

Alvecote
Marina



Springwood
Haven



Ruby's
Yard



Mancetter
Marina



Hawkesbury
Junction



Hatton
Locks

Ensuring Healthcare Access for Canal Boat Residents
June 2025

Introduction

Pilot project in Warwickshire North to determine if accessing healthcare was an issue for the Boating Community

Really pleased to see healthcare staff speaking to residents on the canal.

Working with professionals in the primary care networks, local hospitals, emergency services, and the Canal & River Trust we wanted to understand and improve the health and social care needs of the boating community.

Between December 2024 – April 2025 Healthwatch Warwickshire asked a series of questions (see Appendix 1) to people living on the canal network.

The survey was circulated through the Canal & River Trust Boaters magazine, National Association of Boaters magazine, social media pages specifically for canal users, with partner organisations, and on the Healthwatch Warwickshire website.

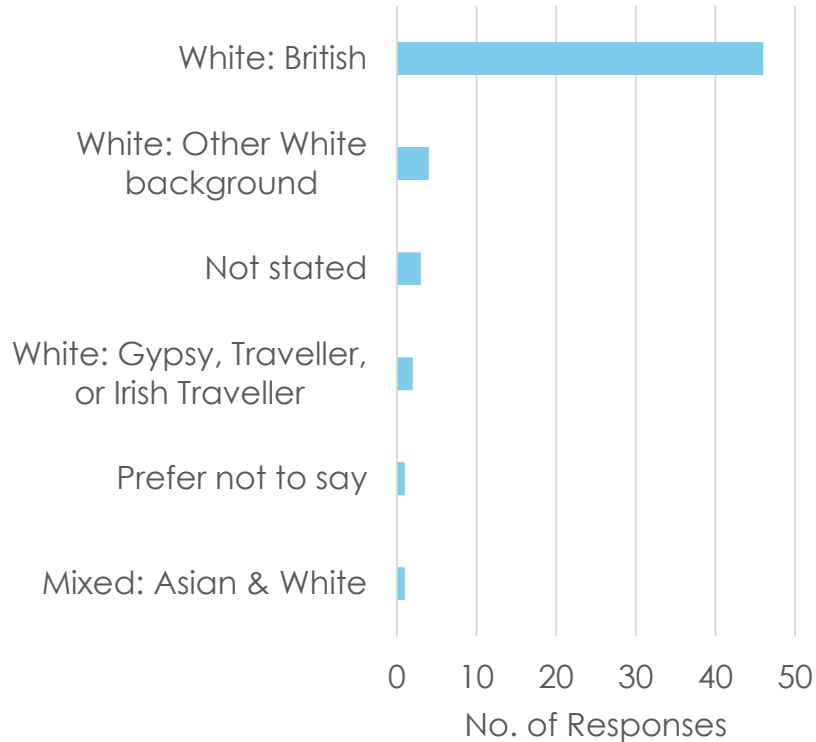
We listened to 57 people on canal towpaths, at local marinas across Coventry and Warwickshire and through our online survey.

Who we heard from

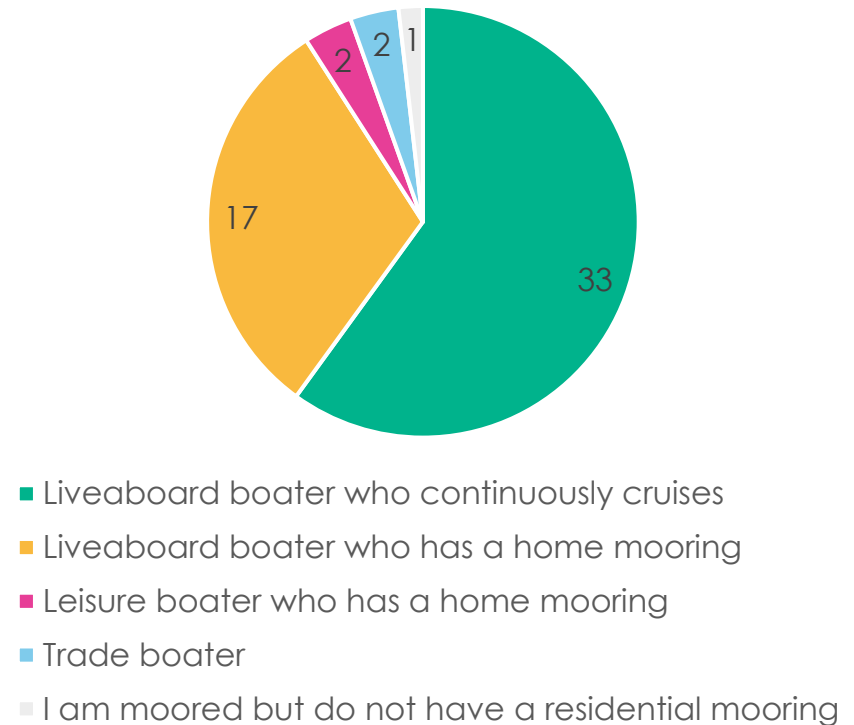
Approximately 36,000 boats are registered with the Canal & River Trust across England and Wales. Warwickshire is home to several canals, making it a popular area for boaters. Around 10–15% of all boaters are based within the West Midlands region.

We heard from 57 people who live on boats along the canal network.

Ethnicity



Types of Boaters



Who we heard from

7 people told us they have a disability

30 people told us they have a long-term condition

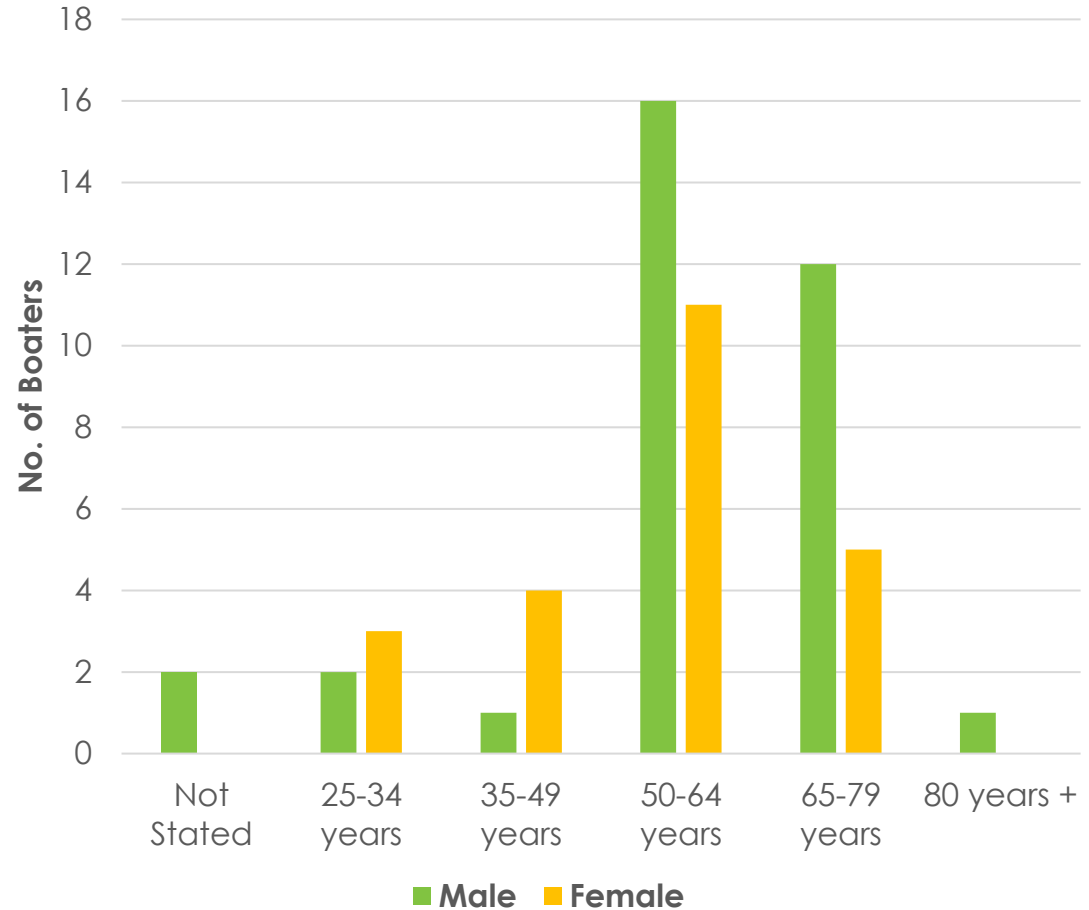
10 people told us they were employed

2 people told us they were ex-armed forces

2 people told us that English was not their first language

Approximately 73% of people who live on boats are aged over 55 years.

Age & Gender

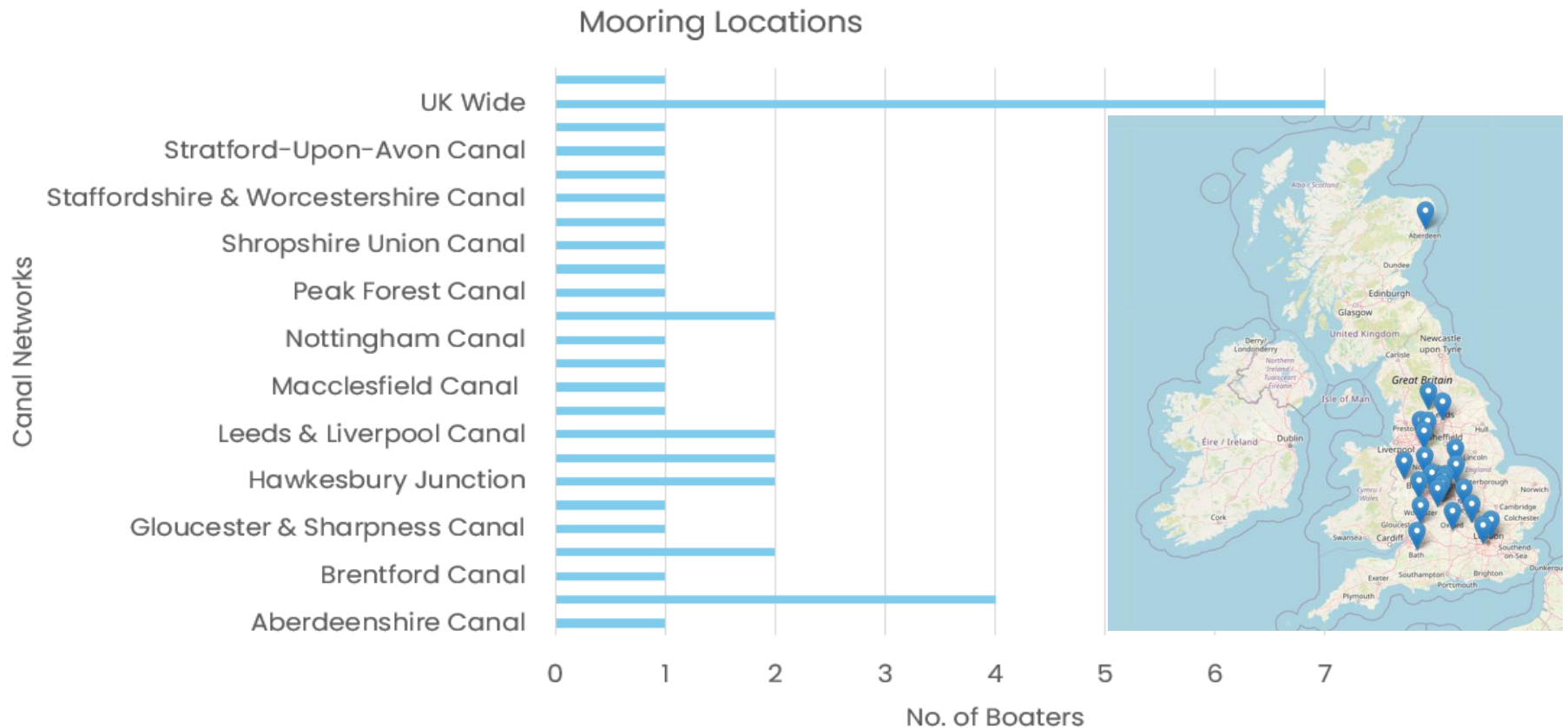


Some people choose to retire onto boats without fully understanding how physically demanding the lifestyle can be. They don't realise how limited the space is, how tricky it can be to get on and off the boat when you have mobility issues, and that operating locks requires strength – Liveaboard boater at a marina

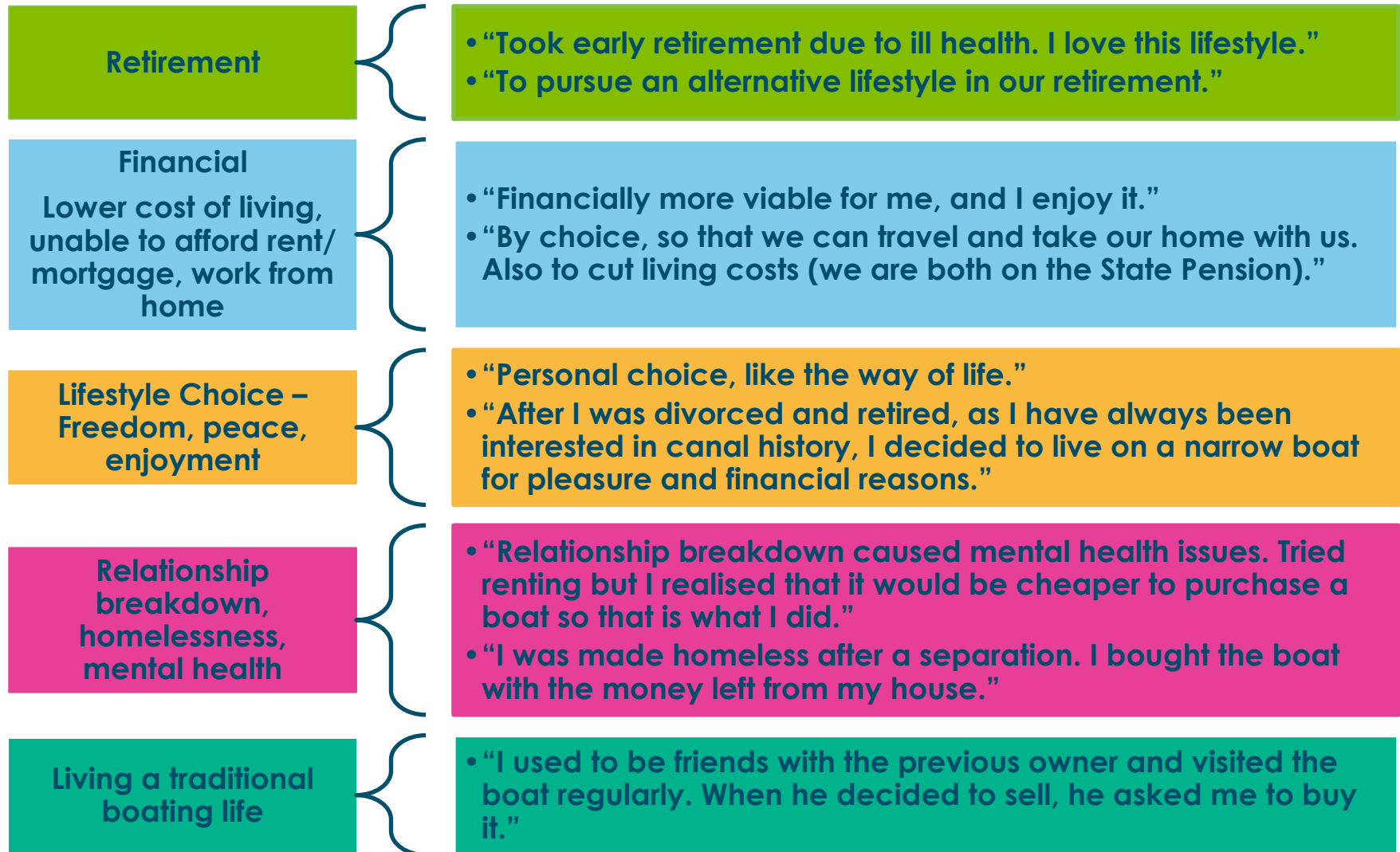
Who we heard from

The canal network in the UK spans over 2000 miles. Boats without a home mooring cannot stay moored in one neighbourhood or locality for more than 14 days.

55 people shared their mooring locations. 1 person told us they are permanently moored and live in Warwickshire.



Reasons for living on a boat



Sentiments

Most boaters shared neutral or factual comments about their healthcare experiences, while a smaller number expressed clear frustrations or praise, highlighting both positives and challenges in accessing care while living on the canal.

**11% provided
a positive
response**

**16% provided
a mixed
response**

**8% provided a
negative
response**

**63% provided
a neutral
response**

I feel I get the same treatment as everyone else.

Wife had a head scan at the hospital she was seen before her appointment time; we were in and out with no problems.

It varies a great deal; I have found Hospitals better at this than GP surgeries

Be open to me coming in when I need it. I do what I can, but with no driver's license, I have to rely on care here. I don't know the area or the buses.

Our home mooring GP and hospital, is very good, but this is not always the case when I am out boating with other health care providers.

Case Study

Flexibility of remote living/ Finances

Living at a marina as a family with young children offers an affordable alternative to renting, particularly for those who work from home. However, it comes with unique challenges, especially regarding official documentation and residency status. With both children born around the Covid era, registering for healthcare and schooling required tenancy registration at the marina. Despite this, marinas do not permit their address to be used as a permanent residence, making proof of address a significant hurdle for essentials like passports, driving licenses, and employment verification. Continuously cruising without a fixed abode complicates this further, as nominating a land address places the family on the electoral register, potentially affecting the landowner's council tax obligations.

There is stigma attached to living on a boat. Depending on the health visitor/ midwife who visited there were always concerns raised about child safety with the proximity to water. The water level at the marina is less than 3 feet. I felt judged about my lifestyle choice. The health visitor frequently commented on the wood burner and fire safety. I was conscious that a referral to social services could happen very quickly and escalate into something more. I felt that I had to take additional precautions to ensure that I took safety seriously which caused me anxiety before and after each visit. There was also stigma around co-sleeping arrangements. Due to space, we co-slept with the girls. Eldest now sleeps in her own room.

Case Studies

Relationship Breakdown

A liveaboard leisure cruiser with a permanent mooring has been living on a boat for over 20 years following the breakdown of a marriage, choosing this lifestyle instead of taking on another mortgage. With a residential address registered, accessing GP services has not been an issue. Meanwhile, around a third of boaters prefer to live off-grid, making them untraceable.

I have no issues with accessing GP

Retirement

A retired husband and wife live as continuous cruisers after taking early retirement due to health reasons. Managing medical care is a key part of their lifestyle, with regular check-ups for rheumatoid arthritis requiring travel to Warwick. They particularly value the convenience of the NHS app, which allows them to order prescriptions easily and have them sent to a local pharmacy near their current mooring, ensuring they can access necessary medication no matter where they are.

The NHS App is the best thing ever because I can get my prescriptions sent to a local pharmacy.

Case Studies

Living a traditional boating life

Living aboard an old narrowboat without running water offers a simple and traditional way of life, where resources are carefully managed and waste is minimal. Fuel supplies like coal and diesel are sourced from passing working boats, making mobility and planning essential. While this lifestyle provides solitude and independence, winters can be especially tough, as heating takes time and the cold sets in quickly if the fire goes out. Increasing licensing fees from the Canal and River Trust are raising concerns about the future of boat living, with growing efforts to commercialise the waterways creating uncertainty.

Lifestyle Choice

Seeking a fresh start, a family chose boat life, providing a safe and supportive environment for home schooling. They craft and sell jewellery at floating markets, embracing a mobile lifestyle. After spending a decade abroad, they returned to the UK, settling into a well-equipped boat with modern conveniences such as running water, electricity, and gas-fired central heating

No issues registering with a GP and accessing healthcare when needed.

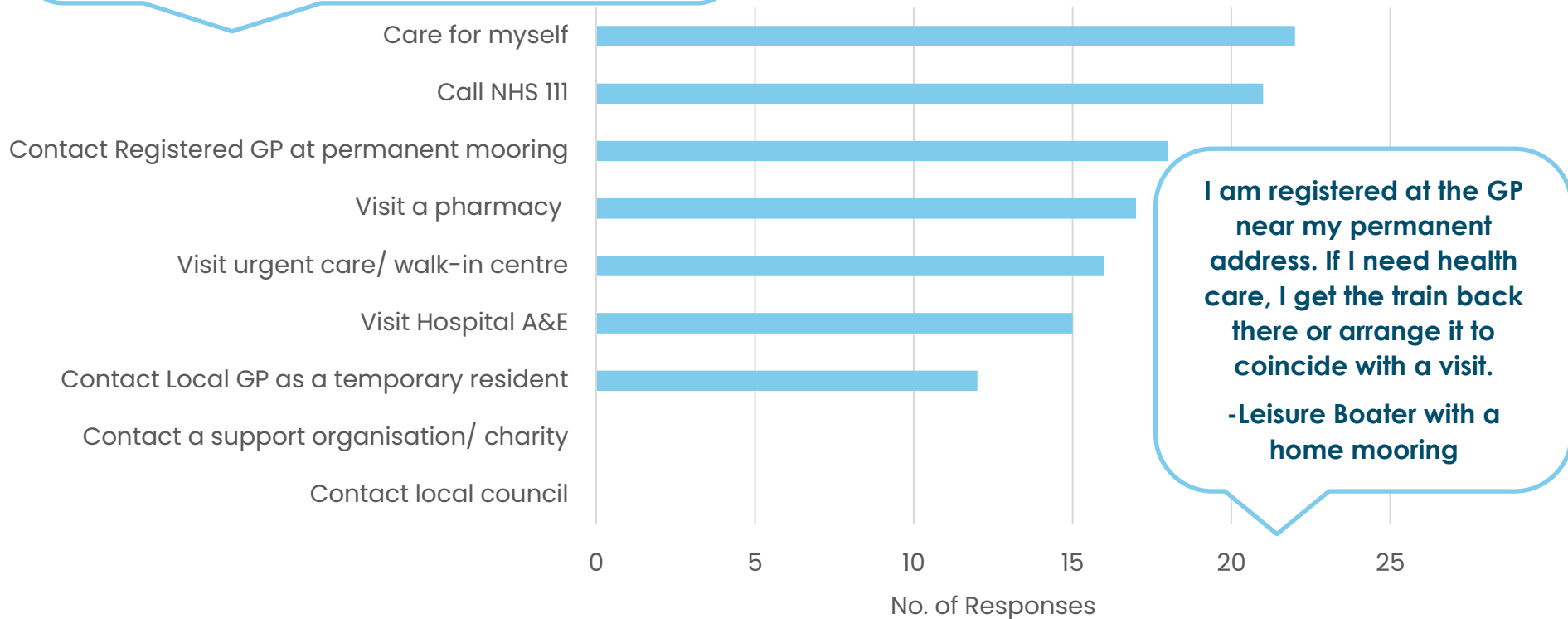
Respect our way of life and the fact we have always paid into the system. If we are unwell, we should be able to seek local help and not be turned away.

We asked people: 'Who do you contact when you need healthcare support?'

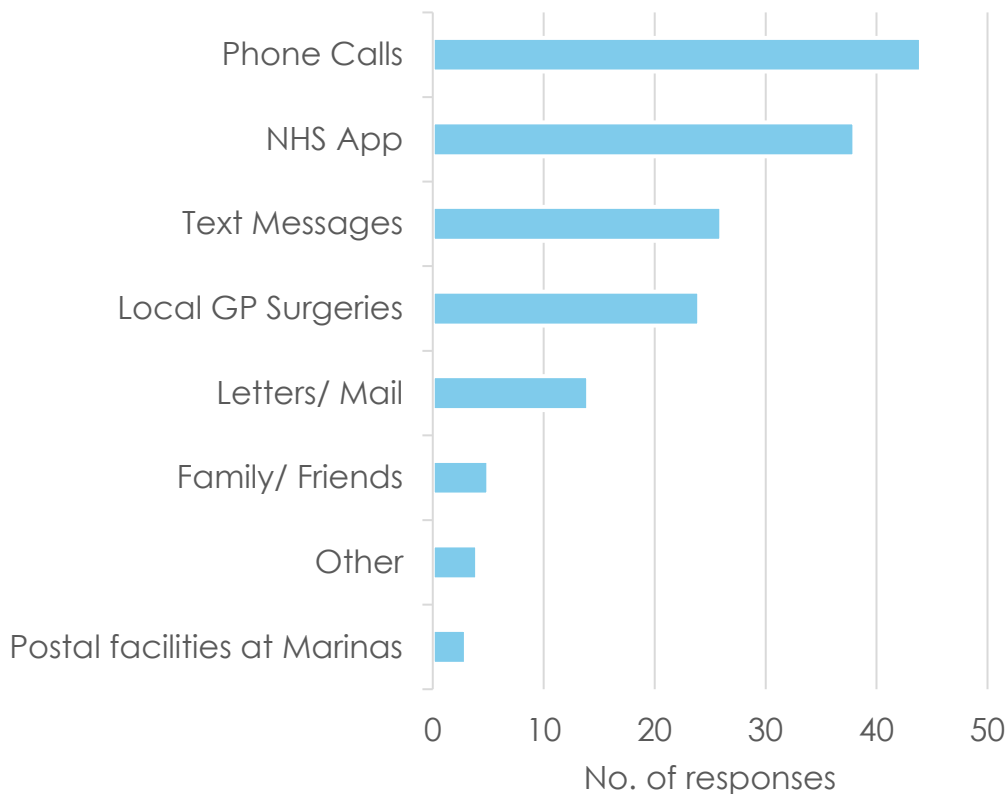
38% of responders told us that they prefer to care for themselves when they become ill.

I don't go to GP anymore; I don't bother with them. No trust, no faith in the system. I can't get access, and they are not prepared to listen. Self-medicating is an easier option
– Continuous Cruiser

I contact the GP I was registered with when I had a permanent mooring; I am still registered with them at that address, though I no longer live there.
– Liveaboard boater with a home mooring



Preferred methods of communicating with healthcare providers



Really dissatisfied, I once waited for a letter for an appointment for a colposcopy. I have a post box in Bath, and they only open on weekdays. When I was in Wiltshire at my furthest point, I could not regularly check on the post box and it was difficult knowing when I would receive this letter. I went to my GP (to a drop in) and told them about the situation. I was given a number I could call to arrange an appointment with the hospital - all that stress could have been resolved with a text message/email instead of a letter.

- Continuous Cruiser

Letters sent to marina go astray. I always ask for text or emails. Patient access are really good for hospital appointments and ordering repeat prescriptions.

- Liveaboard at a marina

A family member will take a photo of the letter and text it to me.

- Continuous Cruiser

It works for me. Texts are good. But I would like a weeks notice not 2 days. Especially if I need to get to North Devon - Continuous Cruiser

Registering with a GP as a temporary patient

43% of people told us they experience difficulties in registering with a GP surgery as a temporary patient. They also expressed concerns about being deregistered before they had received their test results or completed treatment in the area.

**Difficult to navigate
bureaucracy/front desk at local
surgeries – Continuous Cruiser**

**Taken off the books at the GP surgery. I find that
accessing treatment is dependent on the GP
surgery receptionist. Some places you don't have
a problem, and they will give you a temporary
registration. Other surgeries the GP receptionist
will refuse to register you and will not give you
access to speak to the practice manager –
Continuous Cruiser**

**Appreciate that some people don't have a fixed
address and register us for longer than two weeks
when the need requires. People just don't listen
properly, and I have been told several times to 'just
get seen to at a practice where you actually live.' We
are currently at the other end of the country, it's
completely impractical – Continuous Cruiser**

**Had a permanent address in Norfolk. Was taken off the GP
register when I started continuously cruising. I have tried to
register with GPs as a temporary resident when needed.
Some GP surgeries will register you without any problems.
However other GP surgeries have turned me away. It
depends on the Receptionist. I asked to speak to the
Practice Manager to explain my situation, the receptionist
refused to give me access to the Practice Manager because
she thought I was going to put in a complaint. I was trying to
register so I could be seen for a medical problem
– Continuous Cruiser**

**Automatically
deregistered after
2 weeks as a
temporary patient
even though it
would take longer
than 2 weeks to
get the
appointment and
blood test I
needed.
– Continuous
Cruiser**

**GP surgeries need to
understand that
constant cruisers do
not have a home
address but can be
registered like a
homeless person
– Continuous Cruiser**

**Be more welcoming
instead of defensive,
accept my boat as an
address.
– Continuous Cruiser**

The difficulties of getting healthcare in a local area, when feeling unwell

We listened to feedback from boaters about the challenges of accessing a variety of health services including community services, dentists, doctors, hospitals, and emergency care.

Community Services

- “Nursing, Midwifery, Health Visiting services are hit and miss and entirely dependent on which marina you are moored at.”

Dentists

- “Accessing NHS Dentist without a fixed abode is frustrating.”
- “My partner had toothache whilst on the Staffordshire border. She needed antibiotics but there was not a single NHS dentist willing to see us. we were told to ring the local health authority at 8am and to go where they told us to go for an emergency appointment. It is hard to travel somewhere on a boat. we ended up going to a private dentist which cost £50 and then we had to pay the pharmacy as it was a private prescription.”
- “Can't find an NHS dentist anywhere taking on new patients. I can't afford private. Extremely worried about what will happen when I need work. I had a dentist down south but after COVID they took people off their books and turned private.”

The difficulties of getting healthcare in a local area, when feeling unwell

Hospitals

- “I travel to Warwick Hospital once a month for blood tests. I prefer to travel to Warwick as they have all my records and know my history.”
- “We cruise in North Warwickshire as wife is undergoing ongoing treatment at George Eliot Hospital.”
- “Had faints whilst on voyage from London to Stratford. A&E referred me to GP, who were not able to arrange for consultation or tests to be made outside the local (Stratford) area. So had to journey multiple times from London to Rugby and Coventry hospitals for the tests to be done.”

Access to GPs

- “I have simply not gone to the doctors when I was too far away. I cannot get to the GP in Bath for their drop-in early enough (8:30 am). Don't drive and public transport is sparse in rural areas.”
- “I have used Healthwatch Warwickshire information to prove I have the right to be seen by a GP I'm not registered with.”
- “When I was ill on the Kennet and Avon, I had to lie and say I was on a hire boat to get treatment as my GP was in Sussex because no GP would take me on as a constant cruiser without a home address.”
- “Refused at 5 GPs with stomach pain as I wasn't permanently living in their area. I then had to have emergency gall bladder removal abroad on holiday. Could have been avoided if a UK GP would have seen me.”

The difficulties of getting healthcare in a local area, when feeling unwell

Location

- “I’m Registered in Yorkshire but my boat is in Staffordshire, so I have to go back to my sons.”
- “I was refused registration at GP in Banbury even though I was going to be working nearby.”
- “It should be easier to get care locally - wherever you are. A doctor would not treat my husband until we had been in the area for two weeks!”
- “We own a house in Cardiff. We return for short visits infrequently and plan access for healthcare around these visits.”

NHS 111/ Emergency Care

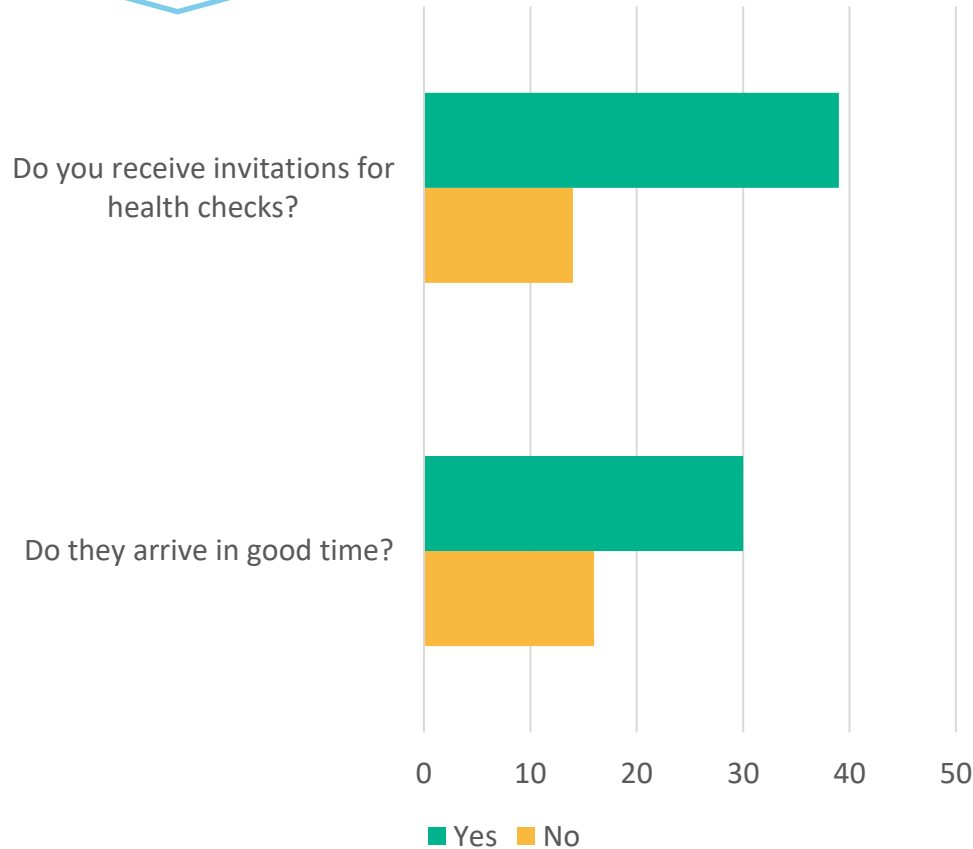
- “Unable to register as temporary resident in various locations resulting in relying on sometimes non-existent/ unpredictable public transport to access walk in centres.”
- “When calling NHS 111, their service is based around providing a post code for one's location. When out on the network, one may not have a post code that adequately corresponds to one's location. NHS 111 doesn't seem to be able to deal with GPS coordinates or What3Words for a location. This needs to be improved.”
- “Understand that not everyone has a post code, especially when on a boat, and accept other forms of location information.”
- “I broke my ankle, the ambulance refused to come to my location. Another boater helped me hobble to the main road where a taxi was waiting to take me to the hospital.”

Invitations for health checks

We asked boaters to tell us about their experiences of receiving invitations for health checks.

I have to specifically request them if I think I might be due one
– Continuous Cruiser

Post sometimes gets missed for health screening
– Continuous Cruiser



Sometimes posted to my care of address and arrive on date of appointment or after date, which can be problem to myself and provider due to possible missing appointments with me being continuous cruiser.

Have been invited, couldn't make it back to Stratford, within the one-week deadline so have been marked as, refused – Continuous Cruiser

As this is largely done by post, because the NHS doesn't seem to want to communicate test results etc. by email or phone, I don't get much. I am due a screening check but I can't access one in the area I'm in for the reasons listed above – Continuous Cruiser

Suggestions for improving access to services

Most boaters will join local Facebook groups as they move around, so advertising healthcare events on local community groups and boating specific groups will ensure that boaters know where you are. Boaters will go to healthcare events at popular junctions if they know they are happening.

The NHS should do more to promote the NHS App to the boating community.

Contact by text or phone call not by NHS app or email.

Create your own Facebook group for healthcare events and advertise it in the Towpath Magazine, Canal & River Trust Website, the "Friendly Narrowboat & Waterways Group."

Have a centralised system for things like BP and blood test results, so they can be done where we are and sent to our GP where they are.

Personal safety on the boat for lone female boaters is a worry. Advice from the fire and police service on increasing personal safety would be useful.

Advertise in Towpath Talk for healthcare events.

Vaccinations and cancer screening services would be appreciated.

A fact sheet by the national boaters and travellers' association would be helpful for GPs.

A floating health service is a great idea and will be most welcome by the community.

Proposals for Healthcare providers

Through our work with boaters, we heard about the health inequalities, stigma and bias which people can face when accessing health care. We invite services to better understand the specific needs and challenges of the boating community to improve access and care for all.

Healthcare Providers

- People should be able to register with a GP even if they don't have a fixed address.
- A list of GP practices that are open to registering new patients should be published and made easy to find.
- Health records should be easier to access across different regions so that care is more consistent and connected.
- Mobile health clinics and floating healthcare services could be considered for funding and made available to reach people in more remote or mobile communities.
- Consider hosting Healthcare events at major canal junctions and promote them early through social media and posters in nearby communities.
- Healthcare providers can consider using a variety of communication methods—like text messages, phone calls, and emails—instead of relying only on paper.
- The NHS can consider promoting the NHS App to boaters so more people know about and use it.

Proposals for Emergency Services, Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) & Charitable Organisations

Emergency Services

- NHS 111 and Ambulance Service staff could be provided with additional training on how to use alternative location points to help them respond more effectively in emergencies.
- The Police and Fire Services could consider collaborating with boat manufacturers to make canal boats safer.

VCSE & Charitable Organisations

- Service providers could consider partnering with voluntary and community groups that already support people living on the water. These organisations can help provide things like health advice, mental health support, and help with paperwork or accessing services.
- Service providers could consider collaborating with charities like the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and SOS Silence of Suicide to offer safety advice and mental health support tailored to the unique challenges of living on a canal boat—such as isolation, remote mooring spots, and limited access to emergency services.
- Service providers could consider building relationships with local charities in towns and villages along the canals. These groups can help reach boaters with services like food support, healthcare access, and social events, especially when boaters are moored nearby.

Proposals for Marinas and Local Councils

Marinas

- Marinas have a duty of care to ensure the environment is safe for people living on their boats while moored—this includes things like good lighting, secure access, and emergency procedures.
- Marinas could consider working with a local GP who agrees to register and care for boaters, making it easier for people who move around to get regular healthcare.
- Marinas could consider displaying clear and up-to-date information about nearby healthcare services—like GPs, dentists, pharmacies, and mental health support—so boaters know where to go if they need help.

Local Councils

- Local councils could consider installing better lighting along towpaths to make them safer and easier to use at night, especially for boaters walking to and from their moorings.
- Local councils could consider putting up signs or noticeboards along the towpath with information about nearby bus stops, train stations, and transport routes to help boaters and visitors plan their journeys.
- Local councils could consider improving access points between car parks and boats—such as adding ramps, clear paths, or designated loading areas—so boaters can move supplies and reach their boats more easily.

Next steps for Healthwatch Warwickshire

Present findings

- Coventry & Warwickshire Integrated Care Board Primary Care Commissioners
- Public Health Warwickshire
- Warwickshire North PLACE
- Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee
- West Northamptonshire Council
- Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust
- National Association of Boaters

Boating Community Partnership

- Primary Care Networks in Warwickshire North
- Canal & River Trust
- Water Chaplains
- Warwickshire Police
- Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service
- George Eliot Hospital NHS Trust
- Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council
- North Warwickshire Borough Council

Promote findings

- Healthwatch England
- Towpath Talk
- Canal & River Trust Boating Magazine
- Marinas
- Social Media Pages
- Healthwatch Warwickshire Website

Right to Access (RAP)

- Promote the use of RAP cards and information leaflets.
- Attend healthcare events aimed at boaters.

Do you need to see a doctor but are not registered at a GP surgery?



I HAVE THE RIGHT TO ACCESS TREATMENT AND REGISTER WITH A GP PRACTICE

The NHS constitution says:
 -I do not need a fixed address
 -I do not need identification
 -My immigration status **does not matter**

If I have any issues registering or accessing a GP practice my local Healthwatch can direct me to advice.

- You can register as a temporary resident with a GP surgery for up to 3 months. This can be helpful if you're living away from home but do not want to change your home GP surgery
- If your application is refused, you can still receive any treatment you need immediately for up to 14 days

www.healthwatchwarwickshire.co.uk

Call 01926 422 823, or email
info@healthwatchwarwickshire.co.uk

healthwatch
 Warwickshire

Initial reactions to the findings

George Eliot Hospital

- It's nice to know that people haven't had many issues with using the George Eliot Hospital. It's nice to know that our doors open.
- I noticed that they had notice boards on the towpaths. We could put something on there about when registering with GPS. So, when people are stopping or walking down the towpath, they can read the notice boards.

Primary Care Networks

- It's really useful to hear the comments that the boaters have made.
- It's really encouraging that others are interested in learning more about the project.
- We are looking into how to educate reception staff because we know ourselves that it is a hurdle and it's something that we need to address.

Emergency Services

- You put a smile on my face when you mentioned emergency services and fire service.
- Promoting fire safety messages with our posters.
- Ensuring boaters have working smoke detectors installed.
- Fire service is offering free safety and wellness visits. Where check the safety, install smoke alarms, and advise on evacuation plans.

Canal & River Trust

- Very comprehensive and really well put together, really nice to see that report and everything you've said there about boaters kind of rings bells to us.
- We can look into using our social media campaigns and Water Chaplains to promote messages. We have our visitor stations and welcome stations and service blocks that might have opportunities to put up posters. We would need to get permissions from the local operations managers. We can look into that.

For more information:

Healthwatch Warwickshire
4-6 Clemens Street, Leamington Spa
CV31 2DL

website: www.healthwatchwarwickshire.co.uk

telephone: 01926 422 823

email: info@healthwatchwarwickshire.co.uk

write: FREEPOST Healthwatch Warwickshire

Let's stay connected:

 **Facebook/ Twitter:** @HealthwatchWarw

 **Instagram:** @healthwatch_warwickshire

 **Threads:** @ healthwatch_warwickshire

 **Bluesky:** @healthwatch-warwks.bsky.social

APPENDICES

1. Survey questions
2. References

Appendix 1: Survey Questions



1. How would you describe your situation?

- ☐ Liveaboard boater who continuously cruises
- ☐ Liveaboard boater who has a home mooring
- ☐ Leisure boater who continuously cruises
- ☐ Leisure boater who has a home mooring
- ☐ Trade boater
- ☐ Other _____

2. Why do you live on the canal network? (Please let us know if it was your choice or there were other reasons.)

3. Where are you predominantly moored?

- ☐ North Warwickshire Borough
- ☐ Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough
- ☐ Rugby Borough ☐ Warwick District ☐ Stratford District
- ☐ Other _____

4. Do any of the following apply to you? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ I have a disability
- ☐ I have a long-term condition
- ☐ I am a carer
- ☐ I have children under the age of 16
- ☐ I am ex-armed forces
- ☐ English is not my first language
- ☐ I am employed (part time/ full time)
- ☐ I claim benefits
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Survey Questions

5. If you are feeling unwell, or need support with your health, wellbeing or care, what do you do? (Choose any that apply)

- ☐ I contact the GP I am registered with at my permanent mooring
- ☐ I contact a local GP and register as a temporary resident
- ☐ I visit an urgent care, or walk in, centre
- ☐ I visit a hospital A&E
- ☐ I call NHS 111
- ☐ I care for myself
- ☐ I speak to a support or charity organisation
- ☐ I contact the local council
- ☐ I visit a pharmacy
- ☐ Other: _____

6. Have you found difficulties getting health care in a local area, at the time you felt unwell?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Survey Questions

7. What could health and care providers do differently to make it easier for you to get the help or support you need?

8. 'Reasonable adjustments are a legal requirement to make sure health services are accessible to all disabled people' (NHS). Do you need any 'reasonable adjustments' to get the health or social care information or support you need?

9. How do you communicate with health care providers? (Choose any that apply)

- ☐ Text messages
- ☐ Phone calls
- ☐ Letters/ mail
- ☐ Postal facilities at a marina
- ☐ NHS app
- ☐ Local GP surgeries
- ☐ Salvation Army
- ☐ Family or friends
- ☐ Other

How satisfied are you with this communication?

10. Do you get invitations for health checks?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please tell us more:

Survey Questions

11. Do invitations for health checks arrive in good time?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please tell us more:

12. Are there any other experiences of health or social care you would like to share with us?

Appendix 2: References

Canal & River Trust (2025) “Making Life Better By Water.” Canal & River Trust [Online] Available at: [Canal & River Trust | Making life better by water](#). Accessed 05/06/2025.

Leisure London (2024) “What kind of people go canal boating?” Cruising the Cut [Online] Available at: [What kind of people go canal boating? – Cruising The Cut](#). Accessed 05/06/2025

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