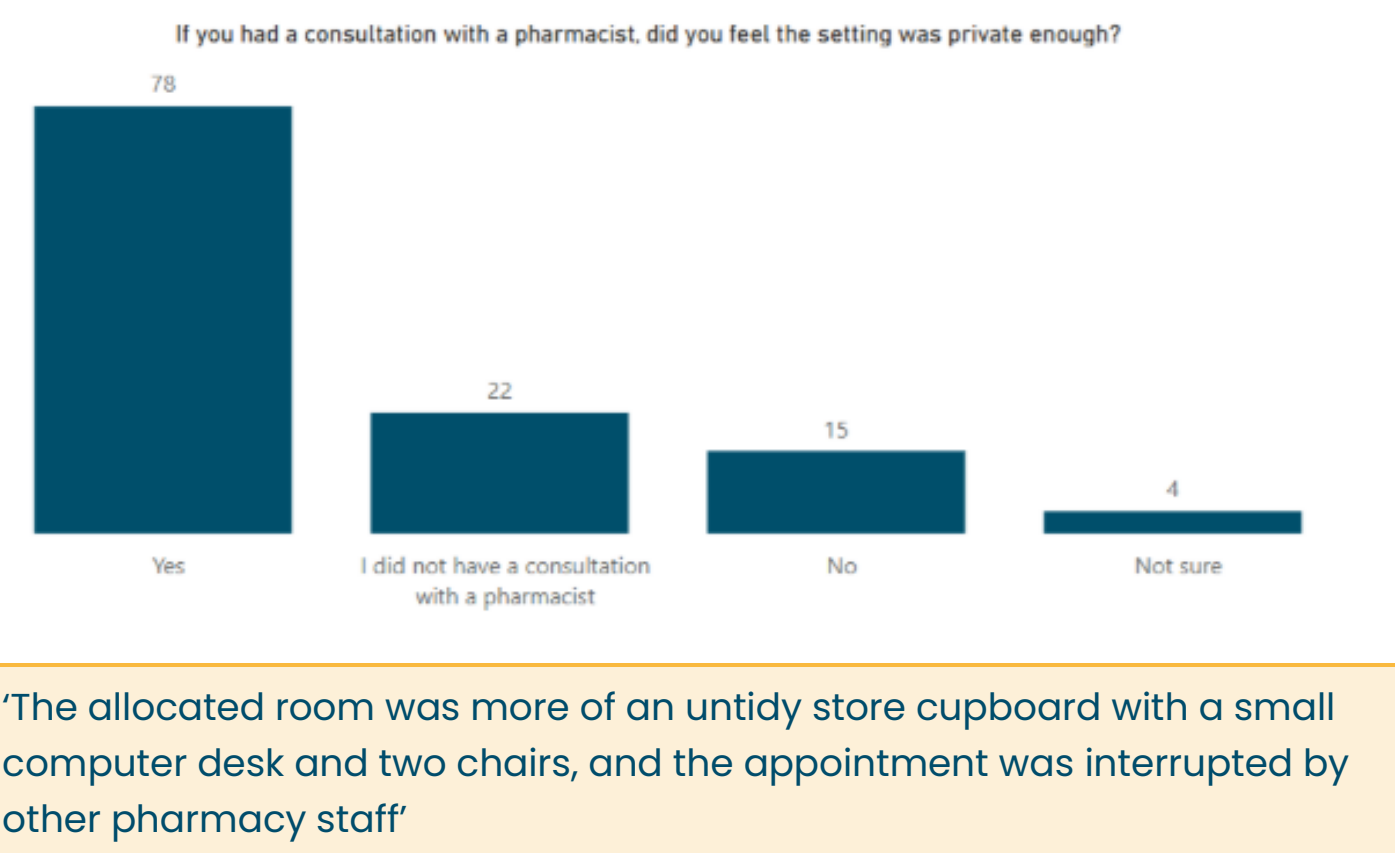
Privacy

'I wasn't aware of the private consultation room until the pharmacist pointed it out so started to explain the symptoms at the counter which obviously wasn't very private'

We asked people who had experienced a consultation with a pharmacist whether they felt the setting was private enough. Of those who had had a

consultation, 80% thought that they did have enough privacy. 16% were unhappy with the level of privacy, and 4% were not sure, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6



Satisfaction

61% of respondents said that the pharmacist was able to help with their issue (see Figure 7), and this corresponds with 67% saying that they were satisfied with the service they received from Pharmacy First. 17% were not satisfied and 16% were not sure (see Figure 8).

Figure 7

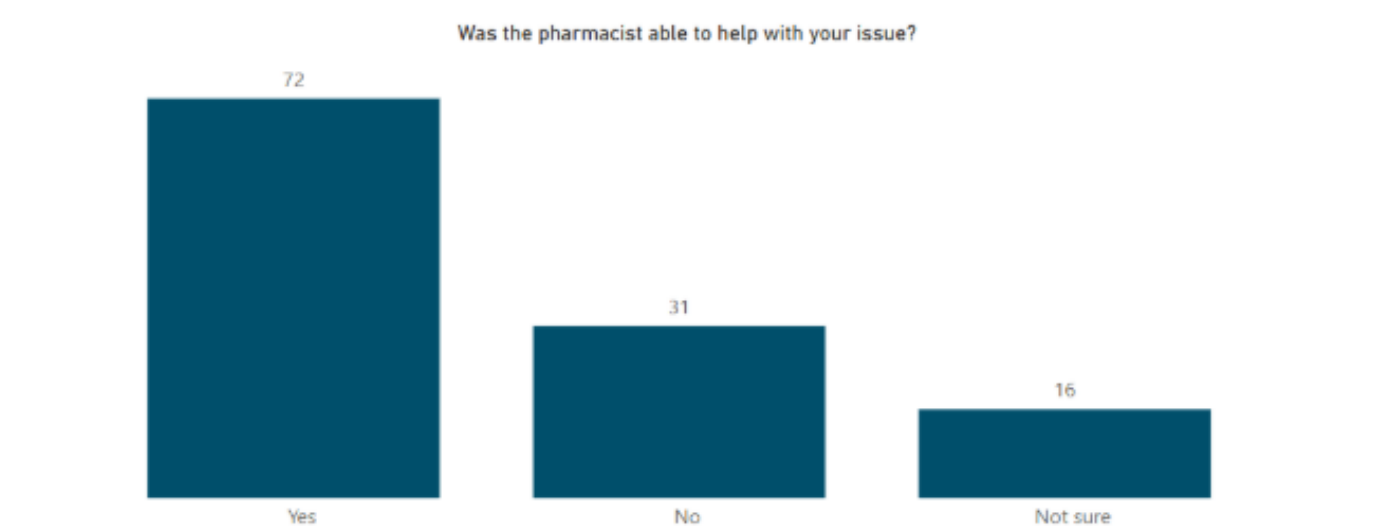


Figure 8



When asked why they were satisfied with the Pharmacy First service, many of the comments were around the speed and effectiveness of the service:

‘Managed to see someone very quickly who was extremely helpful’

‘Quick and kind service. Very helpful to clear up my infection’

‘Prompt service and successful resolution of the issue’

‘Quick, efficient, an excellent service for patients with minor, repeat infections’

Others commented on the speed with which the pharmacy got them a referral, if they were unable to help with the issue:

‘When she could not help me with a prescription, she referred me to see an emergency doctor on the same day’

‘The pharmacist explained that because I was over 70 I would need to see a GP, which she then arranged’

‘The pharmacist was helpful but was unable to help me because I was too old for her to be able to prescribe any antibiotics. She then, at the very end of the day, had to refer me back to the GP’

Other respondents commented positively on the attitude of the pharmacist:

‘The pharmacist was knowledgeable and helped with the problem. Was very impressed with the care I received from the pharmacist at our local pharmacy’

‘Very friendly and knowledgeable and talked about various symptoms and options’

Respondents mentioned that they were satisfied with the medication that the pharmacist had prescribed:

‘Although I was hoping for antibiotics the pharmacist suggested a throat spray first which seemed to ease symptoms’

‘I was promptly prescribed the necessary antibiotics to clear the infection’

‘Very helpful, got antibiotics needed’

‘Quick examination and suggested treatment’

‘Quick results, spot on treatment, put me at ease during consultation’

‘I took my 16-month-old daughter who had a middle ear infection. The pharmacist prescribed antibiotics, which cleared up the infection’

‘The pharmacist readily identified the problem and recommended a cream, which I had been prescribed many years ago, but couldn’t remember the name’

The individuals who were not satisfied with the service and commented further on their reasons for this commented, several commented on not being able to book an appointment, or the appointment feeling rushed:

‘I was unable to speak to, or book an appointment to, see a pharmacist’

‘Didn’t have enough time for a consultation felt like it was very rushed and didn’t solve the issue’

‘[It would have been good] actually seeing or speaking to a pharmacist!’

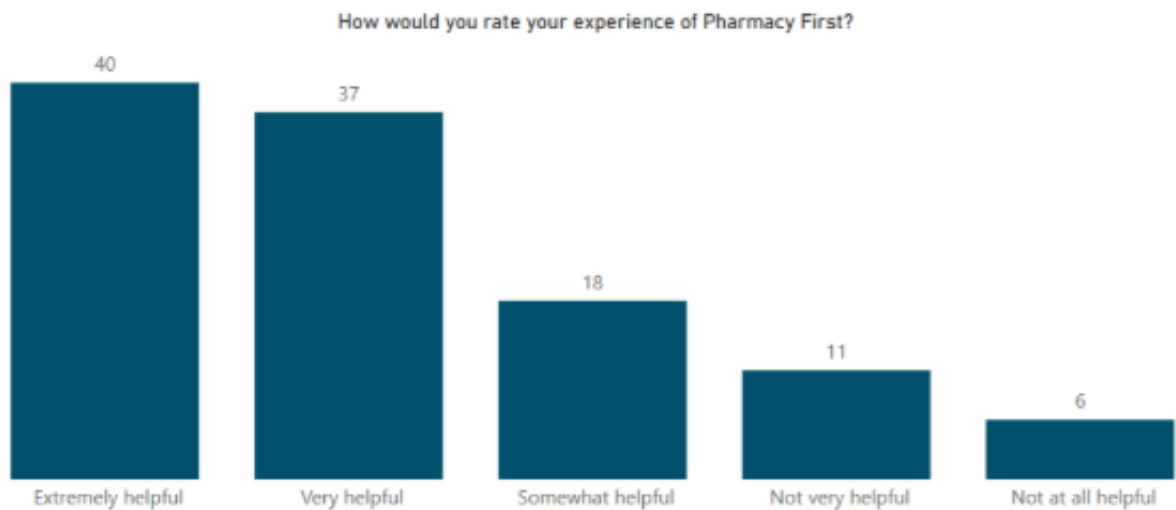
Other individuals commented on the lack of space for consultations or not knowing that a consulting room was available:

‘[They need a] bigger consultation room with ability to shut the door (though I did have my 2 children with me, but it was a very small cluttered space!’

‘I feel the tiny room used for consultations could be cleaner and tidier. It’s not cared for and needs a good makeover’

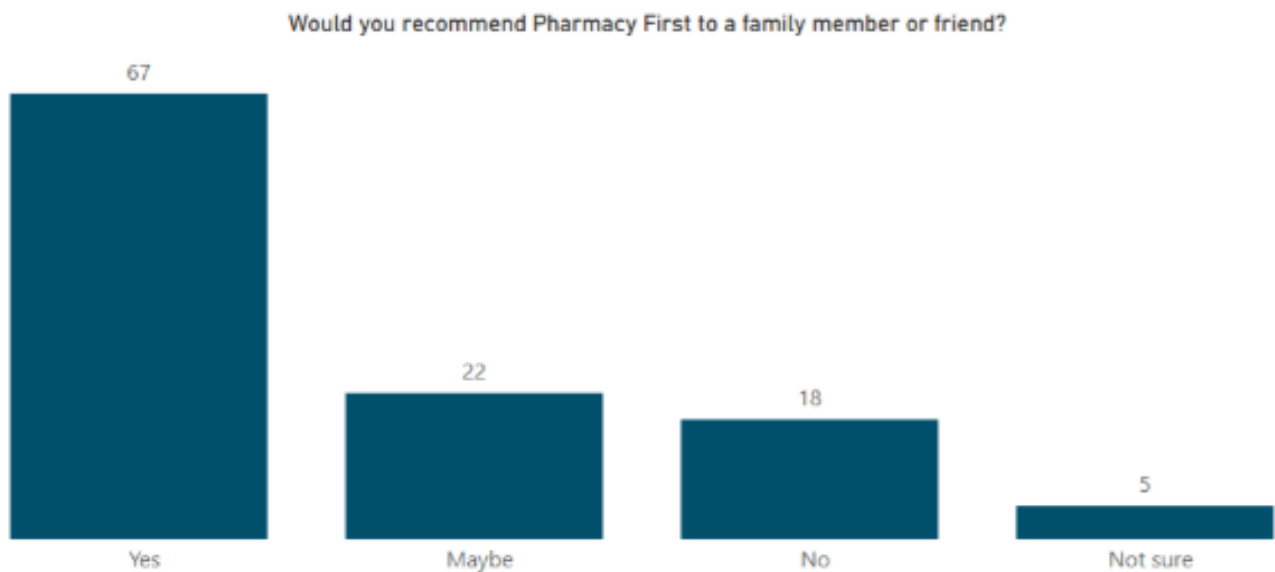
When asked to rate their experience of Pharmacy First, only 15% thought that the service was either not very helpful, or not at all helpful. The other 85% thought that the service had been between somewhat helpful and extremely helpful, as shown in figure 9.

Figure 9



As shown in Figure 10, nearly two thirds of respondents who used Pharmacy First stated that they would definitely recommend Pharmacy First to a family member or friend, with only 16% saying that they would not recommend it.

Figure 10



‘They were able to help me straight away and were able to prescribe the correct medication. It was excellent service’

What pharmacists have told us

Raviraj Vaghela, Castlemead Pharmacy, Worle



'Pharmacy first is a great initiative for pharmacy, saving lots of time for surgery GPs and cost effective for NHS.

The amount of time we spent on consultations and paperwork is quite a lot on top of our day-to-day Pharmacist responsibilities!

In my opinion, the funding structure need to be reviewed and should be more in compare to amount of time and resources we use to complete the consulations.

Also, surgery staff need to be trained appropriately as we still get lots of patients referred verbally by surgery staff and we do not get paid anything if it is for minor ailments.

Pharmacy is in dire situations for funding and everyday many pharmacies shut their door for good due to financial and staff difficulties we face on daily basis.'



Pharmacist, North Somerset



'I think the service has been extremely beneficial to our patients and the feedback from the patients so far has been great.

In terms of challenges, I think one of the biggest issue is that certain referrals are being made that has criteria exclusions. For example, uncomplicated UTI treatment for someone who over the age limit. Because of this, patient are having to go back and forth between the surgery, NHS 111 and us which eventually leads to some frustration.'



Gilbert Kamgang, Graham Road Pharmacy, Weston-super-Mare



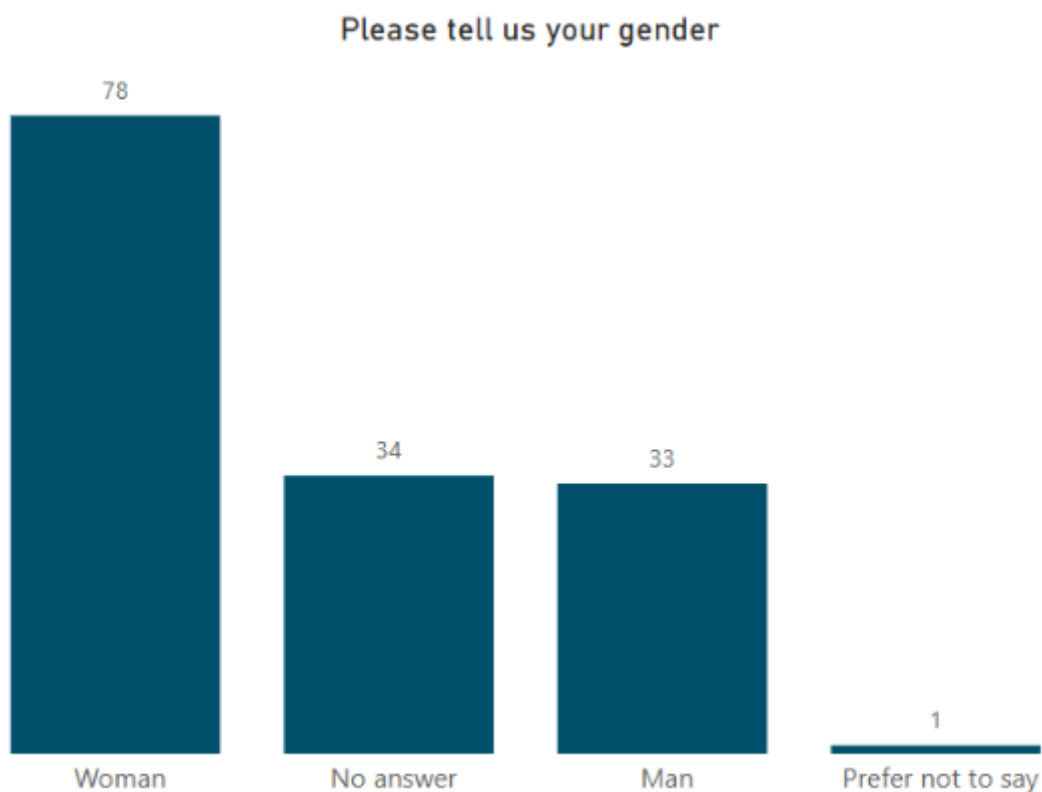
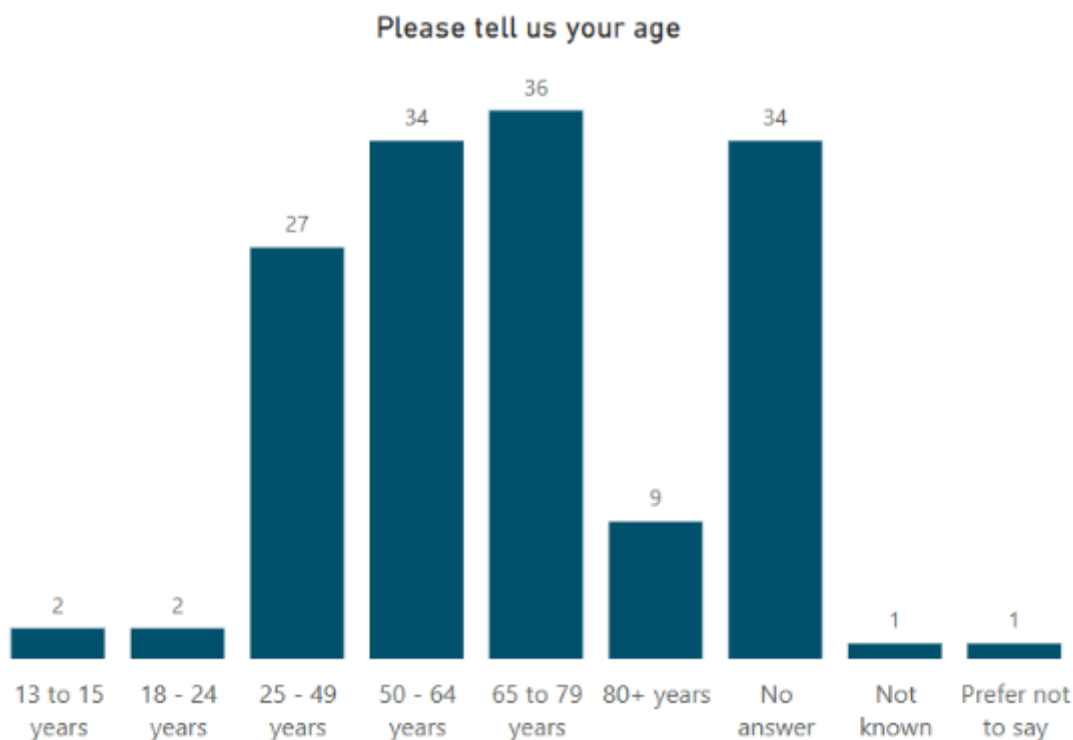
'I believe that Pharmacy First is an excellent initiative, particularly if surgeries recognize the importance of meeting their targets via this. Directing all minor ailments to the pharmacy can free up space for addressing more significant health issues, ultimately contributing to the well-being of patients.

Additionally, this approach is more cost-effective for surgeries, as GPs are compensated significantly more than what we receive for the Pharmacy First service. It would be even more beneficial if the plan to expand the range of services under Pharmacy First is implemented, as this would add value to our profession.

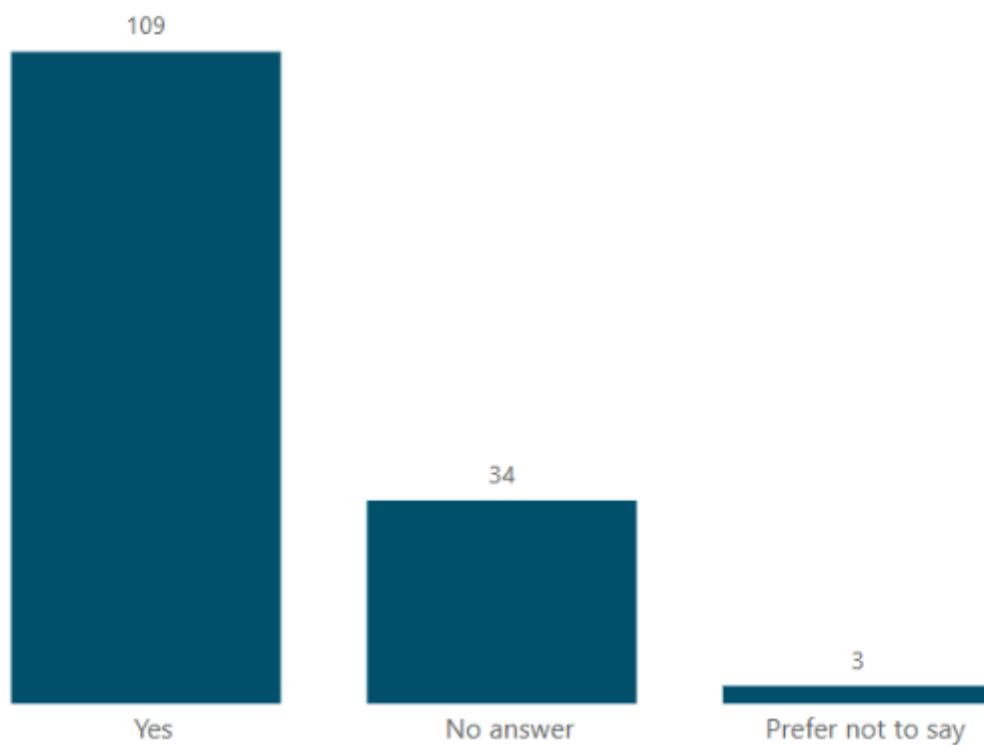


On the other hand, we still encounter some surgeries that are reluctant to collaborate with this fantastic service.'

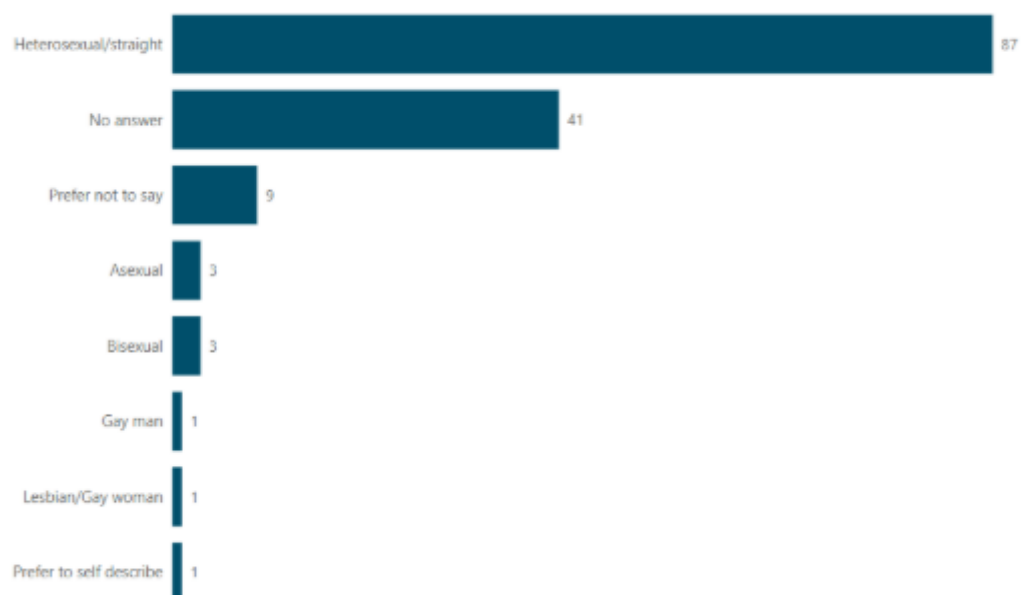
Demographics

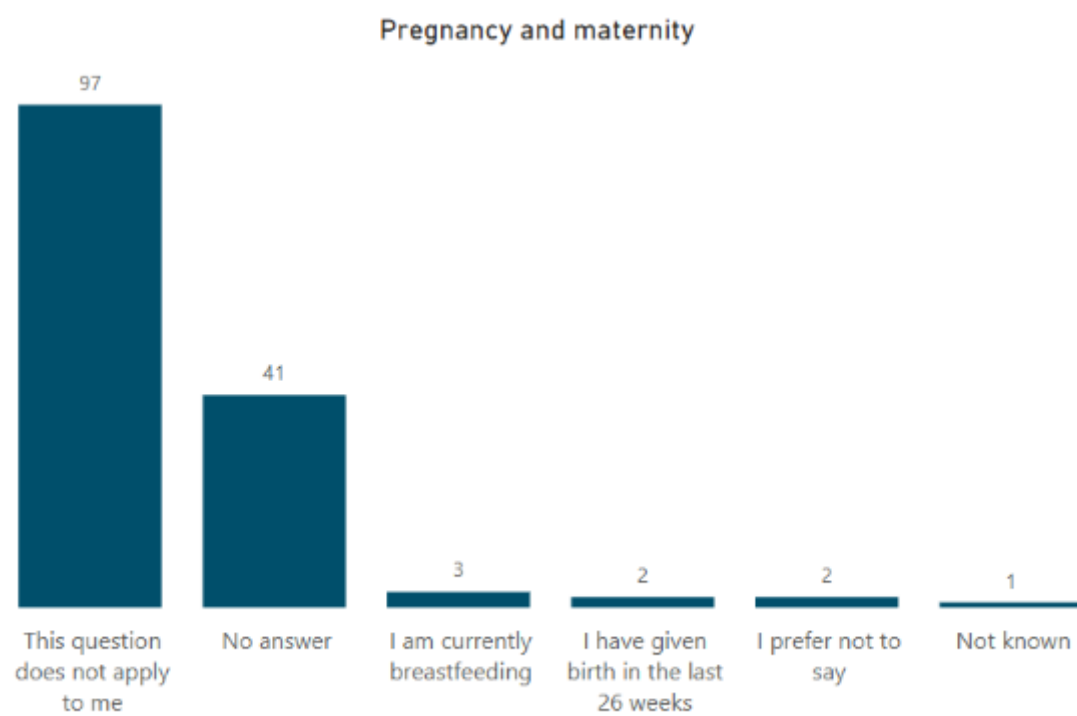
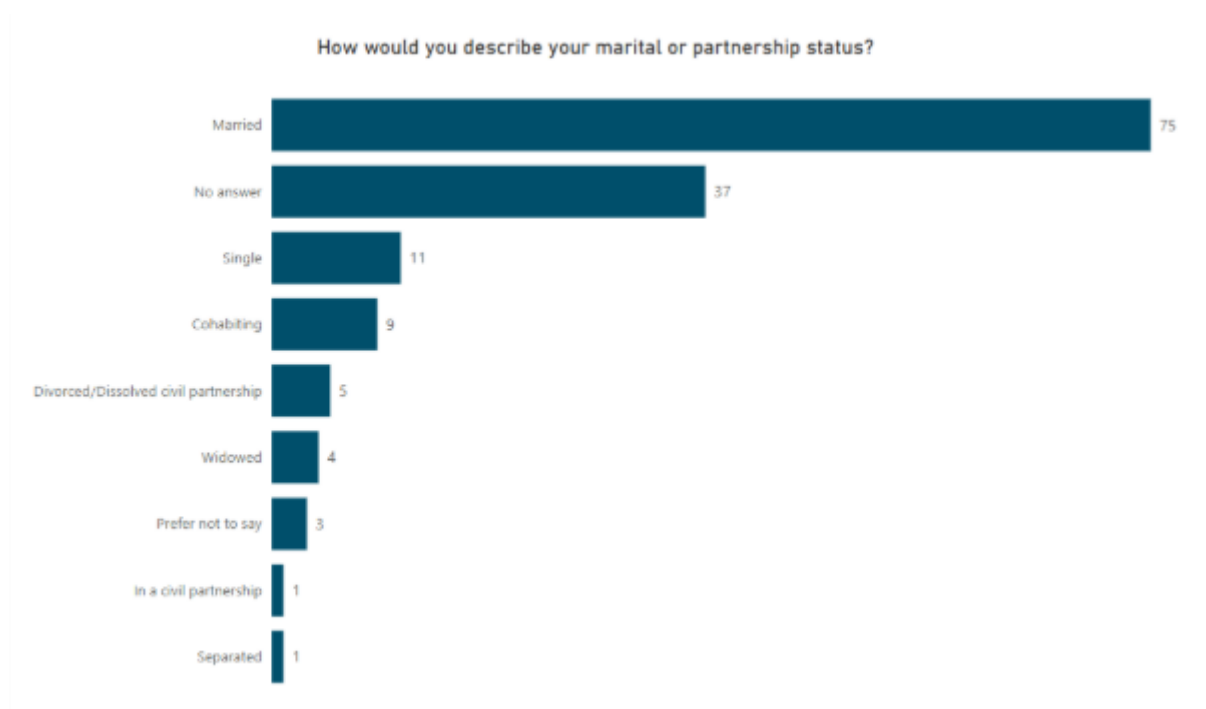


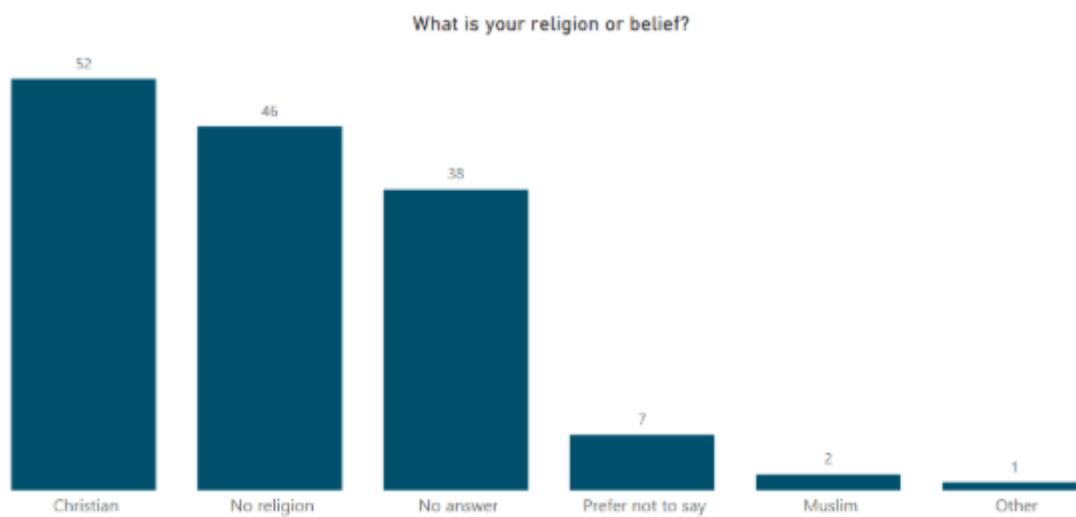
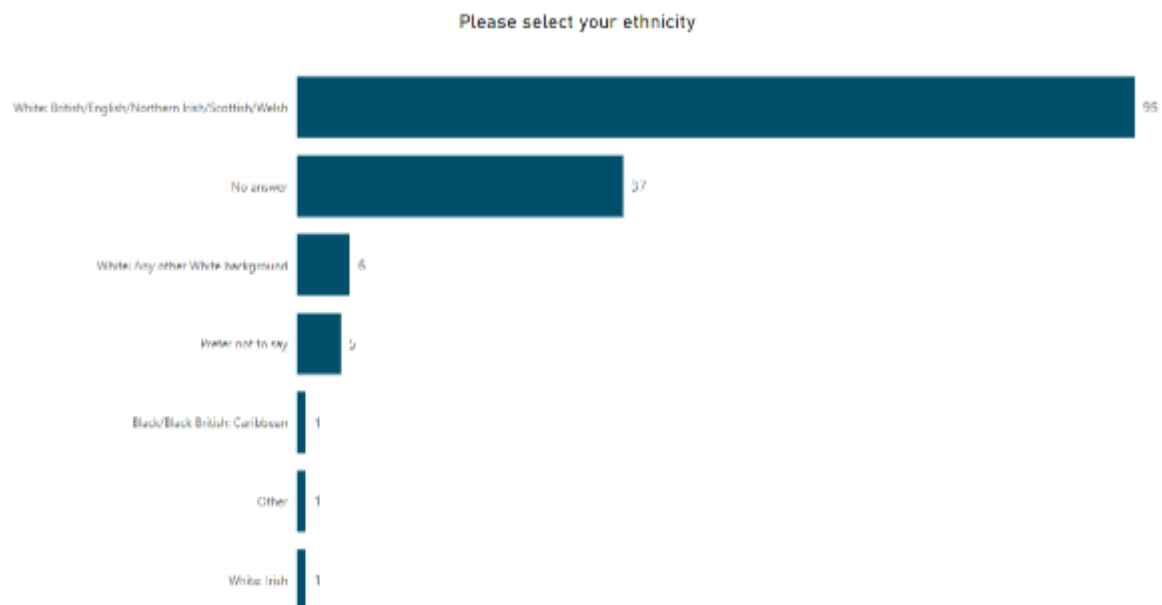
Is your gender identity the same as your sex recorded at birth?



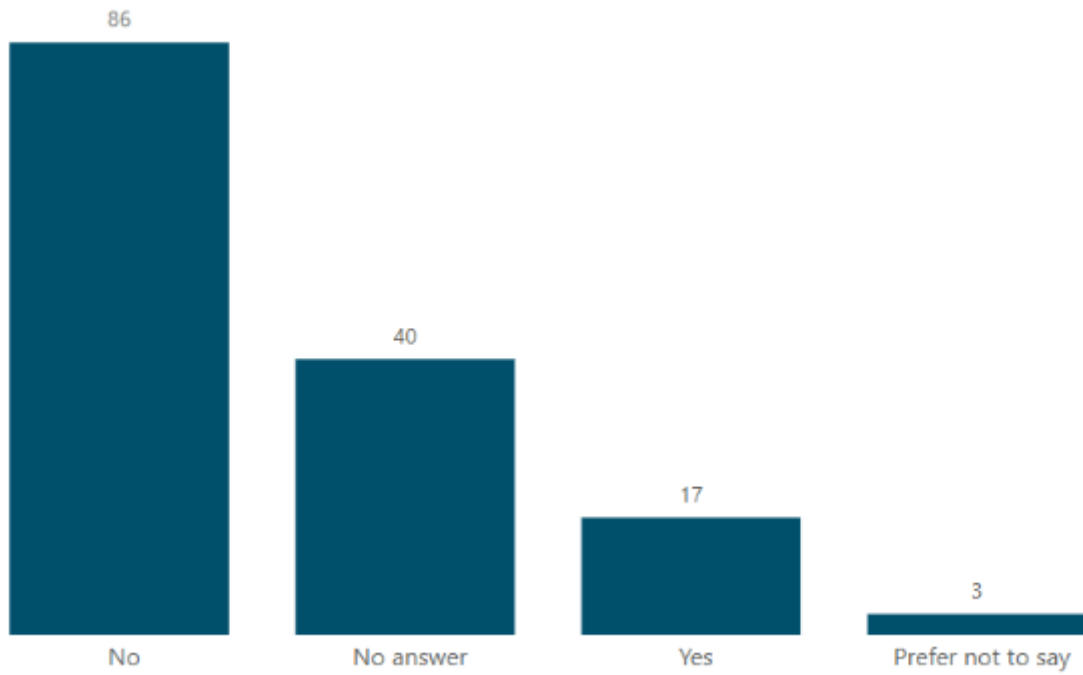
Please tell us which sexual orientation you identify with



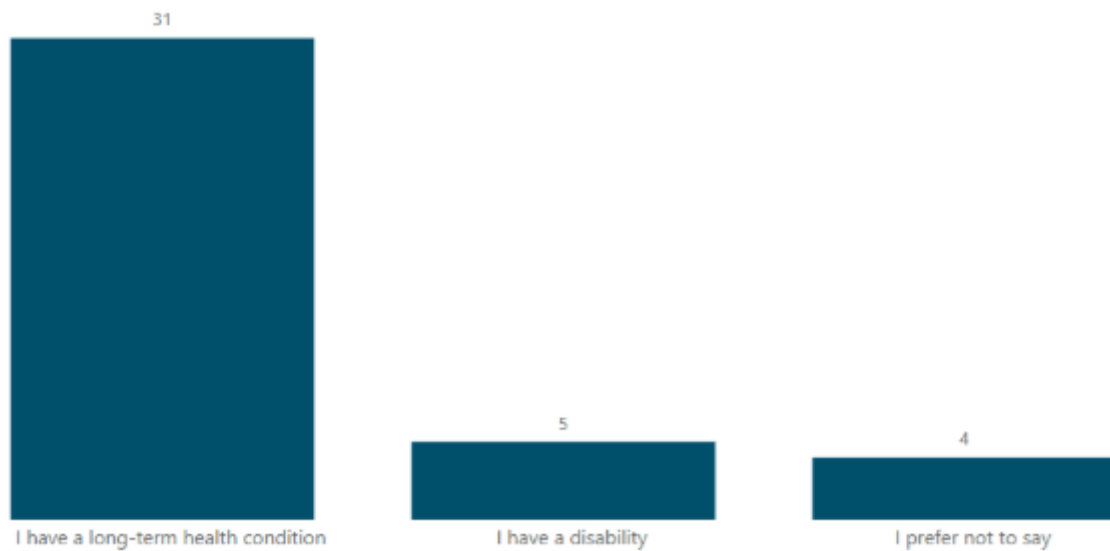




Do you consider yourself to be a carer?



Do you consider yourself to have a disability or long-term condition?



Recommendations

Overall, the survey responses suggest that Pharmacy First has been positively received by those who have used it. Much of the benefit as desired was regarding waiting times and the ease and availability of consultation appointments. Issues remain about wider promotion and privacy in some settings, and we hope to revisit this topic to ascertain how the support and treatment outcomes have developed.

Healthwatch North Somerset recommends the following based on local research, analysis of our survey

We believe the following recommendations to be achievable, affordable and evidence based.

1. The Integrated Care Board to work to raise more awareness of the service through media promotion.
2. The Integrated Care Board should ensure that more information and guidance is given around self or NHS 111 referral to avoid the large percentage of patient referrals from GP surgeries which in part defeats the objective of the service.
3. GP surgeries and NHS 111 to ensure that all service users are given an explanation regarding why they have been referred to the pharmacy for treatment.
4. Work to be undertaken across pharmacy providers to investigate why 1 in 6 people reported being unsatisfied with the service and find where improvements can be delivered.
5. Pharmacy settings to ensure that 100% of consultations are private and cannot be overheard.
6. Work to be undertaken by pharmacies and the Integrated Care Board to publicise good levels of customer satisfaction and encourage more use.

Stakeholder responses

The stakeholders who received this report ahead of publication did not provide a response to our findings.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch North Somerset is grateful to all those who completed the survey, supported its distribution and to the participants who freely gave their time.

Special thanks to the pharmacists who were willing to share their views either directly or with anonymity.

We would like to thank our volunteers who help to disseminate information and collect and collate participant comments.

References

- (Ref.1) <https://healthmedia.blog.gov.uk/2024/02/01/pharmacy-first-what-you-need-to-know/>
- (Ref.2) <https://healthmedia.blog.gov.uk/2024/02/01/pharmacy-first-what-you-need-to-know/>
- (Ref.3) BNSSG ICS Joint Forward Plan, 2024 – 2029. Published May 2024
- (Ref.4) [Public Perceptions of Community Pharmacy | Ipsos](#)



healthwatch

North Somerset

Healthwatch North Somerset
The Vassall Centre
Gill Avenue
Bristol
BS16 2QQ

www.healthwatchnorthsomerset.co.uk

t: 01275 244238

e: contact@healthwatchnorthsomerset.co.uk

X @HealthwatchNS

f [Facebook.com/HealthwatchNorthSomerset](https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchNorthSomerset)