

Pharmacy First

Patient, pharmacy and GP practice feedback
August 2025

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About Healthwatch South Tyneside

Healthwatch South Tyneside is your dedicated consumer champion.

We work with users of local NHS and social care services to hear about your experiences, identify any issues or problems and help generate improvements.

We also assist commissioners and providers of healthcare services by conducting patient surveys, visiting healthcare venues, and attending meetings with user groups and feeding back our findings in regular reports.

Healthwatch South Tyneside:

- Has the power to enter and view services.
- Influences how services are set up and commissioned by having a seat on the local health and wellbeing board.
- Produces reports which influence the way services are designed and delivered.
- Provides information, advice, and support about local services.
- Passes information and recommendations to Healthwatch England and the Care Quality Commission.

Background

Pharmacy First is one of the four priority areas in our Operational Plan 2024–26.

We said we would find out how well the new service is working across South Tyneside by consulting with patients and healthcare practitioners.

This report will:

- Explain what Pharmacy First is
- Outline the methods we used to engage with communities, pharmacies, and GP practices

- Describe and analyse our findings to highlight the success and learning points around the delivery of Pharmacy First
- Explain challenges we faced in data collection
- Provide recommendations for enhancing the delivery of Pharmacy First.

Pharmacy First

Pharmacy First was launched across England on January 31, 2024. The service enables community pharmacies to provide advice and NHS-funded treatment for minor illnesses or an urgent repeat medical supply.

Community Pharmacy England state that the service was set up in recognition of the amount of healthcare advice that pharmacies provide to the public, and to establish community pharmacies as the first port of call for healthcare service.

The seven conditions covered by Pharmacy First and age restrictions are listed below:

- Sinus infections (12 years and over).
- Sore throat (five years and over).
- Earache (one to 17 years).
- Infected insect bites (one year and over).
- Skin infections (one year and over).
- Shingles (18 years and over).
- Uncomplicated UTI (women aged 16 to 64 years).

Information from the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board indicates that all 32 community pharmacies across South Tyneside are signed up to deliver the Pharmacy First service.

Our aims

Alongside raising awareness of the Pharmacy First across communities in South Tyneside, we had two key goals in this area of work:

1. **Hear from 'seldom heard' communities.** We wanted to gain insights from community groups to identify gaps in data and knowledge so that we understand the barriers that prevent people from being heard. We particularly

wanted to understand the provisions pharmacies are making for under-served groups.

2. **Work in partnership.** We aimed to work with the 'A Better you' network and South Tyneside's Local Pharmacy Network to aid our understanding of the impact on health care professionals and the services they are delivering.

Methodology

Patients

We drew up a short survey which patients using pharmacies could complete either online via SurveyMonkey or on paper.

This was shared with 14 community groups, was available at all public outreach events, and was promoted at our monthly pop-up stalls at South Tyneside Hospital, Palmer Community Hospital in Jarrow and Cleadon Park Primary Care Centre.

Our efforts to reach 'seldom-heard' communities including ethnic minority groups, by visiting organisations such as Apna Ghar and engaging with the A Better U network, were successful. More than 11% of respondents to the patient survey came from an ethnic minority background – double the local ethnic minority population.

In the survey, we asked patients:

- If they had heard of the Pharmacy First service
- If they had used Pharmacy First
- What was good about Pharmacy First and what could be improved
- How they compared their experience of Pharmacy First to their GP practice
- How accessible their pharmacy was
- Demographic information

We received 166 responses.

Pharmacies

We collaborated with Gateshead and South Tyneside Local Pharmaceutical Committee to agree the questions that we would ask pharmacy staff.

An online survey, sent by email to 17 pharmacies in South Tyneside, asked:

- How they promote the Pharmacy First service
- How well patients understand Pharmacy First
- The accommodations pharmacies are making for under-served groups
- Challenges in service delivery
- How pharmacies are gathering patient feedback
- How they work with GP practices.

In June 2025, we also visited three pharmacies in South Shields, Jarrow and East Boldon to collect data in-person.

We received six responses from pharmacies.

GP practice managers

In July 2025 we sent an online Pharmacy First survey for GP practice managers to 30 practices across the borough.

We asked the practice managers:

- How many patients their practice refers to Pharmacy First each month
- If the service was freeing up GP appointments
- If the service was working well for staff and patients
- Training for staff who make referrals to Pharmacy First
- Any further feedback that they would like to share.

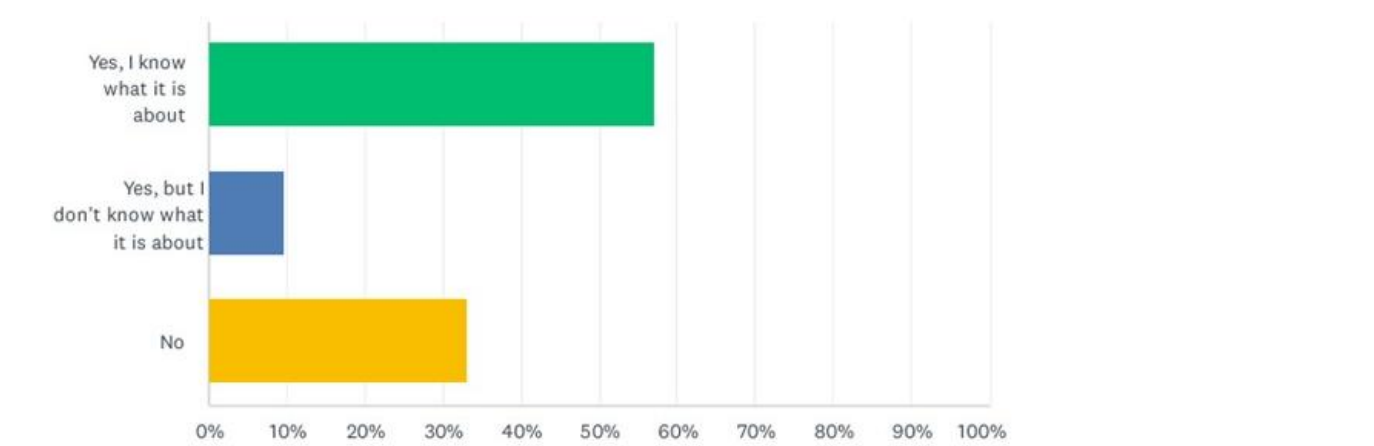
We received nine responses from GP practice managers.

Survey responses

Patients

It should be noted that there were a varying number of responses to each question on this survey based on how much people knew about Pharmacy First and if they had used the service before.

Have you heard of the Pharmacy First service?

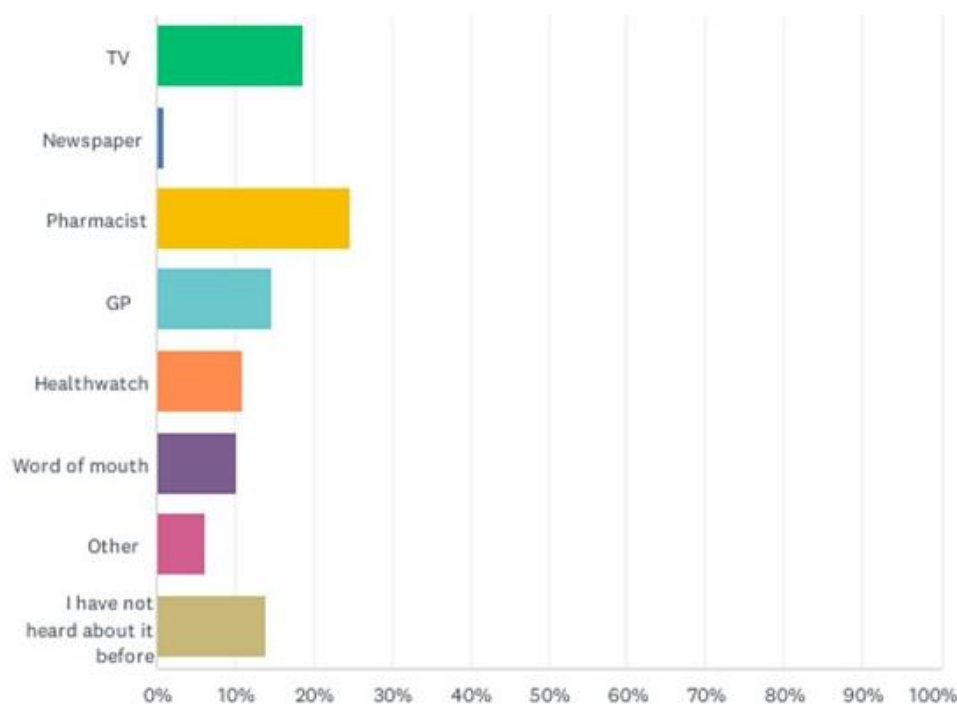


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes, I know what it is about	57.23%	95
Yes, but I don't know what it is about	9.64%	16
No	33.13%	55
TOTAL		166

Out of 166 respondents, 67% said they had heard of Pharmacy First, with 57% answering ‘Yes, I know what it is about’.

How did you hear about it?

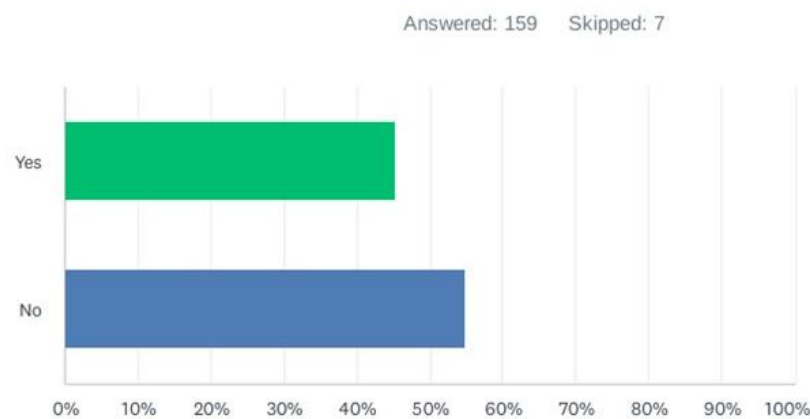
Answered: 129 Skipped: 30



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
TV	18.60%	24
Newspaper	0.78%	1
Pharmacist	24.81%	32
GP	14.73%	19
Healthwatch	10.85%	14
Word of mouth	10.08%	13
Other	6.20%	8
I have not heard about it before	13.95%	18
TOTAL		129

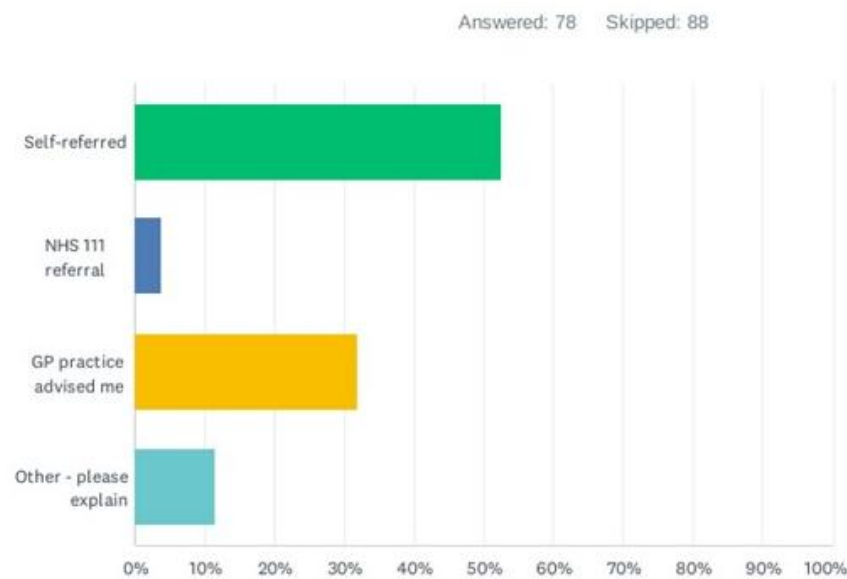
When asked where they had heard about the service, 24.8% of the 129 respondents said they had heard about it through their pharmacist, with 18.6% hearing about it on TV.

Have you used the new Pharmacy First service?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	45.28%	72
No	54.72%	87
TOTAL		159

How did you choose to use the service?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Self-referred	52.56%	41
NHS 111 referral	3.85%	3
GP practice advised me	32.05%	25
Other - please explain	11.54%	9
TOTAL		78

Of the 78 people who answered how they chose to use the service, 52.6% said they had self-referred to Pharmacy First, with 32.1% being referred to the service by their GP.

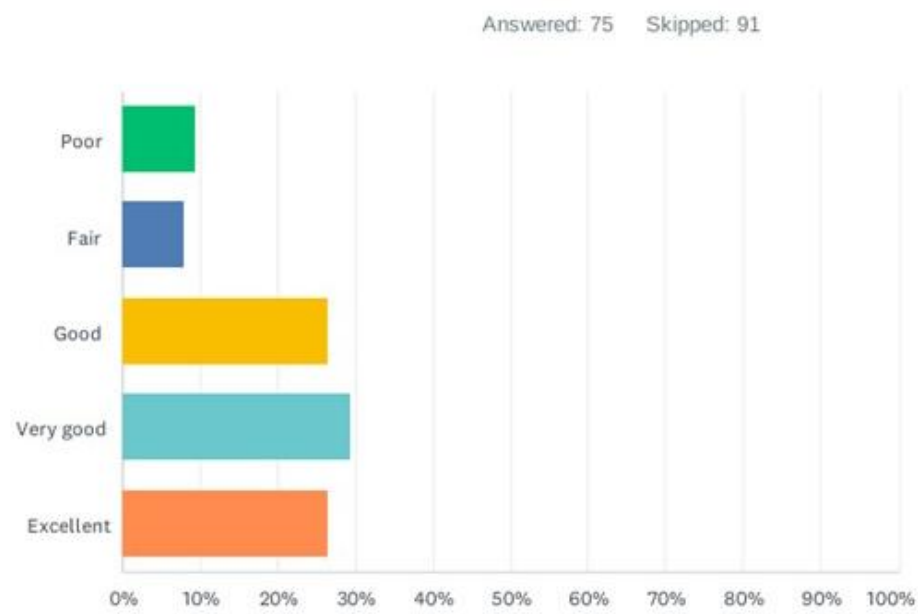
The discrepancy between the number who said they had used the service (72) and those who answered the following question about how they chose to use the service (78) may be explained by some of the accompanying comments where respondents said they had tried to use the service but were referred back to their GP, or could not access the service due to the age limits.

"I have used it, but I did not know about the particular service. The pharmacy sends me prescriptions regularly as I have a disability."

"I had not realised I was being referred under Pharmacy First. I was sent for a bee sting."

"Visited Fellgate Pharmacy for my ears and throat. Because I am over 70, I was advised to contact my GP to see whether the pharmacy could treat me. The GP called the pharmacy who contacted me as they were able to treat me for an ear infection."

If you have used the Pharmacy First service, how would you rate the service received?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Poor	9.33%	7
Fair	8.00%	6
Good	26.67%	20
Very good	29.33%	22
Excellent	26.67%	20
TOTAL		75

82.7% of respondents who had used Pharmacy First rated the service as either ‘excellent’, ‘very good’ or ‘good’ while 17.3% of respondents rated it as either ‘fair’ or ‘poor’. In conversations at engagement events, many survey respondents said the service had been very helpful to quickly get effective care for their young children.

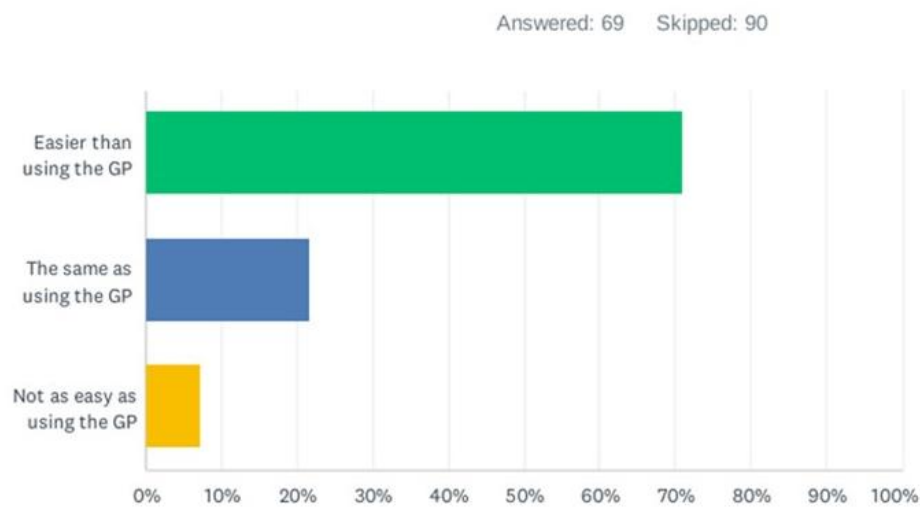
“It was easily available. There was no waiting, and it was very informative.”

“Received cream for my eye instead of having to go to the GP.”

“Quick and accessible.”

“More advertising is needed to spread the word.”

How did you find the service?

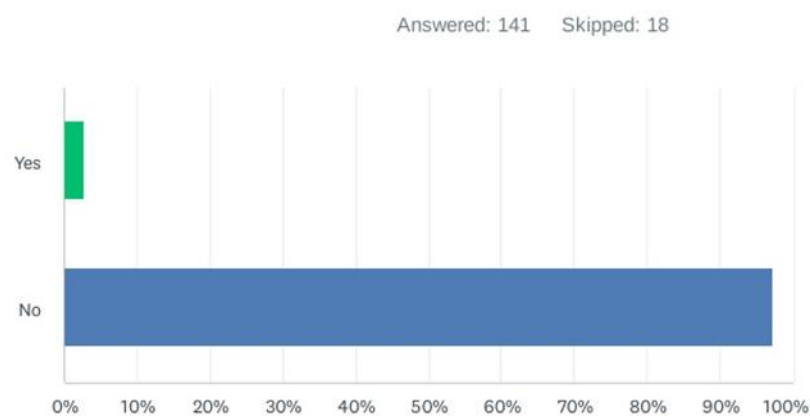


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Easier than using the GP	71.01%	49
The same as using the GP	21.74%	15
Not as easy as using the GP	7.25%	5
TOTAL		69

71% of respondents said they found using Pharmacy First easier than using the GP, with only 7.3% of respondents saying they thought the service was not as easy as using the GP.



Do you have any problems accessing your pharmacy, eg entering the building or difficulties getting served due to the counter height restrictions etc?



ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Yes		2.84%	4
No		97.16%	137
TOTAL			141

Only 2.8% of respondents said they faced challenges accessing their pharmacy.

“There is a high step, but the staff always open the door for me.”

“There are automatic doors so you can walk through easily.”

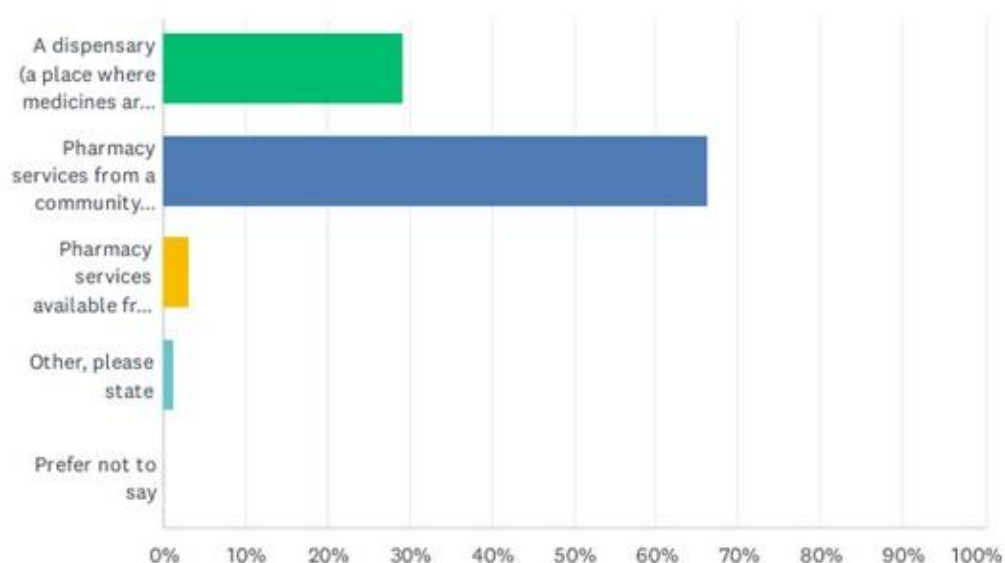
“There are three pharmacies in my location, and I can use any of them.”

“There is a ramp to get up to the pharmacy but a step to get into the building. I have to make sure that I have someone with me to stay with the pram. The area to be served is very small.”

“No wheelchair access”

What type of pharmacy do you use the most?

Answered: 157 Skipped: 9



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A dispensary (a place where medicines are prepared and given out, often in a hospital or GP practice)	29.30%	46
Pharmacy services from a community pharmacy e.g. on the high street, in a supermarket	66.24%	104
Pharmacy services available from an online only (or internet) pharmacy	3.18%	5
Other, please state	1.27%	2
Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
TOTAL		157

66.2% of respondents said they used services from a community pharmacy, such as one on the high street or a supermarket like Asda. 29.3% said they used a dispensary pharmacy the most. Some respondents also mentioned ordering prescriptions online.

Pharmacy staff

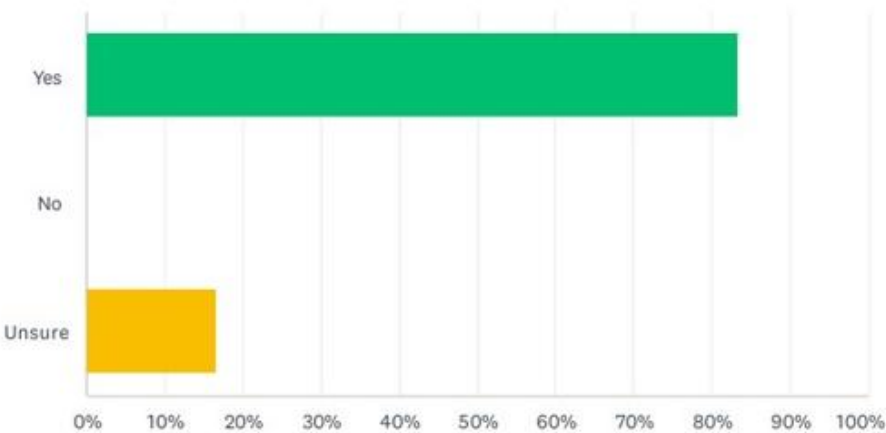
How do you promote the Pharmacy First service?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 0

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	Posters, Social media, target local schools when we see an outbreak.	7/2/2025 3:32 PM
2	Posters	7/2/2025 10:28 AM
3	posters in doctors surgeries and in store, social media and word of mouth	7/1/2025 2:08 PM
4	We have posters up in the pharmacy, and we advertise about the service by social media and word of mouth. If patient symptoms look like they come under PF we offer a consultation. We give patients leaflets as well about the service, which is good for those who are isolated.	7/1/2025 11:46 AM
5	There are posters up in the pharmacy explaining what the service is. Residents ask us about the service and we provide them with advice.	6/25/2025 12:08 PM
6	Through posters, leaflets, Facebook, conversations with pharmacy team members	6/12/2025 4:16 PM

Do patients understand the Pharmacy First system?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	83.33%	5
No	0.00%	0
Unsure	16.67%	1
TOTAL		6

What measures are in place at the pharmacy to support people with disabilities and those from minority groups?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 0

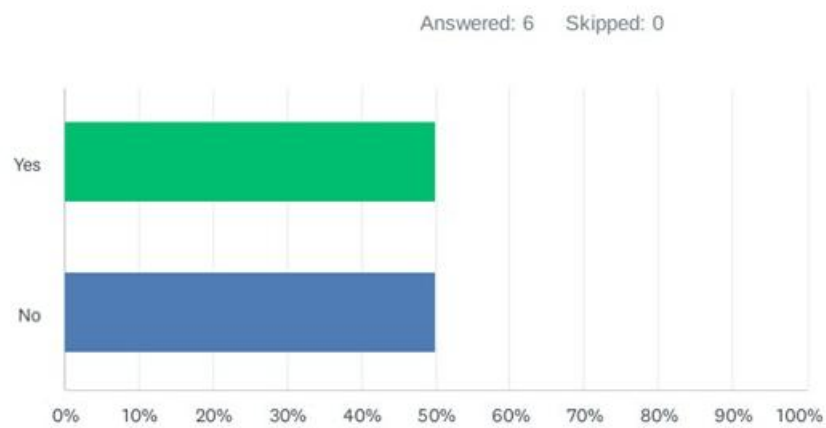
#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	As the demographic is predominately White British, we do not have measures to support minority groups in place at the moment. We recently had a refit to ensure disability access, and staff are aware of this issue. We have a patient who is a wheelchair user who travels from Jarrow by metro to use the pharmacy as it is easier for him.	8/26/2025 11:59 AM
2	We have disabled access and two consultation rooms. All of our staff are English speaking. The area does not have any non English speaking residents. If this changes we would use Google translate or a family member.	7/2/2025 3:32 PM
3	We do not discriminate against anyone.	7/2/2025 10:28 AM
4	we work with translators in the GP practice and take extra time and measures for people with disabilities	7/1/2025 2:08 PM
5	We have private consultation rooms so those with learning disabilities have a comfortable environment. We also have staff who speak multiple languages to accommodate those who do not speak English as their primary language.	6/25/2025 12:08 PM
6	Premises are DDA compliant. Also, we would support any patient on an individual basis to help meet their requirements. For some medical conditions, the consultation can be carried out by telephone/video-link, although certain consultations require the patient to be physically present in the pharmacy.	6/12/2025 4:16 PM

In your opinion has the transition worked well with local GPs when taking on the additional Pharmacy First service?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 0

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	Yes, there is a bus or car ride to a GP, so much easier for residents to visit their local pharmacy. We have a good relationship with all South Tyneside GP's as our customers come from South Shields, Jarrow, Hebburn and Boldon. We work with around thirty practices.	7/2/2025 3:32 PM
2	Yes.	7/2/2025 10:28 AM
3	Yes this service frees up appointments for more urgent care.	7/1/2025 2:08 PM
4	I spoke with GP receptionists in the area as we are not getting many referrals. There is more work to be done in this area. Receptionists see it as a negative when the patients are sent back but this is done only when a GP is needed.	7/1/2025 11:46 AM
5	It has worked well. However, more conditions need to be added to the list. For example, nasal spray can be bought on offer. All local GPs in the area do refer through Pharmacy First, however we do not keep data on how many patients we refer back to their GP.	6/25/2025 12:08 PM
6	Yes, generally well. We also have local practice network to communicate best practice, and facilitate communication between surgery and pharmacy teams.	6/12/2025 4:16 PM

Are there issues beyond your control, such as cost of medication against reimbursement, shortages of meds?



ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Yes		50.00%	3
No		50.00%	3
TOTAL			6

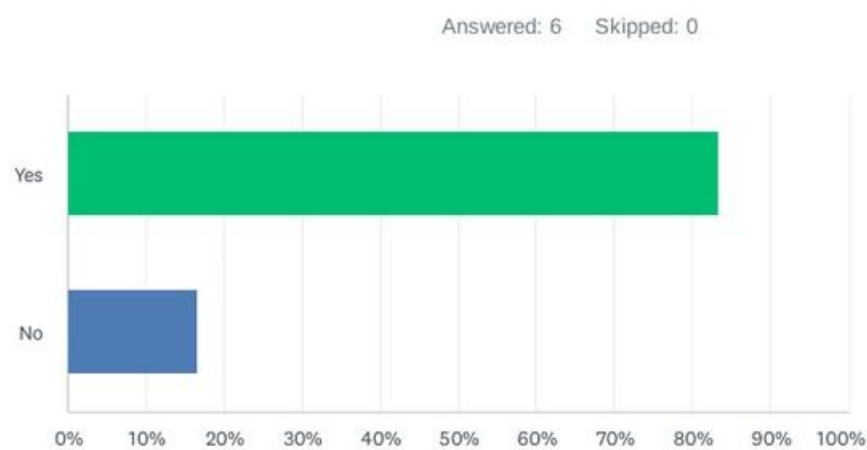
In further comments, all pharmacies involved in this survey said they had not experienced shortages of Pharmacy First medication but there were shortages of other medicines such as ADHD medication or menopause treatments.



As staff, we are not involved in finances. There is a complicated meds system for patients, which makes it hard to understand which meds they can get on prescription and what you have to pay for.



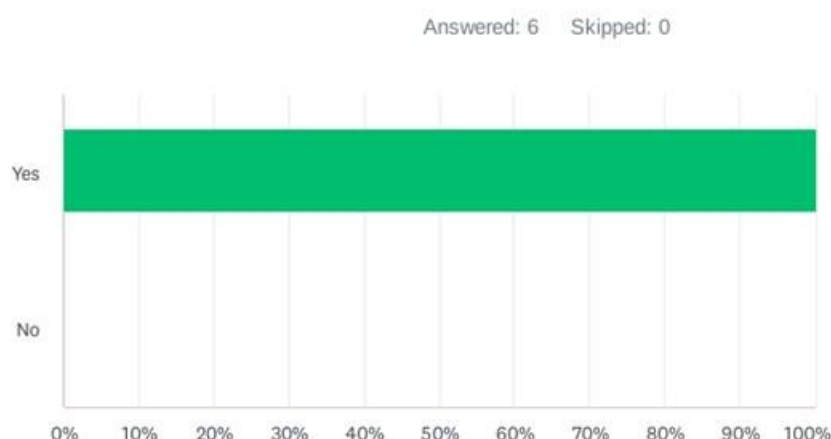
Do you invite and obtain feedback about the Pharmacy First service?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	83.33%	5
No	16.67%	1
Total Respondents: 6		

Three pharmacies who collect feedback about Pharmacy First said that they collect the data through a survey or through leaflets following a patient consultation. Most said that they receive the feedback verbally, and one said they receive comments through Google/Facebook reviews.

Does your pharmacy have a private consultation room suitable to its needs?



ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONSES	
Yes		100.00%	6
No		0.00%	0
TOTAL			6

Community Pharmacy England state that having a private consultation room is a requirement as part of delivering Pharmacy First.

Comments from pharmacies on changes they would like to see to the Pharmacy First service

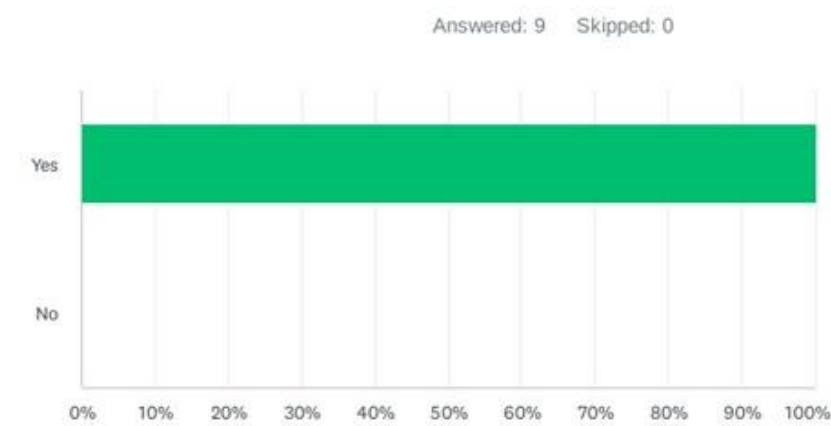
"Help with promotion, nationally and locally i.e. schools and nursing homes."

"Better communication of the service nationally - this was something the NHSE had committed to, but we have yet to see much public communication about the service. The range of conditions that could be treated on Pharmacy First could/should be expanded - this would be good for patients and good for NHS capacity."

"GPs could be referring to Pharmacy First more and it should be easier for pharmacies to refer back to the GP. Service could be advertised more in GP surgeries. Receptionists should make a formal referral to the pharmacy rather than just saying to visit the pharmacy so that we are aware and can provide them with the help they need."

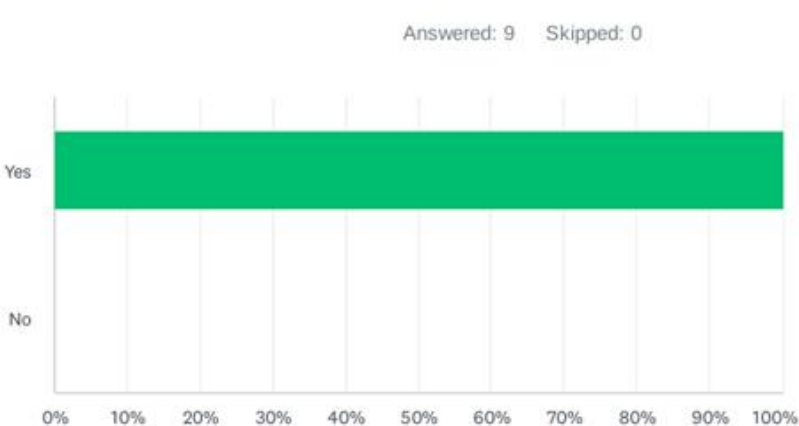
GP practice managers

Does your GP practice refer to Pharmacy First?



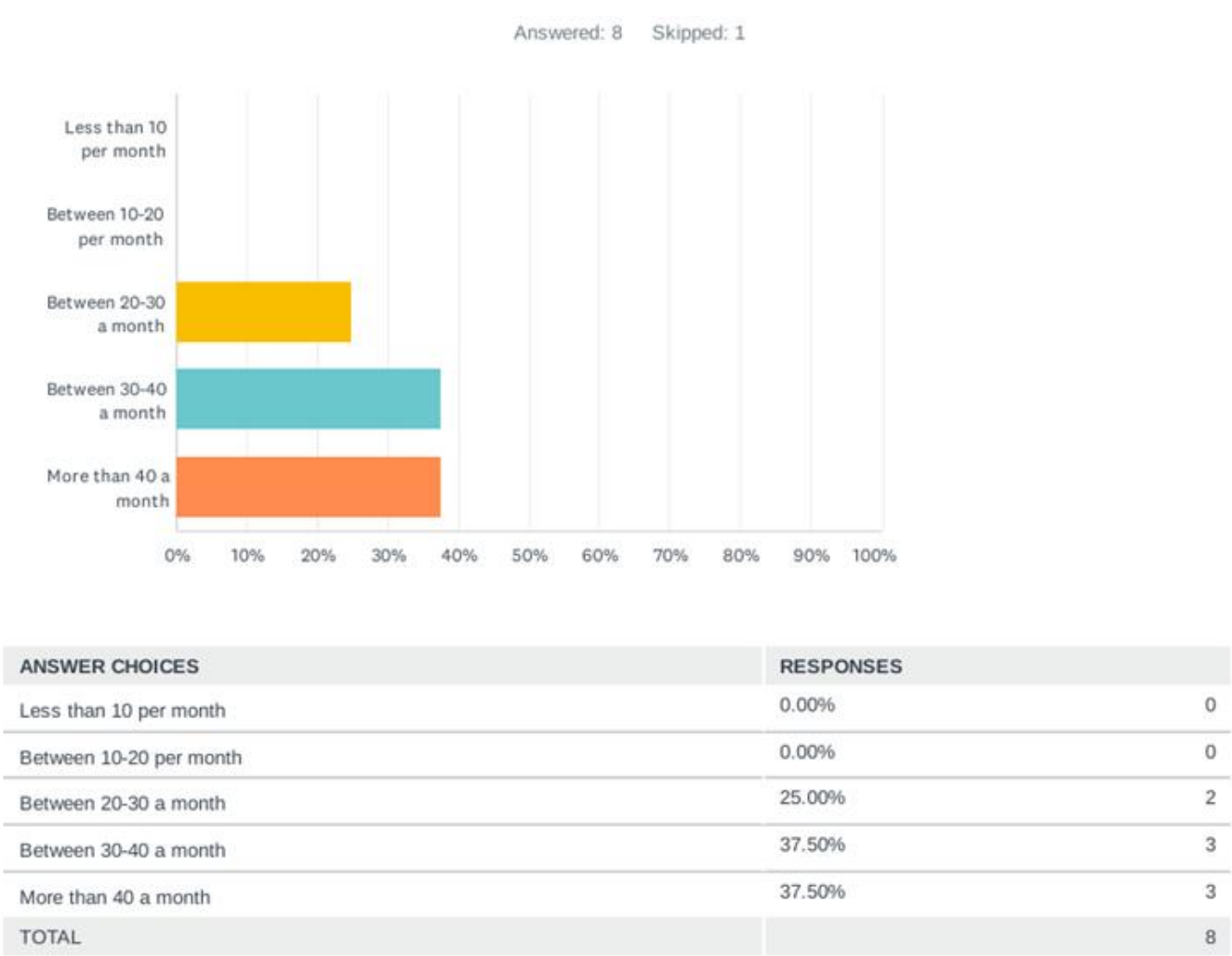
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	100.00%	9
No	0.00%	0
TOTAL		9

Have staff who refer to Pharmacy First received appropriate training?

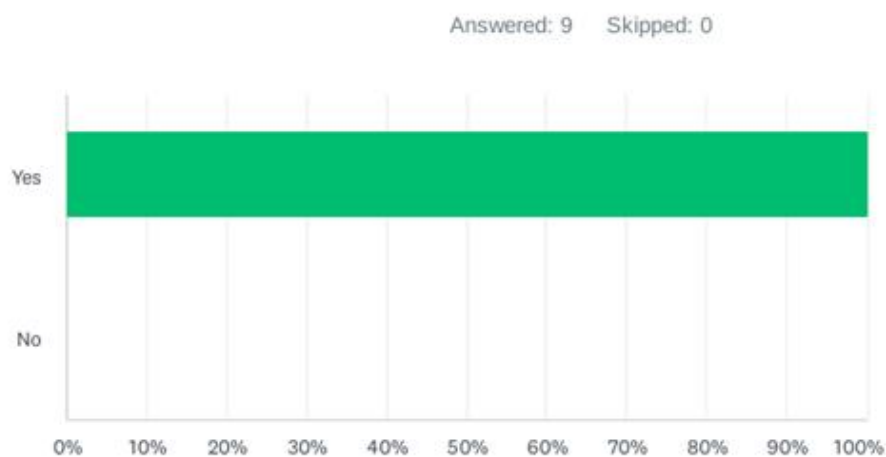


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	100.00%	9
No	0.00%	0
TOTAL		9

How many patients a month are referred to Pharmacy First from your GP practice?

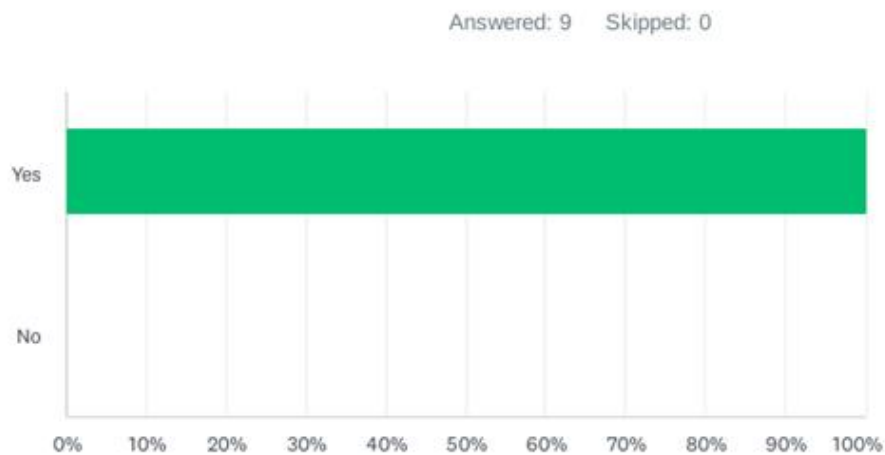


Is there a process in place for when patients are referred back to their GP?



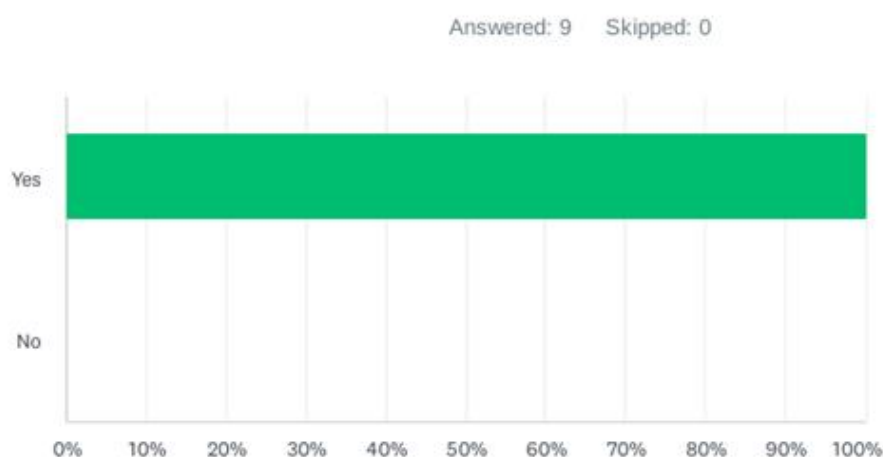
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	100.00%
No	0.00%
Total Respondents: 9	

Do you agree that by referring patients to Pharmacy First saves appointments for those who need to see a GP?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	100.00%9
No	0.00%0
Total Respondents: 9	

Has the introduction of Pharmacy First worked well for staff and patients?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	100.00%	9
No	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 9		

"Some pharmacists are trained to different levels, so we could refer a patient to the pharmacy one day and they accept the referral, but the next day the pharmacist working may not see that condition. This isn't all the time, but sometimes patients will lose faith in the service if it is not consistent."

"Some pharmacies are better at treating conditions than others; some seem to be a lot more competent and confident in their treatments."

"Overall, this is a helpful service, but it takes time to educate patients; many still believe the GP is the only person qualified to see them."

"Patients sometimes refuse an appropriate referral to Pharmacy First, can't be persuaded, as they only want to see a GP."

"We were used to using the GP2Pharmacy services a few years ago, however there is a lot of conditions that can no longer be treated at the pharmacy as the PGDs are no longer in use. This would be amazing and a great help if the pharmacy could treat the conditions from the GP2Pharmacy service."

What we learned

The survey responses from patients, pharmacies and GP practices would indicate that the introduction of the Pharmacy First service has been received positively.

There was a reasonable recognition rate with two-thirds of patients surveyed saying they had heard of Pharmacy First, of whom 57% said they knew what the service was about. Patients have heard about Pharmacy First from various sources, with the most popular being through TV and at their local pharmacy.

But awareness would improve if Pharmacy First was advertised more via the local media and social media and signposted by other health and social care services.

82.7% of respondents who had used Pharmacy First rated the service as either 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good' and 71% said they found using Pharmacy First easier than using the GP.

Many survey respondents we met in person at events said the service had been very helpful to quickly get effective care for their young children.

The online and face-to-face service provision that many pharmacies provide was praised by patients.

Pharmacies are handling a wide range of conditions through the service, and the responses from service users demonstrate they are providing effective treatment across different age groups, from young children to older people.

Pharmacy staff have also received praise from patients for taking their time to listen and explain things clearly.

Some survey responses indicate gaps in communication between patients, pharmacies and GP practices, meaning that there is sometimes inconsistency in the care that patients receive.

All pharmacies who responded to this survey said they had an internal consultation

room available – a requirement of delivering the Pharmacy First service.

Pharmacies would like to see increased promotion and scope in terms of the range of conditions included.

The GP practices who took part in the survey were equally supportive of Pharmacy First but some believe there is not a consistent level of service across pharmacies in the borough.

Across all three surveys, one common theme is that patients sometimes struggle to gain clarity on what is being offered to them by their pharmacy. Clearer communication is needed, led by the NHS nationally and regionally.

More clarity on what pharmacies across South Tyneside can offer would help address the perception of some patients that their GP is the only person qualified to see them.

Where there is local demand, some pharmacies have recruited multilingual staff and have access to translation services.

It was good to see pharmacies receiving positive feedback from patients in our survey. However, a more formal, ongoing feedback process at each pharmacy would help to better understand patients' challenges.

The age limits on treatment for some conditions covered under Pharmacy First have caused difficulty and frustration for some patients, as did treatment for urinary tract infections (UTIs) being restricted to women.

We have to acknowledge that with such a small sample size of responses from pharmacies and GP practices, there may be issues and challenges not explored here.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we would propose the following actions:

- Pharmacy First should be advertised more widely, particularly in the local media and social media and by other public services. These advertisements should provide clarity on what conditions are covered by Pharmacy First.
- GP practices and pharmacies must communicate clearly with patients on what conditions are covered by Pharmacy First and in which circumstances they will need to book a GP appointment.
- Pharmacies should ensure all staff have the appropriate training and support they need to deliver a consistently high quality of care.
- All pharmacies should continue to consider how they can make their buildings more accessible for those who have disabilities.
- Pharmacies who deliver Pharmacy First should consider implementing a patient feedback process, so users can offer feedback direct to their local pharmacy.

We would like to thank all patients, local groups, pharmacies and GP practice managers who have taken the time to provide us with valuable feedback as part of this research.

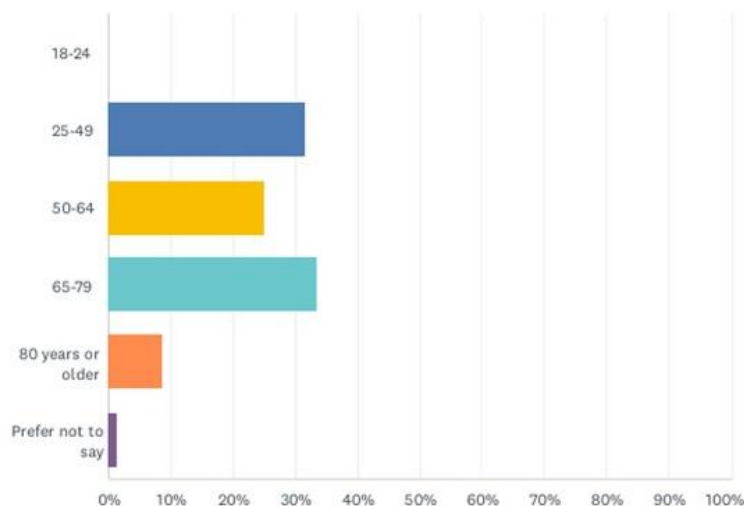
APPENDIX: Patient survey respondent profile

The 166 respondents came from across the South Tyneside area.

Postcode district	Number of respondents
NE31	17
NE32	23
NE33	18
NE34	47
NE35	1
NE36	4
SR6	1

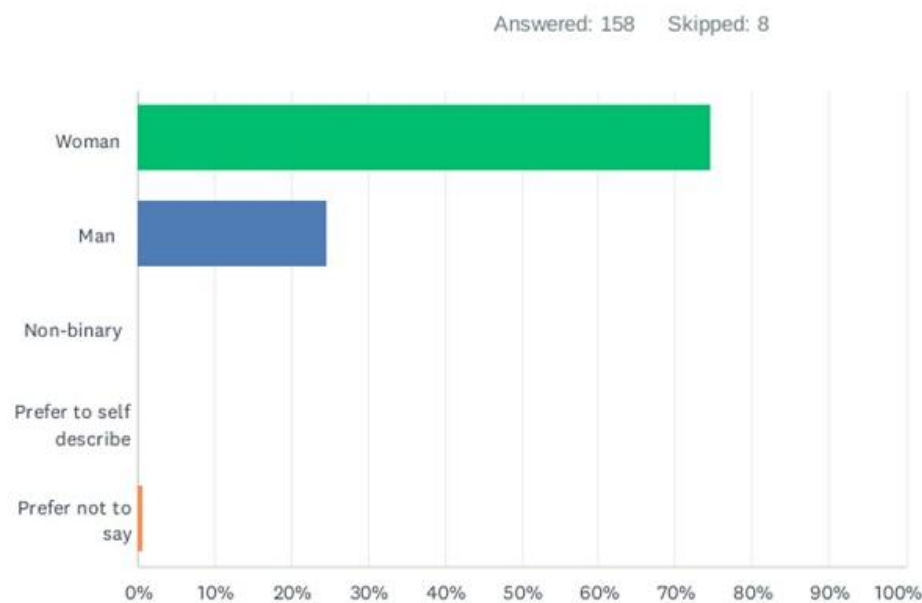
What is your age?

Answered: 152 Skipped: 7

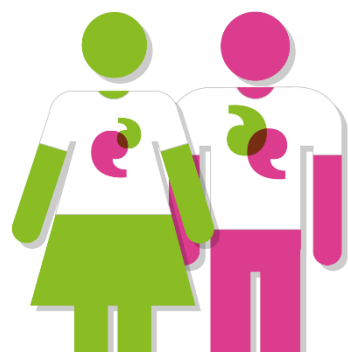


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
18-24	0.00%	0
25-49	31.58%	48
50-64	25.00%	38
65-79	33.55%	51
80 years or older	8.55%	13
Prefer not to say	1.32%	2
TOTAL		152

What is your gender?

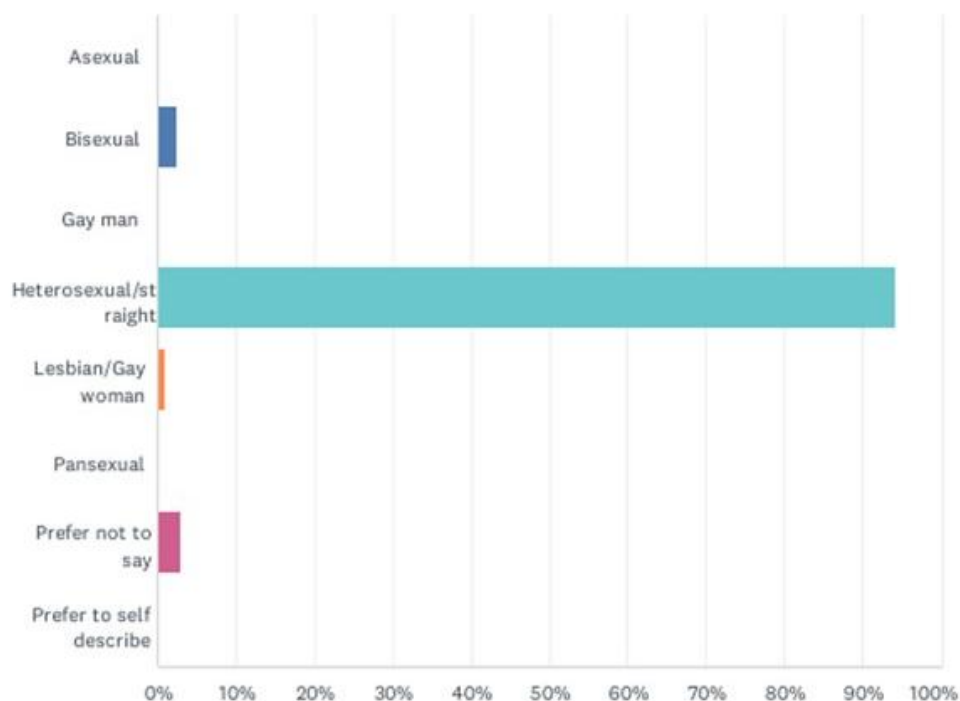


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Woman	74.68%	118
Man	24.68%	39
Non-binary	0.00%	0
Prefer to self describe	0.00%	0



Please tell us which sexual orientation you identify with

Answered: 133 Skipped: 33



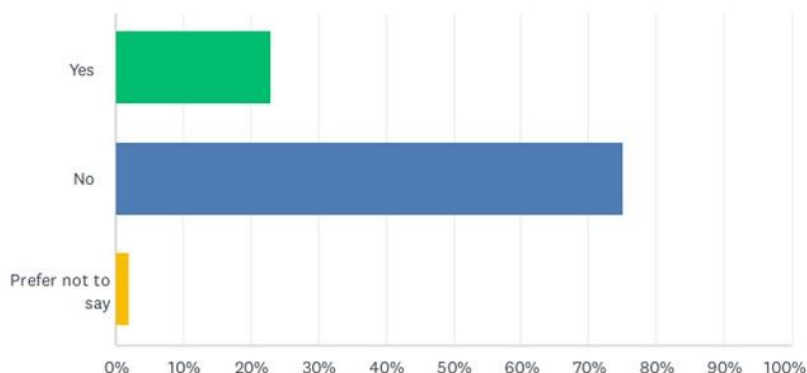
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Asexual	0.00%	0
Bisexual	2.26%	3
Gay man	0.00%	0
Heterosexual/straight	93.98%	125
Lesbian/Gay woman	0.75%	1
Pansexual	0.00%	0
Prefer not to say	3.01%	4
Prefer to self describe	0.00%	0
TOTAL		133

Please select your ethnicity

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Black, Black British: Any other Black / British British background	0.00%	0
Arab	0.00%	0
Asian/Asian British: Bangladeshi	6.38%	9
Asian or Asian British: Chinese	0.71%	1
Asia/Asian British: Indian	0.00%	0
Asian/Asian British: Pakistan	0.71%	1
Asian/Asian British: Any other Asian/Asian British background	2.13%	3
Black/Black British: African	1.42%	2
Black/Black British: Caribbean	0.00%	0
Black/Black British: Any other Black/Black British background	0.71%	1
Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups: Asian and White	0.00%	0
Mixed multiple ethnic groups: Black African and White	0.00%	0
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White	0.00%	0
Mixed multiple ethnic groups: Any other Mixed/ Multiple ethnic group background	0.00%	0
White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish/ Welsh	85.82%	121
White: Irish	0.71%	1
White: Gypsy / Traveller / Irish Traveller	0.00%	0
White: Roma	0.00%	0
White: Any other White background	0.00%	0
Prefer not to say	1.42%	2
Other (please specify)	0.00%	0
TOTAL		141

Do you consider yourself to be a carer?

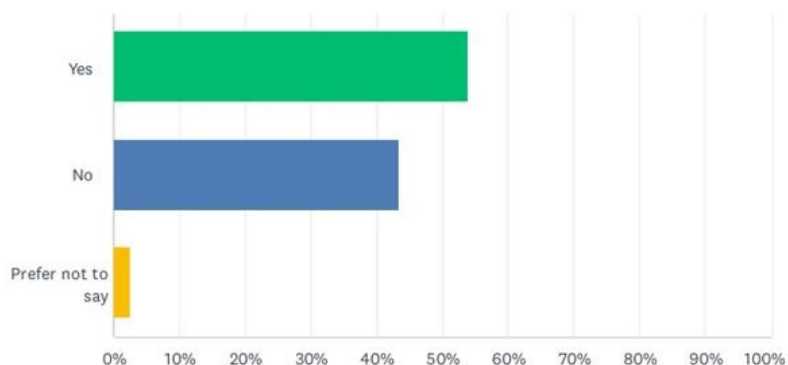
Answered: 156 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	23.08%	36
No	75.00%	117
Prefer not to say	1.92%	3
TOTAL		156

Do you have a disability or long-term condition?



Answered: 161 Skipped: 5



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	54.04%	87
No	43.48%	70
Prefer not to say	2.48%	4
TOTAL		161

There were a wide range of conditions that respondents said they dealt with, such as asthma, high blood pressure, diabetes, mental health issues and physical or mobility impairments. Some respondents mentioned they were neurodiverse.



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