

People's experience of accessing health, wellbeing and community services when living in rural areas of West Sussex

Cheryl Berry Community Partnership Lead, July 2026.

Introduction

West Sussex is a large and diverse county covering an area of 769 square miles with over half the land designated as protected countryside. It has a high concentration of coastal communities, as well as extensive rural areas.

In 2024, our rural survey informed that residents living in the more rural areas of West Sussex faced specific barriers when trying to access health, wellbeing and community services primarily transport, the location of the service and costs.

Twelve people completed the survey, a small statistical sample, that has shown some of the specific barriers to access.

Thank you

We would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to complete the survey to support this important piece of work.

Summary

Although only twelve people completed the survey, the findings should be viewed as a sample. However, the responses, do show that people living in rural areas of West Sussex face several barriers when accessing health, wellbeing and community services. The most common challenges relate to transport, the location of services, the cost of travel, and the need for support getting to and from appointments.

For some respondents limited public transport means relying on taxis, which can be expensive and often need to be arranged in advance.

Respondents shared they access a range of services, including GP practices, opticians, dental services, hospitals, minor injury units, accident and emergency, and physiotherapy.

It is important to note that some respondents reported gaps in their knowledge about how to access wider community and wellbeing support, including how to access services for weight loss, mental health, smoking cessation and physiotherapy.

The findings suggest that face-to-face communication remains important, particularly for respondents who do not use Apps or social media or experience poor digital connectivity.

Whilst some respondents use the NHS App, others do not use Apps at all and prefer trusted sources from family, friends, healthcare professionals and official websites.

Overall, the responses highlight the importance of accessible local information, affordable transport option and clear signposting to services for people living in rural communities.

Next steps

We will share the survey report through our communication channels – webpage and social media. As well as with relevant local partners, including health, voluntary sector and community transport organisations, to raise awareness of the barriers experienced by rural residents.

It is important to note, that these findings are a starting point for further engagement with rural communities to build a wider understanding of local needs and priorities.

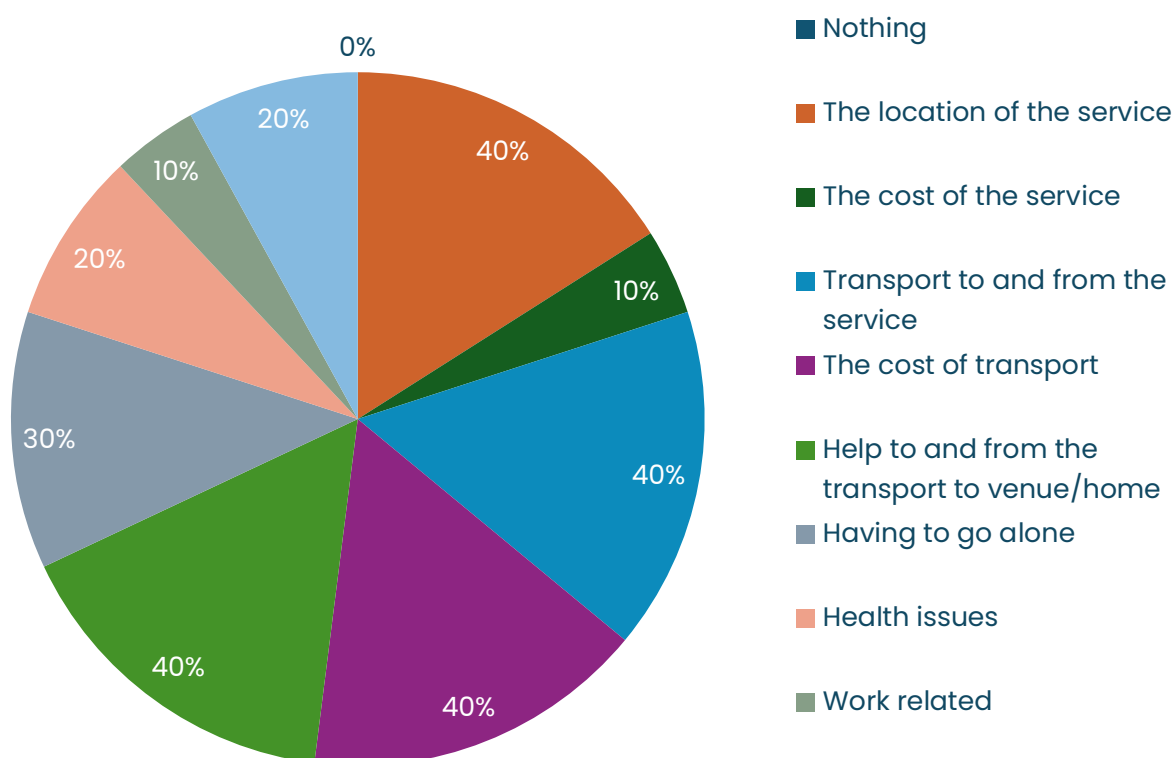
Findings

The twelve responders live in the Arun, Chichester and Horsham areas of West Sussex. The age range of responders was between 50 and 75+ years. Two responders work full-time, one part-time and 6 are retired. One person is unable to work due to managing a health condition.

Health and wellbeing access

The main barriers to accessing services were the location of the service, transport to and from the service, cost of transport and help to and from the transport to venue or home.

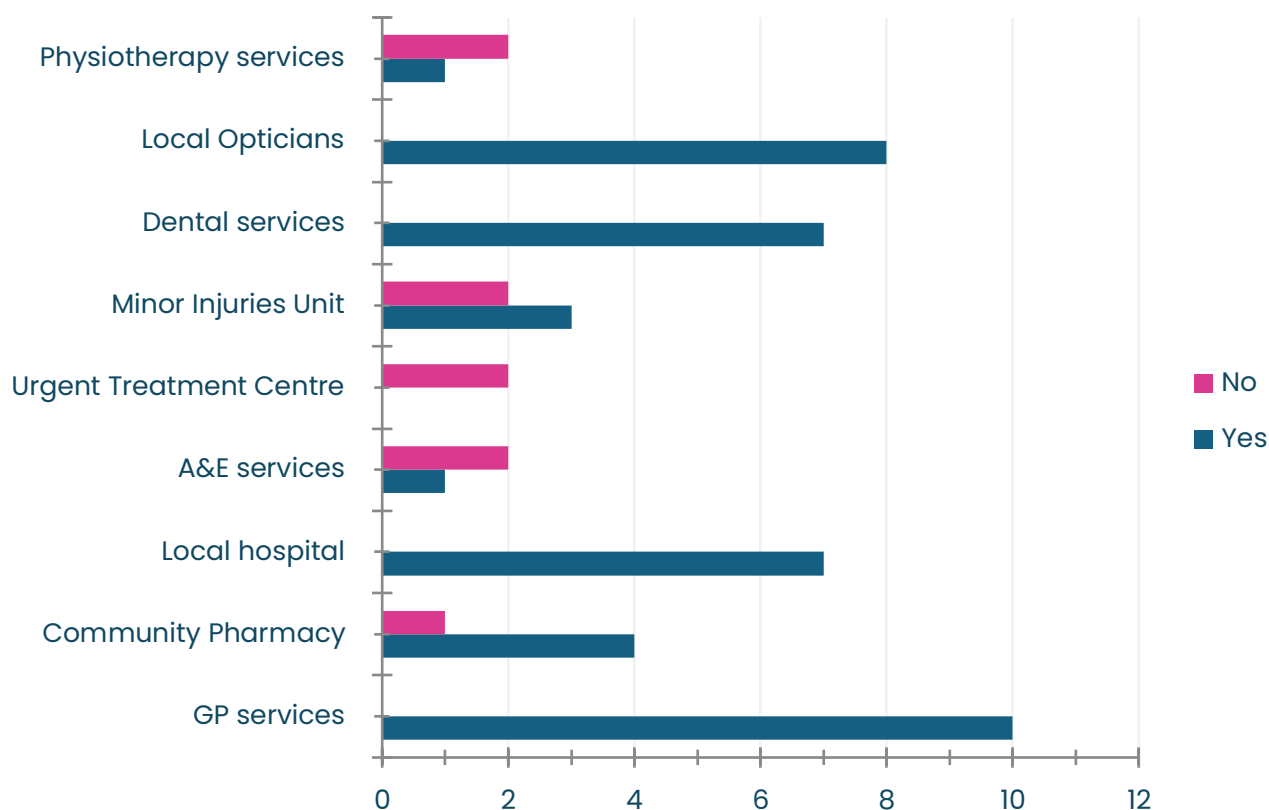
As someone living in a rural area, what barriers do you or your family have in accessing health, wellbeing and community services.



“ If I needed to see GP have to arrange a taxi which costs around £35 for the round trip. The bus does not stop at Pulborough Medical Centre and the walk from the town to the surgery is too far currently. You also have to arrange transport in advance and cannot just sort out on the day even if an emergency.

The medical services responders have accessed include GP practice, local optician, dental services, local hospital, Minor Injuries Unit, Accident and Emergency, and physiotherapy services.

What medical services do you access?



“ Dental service is private not NHS as there are none.

45% of responders confirmed that they know how to access other community services such as Time to Talk, leisure centres, medical services, local GP, dentist, local opticians, and Minor Injuries Unit.

Support gaps

27% of Responders shared that they do not know how to access other community services such as weight loss, physiotherapy, mental health service, smoking etc. With one responder not being aware how to access most of NHS services.

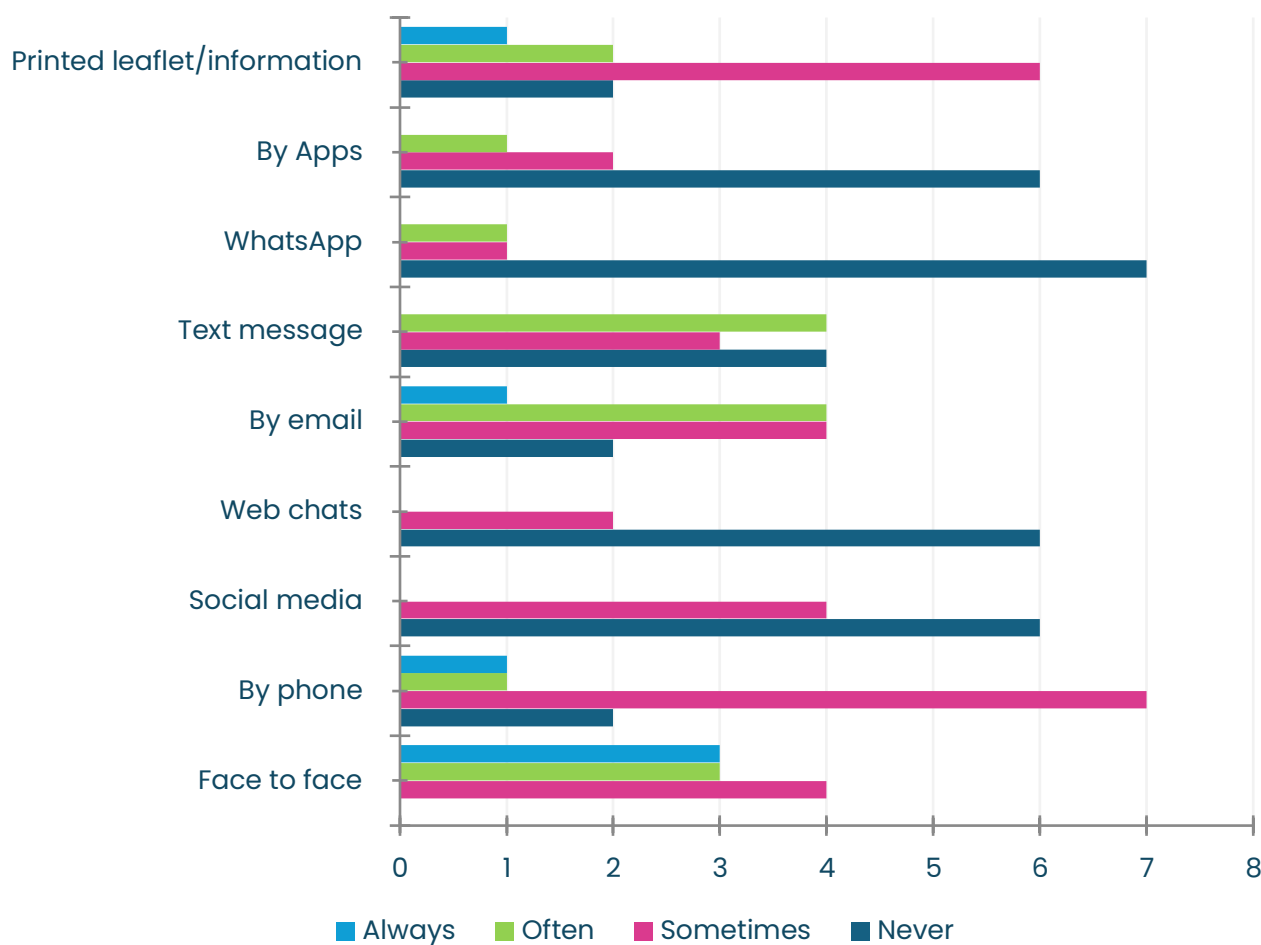
“ I wouldn't know unless my doctor told me and referred me.

I know where the local leisure center is but not what activities they provide.

Responders shared how they would like to access information about services. Face-to-face was the preferred option, then emails, with text messages being OK.

“ I do not have a computer.
I live rurally and the mobile phone signal is very poor.

How do you prefer to receive information about health and wellbeing services?

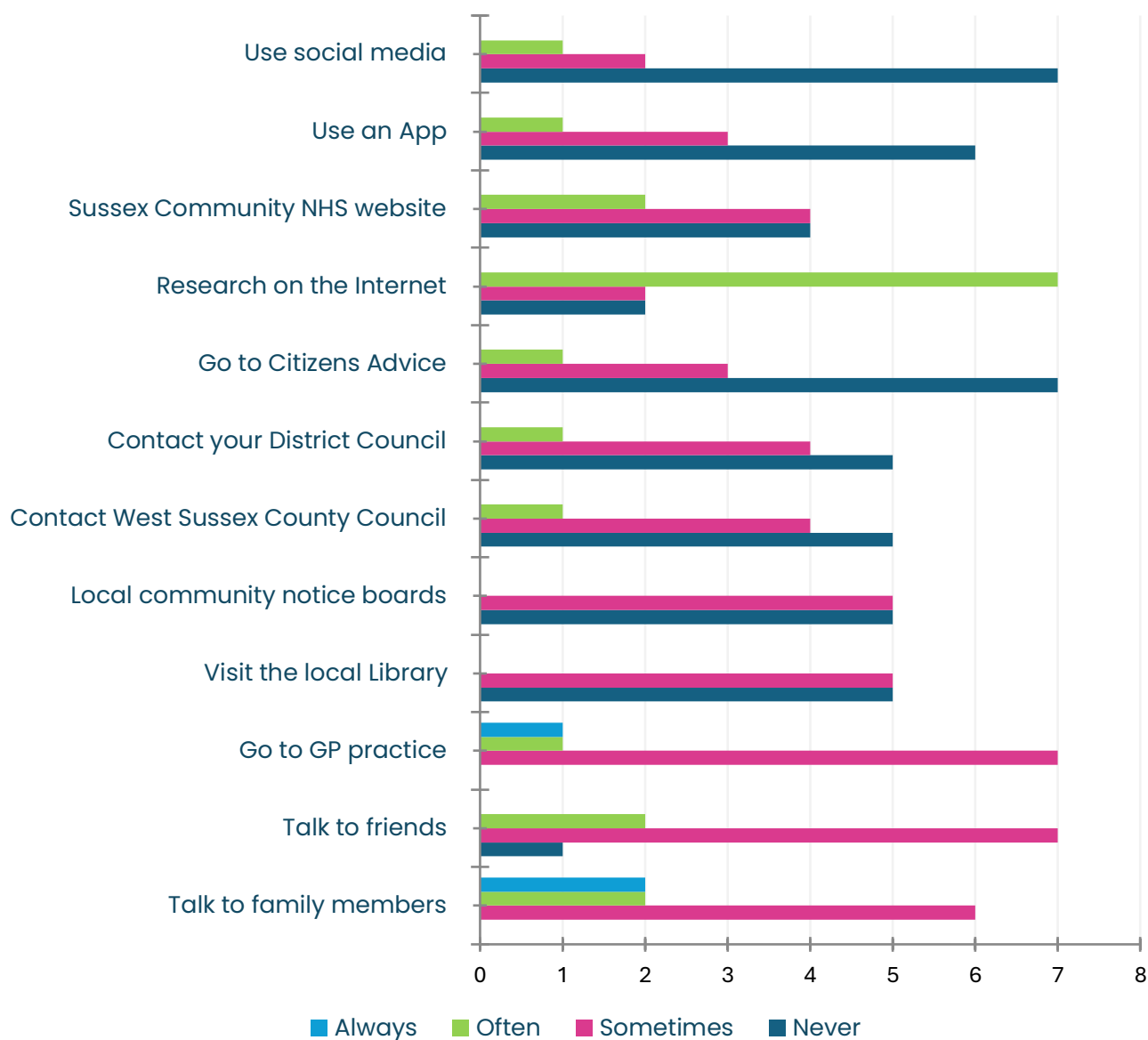


Social media platforms responders prefer not using any, but could use Facebook, and Instagram.

“ Prefer not to get involved.

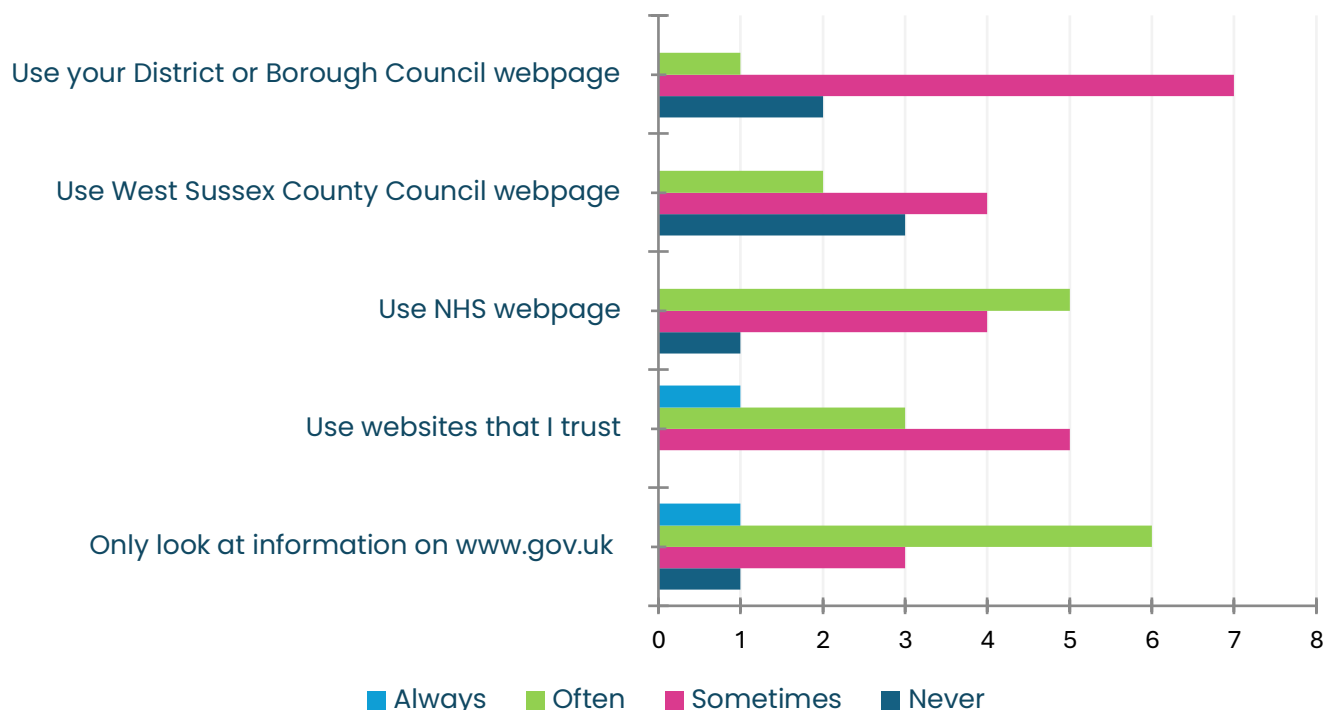
Responders shared that if they needed information or advice on a particular subject they would start by speaking with family and friends.

If you wanted information or advice on a particular subject, where would you go?



Responders shared that they only look for information from www.gov.uk and sites they trust.

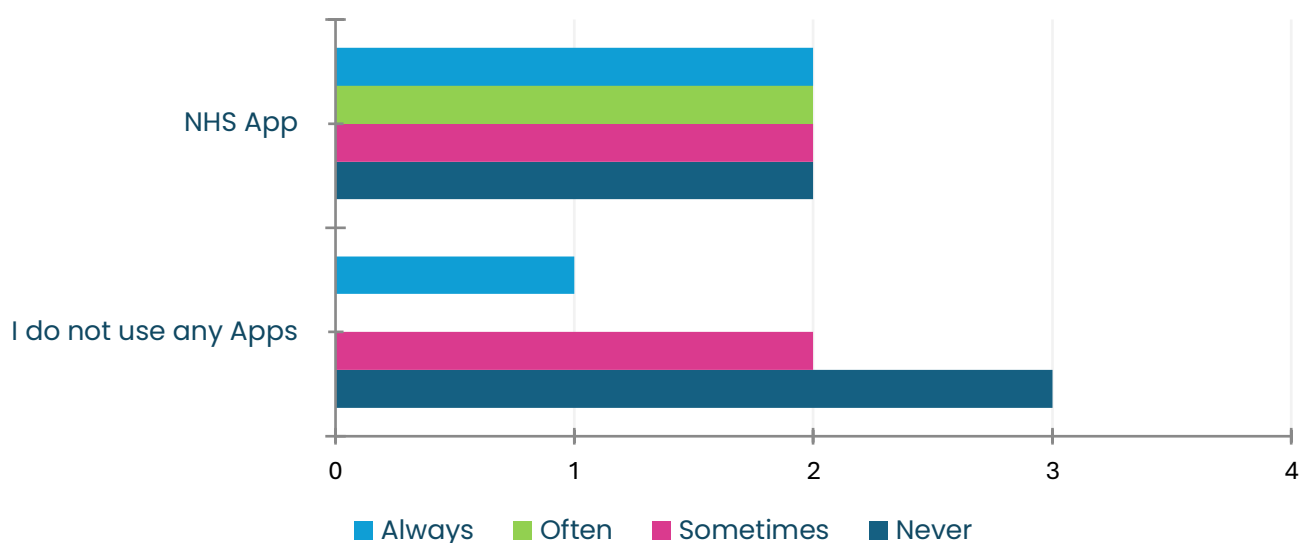
If you searched the internet, how do you choose safe and accurate websites to access?



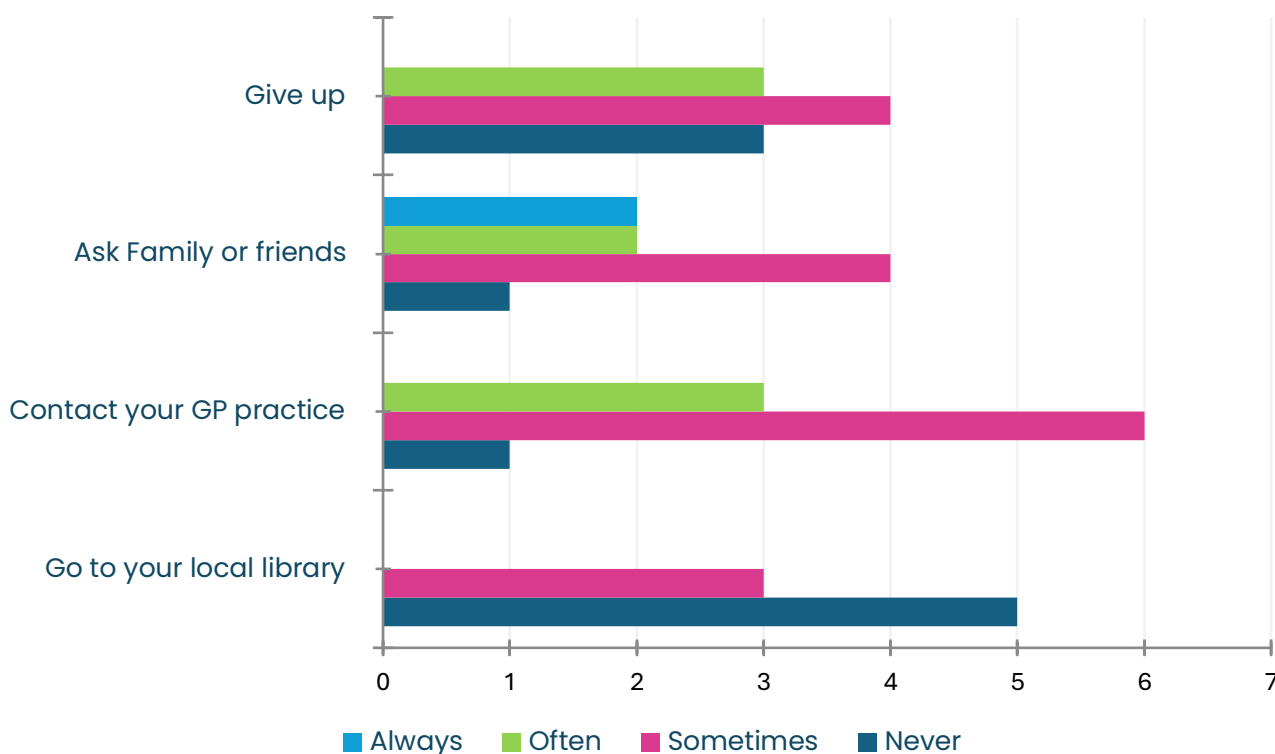
6 people stated they use the NHS App and 6 people shared they do not use any Apps.

“ I don’t have Apps.
I’m old school and don’t use App`s.

If you use an App which, have you accessed?



If you can't find helpful information, what steps do you take?



“ Have had to access private doctors when unable to access GP, but very expensive and can't afford to do this regularly.

7 respondents shared that they feel lonely, isolated or socially excluded some of the time and often.

Lonely, isolated and socially excluded

82% (9) of respondents shared how they have been pro-active to help feel less lonely, isolated and socially excluded, such as.

Attending church, volunteering for community groups, join various community groups, going out with friends for tea and cake.

“ I have tried the social prescribing service, but not sure it's for me, too long winded to follow it. I don't think certain services really understand people with mental health issues.

Confidence and motivation

1 No confidence	2	3	4	5 Full confidence
0	1	2	4	4

73% (8) respondents have full confidence, 18% (2) low confidence and 9% (1) no confidence.

1 No motivation	2	3	4	5 Full motivation
0	2	2	6	1

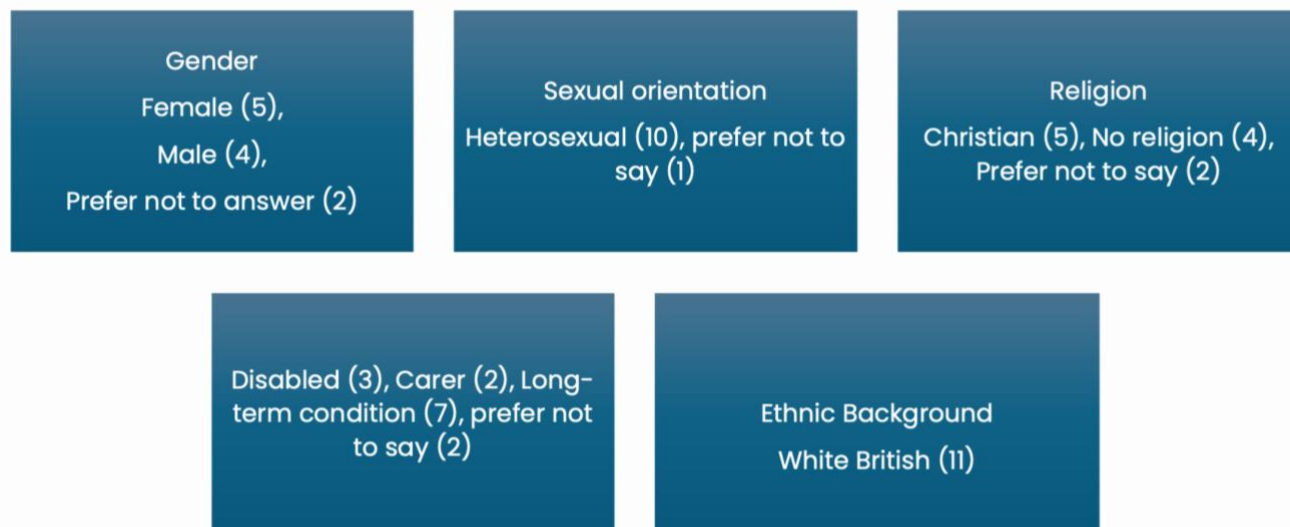
64% (7) have full motivation, 18% (2), low motivation and 18% (2) no motivation.

“ Confidence is returning following caring for a family member who recently died, but it is not easy.

It is difficult sometimes walking into a venue where others already know each other.

Transport can be an issue as do not know what time the bus runs or where to and Taxis are too expensive.

Respondents' characteristics





w: healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

t: 0300 012 0122

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

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Healthwatch West Sussex
works with [Help & Care](#) to
provide its statutory activities