



NHS Online
consultation
February 2026

Introduction

As part of the 10 Year Plan for the NHS, the Department of Health & Social Care announced plans to create a new NHS Trust, which would offer outpatient appointments online. This is part of the drive to cut waiting times through the use of digital solutions. The Department believes up to 8 million appointments could be offered in the first three years.

Local Healthwatch are consulted whenever a new NHS Trust is to be formed. To help us respond, we asked local people to complete a short survey, giving their views.

How would it work?

To begin with, NHS Online would offer virtual outpatient appointments for certain conditions in gastroenterology, gynaecology, ophthalmology and urology. These could include prostate problems or the menopause, for example.

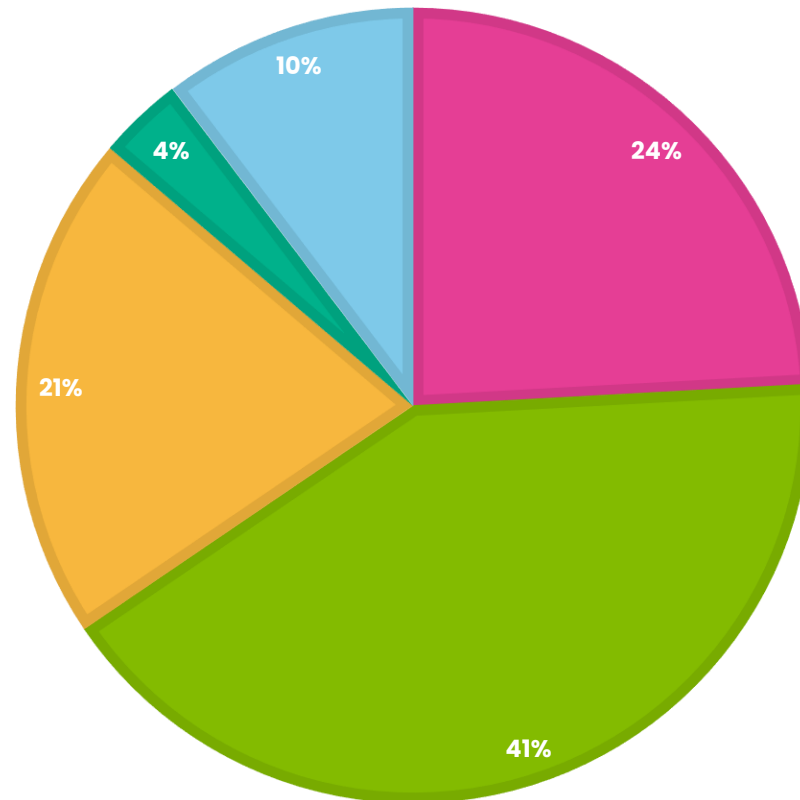
A patient will have the choice of seeing a specialist at a hospital of their choice, or choosing the online hospital. The patient would book an appointment using the NHS App. If x-rays or tests were needed, these could take place locally, often before the appointment, with the results being available to the online consultant. Prescriptions would be sent electronically to the patient's local pharmacy. If surgery is needed, this would take place at a hospital of the patient's choice.

Should the patient still need to be seen physically after an online consultation, this again would take place at the patient's preferred hospital.

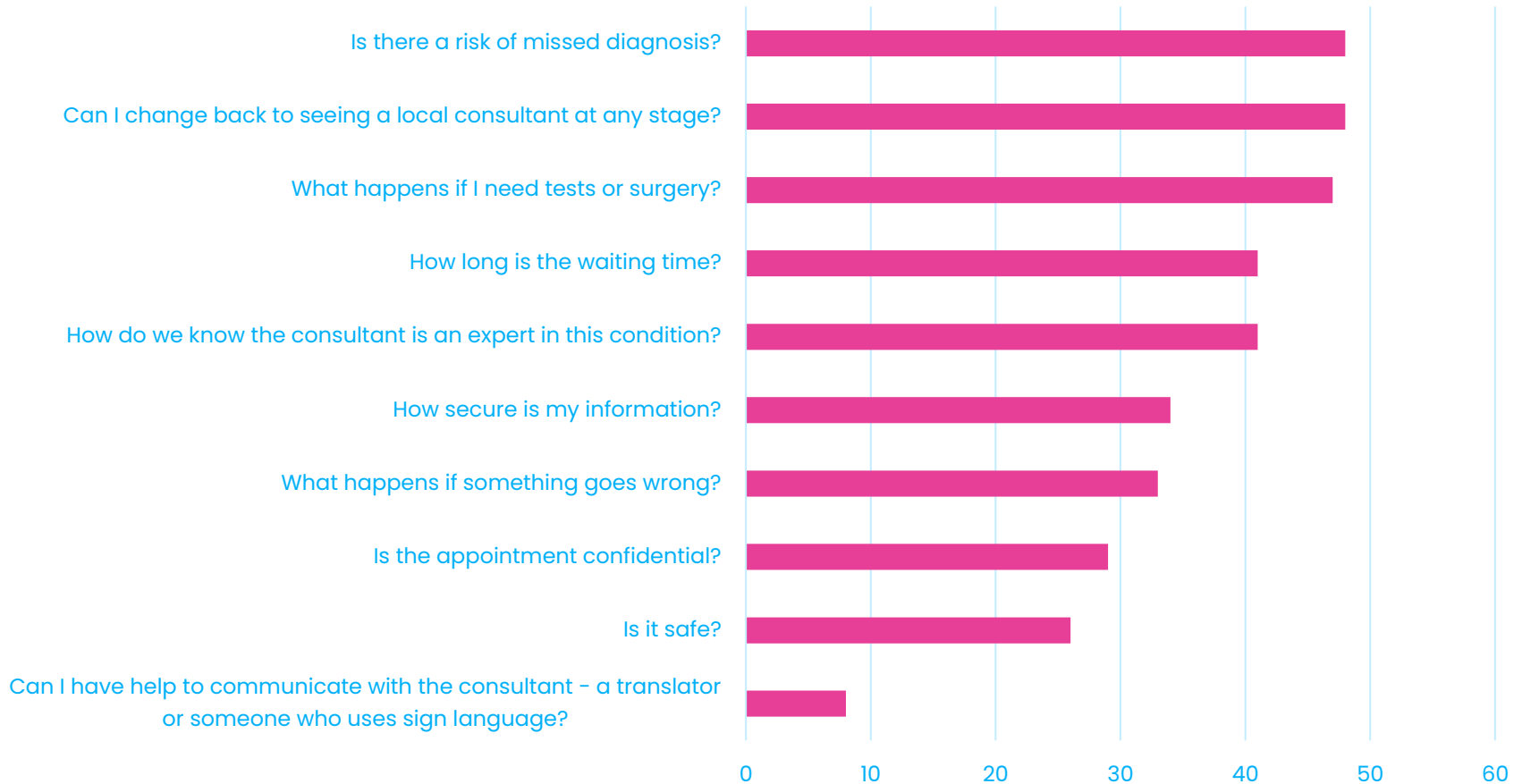
How likely are you to use NHS Online?

N=58

Very likely Likely Neither likely nor unlikely Unlikely Very unlikely

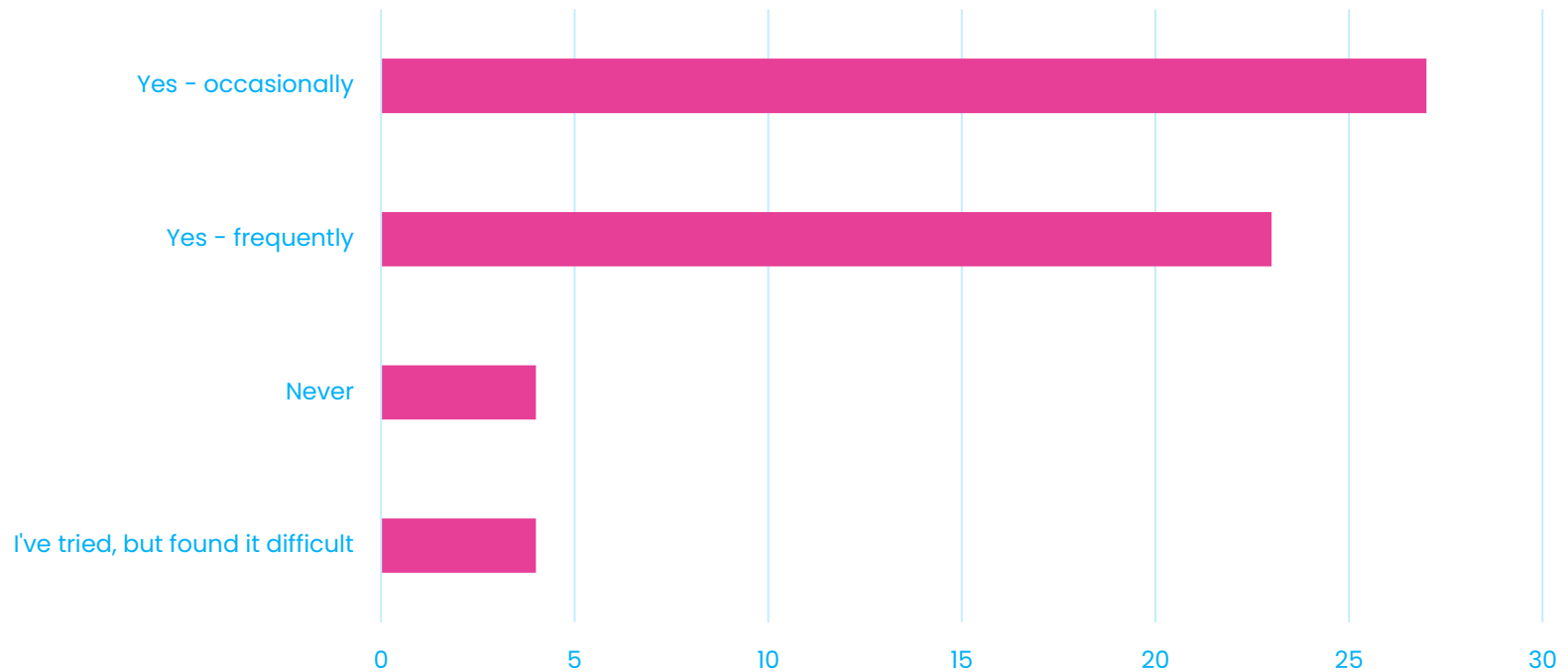


What information would you want before choosing an appointment with NHS Online?



Have you used online services for your health before - the NHS App, for example

N=58

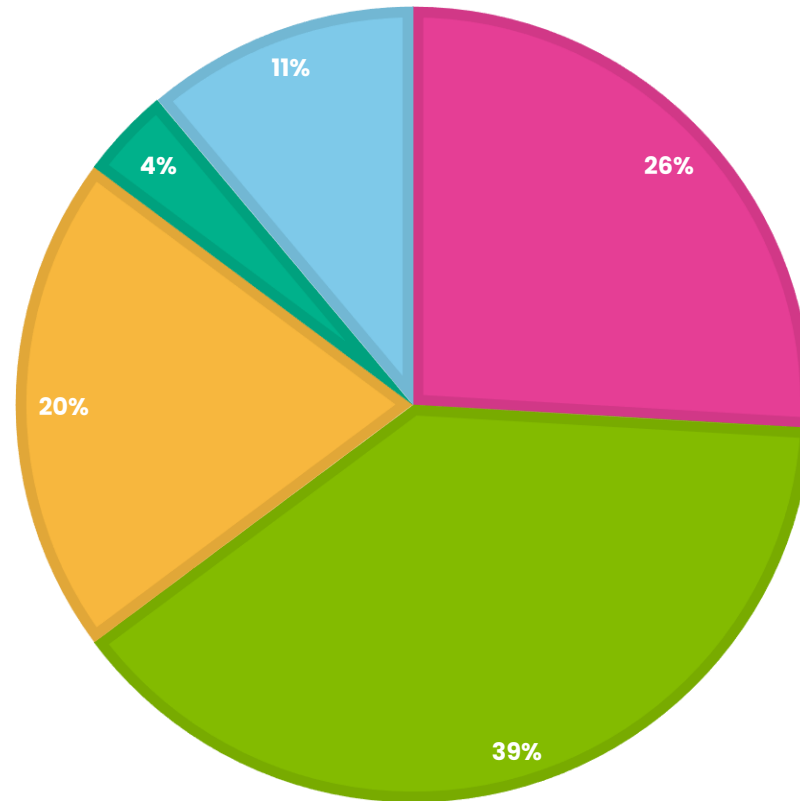


How likely are you to use NHS Online?

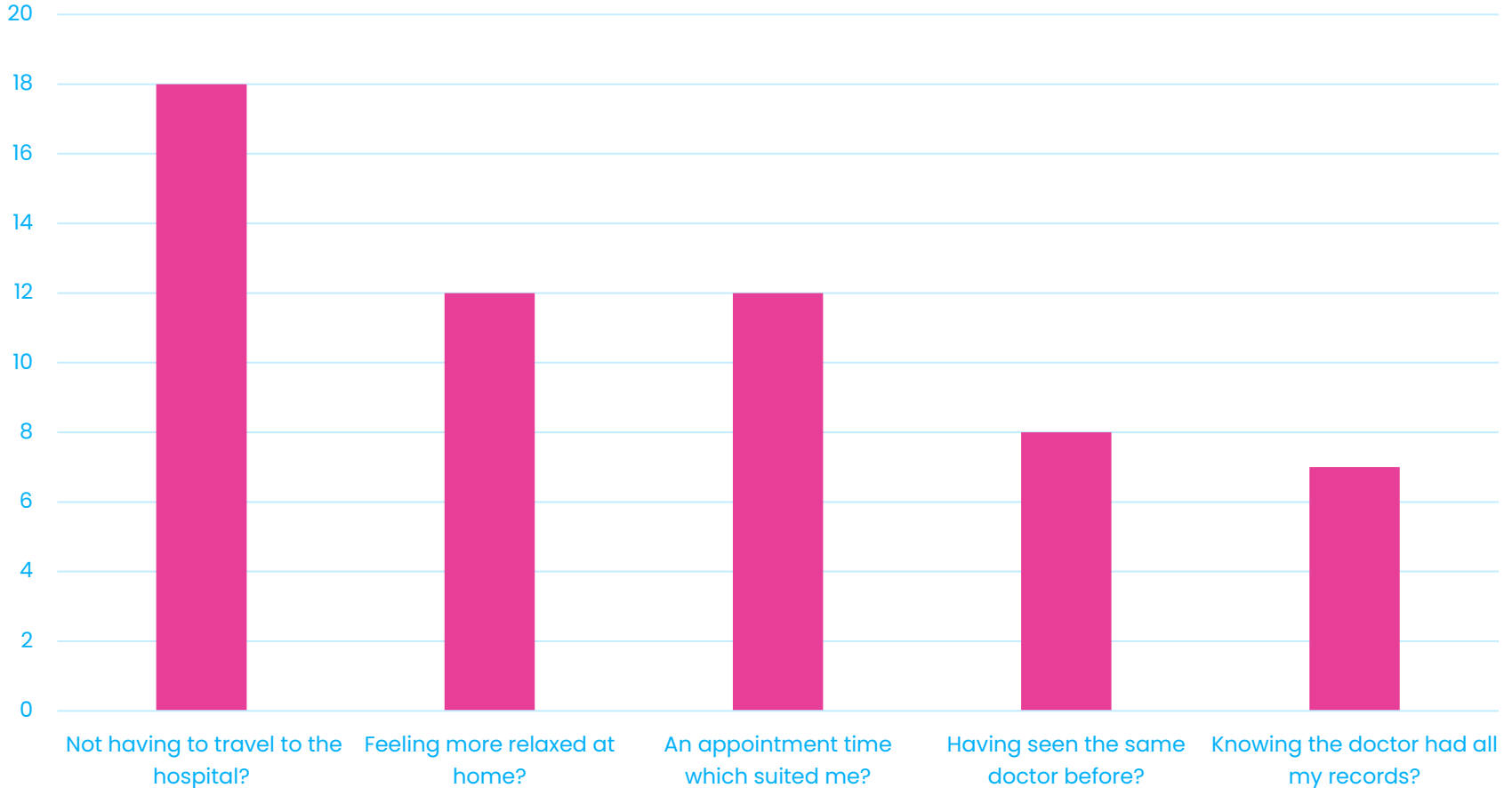
Previous users of online NHS services

N=54

Very likely Likely Neither likely nor unlikely Unlikely Very unlikely



If you have had a virtual outpatient appointment in the past with your local (or another, physical) hospital, what worked well?

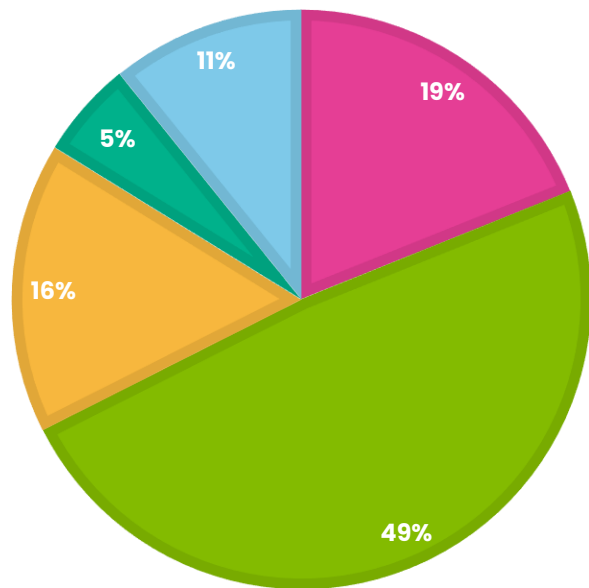


Gender differences

How likely are you to use NHS Online?

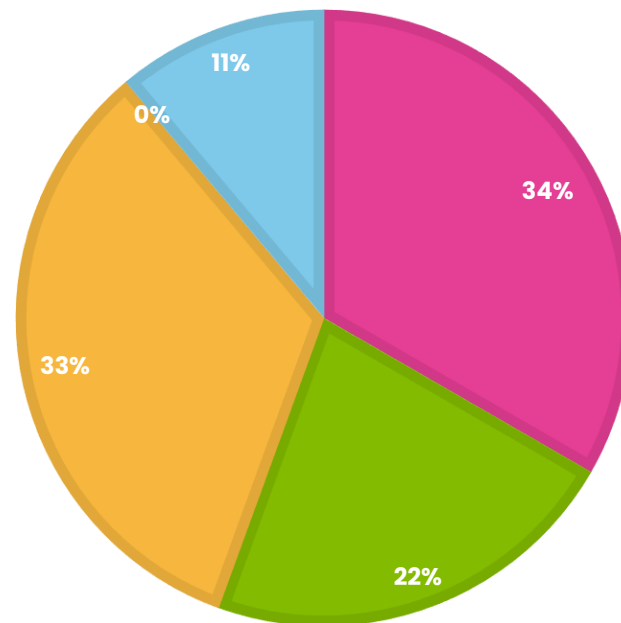
FEMALE

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely



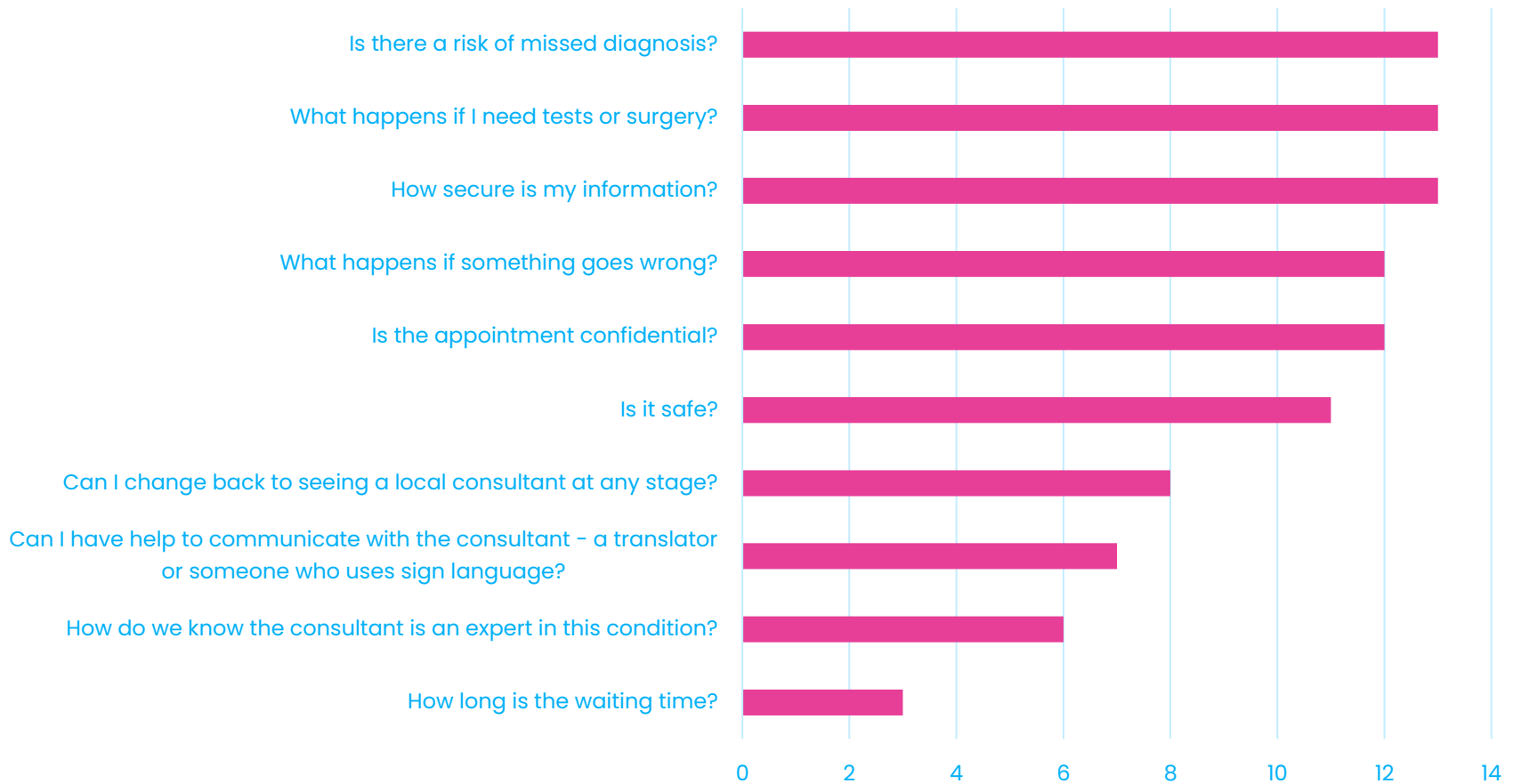
MALE

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely



Gender differences

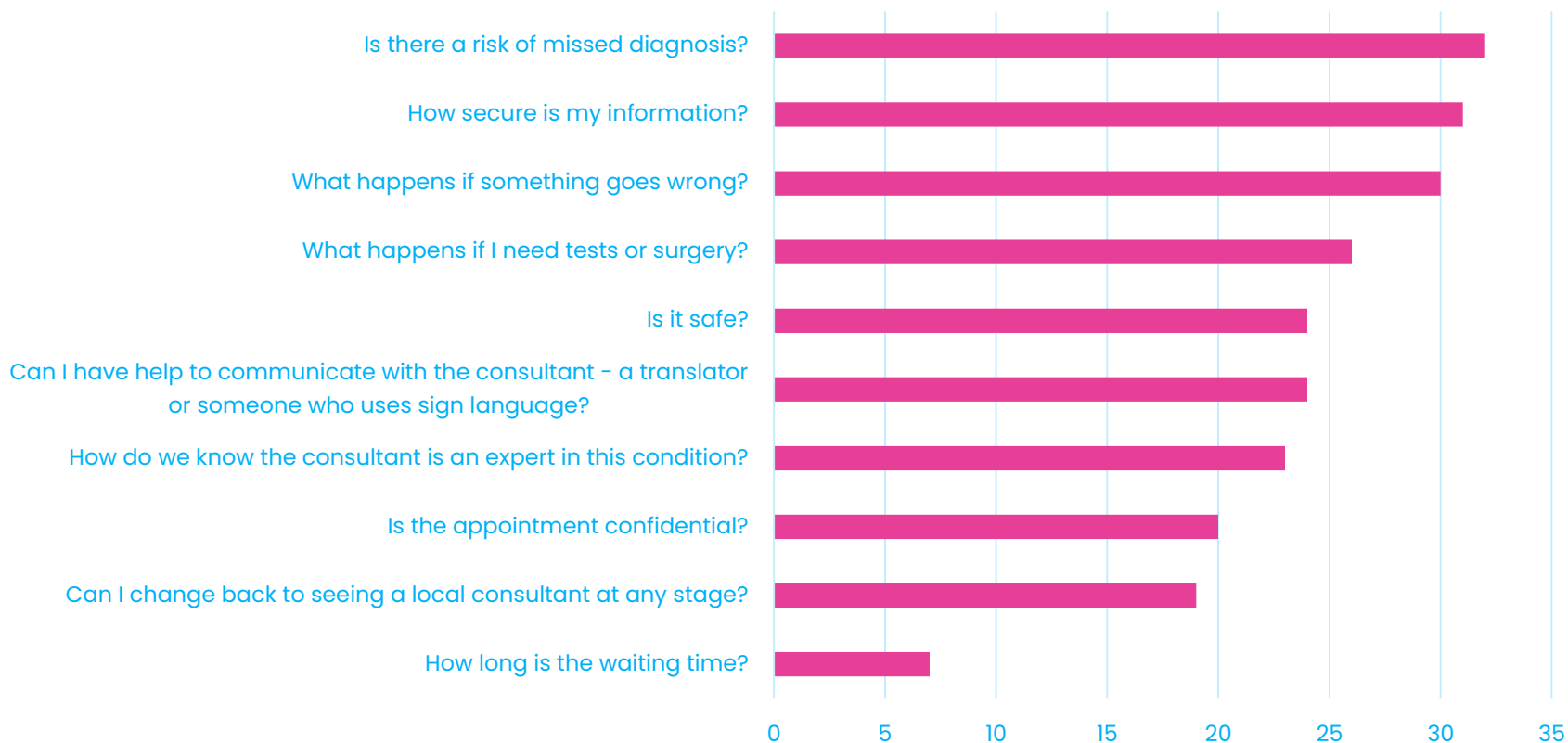
Men's information needs



Gender differences

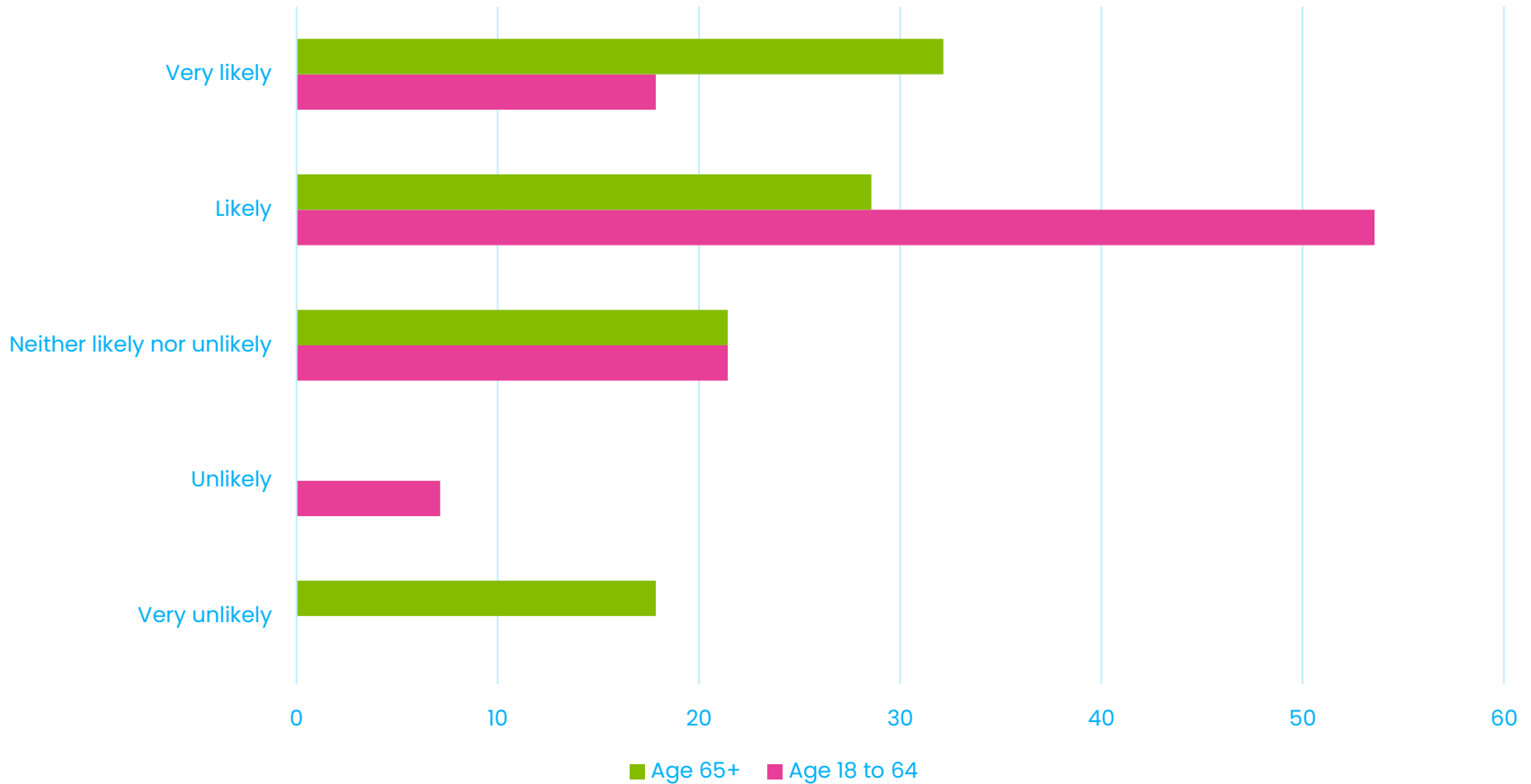
Women's information needs

Women's information needs



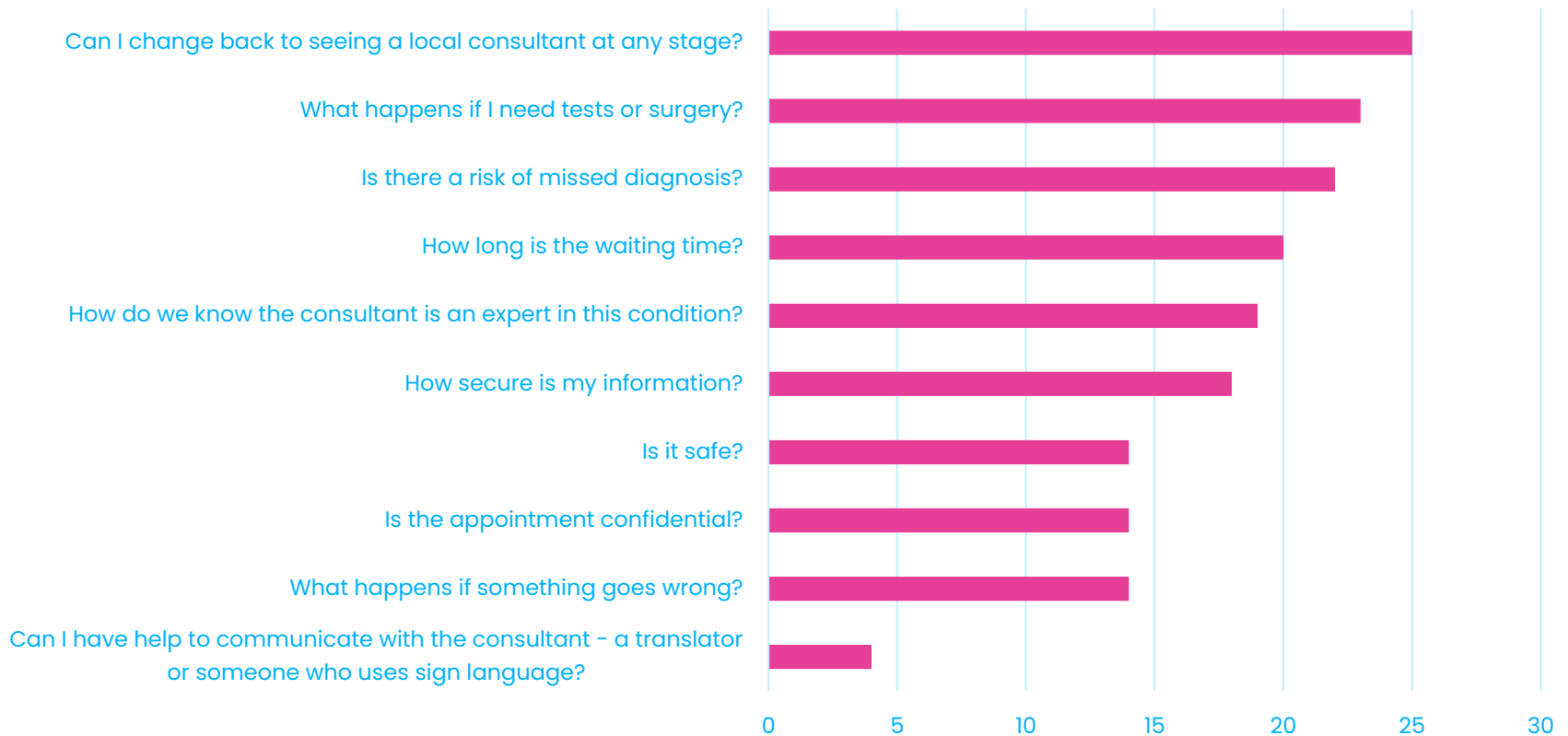
Age differences

How likely are you to use NHS Online?



What information would you want before choosing an appointment with NHS Online?

18 to 64



What information would you want before choosing an appointment with NHS Online?

over 65



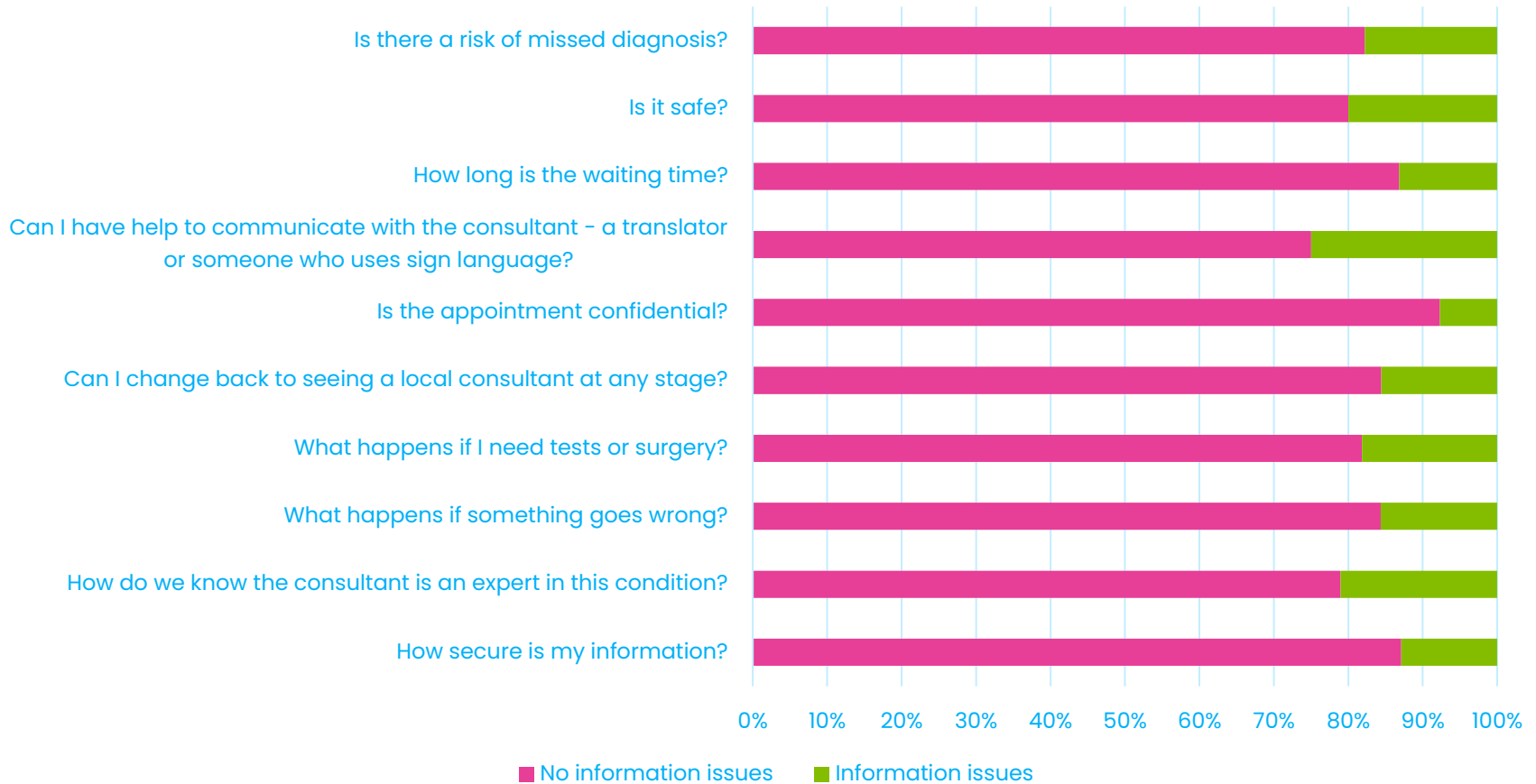
Accessing information

We asked respondents to indicate whether they had any difficulties accessing information because of a disability, impairment or sensory loss . Ten people said they did, roughly a fifth of all responses.

Although the differences in response are relatively small, they do show some interesting views:

- People who felt accessing information was a challenge were less concerned about security of information, confidentiality and access to communication support
- Those who did not struggle to access information were far more open to using an online hospital service – 72% versus 40% were likely or very likely

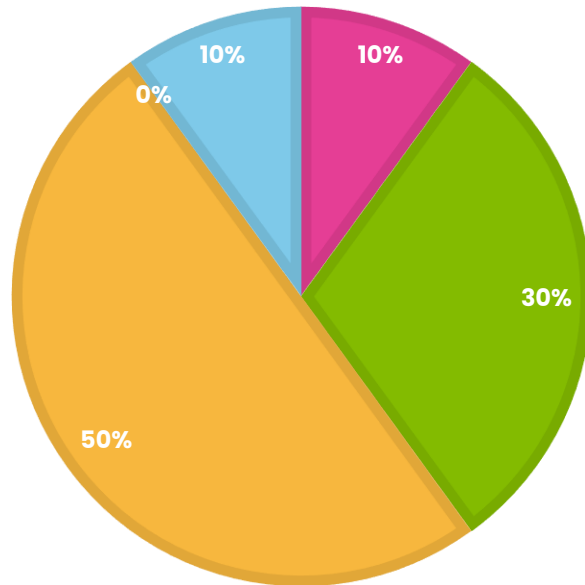
What information would you want to make a choice?



Would you use an online hospital?

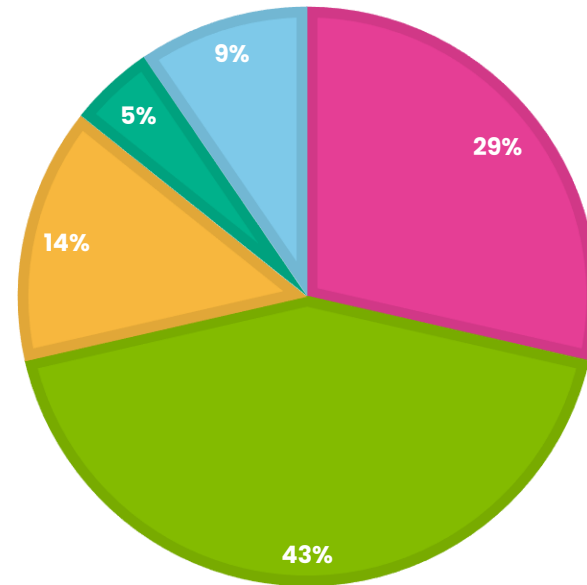
INFORMATION ISSUES

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely

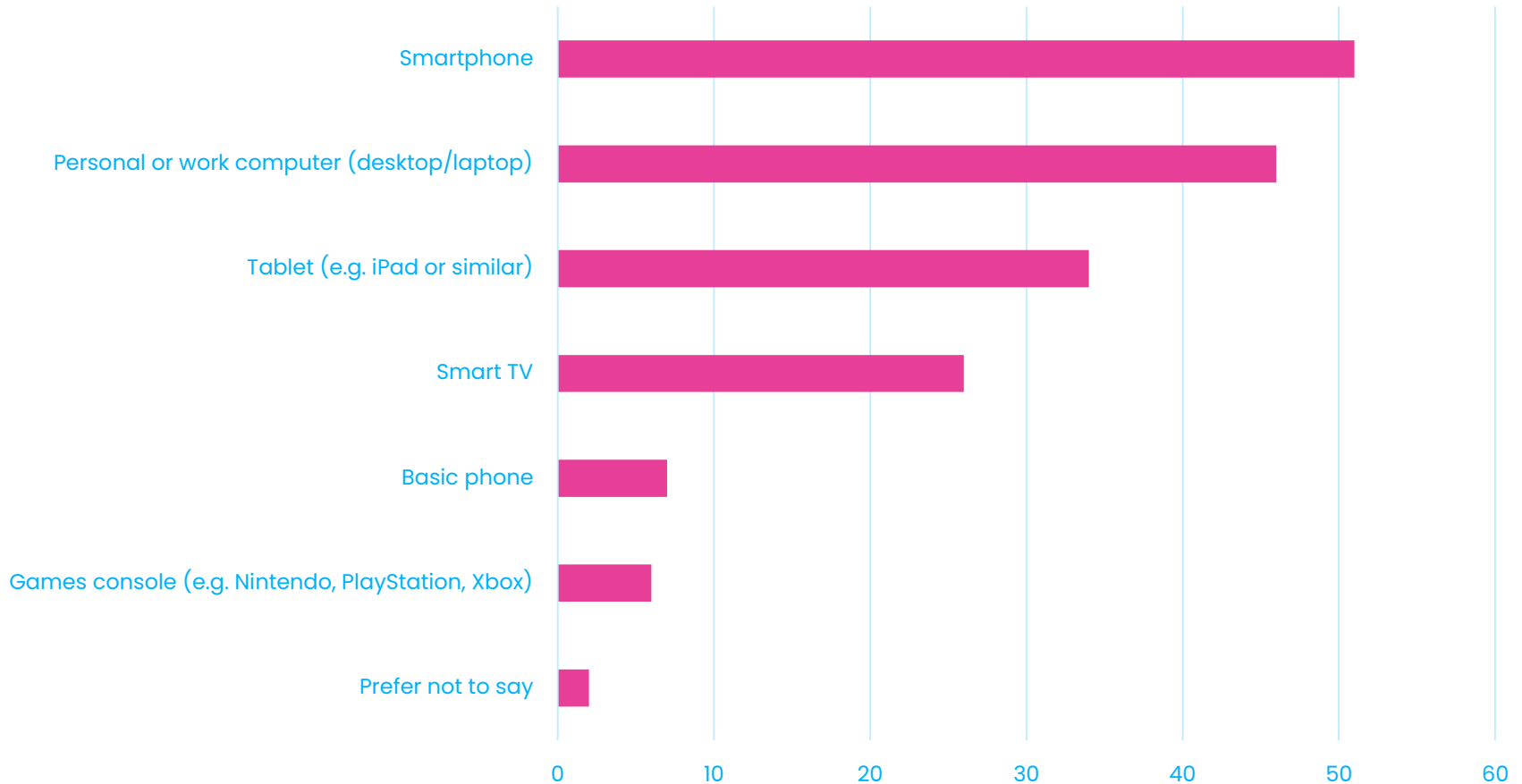


NO INFORMATION ISSUES

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely



Which of the following devices do you own or have regular access to?



Do you have access to the internet on a regular basis at any of the following:



Free text comments about virtual appointments

We asked respondents to offer any further comments about their experiences of online consultations or concerns about this proposal.

A selection of these has been included as they were submitted, without correcting spellings etc.

A complete list of all the comments is in the document embedded below.



Microsoft Word
Document




I had telephone appointments from Haematology throughout treatment for lymphoma and saw people in different departments including oncology. Successful treatment and never once saw anyone in haematology.







I work from home and my condition affects my mobility so online appointments would work better for my lifestyle, it would allow me to avoid going into the hospital physically and therefore avoid getting more illness






That is not safe, safe is only for a follow up when diagnosis is established and the treatment confirmed. As medical professional i do not feel secondary care consults can be safe conducted inline. If the patient already has been referred, that means the case is complex, unclear or serious if could not been managed in primary care






It was very inconvenient – the consultant called me an hour and 45 mins after the allocated appointment time which was in the middle of a clinical session for me and his first language wasn't English so he was difficult to understand and he didn't understand some of what I was trying to tell him. In the end I still had to go to the hospital for something that should have been fairly easy to manage over the phone




A large, stylized number '6' in a bright pink color, positioned at the top left of the slide.

Give opportunity for a written submission before the appointment - giving me time to reflect and make sure that I ask all the questions that I want and don't feel pressurised to remember everything at the time of the appointment.





I previously worked for the nhs. During Covid we began offering telephone appts where appropriate. Face to face appts were still available. Most pts [patients] preferred this service. As a clinician I could see more pts - reduce waiting list. Any pt who needed F2f [face to face] following telephone appt was seen within a week. I feel this short wait time when pt has to be physically seen is very important to I still confidence in the system





The only difficult is the lack of opportunity for physical examination - my explanation of a condition might not be accurate and the physician might spot something physically I thought not important.



Limitations

The survey was never intended to be a statistically significant representation of our population, rather it is an attempt to obtain some qualitative feedback to inform the work of the Department of Health & Social Care

We acknowledge that

- This was an online survey, so respondents would already have some familiarity with IT; many respondents had also used the NHS App or online services in the past
- The vast majority of respondents were fluent in English
- Not all the details of how the service would operate were available to inform respondents

Conclusion

- There seems to be general support for the introduction of NHS Online
- Avoiding the need to travel to a hospital and feeling more relaxed at home are seen as key benefits of an online outpatient appointment
- Men may be less inclined to use the service, as are older respondents and those who struggle to access information
- There are different priorities in terms of the information patients would need to make an informed choice

Recommendations

Healthwatch Southend **recommends** that the Department of Health & Social Care uses the intelligence in this report to

1. Help develop the operating model for NHS Online
2. Shape public information campaigns to reassure patients about the proposal
3. Underpin ongoing work to equip patients, families and carers with the digital skills needed

We also **recommend** that the Department promotes genuine patient choice, empowering patients to select the best option for their care.

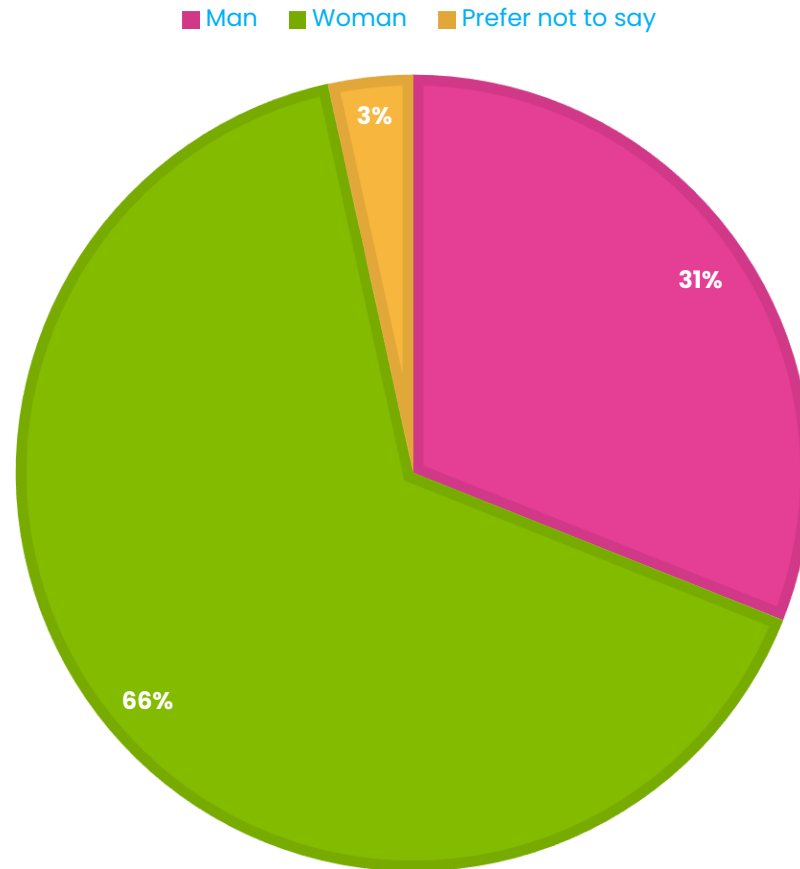
Why do we collect information about respondents?

We ask a number of questions about who responds to our surveys. None of these have to be answered and all are treated in confidence.

We know that people from different backgrounds often have differing experiences of health and care services, so this helps us understand whether this is the case in Southend. We want to make sure we hear from a broad range of people across Southend.

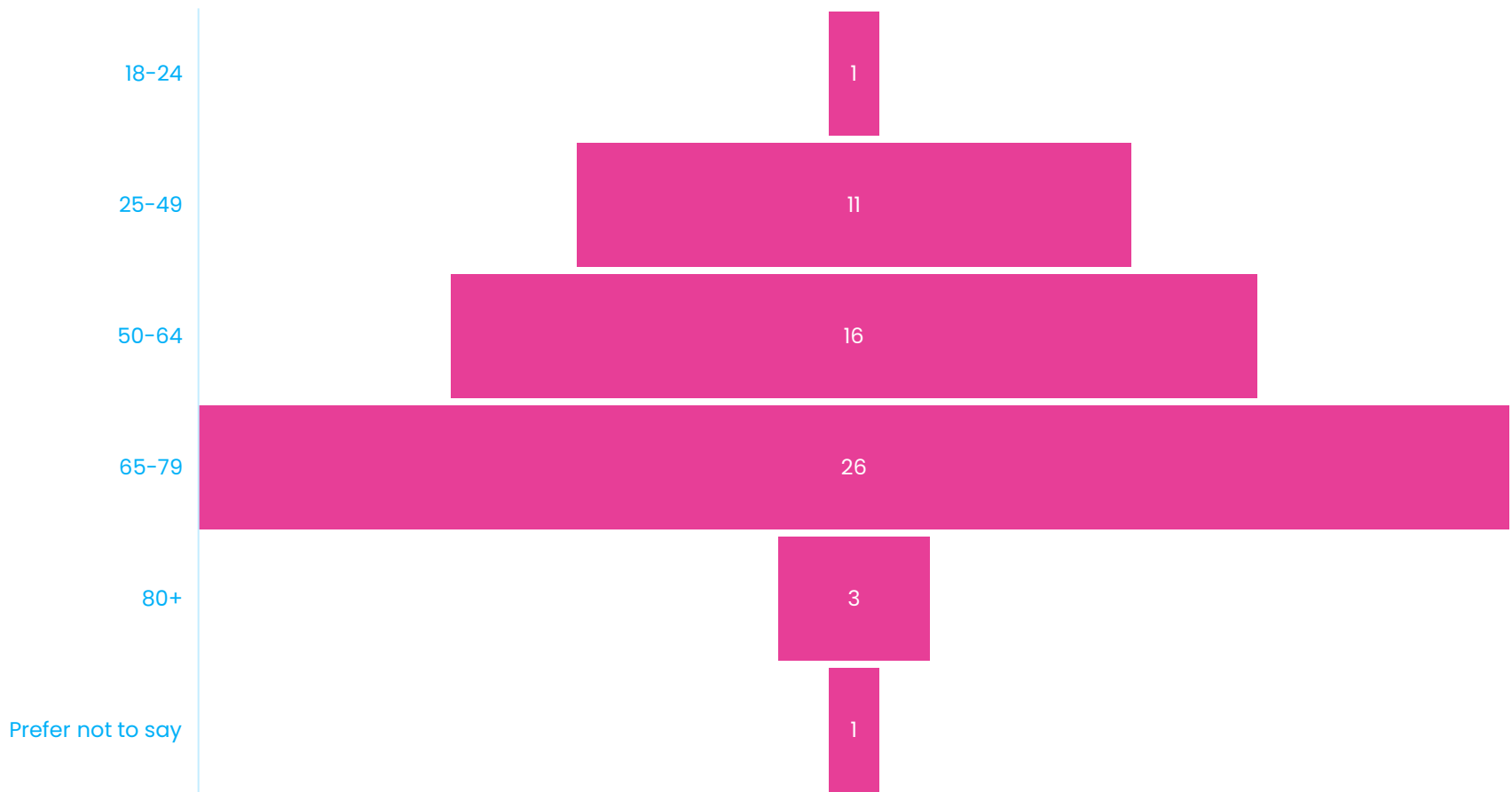
What is your gender?

N=58



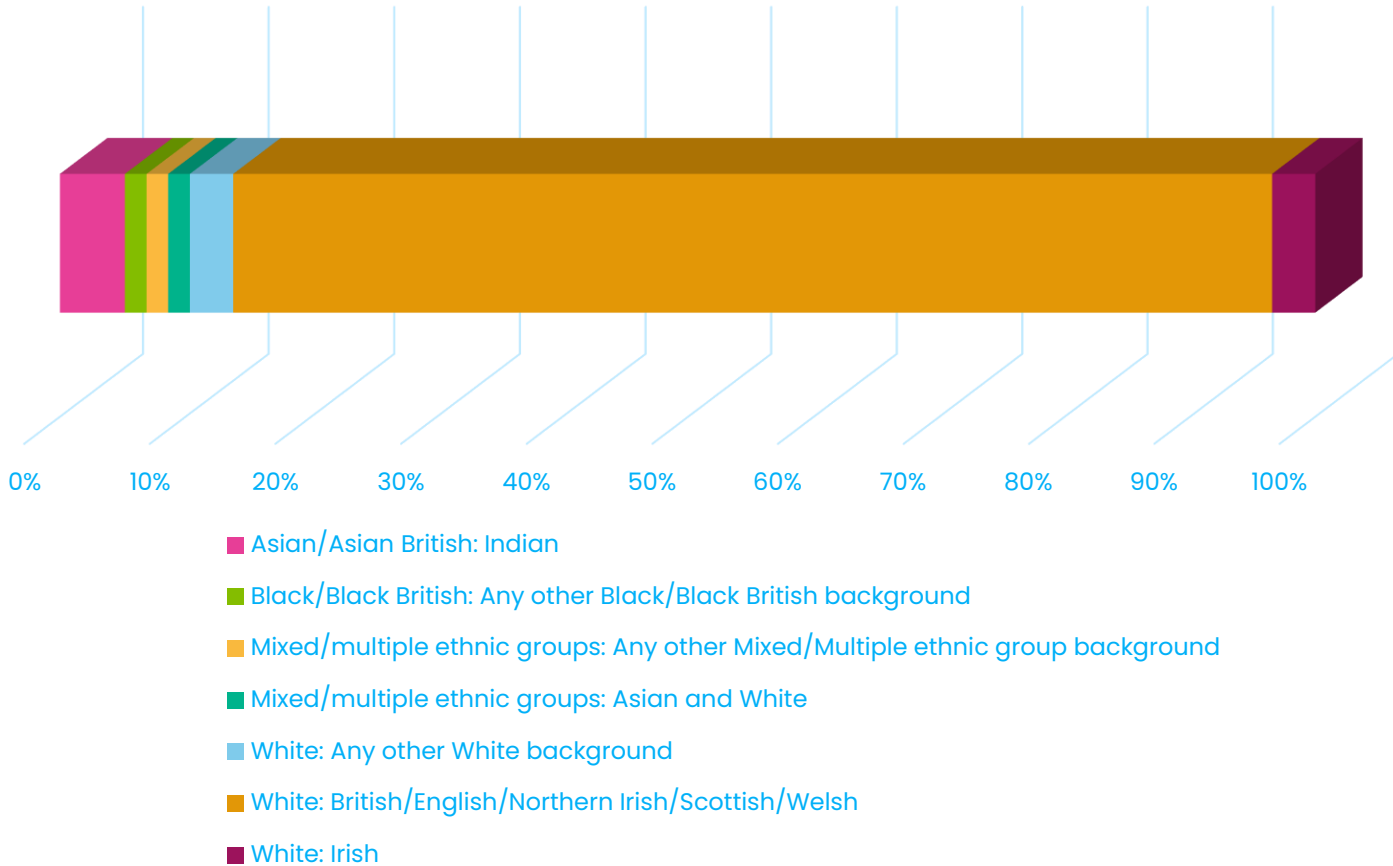
How old are you?

N=58



How would you describe your ethnicity?

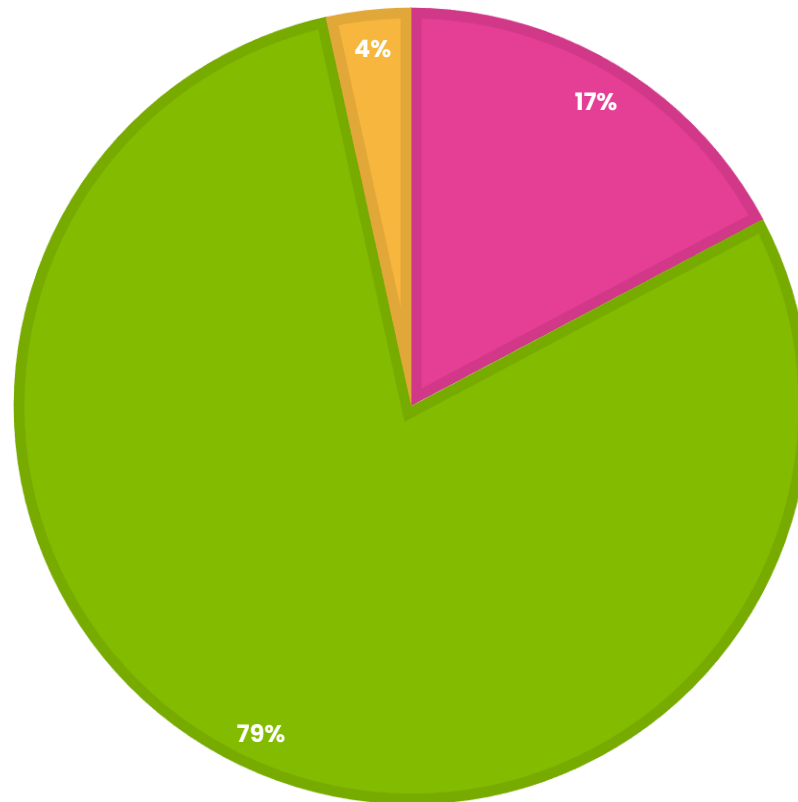
N=58



Do you have a disability, impairment or sensory loss that can make accessing information challenging?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Prefer not to say

N=58



Fluency in English

	Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all well
I understand spoken English	53	3	0	0
I speak English	54	3	0	1
I read English	53	3	1	0
I write English	54	3	0	0

For more information

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