

# Getting There: Travel to Health Care Appointments in Southampton

**April 2026**



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# Summary

## Overview

Healthwatch Southampton conducted an exploration into issues that people living in Southampton faced when travelling to their healthcare appointments. This was prompted by feedback and enquiries received about issues people had experienced. Through engagement with stakeholders, transport providers, community groups and the public, we have been able to understand more about the main issues that people face in Southampton with transport to appointments.

## Key Issues

**Parking:** Limited spaces, narrow bays, and high costs.

**Patient Transport:** Booking difficulties and long delays.

**Public Transport:** Indirect routes, accessibility challenges, and high costs.

**Taxis:** Expensive fares and limited availability of accessible vehicles.

**Communication:** Lack of awareness about support schemes and transport options.

## Key Recommendations

- Improve communication on transport options and support schemes.
- Enhance Non-Emergency Patient Transport booking accessibility and patient engagement.
- Publish bus route maps to healthcare locations.
- Introduce discounted taxi fares for healthcare travel.
- Expand disabled and carers' parking at Southampton General Hospital.

## Introduction

In 2025 Healthwatch Southampton started an exploration into issues that people faced when travelling to their healthcare appointments. The main focus was the experiences of people living in the Southampton SO14 – SO19 postcode areas.

The decision for Healthwatch Southampton to focus on transport to healthcare venues was driven by several factors:

1. In Healthwatch Southampton's 2023 and 2024 Priorities Surveys, access to transport to attend health appointments was highlighted as a priority issue and a challenge for many residents.
2. Local health professionals shared that some people were having difficulties when trying to book Non -Emergency Patient Transport (NEPT) to access health appointments. Many NEPT users are digitally excluded and find it difficult to use the automated telephone system for booking transport (before speaking to a person). The health professionals reported that there had been a change in the support and assistance available for people who were unable to book this service for themselves. Previously NEPT was often booked by GP surgeries.
3. Both health professionals and members of the public, shared their concerns with Healthwatch Southampton about the impact of the closure of the Dial-a-Ride Service that was provided by SCA Transport in September 2024.
4. Healthwatch Southampton had received feedback from several members of the public, raising concerns and highlighting issues relating to travelling to their health appointments. One example was an early morning appointment offered at Lymington Hospital and there was no public transport operating early enough to get there on time.

## Context

In November 2024, Healthwatch England highlighted barriers that people face getting to healthcare appointments: [NHS travel troubles: Five barriers patients face getting to appointments | Healthwatch](#). They identified five main issues:

1. Trouble accessing help to travel to healthcare
2. Inconvenient times and locations
3. Unreliable or limited transport
4. Availability and cost of parking
5. Accessibility

In November 2025, Healthwatch England (HWE) reviewed patient transport services: [How well are patient transport services performing? | Healthwatch](#). Some people with complex health or mobility issues, would be unable to get to health appointments without the support of non-emergency patient transport services (NEPTS). It is seen as a valuable service for patients and is always in high demand. Healthwatch England reviewed what is working well and what needs improvement. They shared issues with the eligibility criteria, booking and using patient transport. HWE made seven recommendations:

1. A five year stocktake of the NEPTS review.
2. An overhaul of the NEPTS booking system.
3. A formal review of the NHS Low-income scheme.
4. Reduction in the cost of NHS car parking.
5. Better support for people who travel further for quicker NHS care.
6. More care coordinators to proactively discuss patient travel needs.
7. Better implementation of hospital discharge guidance.

## Methods

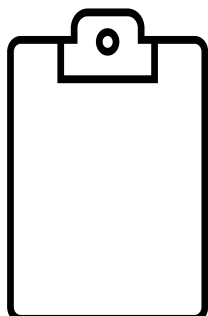
Healthwatch Southampton mapped transport provisions (February 2025) that are available to Southampton residents to access health appointments. There were many different transport options available to the public when travelling to health appointments in Southampton – by car, walking, cycling, electric scooters, bikes, buses, trains, taxis and patient transport services. There is a website called My Journey Southampton which is part of a campaign delivered by local councils to help residents get around more easily and explains the transport options available in the city: [Home | My Journey Southampton](#).

To help identify the issues that people face, Healthwatch wanted to hear more about people's experiences when travelling to health appointments. We gathered insights and feedback from transport providers and local stakeholders about issues and challenges by conducting a survey in early 2025. We invited local stakeholders to two meetings to consult with them and discuss issues of concern that had been raised by the public and other stakeholders. These partners were from transport services, health professionals and the voluntary and community sector and included South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS), Bluestar, Radio Taxis, Unpaid Carers Support Service, Communicare, Shopmobility, Social Care in Action (SCiA), Busy People and So Collective.

To gather more feedback from the public, Healthwatch Southampton (HWS) developed a survey to be shared in the local community. There were paper copies of the survey as well as it being available digitally – via email, and on the HWS website and social media. Posters were distributed with a QR code for participants to scan and complete the survey online and the survey was open for eight weeks in Spring 2025.

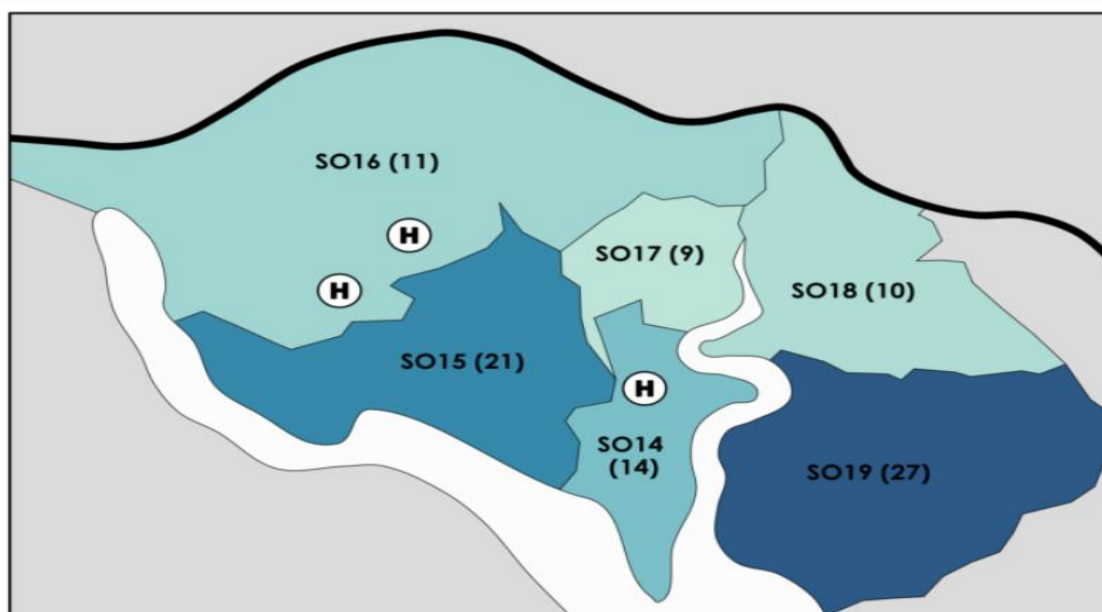
HWS visited community groups to ensure that we heard about travel experiences from people with additional needs or equality access issues including physical health issues, mental health issues, neurodiversity and learning disabilities, older people, carers groups and black and ethnic minority groups.

## Public Survey about Travel to Healthcare Appointments



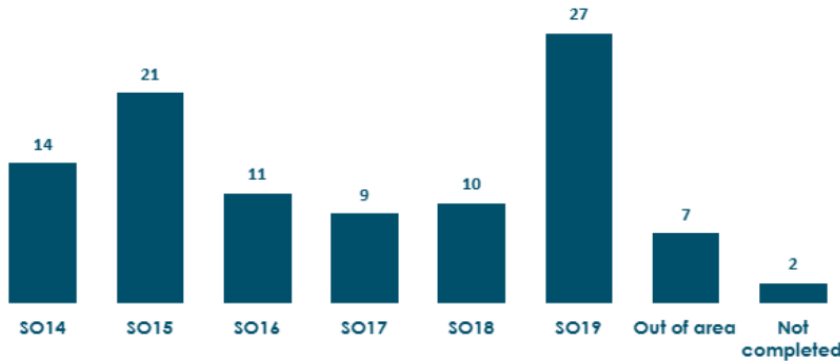
Healthwatch Southampton (HWS) received 102 responses to our public survey. People shared a wealth of information about their experiences getting to healthcare appointments and we would like to thank everyone who took the time to share their views, stories and experiences. The survey respondents completed the survey anonymously, but we asked for their postcode district, ethnicity, age and additional needs and disabilities in order to understand more about peoples experiences.

### Demographic Data



This map shows the post code areas (from SO14-SO19) of the 102 people that responded to our survey about travel to healthcare appointments. The number of people that responded is shown in brackets after each post code area.

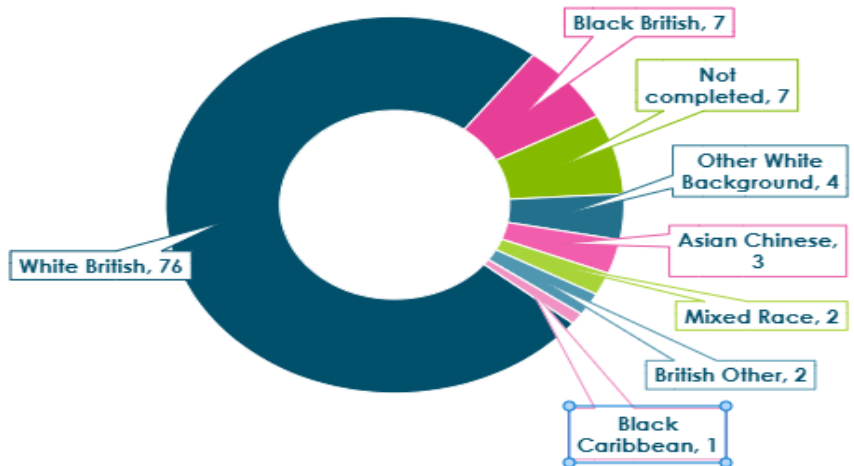
Postcode district of people surveyed



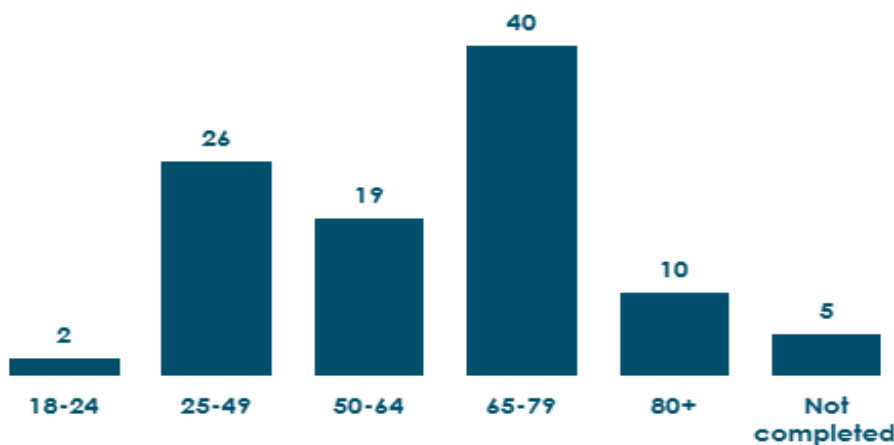
More people living in SO18 and SO19 (east of the city) responded to the survey. Some people who responded lived in other postcode areas.

The majority of respondents (76) identified as White British. 19 respondents were from other ethnic minority backgrounds.

Ethnicity of people surveyed



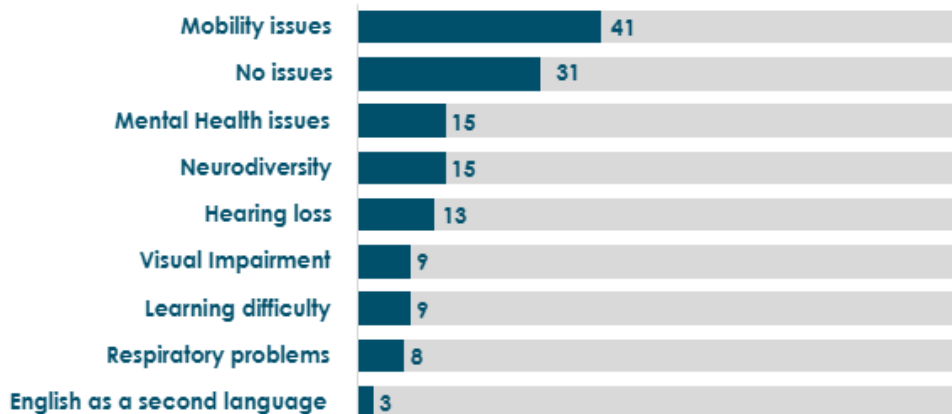
Age group of people surveyed



Nearly half of people who responded to the survey were over 65 years old.

## Locations and methods of travel to health care appointments

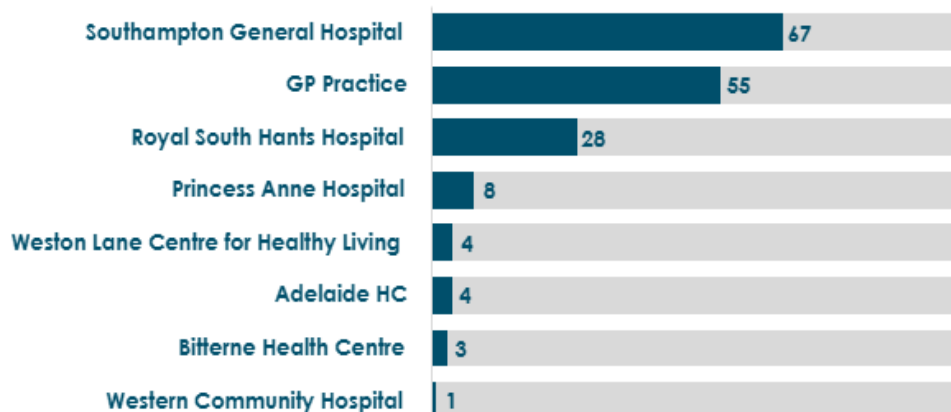
### Do you have any additional needs that may affect your journey to a healthcare appointment?



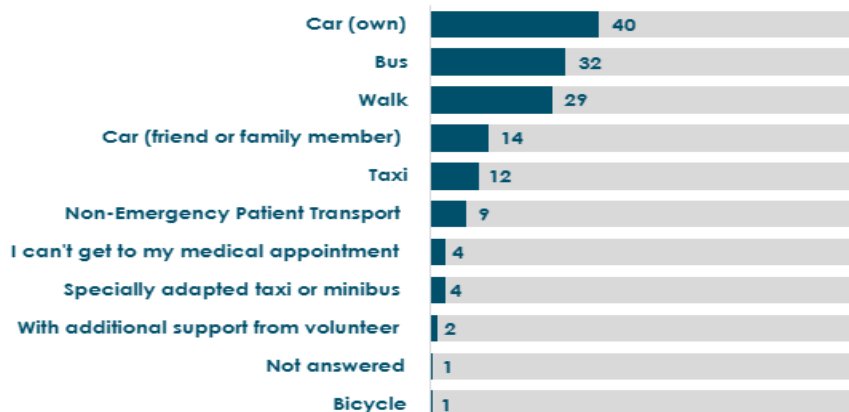
Number of people who mentioned each additional need (we asked 102 people)

The most common site travelled to for health appointments was Southampton General Hospital – University Hospital Southampton (UHS).

### Where is the healthcare appointment/s that you would like to tell us about based?

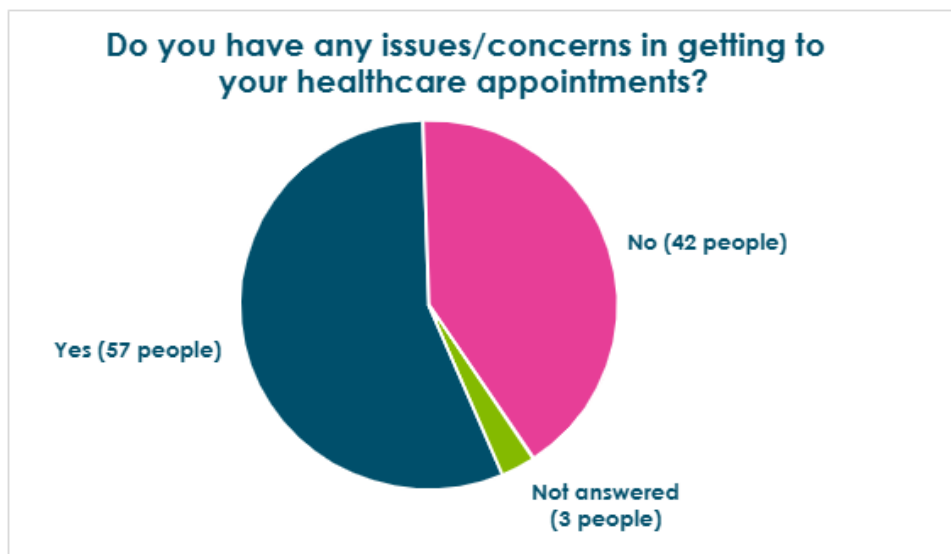


### How do you travel to your healthcare appointments?

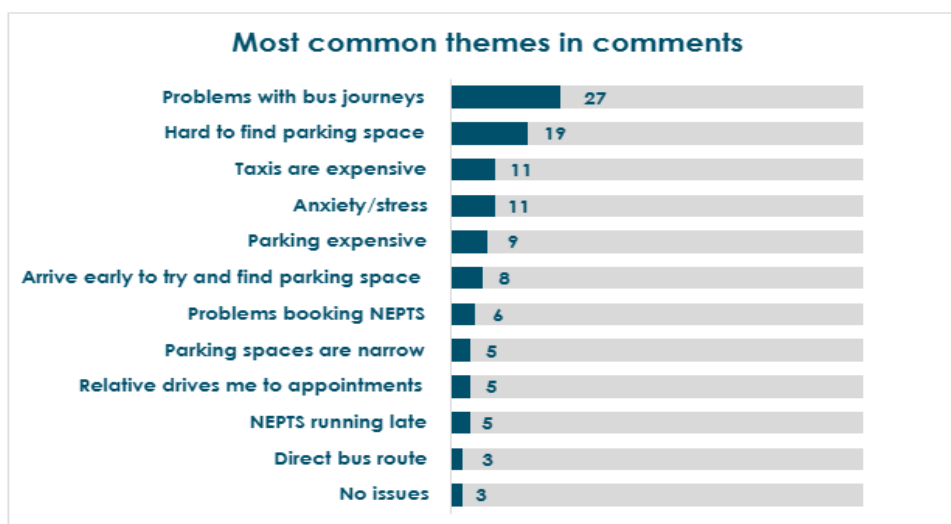


This chart shows the number of people who mentioned each mode of transport (we asked 102 people). Travelling by car (own, friend or family members) was the most common mode of transport.

## Issues travelling to healthcare appointments



57 out of 102 people identified issues when travelling to health care appointments.



There were common themes identified in the feedback we received. The most common was problems with bus journeys.

### Feedback about bus journeys

There were three main areas of concern that people reported about travelling by bus to health appointments:

- 1. Reliability & Access of using buses** – People shared their concerns and experiences about getting to their health appointment on time when travelling by bus. This might be due to a lack of direct route, change in buses, frequency and operating times. Some raised concerns about the bus routes to the hospitals, particularly when they were travelling across from the east of the city to Southampton General Hospital.

- "I am thankful for the route 21 Bluestar bus but I have to get to my appointment between 8am-2pm as the buses don't run after 2pm so I need a morning appointment".
- "I had to wait at the bus stop 1 hr 15mins for a bus when it should have been 4 buses an hour".
- If using public transportation, the routes are not always direct, requiring transfers, which wastes time and add uncertainty to the journey.
- "If I rely on public transport the routes are not always direct, and transfers can take up a lot of time and add uncertainty to the journey".
- "I have to change buses 2 or 3 times and still have a lengthy walk the other end. I'm 82 years old".
- "Kids are tired or have melt downs 2 children have autism. 45 mins bus journey and then have to change buses (2 buses) I have to go appointments for eczema every one or two months".
- "I have to take 2x buses & walk when I have appointments at the hospital. I'm very unsteady on my legs now and the walk is difficult at times. Very difficult when I have an early appt. as buses not started running yet or bus pass not accepted until 9am".
- "Have to wait until 9am to use bus pass - some appointments are before 9am".

**2. Cost of using buses** – Some people were concerned about the financial cost of travel especially if they needed to travel with a carer or bring dependants to their appointments.

- "The cost (of travelling by bus) has increased and is expensive for all of us".
- "I do find that buses are getting expensive, now it is almost £5 to travel to and from places on the bus as there is no return tickets now. Only day riders, and it is difficult paying with cash or getting a ticket actually on the bus as they have increased fares for paper tickets by a little bit".

**3. Accessibility of using buses** – People with additional needs shared their experiences and challenges of travelling by bus.

- "Drivers often do not release the ramp for my wheelchair".
- "The space for wheelchair users is often full with buggies and I have had to wait for several buses before there is room. I have missed several appointments because of this issue".
- "I don't feel safe using my walker on the bus especially when there are no seats available and I get jerked around".

- "My son is a wheelchair user, the bus just became too stressful because drivers often don't get the ramp down, it's extremely unusual for them to ask people to move from the wheelchair space. Passengers will make comments about you taking up the wheelchair space. The parking is so terrible at the hospital that it's just easier to walk".
- "The bus is terrible, I don't like to use them. I use a walker and sometimes they let you on the bus when there is no space for you to sit. I have been thrown across the bus before as there is no space to sit down. I have to use taxis, but I can't afford them so sometimes I have to miss appointments".
- "I can't afford a taxi and cannot ride the bus. I can't understand the bus routes and the last time I tried to ride one I was jerked about by the driver sharply turning and braking that I injured my shoulder trying to avoid falling onto the floor. I was seated!"

## **Feedback about Parking**

There were three main areas of concern that people reported about parking for health appointments. The majority of these comments relate to parking at Southampton General Hospital:

- 1. Availability and size of parking bays** – People raised concerns about the lack of availability of spaces and the time it takes to find an appropriate space to park. Some identified that the spaces were too narrow, particularly for those with mobility needs or dependants.
  - "Some medical facilities have limited parking nearby, or fees are high, which can bring additional stress".
  - I always dread appointments at SGH. Last time I went I managed to get a parking space but was unable to actually open my car doors to get out. I tried several spaces - all are too narrow and I only have a little car.
  - "I'm very anxious if I have an appointment at the General Hospital - because of the build-up of traffic and finding a parking space. Sometimes once in car park and can't find a space - you are in there so long you have to pay despite not finding a parking space".
  - "It can be very difficult to park at the hospitals, and the spaces are very narrow. I have some mobility issues but not severe enough for a blue badge. I struggle if I cannot park close to the hospital".
  - "Difficult parking at SGH and Salisbury. Would be really helpful to have a park and ride service. Sometimes you are late for your appointment because don't have anywhere to park".

**2. Blue badge parking** – Some people said they did not have any problems finding a blue badge space whereas other said were not enough spaces.

- "Have a blue badge so free parking always find a space".
- "Always arrive approx. 4 hours prior to hospital appointment to ensure we can get a blue badge space, as not enough in the hospital".

**3. Cost** – Many people raised concerns about the cost of parking fees. This seemed to be a particular concern for those who needed to attend the hospital for frequent appointment and for those with a low income.

- "Cost of parking, I look for street parking".
- "Parking is always a concern. Uncertainty over availability leads to early arrival to ensure timeliness for appointments. This leads to an over-long stay in hospital parking, and the costs rise very rapidly which is a burden when working to a pension-based budget".
- "The price of parking is very expensive and if I need to go several times it is difficult to cover the costs".

### **Feedback about taxis**

There were two main areas of concern that people reported about travelling by taxi to health appointments:

**1. Cost of using taxis** – Some people who need to use a taxi because of additional needs but found the fare to be expensive when they were on a low income.

- "Cost of taxi £7 to get there. Need to get a taxi because of my breathing, in the winter I need to get a taxi both ways not eligible for transport/health scheme as just over amount for pension credit".
- Transmobility is extremely expensive for those on Pension Credit (Transmobility is a taxi service with wheelchair accessible vehicles).
- "I use a non-foldable fairly small mobility scooter. Appointments are often made without thought as to transport and some with little notice. I pay £40 return trip often – by taxi as hospital transport frequently fully booked.
- "In terms of cost, without proper financial support or transport schemes, using taxis or private transport can be quite expensive over time".

**2. Accessibility of using taxis** – Some people raised that they needed to book accessible taxis which were not always available and or they needed additional support to get from the house or to the appointment.

- “It is so difficult to get a vehicle with ramp access for a wheelchair since SCIA lost its funding for Dial-a-Ride last year. Please bring back something like Dial-a-Ride again”.
- If appointment is around school run time adapted taxis are often unavailable too which means I have to try and change appointment date and start to book transport again”.
- “Suffer from dizziness sometimes and felt unable to walk to appointment on the day. Tried various taxi companies but nothing available. Had no-one I could ask”.
- “Taxis - very good - need to accommodate walker”.
- “Additionally, if I require accessible transport (such as vehicles that accommodate wheelchairs), the booking process is more complicated, and even booking several days ahead doesn’t always guarantee availability. These challenges can cause a lot of stress before appointments and may even affect my willingness or ability to attend them regularly”.

### **Feedback about using patient transport (SCAS)**

There were two main areas of concern that people reported about travelling by patient transport to health appointments:

**1. Availability of patient transport** – Some people raised concerns about patient transport not being available, especially at short notice.

- “Not always possible to book transport 20 days in advance especially when an urgent health appointment has been made for you. Often fully booked when trying to arrange transport”.
- “I've never been able to get patient transport as not operational at the time I need”.
- “I have experienced some issues when booking transport for healthcare appointments. Sometimes it’s difficult to arrange transport in advance, especially when appointments are scheduled at short notice. The availability of transport services is not always reliable, which can result in being late or missing appointments altogether.”

## **2. Reliability of patient transport** – Others raised concerns about delays in the journey or waiting a long time to be picked up.

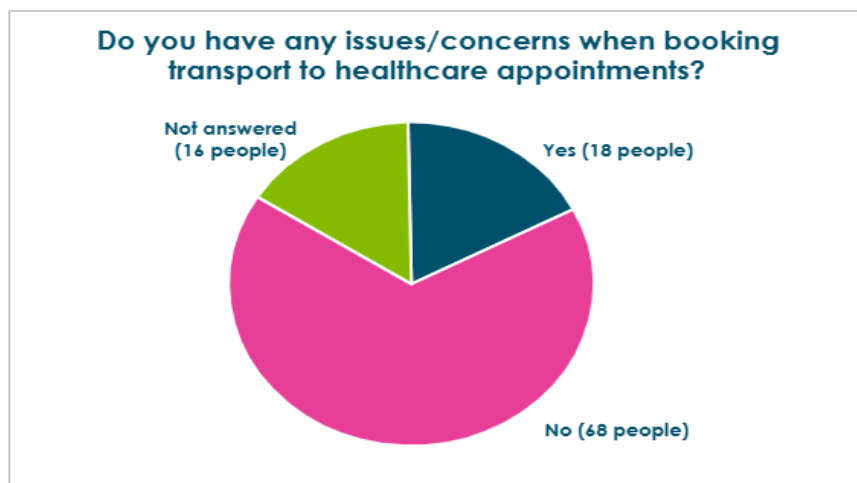
- “The transport service people are great, but I had to wait 6 hours to be taken home”.
- Patient transport has been distressing because the transport arrives late meaning that the appointment is missed. I have been left waiting at the hospital for transport for up to 5 hours.
- I go through my GP for Patient transport to get to Lymington hospital for sleep clinic. It takes a long time to get there and there is a lot of waiting around.
- “I now use taxis because I don't trust hospital transport. I can't really afford it so sometimes I miss my health appointments”.
- “Frustrating as you need to be ready 2 hours prior to your pick up time in case they can collect you earlier. This is not convenient when you have an early health appointment anyway. You also have to wait around for hours for the journey home after your appointment”.

### **Anxiety about travel to healthcare**

Anxiety about travel to healthcare appointments was a common theme:

- “I get very anxious with unfamiliar bus journeys and worried about getting to my appointments on time when using the bus”.
- “Parking takes 45 mins, it makes me anxious. Hard to get child out of the car because of narrow spaces”.
- “Difficult to get him (relative) to leave home as he is terrified of hospitals. Hypersensitive hearing”.
- “Sometimes has a melt down when leaving the flat. May have to wait 40 mins for her to calm down. Always leave early to be on time”.
- “Sending me for appointments for places that I don't know, so don't attend”.
- “The logistics to get to appointments across the city (travel time, lack of parking) is a real stress, it can raise my anxiety”.
- “My GP surgery has moved within the RSH hospital, and it is now a long way from the entrance of the hospital which is a problem for people to access if they have mobility issues”.

## Issues when booking travel to healthcare appointments



18 out of 102 people said that they have issues when booking transport to health care appointments.

## Feedback about booking patient transport

People gave feedback about accessibility issues in their experiences of booking patient transport (SCAS) to health care appointments.

**Accessibility** – People reported that they are unable to book patient transport because they are digitally excluded or have accessibility needs (e.g. visually/hearing impaired) and often rely on family members to book for them.

- "I have to rely on my family to transport me to my appointments as I am visually impaired. They have also helped in the past to book hospital transport as medical professionals do not do this for me".
- "Since Hospital Transport changed their systems taking the booking away from health care professionals, I find it extremely difficult booking transport as it has to be done exactly 20 days in advance, or it's fully booked to capacity".
- "I used to have them all booked for me and as I can't see, I can't navigate it online".
- "Some of the questions they ask are irrelevant as well".
- "It is really hard to book now. You have to arrange it yourself now and book it well in advance. I now use taxis because it is too hard to book (low availability)".
- "People with a hearing loss struggle to book appointments - not all can hear to speak on the phone - people prefer to text or email. Some people that I work with have both a sight and hearing loss. Unless family members or friends take to appointments, they are not always able to attend".
- "I don't know how to book transport. I call an ambulance when I'm not supposed to because I don't know how to book transport".

## Feedback from Stakeholders

HWS facilitated two meetings with transport providers and stakeholders who operate in Southampton to discuss to gather their insight and views about the issues and challenges Southampton residents face when travelling to health appointments. HWS also conducted a survey for local transport providers and stakeholders to share their views. They shared details about their service and identified issues and barriers and potential solutions and recommendations.

### Feedback from Bluestar and Unilink

Bluestar and Unilink provide a network of scheduled bus services across Southampton and has routes to the major hospitals and medical centres. You can book tickets using the app or in person on the bus. They take steps to accommodate the needs of people with mobility, sight, or hearing difficulties when travelling around on the buses and using their website.



### Bluestar shared the following information with Healthwatch Southampton (HWS):

- Drivers undergo several days of accessibility and hidden disability training.
- Websites are equipped with 'Recite me' technology to help the visually impaired. The software can also translate into many different languages.
- Large format printed timetables for the visually impaired and 'next stop' announcement technology.
- All buses are low floor and easy access and spaces available for wheelchair users.
- Helping Hand cards to those with hidden disabilities to discreetly tell the driver that they may need a bit of assistance on board.

- Drivers are aware that wheelchair users get priority for the reserved spaces on buses.
- Southampton has the cheapest bus fares in the country.
- All bus routes can't go directly to the hospital, so changes are unavoidable.
- There are special deals and discount available with ferry and bus companies to travel from the Isle of Wight (IOW) to hospitals on the mainland. Buses on IOW run from 4am-1am.
- Bluestar Route 6 which travels to Lymington Hospital runs from 9am because of low demand. HWS have heard that makes travel to an early appointment difficult. Bluestar would consider introducing if the is need for an earlier bus is identified.
- Bluestar clarified that route 18 drops off a 2 minute walk from Western Hospital although some people are not aware of this route. They agree it is important to promote and share this information. They may explore the possibility of adding an additional stop outside the hospital if a need is identified.
- Bluestar can create a map of health location, including bus times which can be viewed online or printed and displayed in GP practices, Pharmacies etc.

### **Feedback from South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS)**



SCAS provide 999, 111 services, emergency ambulance response service across Hampshire. They also run the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service (NEPTS), which is used for people who need support to get to health appointments. They have an NHS national eligibility criteria that patients need to meet to access their service.

### **SCAS shared the following information with Healthwatch Southampton (HWS):**

- SCAS Patient Transport Services are limited in their capacity. It is important to only be used by those people who people who have no other options.
- SCAS have been developing a directory of alternative local transport services to signpost people to who do not meet their criteria or SCAS are unable to accommodate due to no availability. They have identified 120 services that

can support in Hampshire. However, the group identified that none of these services operate in Southampton.

- SCAS would welcome any support and communicate options for travelling to healthcare appointments in Southampton e.g. the NHS travel to health care scheme.
- SCAS work closely with their Patient Panel who have given them feedback regarding improvements to accessibility (website, user friendly online booking system and easy read documents).
- SCAS has been liaising with the Integrated Care Board to include in the Quality Contract with Primary Care Services for health professionals to discuss travel options at the point of referral to other health services. This would encourage people to think of options other than using patient transport and look at practical and financial support needs.
- SCAS would recommend that GP Surgeries have a transport plan including all transport options displayed/distributed in their Surgery, and on their website.
- SCAS provided Healthwatch Southampton information about their booking process, eligibility and assessment process which will be shared in the booklet being developed to provide more information about transport options in Southampton for health appointments.
- SCAS receives feedback about the lack of communication of patient transport services e.g. time of arrival etc. Improvements could include providing a text telling patients when the vehicle will arrive and the registration number of the vehicle.

## Feedback from Radio Taxis



Radio Taxis operate a 24/7 taxi service throughout Southampton, Hampshire. They have approx. 500 vehicles which offer different options to travel including 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 seater vehicles that can all cater for foldable wheelchairs. There are multiple booking channels to choose from: phone (person answers phone); phone (automated system answers phone); website link/booking form; App and email.

### Radio Taxis shared the following information with HWS:

- We do provide transport for passengers that have mobility needs and supply vehicles based on the booking criteria given when booking. For any journeys that may require the passenger to be assisted or with medical equipment we would require them to be accompanied by a person that has had the relevant training to assist the passenger.
- Our drivers do not currently undertake manual handling training. If we work with Transmobility to provide transport, then their drivers will be trained to transport passengers in line with their vehicles use.
- Radio Taxis support numerous patients for Southampton General Hospital, Spire Healthcare and other care provisions around the city with their travel needs. This includes free phones for taxi services around the General Hospital and accounts set up for various healthcare providers in the City. We have a designated pick up and drop off location at Southampton General Hospital.
- Radio Taxis get many requests for transport for people who have medical needs and need additional assistance to travel. If funding could be identified and training provided for Moving and Assisting, Safeguarding Level 2, Mental Capacity Act & Deprivation of Liberty (DoLS), some drivers may be able to provide limited support when needed.
- Radio Taxis can explore changes that can be made, discounts or fixed fees for people needing support to travel to health appointments.
- Radio Taxis try to provide a quote on the cost of the taxi at the time of booking. This can ease anxiety.

## Feedback from Voluntary & Community Organisations

**Shopmobility** provides daily hire for manual, electric wheelchairs and mobility scooters to people with limited mobility 18+, enabling them to access West Quay and Southampton's City Centre. People can book by phone, email, or in person.



### **Shopmobility shared the following information with HWS:**

- Often accessible taxis are not available when people with mobility issues need to book them particularly during school drop off/pick up times.
- Often people with mobility issues can use taxis but need assistance or additional time when travelling from door to door.
- Some customers of Shopmobility hire scooters to attend appointments at Royal South Hants Hospital.

**Busy People** is a self-advocacy group in Southampton. They focus on discussing important issues that affect people with learning disabilities and the neurodiverse and share learning to improve services.

### **Busy People shared the following information with HWS:**

- Many people with a learning disability are issued with a free bus pass, which is useful when getting to health care appointments.
- You are not able to use your free bus pass until after 9am, which can be a problem if you have an earlier appointment.
- Some people need support to attend health appointments and do not have a family member who can support them. Community advocacy would be beneficial for people with additional needs but there is no known current provision in Southampton.
- Some GPs will still book patient transport for people with a learning disability but this not consistent across all surgeries in Southampton.

**Communicare** supports lonely and isolated people in the community of Southampton. Their service includes befriending, limited transport, shopping and mental health support. They rely on volunteers to provide practical and emotional support to those in need.

**Communicare shared the following information with HWS:**

- Communicare informed Healthwatch Southampton that they receive a high volume of enquiries about transport support including transport to healthcare appointments for which they do not have the capacity to fulfil.
- Communicare told us that between April 2024 – September 2024 they received 128 enquires for transport of which they were only able to accommodate 21 people.
- Communicare receive many enquiries from patients who are eligible for SCAS patient transport but have been unable to secure a suitable date/time.
- Often Communicare are unable to support enquires from people who need help to get to health appointments as their medical/mobility needs are too great for their volunteers to support.
- Some taxis drivers are not patient when picking up those with mobility needs and may drive off before the person has had time to get from their home to the taxi.
- Most people are unaware of the NHS travel to healthcare costs scheme.
- Many people who use the bus to get to health appointments across the city have concerns about access to a public toilet on their journey. This is an increased concern with a lengthy journey or multiple bus changes.

**Unpaid Carers Support Southampton (UCSS)** is the local service for adult unpaid carers. They provide support for all unpaid adult carers, from 18 years upwards, across Southampton, which includes: Adult Carers Assessments, facilitating events and workshops, respite breaks and activities for carers, issues an adult carers identification card. In Oct 2025, UCSS were aware of and supporting 2,824 adult unpaid carers across Southampton.

**Unpaid Carers Support (UCSS) shared the following information with HWS:**

- Carers have expressed concern about the drop off zones at the hospitals. The drop off zones are often full of parked cars with nowhere to stop.
- Carers Steering Group suggested that UHS could have parking spaces reserved for Carers.
- It is not always possible to leave the cared for person alone while you park the car.
- The parking spaces in the car park at UHS (Southampton General Hospital and Princess Anne Hospital) are not wide enough for people with wheelchairs, pushchairs, mobility issues. They may not be eligible for a blue badge.

**So Collective** is a community organisation, dedicated to creating a healthier and more sustainable city. They deliver collaborative projects, engaging the community with a focus on health, nature and climate change.

**So Collective shared the following information with HWS:**

- There is more than can be done to reduce anxiety about travelling. Using a taxi service can help to reduce anxiety.
- There have been big improvements since the introduction to the 19a Bluestar bus route.
- Health Services could improve communication on travelling to appointments, where to park, bus routes, claiming back travel expenses.
- Is there a bus users forum that can collect and share views? What is happening with the Accessible Southampton Forum – is it still active?
- [The Southampton Citizens' Climate Assembly's report](#) on climate change and transport in 2024 made many recommendations about transport including accessibility of public transport, walking, cycling. It would be a concern if the learning was lost.
- What can we do to encourage people to be more confident using taxis and buses?

**Social Care in Action (SCiA)** is an organisation focussing on improving health and wellbeing for communities in Southampton. Their services include Home Care, Therapeutic Services, Transport and Wellbeing Support. They have a fleet of accessible minibuses that can support people to access their day centres and a hospital to home service to support discharge from Southampton General Hospital (This service cannot be booked via SCiA).

**Social Care in Action (SCiA) shared the following information with HWS:**

- Currently we do not provide transport to healthcare appointments. We did run a service during Covid, but there is no longer funding available for this service. We used to operate the Dial-a-Ride service in Southampton (not for health appointments), but funding was stopped in September 2024.
- SCiA receive several calls a week regarding transport to healthcare appointments but without someone willing to fund it we cannot provide a service.
- Many of the enquiries to SCiA concern transport to healthcare (mostly from people not eligible for patient transport). Many people express they cannot afford a taxi, and others say that they are unable to attend their health appointments if they cannot get support to travel there.
- The loss of the Dial-a-Ride service has resulted in increased isolation and loneliness of vulnerable people. It's not only healthcare appointments, but transportation to church or other community events, shopping etc.
- SCiA provide a hospital to home shuttle service from Southampton General Hospital. This cannot be booked with SCiA but is arranged by the discharge team and the hospital if needed.

## **Feedback from Healthwatch Isle of Wight about people travelling for healthcare appointments in Southampton**

Healthwatch Isle of Wight shared their feedback [report January 2025-May 2025](#) highlighting the issues and barriers residents from the Isle of Wight experience when travelling to healthcare appointments to hospitals on the mainland. We have included feedback collected by Healthwatch Isle of Wight in our report as it was raised as a concern by our stakeholders from the voluntary sector.

- “Patient has an appointment at 2.30pm at UHS. Has to leave home at 7am and got home after 7pm – exhausting experience”.
- “Patient had to stay in hotel overnight in Southampton due to very early appointment – very expensive”.
- “Morning appointments almost impossible to make as buses on island not operating this early and ferries unreliable”.

## **Communication about transport options**

This project and the related research on transport options available to people who need to get to their health identified that many people including professionals are not aware of some of the support and options that are available. One example would be, the NHS Healthcare Travel Cost Scheme.

Although most of the information is available, transport providers and other providers can take steps to continually improve communication about their services and ensure that people have access to and can understand information about transport options e.g. easy read leaflets, posters at health service provider building – GPs, clinics and hospitals.

Another issue that was identified was that clinics’ outpatients departments often sent out appointment letter without considering where people live and how they might get there e.g. early morning appointments for people travelling from the Isle of Wight, or right across the city or travelling to hospitals outside of the city for example Lymington hospitals.

## Recommendations

### **1. Non-Emergency Transport services should make it easy for patients to access their service:**

- South Central Ambulance Service should engage with patients, GP services and communities across Southampton by sharing their easy read leaflets about eligibility for their service and how to book non-emergency patient transport when needed.
- South Central Ambulance Service should explore viable options to support patients who are unable to use online bookings or automated telephone systems.

### **2. Southampton City Council, NHS Health Services (Primary Care, UHS and HIOW Healthcare) and Transport providers should provide more information and communication to the public to improve accessibility and consider changes to make travel to healthcare appointments easier:**

- Bluestar Bus should create maps of bus routes to health locations (Southampton General Hospital, Princess Anne Hospital, Royal South Hants Hospital and Western Hospital).
- Travel maps and other support information should be shared on GP website, displayed in GP reception areas, travel provider websites, and other healthcare locations such as clinics.
- Review the timings of when people are allowed to use their free bus pass to allow for travel to early health appointments (currently starts at 9.00am).

### **3. NHS Local Trusts (UHS and HIOW Healthcare) should provide more information and communication to the public to improve accessibility:**

- Health providers should review their travel and accessibility information they have available to the public to ensure that it is current, widely known and easy to access (e.g. AccessAble website – for UHS services) to patients prior to health appointment visit.

- Health providers should offer virtual tours/walkthroughs of health venues to help reduce anxiety and improve public knowledge and confidence of how to get there.
- All health providers should promote and communicate the location of disabled parking spaces (blue badge) and consider widening current parking bays to accommodate mobility aids and people who struggle to get in and out of the car but do not require a blue badge space.

**4. Southampton City Council and Taxi firms should explore viable changes that can be made to reduce the cost for people who need to travel to healthcare appointments:**

- Discounts or fixed fees.
- Discounted/free Itchen Bridge toll.
- Direct booking line instead of automated systems for people to book taxis.
- Parking options for Southampton General e.g. park and ride.

**5. All local NHS Trusts should:**

- Encourage outpatients' departments in hospitals and clinics to consider factors such as where residents live, distance travelled and additional needs when booking appointment times (e.g. travelling from IOW to SGH or to Lymington from Southampton).
- Review the appointment letters to ensure they provide comprehensive and easy to understand travel information and support options.
- Primary Care services should discuss a travel plan with patients at the point of referral to Secondary Care Services.

**6. Produce a community based booklet with information about all transport services and all additional support available for patients when travelling to health appointments in Southampton. This should include:**

- where blue badge parking spaces are available.
- highlight bus routes available to all hospitals.
- information about the Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme.
- availability of wheelchair vehicles.
- accessibility information for public transport (i.e. Bluestar and Radio Taxis).

- information about traveling from the Isle of Wight to UHS including special deals/discounts for patients.

## **7. All stakeholders should highlight the issues raised about transport to health appointments at local forums and at a strategic level.**

- Southampton City Council Bus Forum.
- Southampton City Council Bus Services Improvement Partnership.
- NHS Trusts.
- Health and Wellbeing Board & Health Overview Scrutiny Panel.

### **Improved communication between Shopmobility and Radio Taxis**

We have already seen improvements made to people's non-health related travel experiences, as a result of a meeting facilitated by Healthwatch Southampton between Shopmobility and Radio Taxis. Shopmobility raised the issues that their customers had been facing when traveling into West Quay:

- Issue:** Taxi drivers are reluctant to come into the West Quay carpark because they are concerned about paying parking costs. They actually have 10/15 minutes before charge starts.

**Response:** Radio Taxis have communicated to their drivers that there is no cost (for 10 mins) for access to the West Quay Podium car park to collect or drop off Shopmobility customers.
- Issue:** Difficulties for Shopmobility customers when booking/contacting Radio Taxis. Customers often cannot get a phone signal . Can Radio Taxis contact the Shopmobility phone instead?

**Response:** Radio Taxis have shared the corporate booking telephone number with Shopmobility, this will ensure that they can speak directly to a person. Taxis drivers will have access to Shopmobility telephone number as well, when collecting a customer from there.
- Issue:** Taxi drivers often say they cannot find Shopmobility or are confused which entrance to wait at Some drivers still go to old Shopmobility location at Castle Way car park.

**Response:** Radio Taxis have ensured that all taxi drivers know about Shopmobility location and the appropriate drop off pick up point.

4. **Issue:** Most Shopmobility customers have mobility issues and cannot get into high cars. Although people can often independently get in and out of saloon style vehicles and there is enough room to transport their mobility aids.

**Response:** Radios Taxis to always send saloon cars so they are low to get into and have space for walking frames/shopping.

### **Improved information about Taxi Services**

Radio Taxis were able to confirm the following improvements after hearing your feedback that some people were struggling to book and travel to health appointments in the city:

- 1. DEDICATED NUMBER:** They have provided a dedicated number for people to contact them and speak to a person instead of an automated : 02380 444 444 for all appointments. Speak to a human.
- 2. DISCOUNT:** After the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2026 you may be able to access a discount if you contact Radio Taxis and confirm you are attending a health appointment.
- 3. FIXED FARES:** Radio Taxis can provide fixed fares so passengers are aware of the price upfront. (No metered journeys).
- 4. ACCESSIBILITY:** Radio Taxis drivers are able to provide extra assistance when required – please mention this to an operator if this is required. They can provide smaller vehicles for easy access or larger vehicles for passengers who need extra leg room and can take folding wheelchairs and walking frames in vehicles easily.

### **Improved information about Bus Services**

Bluestar updated Healthwatch after their recent review of information about travel to hospitals. They have updated their webpage for hospitals and healthcare that informs people of the best buses for each setting:

<https://www.bluestarbus.co.uk/buses-to-hospitals>. People can of course use the web or app journey planner that will offer directions door-to-door.

## Conclusion

Healthwatch Southampton has highlighted transport issues faced by many people in the local community who have some difficulty in travelling to their health appointments. Through talking to stakeholders, community groups and the public we found that there were many common themes and issues that people were facing. The themes that were raised further reinforce the work done by Healthwatch England and therefore confirms that these are not only local issues but reflected nationally.

One of the key themes that was raised was the lack of awareness of travel options and support services. This was not only with the public but also professionals and stakeholders. Healthwatch Southampton is developing a booklet "Travelling to Hospital Appointments in Southampton", which will be launched in April 2026. This booklet aims to increase public and professionals' knowledge of travel options in one place.

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**Bluestar and Unilink**

**Radio Taxis**

**South Central Ambulance Service**

**Shopmobility**

**Communicare**

**Social Care in Action**

**Unpaid Carers Support Southampton**

**So Collective**

**Busy People**

**Let's Communicate**

**St Denys Action Group**

**Saints Foundation**

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