

Healthwatch Halton

'GP Access and Out of Hours Provision'
Survey 2014





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Who are we?

Healthwatch Halton was established under the Health & Social Care Act 2012 and came into existence on 1st April 2013.

Healthwatch Halton is the independent local consumer champion for health and social care services across Halton. We provide an opportunity for local people to have a stronger voice to influence and challenge how health and social care are provided locally.

We bring together people's views and experiences of local health and social care services and use this feedback to build a picture of where services are doing well and where they can be improved.

We also provide people with information about the choices they have and what they can do if things go wrong

Nationally the Healthwatch Network is made up of 148 local Healthwatch with Healthwatch England in place to offer leadership, guidance and support to the network.



National Context

Nationally over 90% of patient contacts within the NHS are carried out in general practice¹ yet easy access to a GP continues to be a concern for a lot of patients.

The number of visits people make to their GP is continuing to rise year on year. Between 1995 and 2008, the number of patient consultations rose by 75%, from 171 million to more than 300 million². From 1995 to 2011 there was only a 33% increase in the number of registered GP's.

When patients cannot get to see a GP because there are no more appointments available that day or the wait will be several weeks, they often resort to attending A&E or a Walk-in-Centre: According to the July 2014 Ipsos MORI GP Patient Satisfaction (GPPS) survey 14% of those who could not get an appointment with their GP in Halton attended A&E or the Walk-in-Centre or instead. Not only is this more costly for the NHS than a visit to the GP, it is also an inappropriate use of these services and puts greater strain on already pressurised services.

According to the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), the number of occasions during which patients have to wait more than a week to see their GP or practice nurse are set to go through the 50m barrier for the first time ever in 2015 following successive rises in previous years: up from 41.9m occasions in 2013 and 46m occasions for this year.

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) stated: "No GP wants to turn away a single patient - but surgeries are being faced with no choice because they don't have the resources to cope with the increasing number of older people who need complex care, whilst also meeting the needs of families and people of working age.

"The profession has been brought to its knees both by a chronic slump in investment and the fact that there are now simply not enough family doctors to go around."³

The RCGP recognise that with the increasing use of technology amongst young people "the traditional face-to-face consultation will no longer be accepted as the 'default' way to access care."

¹ Royal College of General Practitioners press release, October 2013 <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/news/2013/october/patients-bear-brunt-as-gps-reveal-shocking-400m-black-hole.aspx>

² Royal College of General Practitioners http://www.rcgp.org.uk/policy/rcgp-policy_areas/-/media/Files/Policy/A-Z-policy/The-2022-GP-Compendium-of-Evidence.aspx p21

³ Royal College of General Practitioners press release, July 2014 <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/news/2014/july/crisis-hit-gp-surgeries-forced-to-turn-away-millions-of-patients.aspx>



In their 2013 policy paper '2022 GP A vision for General Practice in the NHS the RCGP' said "Simply increasing the quantity of face-to-face GP consultations alone will not be a cost-effective or sustainable strategy for achieving increased capacity and meeting growing demand, especially given the need to provide longer consultations to patients with more complex needs. The GP of the future will need to be skilled in using a suite of new and flexible tools for communicating with patients, including telephone, email and various online forms of consultation. This will include online group discussions, where appropriate, for example, patients with long-term conditions where peer-to-peer support and shared experience can be particularly valuable."



Executive Summary

Involve patients in the design of services. It is not rocket science to look at the best customer service in the outside world and apply those lessons across the NHS⁴

Introduction

From the start of Healthwatch Halton in April 2013 one of the main issues we were receiving comments on was access to local GP services.

Having made note of the findings from national surveys and the local feedback we were receiving, it was agreed by our management committee that we set up a task and finish group with the aim of gathering the views of Halton residents on Access to GP Services and the Out of Hours GP Provision.

In undertaking this piece of work and talking with members of the public, as well as community and voluntary sector representatives in the borough, we've identified what has been clear to many for some time - that GP access is currently not meeting the needs of many individuals in our borough. This is a pattern witnessed not just locally, but regionally and nationally.

Methodology

The survey was launched towards the end of March 2014 and ran until the end of June 2014. It was distributed to over 1200 Healthwatch Halton members either by post, with the newsletter, or electronically via email and the regular Healthwatch Halton E-Bulletin. The survey was also promoted on the Healthwatch Halton website and widely through social media. All GP Patient Participation Groups were sent details of the survey and asked to promote it within their respective practices.

Visits were carried out to a variety of groups and organisations to inform them of the service and give them the opportunity to take part in the service, including the Umbrella Group, SHAP Social inclusion Group, Halton People Health Forum Steering Group and Riverside College students.

A news article promoting the survey was published in the Runcorn & Widnes Weekly News.

491 surveys were completed. 105 surveys were completed online and 386 paper copies returned.

⁴ NHS England - Improving General Practice - A call to action Phase 1 report March 2014 - <http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/emerging-findings-rep.pdf>

Summary of Observations and Recommendations

The principle observations and recommendations are stated below. Please refer to the full report for results, observations and recommendations on all questions.

Observation 1 - Poor Communication

Results show that for certain areas there is a lack of knowledge about the services provided and how they are delivered at the GP Practices.

For example, over a third of people (35%) didn't know if they could speak to a GP or practice Nurse on the telephone if required (Q8). In addition 45% of respondents didn't know if they could request prescriptions online (Q30). While the majority of people knew the opening hours of their practice 23% of respondents were unsure of the opening hours (Q20).

We are aware that many practices already use a variety of different methods to try to inform patients of the services they provide. We believe it would be useful to have a standard model layout for the notice boards in waiting areas showing the details such as opening hours, website address, out of hours procedures, how appointment systems and options for making appointments work etc. This information should be repeated on the practice website and any electronic notice boards in waiting rooms. Information about current wait times and the reasons for any delays could also be added to these displays and notice boards.

Recommendation 1

That the CCG co-ordinate a short project with the GP Practices to produce some model systems for Notice Systems

Practices to work with their Patient Participation Group to develop the best ways of prominently displaying information within the practice. We would recommend that the Halton CCG look at a small project with the PPG+ Group to develop a 'best practice guide for patient information'. If possible we'd also like to see this information included as a pull out in a future issue of Halton Borough Council's 'Inside Halton' magazine, which is distributed free to all homes in Halton.

Observation 2 - Triage Systems (Q9 & 9a)

The reasons why practices use triage systems seems not to be widely understood by all patients. Just over half of respondents did not know if their practice used a nurse to triage "Book on the day" appointments. We understand that various triage systems are currently being trialled at the GP practices.



It appears from anecdotal evidence that there may be patient resistance to telephone consultations with GPs and Nurses

Recommendation 2 (Q9 & 9a)

We recommend that Halton CCG work with the local practices and their Patient Participation Groups to produce a guide / information for patients explaining what triage is, why it is used and how it could benefit both patient and practice. We would like to see the results of the trials of triage systems shared or publicised to show the benefits to the patients/practices.

The necessity for triage by clinical staff, as opposed to reception staff, should also be considered.

We also recommend that GP surgeries and the PPG's should review guidelines for emergency and non-emergency appointment booking. Guidelines should be standardised across the borough so patients understand the system, including how and when to access emergency care appropriately.

Observation 3 - Single Call Centre (Q13 & Q14)

From the responses received it seems that options for a single call centre in Halton for access to GP services is not a popular one.

Overall 62% of respondents didn't like the idea of a single call centre. Breaking down the response by age group it failed to show majority support for the idea in all but one age group, with the 18-24 age group having a majority in favour (45% Yes to 30% No) of the idea.

It is possible that those surveyed see this option as a means of diverting appointments away from their GP practice. However when faced with an option to visit another practice if their registered practice had no appointment availability the percentage not liking this reduced to 48% (Q14). An influencing factor could be that older people, possibly some with multiple health issues, prefer to see their own doctor or visit the practice they are familiar with. Whereas younger patients may not mind which practice or doctor they visit and access to treatment is their main priority.

Recommendation 3 (Q13)

Whilst Healthwatch understands the predicted shortage of GPs over the longer term, the general public of Halton may not be aware of this.

If the single call centre option is to proceed, more in depth information showing the key reasons should form part of publicity material. Including consultation with interested parties so that all concerned fully understand the reasoning behind the initiative.



Observation 4 - General Practice Opening Hours (Q20 & Q21)

62% of Halton patients thought GP practices should be open for longer hours. Of the 62% who chose longer hours, weekend and evening opening were the most popular option. To a lesser degree early mornings and lunch times were preferred.

Additional opening hours, particularly across the larger practices may have a knock on benefit in reductions of attendance at emergency centres, A&E, minor injuries etc.

Recommendation 4 (Q20 & Q21)

Consideration to be given to longer GP practice opening times. With changing work patterns etc. for many people it isn't always easy to arrange appointments at times to suit. We would like to see research carried out into the options for increased opening hours.

Review GP practice opening hours to ensure that additional opening hours are widely available in the borough, if not uniformly across the borough.

Practices should consult with their patients, possibly through their PPG, to identify popular methods of booking appointments and adopt a variety of the most popular methods so that patients have choice in how they can book an appointment: including in person, by phone, by text and online booking. The particular needs of those, for example with visual impairment or deafness, should be adequately accommodated within these options.

It would also be of a benefit to see a list of opening hours of GP practices, as well as those of the walk-in centre and minor injuries unit, published on a regular basis within the local press.

Observation 5 - Patient Records (Q26 & Q27)

Patients can be treated outside the boundary of their GP practice, by Out of Hours GP services, and Urgent Care Centres, with the possibility of other GP practices as an option in the review of GP Services. Our survey results show that a large majority, 73% of patients, would like their medical records available anywhere they will be treated in Halton.

Recommendation 5 (Q26 & Q27)

We recommend that Patient Records are made available across local primary care services.

There may be technical difficulties to overcome to achieve this, however if the treatment routes are to be flexible, access to patient records shows to be very important in the minds of patients.



Observation 6 - Urgent Care Centres (Q23)

The success of the new Urgent Care Centres in both Widnes and Runcorn can be seen as crucial to providing valuable relief to the A&E departments of local hospitals. Our survey revealed that 61% of participants were not aware of the plans for the new Urgent Care Centres in Halton

Recommendation 6 (Q23)

Ensure that information on the new centres is made widely available across the borough and in both of our local hospital A&E units, Whiston & Warrington, in time for their opening. Further and/or alternative ways of advertising should be considered to increase public awareness of these improvements in Halton.

A survey of patients attending our local A&E units at Whiston & Warrington Hospitals could be carried out to find out how they ended up at A&E, why they are using it and also to inform them of the new urgent care centres. This could be repeated after 12 months to review the awareness and use of the new centres. (appropriate use etc.,)

Observation 7 - Complaints (Q33 to Q35)

While our figures show that 66% of people were comfortable in making a complaint if needed that still left 34% who weren't. Research conducted by Healthwatch England⁵ has shown that people find the complaints process 'utterly bewildering'. Our results seem to reinforce this.

Almost a third of the people who had made a complaint were not happy with how it was dealt with. Only 20% of people knew what to do next if their initial complaint was not taken seriously.

As Anna Bradley, Chair of Healthwatch England stated⁶, "It's no wonder the public are left confused and frustrated. With so many organisations involved it's difficult to know where to start, let alone having the strength and persistence to navigate the system on your own."

Recommendation 7 (Q33 to Q35)

Almost a third of the people surveyed were not happy with how their complaint - concerning GP services - was dealt with. This level of dissatisfaction would not be tolerated in other organisations/businesses.

⁵ Health & Care complaints system is 'utterly bewildering for people -20th March 2014 - <http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/health-and-care-complaints-system-utterly-bewildering-people>

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Ideally, it should be a straight forward process to raise a complaint with a local service, currently it is anything but.

The complaints process should be simplified. There should be clear information readily available to patients explaining the complaints process, who to contact and how to progress a complaint.

In addition we would like to suggest that training is offered to all relevant staff in complaints handling and customer service to ensure they can offer appropriate help and support to members of the public who wish to raise a complaint.

Summary

The overall results from our survey show both good and poor aspects of our local services. It is not therefore possible for us to draw conclusions about the individual surgeries, but rather gain a general insight into GP practices across the borough.

When we started the survey, our aim was to gather the views of patients accessing local GP services, find out what worked well for them and see if there was room for improvement.

From the results we can see that people are generally happy with the services provided. However there are some specific areas that could be improved on.

- Better access to appointment bookings, both online and by telephone
- Being able to get through to the surgery on the telephone
- Seeing a GP of choice at a date and time to suit the patient
- The complaints process
- Staff training
- Communication & Information

We believe there are many positives to be taken from this report though we realise it does raise more questions.

Our hope is that Halton residents, Patient Participation Groups and the Halton Health Community, including local GP practices, take on board all the views expressed in our survey and report and work together towards excellent health care.



Survey Results

491 surveys were completed and of these 472 related to GP surgeries in Halton.

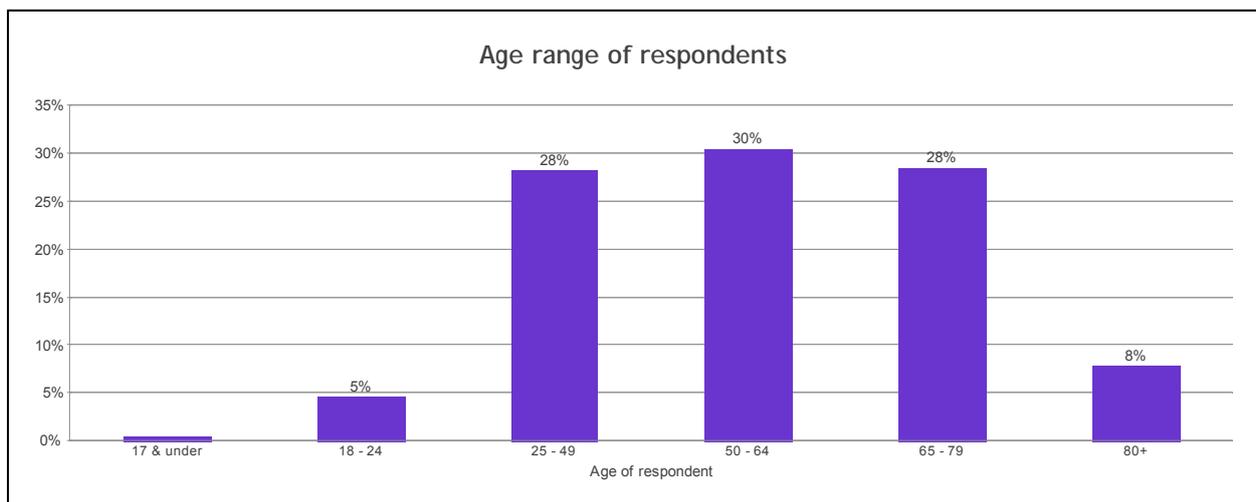
Of the 19 responses where people selected 'other' for their GP Practice, 17 people stated the practice name. 5 people named 'shared' medical centres where there are more than one practice based, i.e. 'St. Paul's' where both Grove House and Tower House practice are based.

The other 12 'other' responses covered GP practices in Liverpool, Frodsham, Northwich, Warrington & Holyhead.

The analysis count varies throughout the report, as not everyone answered every question.

The percentage figures are based on the total number of respondents to each question

Please Note : Not all graphs and charts will add up to 100% due to rounding up of the statistics

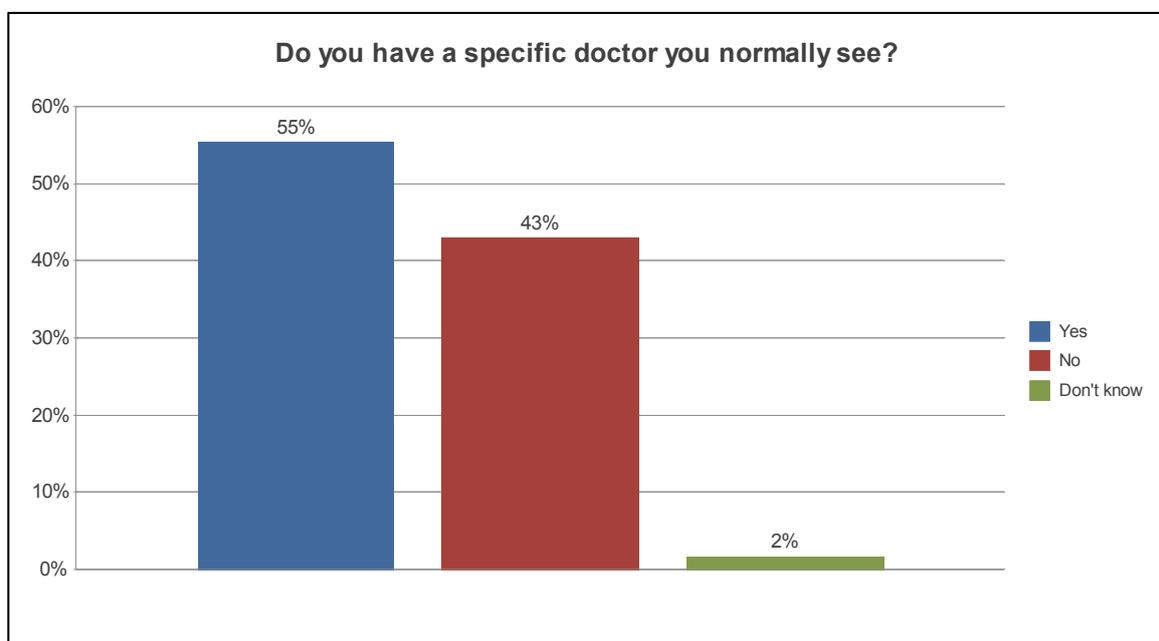


Q1) Firstly, please tell us the name of your usual GP Practice

Responses were received from patients of all GP Practices in Halton, 213 from Widnes based practices and 259 from Runcorn based practices. The number of responses received from patients registered at each practice varied considerably, ranging from 4 to 51 responses for individual surgeries.

It is not therefore possible to draw conclusions about the individual surgeries, but rather gain a general insight into GP practices across the borough.

Q2) Do you have a specific doctor you normally see?



Survey Comments

"I find it hard to get to see my own GP every visit. I would be happier if this was possible but unfortunately she has a busy schedule and is very popular. Otherwise I have no complaints and other GPs are good but I prefer this particular doctor"

"My GP is familiar with my medical history. I would not change or go to any other practice."

Healthwatch Comment

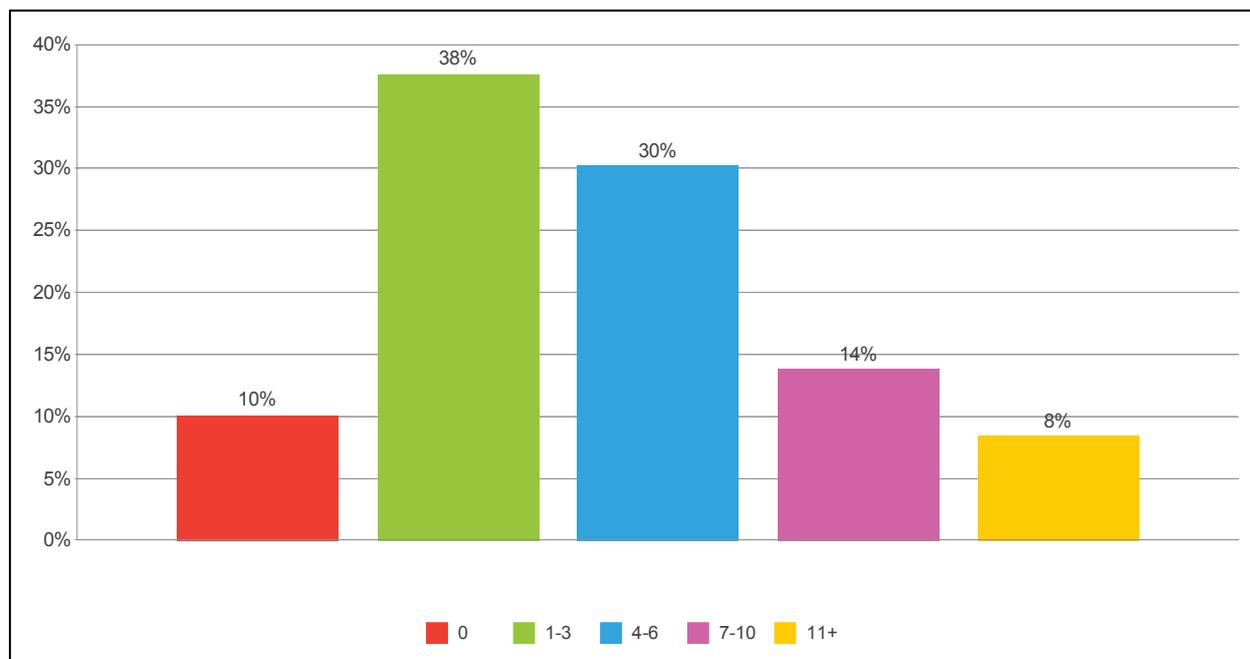
While 55% of the respondents reported being able to see a specific doctor it is apparent that patients cannot always see a specific doctor due to the heavy demand on appointments.

Triage systems are being trialled at some practices which allow this. The idea of the



“Family Doctor” who knows you and your medical history is important for some patients, and is supported by the recent Government moves to have “over 70s” given specific GPs.

Q3) In the past 12 months, how many times have you seen a doctor from your practice?



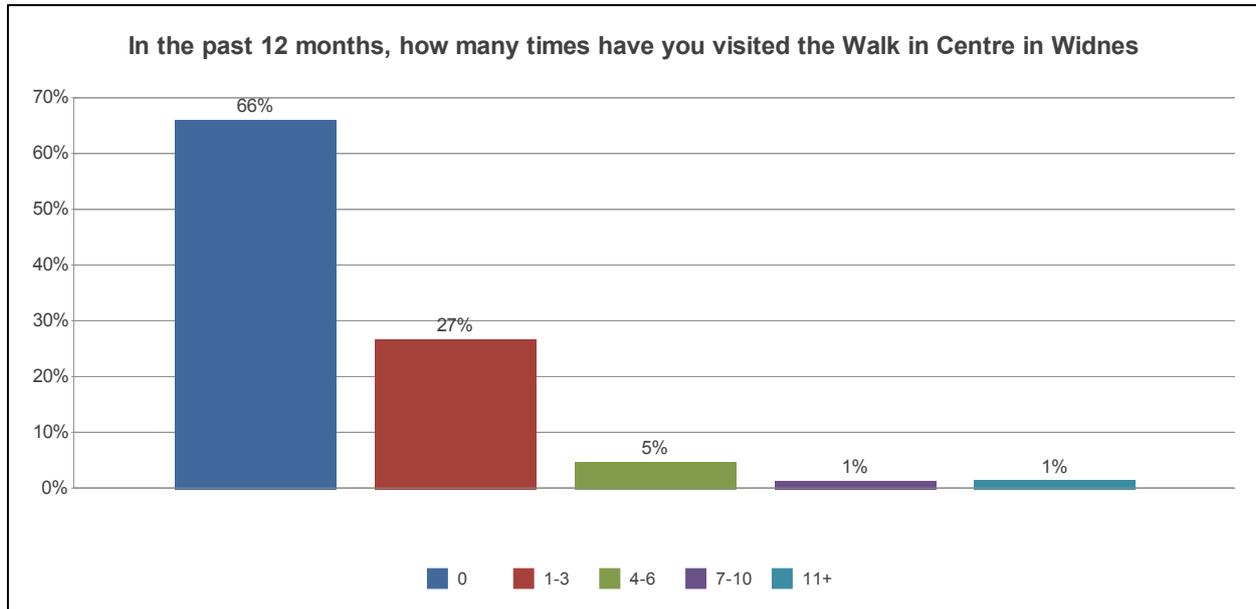
48% of respondents had visited the GP less than 4 times in the previous 12 months or conversely 52% had visited at least 4 times, with 22% averaging a minimum of a visit every 2 months and 8% visiting on average at least once a month.

Healthwatch Comment

These figures indicate the heavy workload placed on the GP Practices and high demand for appointments.



Q4) In the past 12 months how often have you visited the walk-in centre in Widnes?



Only 34% of respondents to the survey had used the Walk-in centre in the previous 12 months.

Of those who had visited the Walk-in Centre, the majority, 66%, were patients from Widnes based GP practices. 39% of users were aged 25-49. About 9% of people used the centre more than 4 times a year.

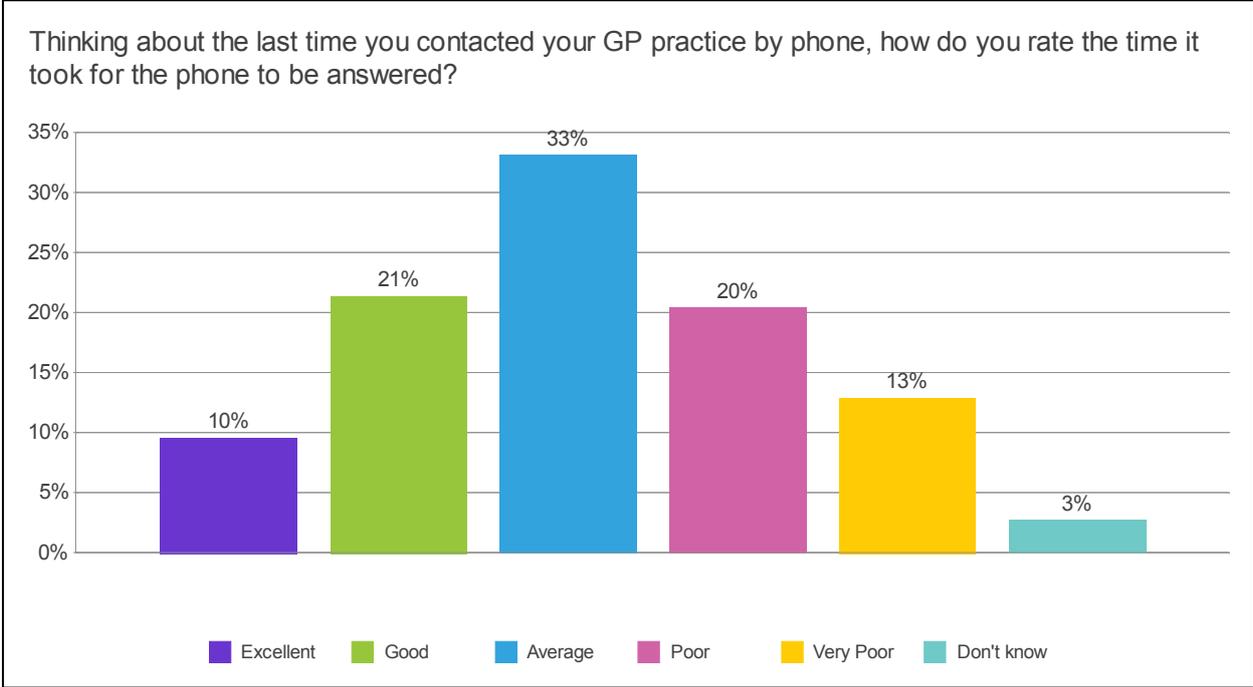
Healthwatch Comment

From the figures it can be seen that the walk-in-centre in Widnes is not necessarily thought of as a suitable alternative for patients from Runcorn who are unable to access their GP.

Hopefully, the plans for a new urgent care centre in Runcorn should provide a welcome boost to Runcorn patients.



Q5) Thinking about the last time you contacted your GP practice by phone, how do you rate the time it took for the phone to be answered?



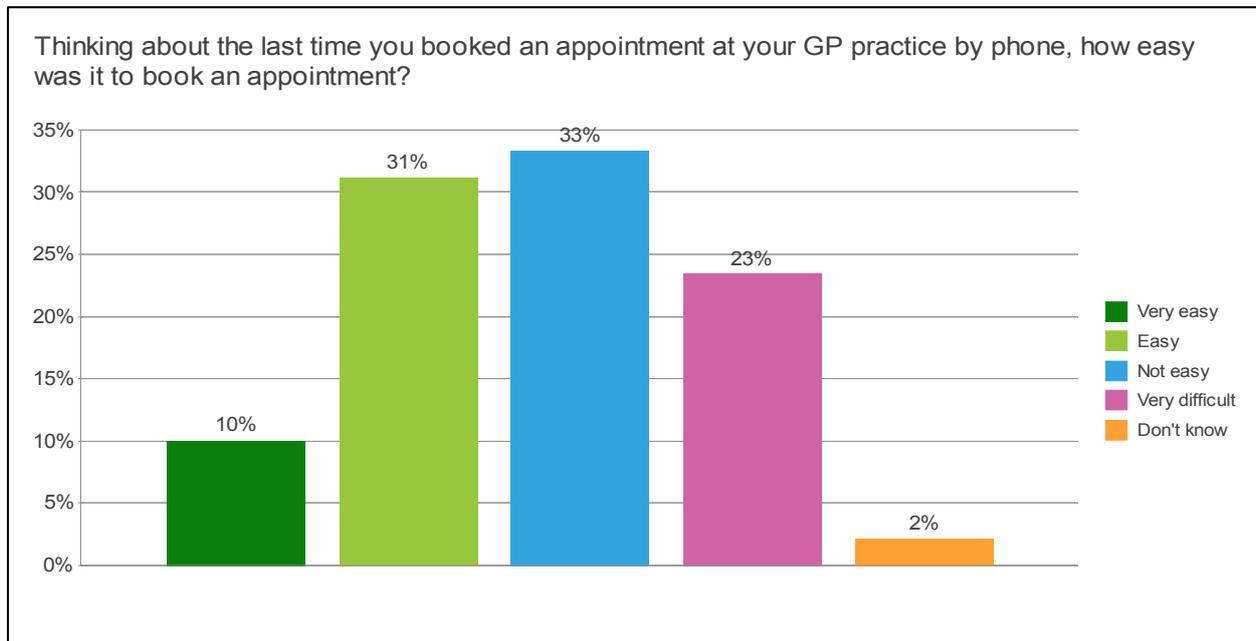
31% rated the time it took for the phone to be answered, good or excellent, whereas 33% felt the response time to be poor or very poor.

Survey Comment

'Last time I phoned I waited 47 minutes to speak to the receptionist'



Q6) Thinking about the last time you booked an appointment at your GP Practice by phone, how easy was it to book an appointment?



41% felt that it was easy or very easy to book an appointment, while 56% found it very difficult or not easy. Across all age ranges at least 50% of respondents found difficulties in booking appointments over the phone. On further analysis it was found that people in the over 65 age grouping found it slightly more difficult than those below 65.

On breaking these figures down by individual practice we found that the poorest performing practice only had 19% of respondents happy with booking appointments over the phone.

Survey Comments

“I find the automated system doesn't help you to choose the doctor you want-he is never available”

“Don't like the appointment arrangements.8.00am till 8.30am - many times when you get through they are all taken so you have to try again the next day.”

“It's very difficult to get an appointment. The phone line is very busy and when you do get through there are no appointments left, which is why I have had to use the walk-in centre”

“Could call you at home if somebody doesn't turn up (or cancels) their appointment so I could use their appointment for that day if I would like to and aren't doing anything that day.”



Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

This may be a function of the phone systems at the practices. The systems take the call, but then put the caller in a queue, often involving a waiting time which can cause some frustration.

This is probably the most contentious area within the survey responses, and the one where we believe improvements can be made.

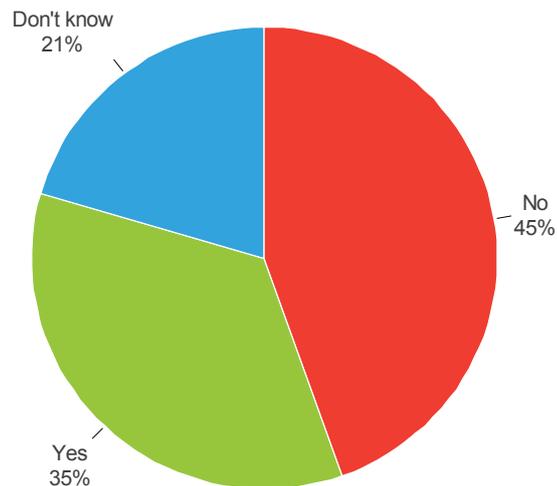
It is clear from the responses that some systems appear to be working much better than others. Telephone booking systems should be reviewed and compared across the borough and good practice should be identified and shared.

Ease of use and accessibility for patients should be the key consideration.



Q7) Does your practice advise you to phone at a different time of the day if you want an appointment in say 1 week's time?

Q7 Does your practice advise you to phone at a different time of the day if you want an appointment in say 1 weeks time?



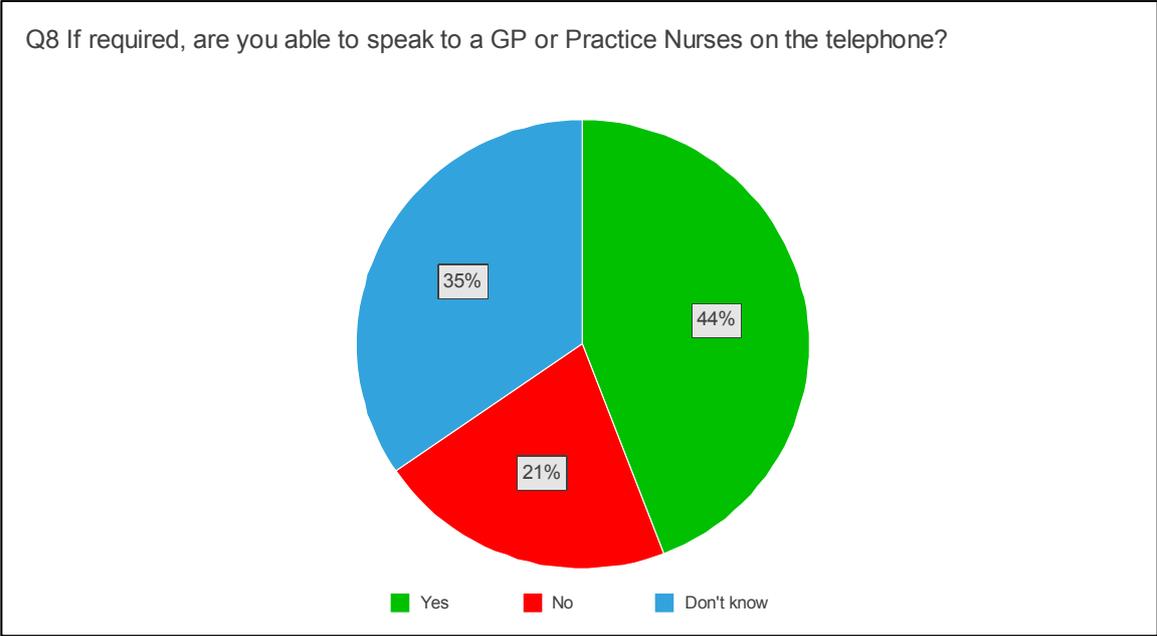
35% of practices advise to ring at a different time of the day for an appointment in a week's time. 21% reported "Don't know" in response to this question.

Survey comment

"It is also difficult to make a non-urgent appointment with a GP up to 2 weeks in advance."



Q8) If required are you able to speak to a GP or Practice Nurse on the phone?



While 44% said they were able to speak to a GP/Nurse, 21% responded “no” and 35% responded “Don't know”.

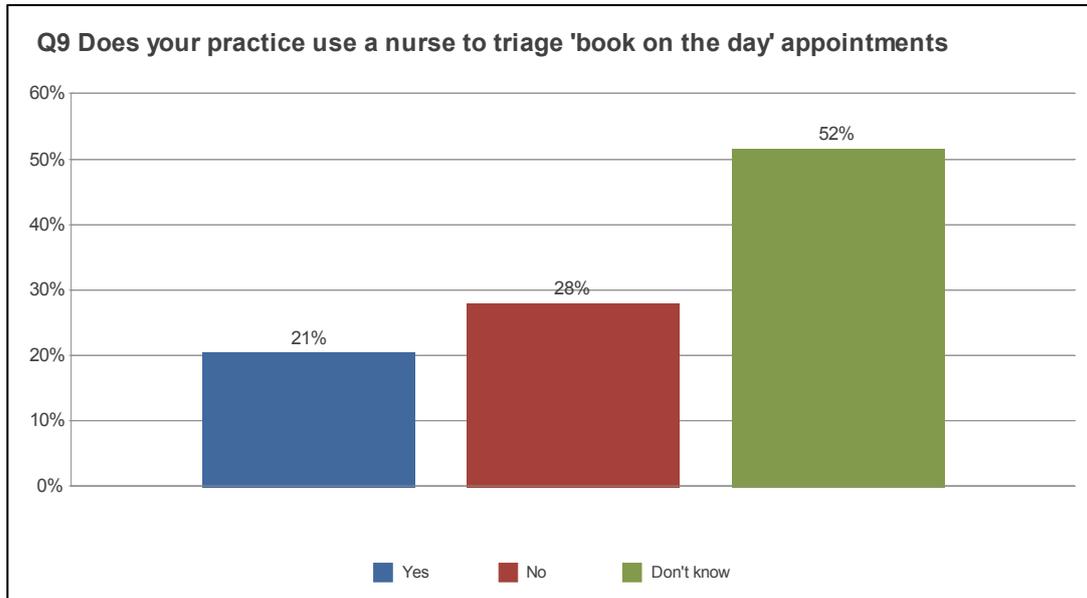
Healthwatch Comments

We looked a little deeper into the answers received on this question. Across all but one practice we received ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers to this question. There may be a number of factors for this:

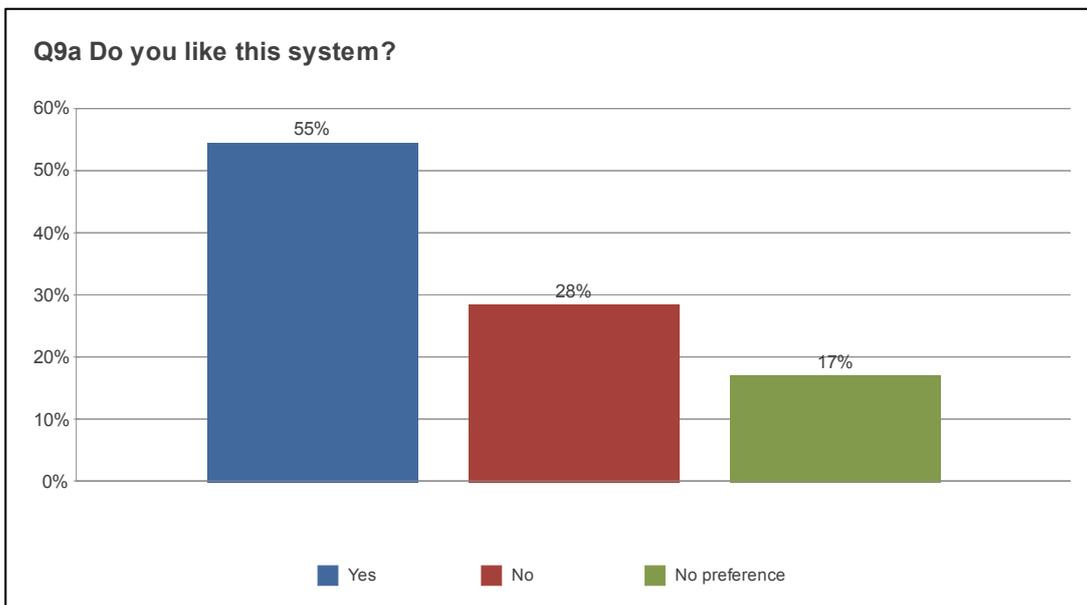
- Lack of information / awareness of the services provided by the practice
- It may also reflect some confusion about what triage is and how the triage systems work at some practices.
- The willingness of GPs and Patients to use a telephone consultation may be a factor.



Q9) Does your practice use a nurse to triage 'book on the day' appointments?



Q9a) If you answered 'Yes' do you like this system?



Survey comment

“Triage makes you feel like you have to justify an appointment, makes you wait to get a phone call and doesn't let you see the doctor you want”

Healthwatch Comment

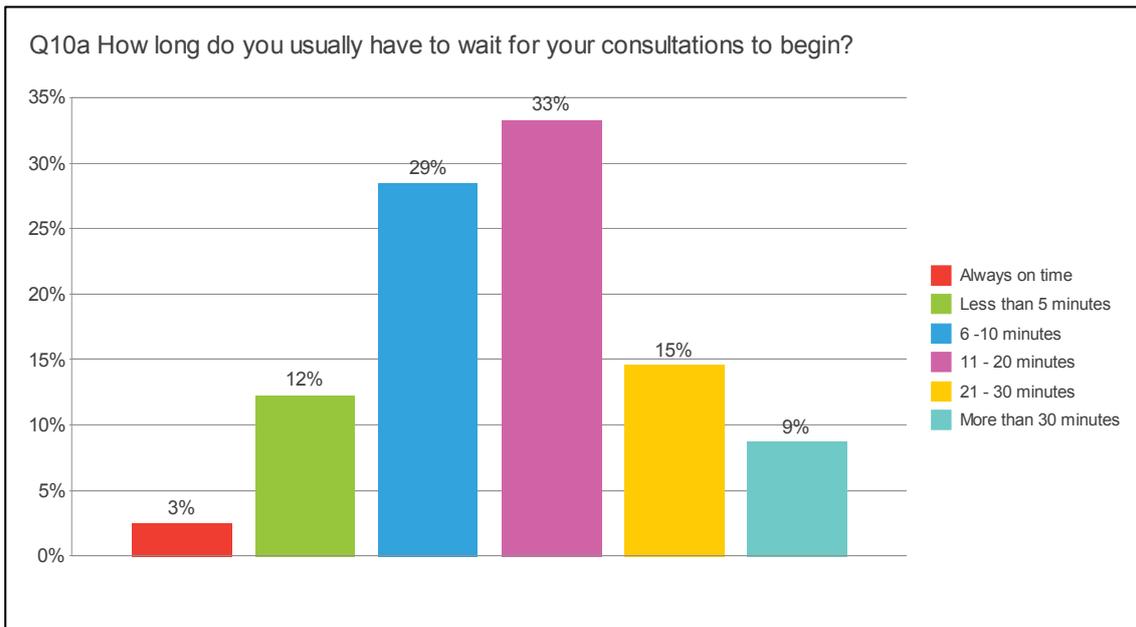
As with the answers to Q8 there appears to be some confusion amongst the public as to what triage is and whether it is offered at every practice. 21% indicated that a nurse was used to triage “book on the day” appointments, and 52% replied, “Don't know”.



Triage systems have not been running for long, and there appears to be some resistance to a Nurse rather than a Doctor triage.

As can be seen from the answers to Q9a, of those people who've used the 'Triage' system, there is an almost 2 to 1 majority who like the system.

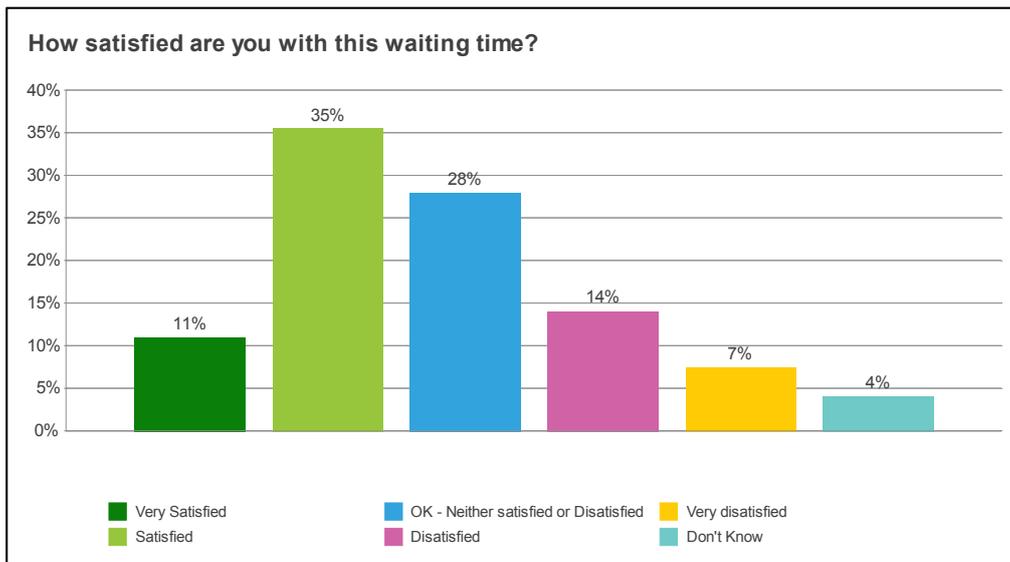
Q10a) How long do you usually have to wait for your consultations to begin?



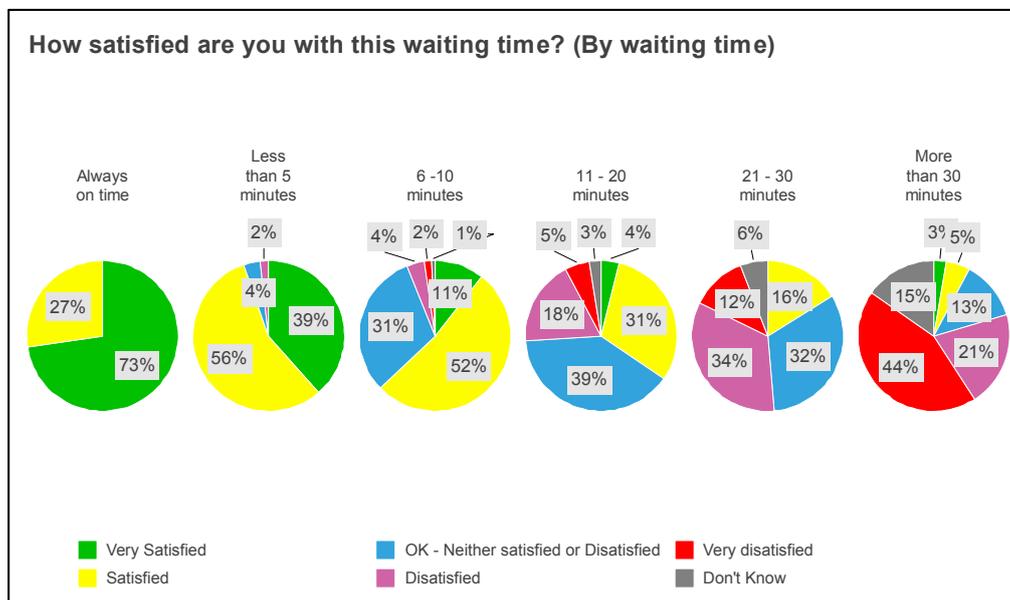
44% of people reported a waiting time of ten minutes or less while 24% reported having to wait more than 20 minutes to see the GP.



Q10b) How satisfied are you with this waiting time?



The overall satisfaction rates are shown above. 46% stated that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the time they had to wait as opposed to 21% who were 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. While these statistics were useful to give an overall rating we felt we needed to look deeper into the answers. We broke this question down by looking at the amount of time waited and the satisfaction rate with that length of time.

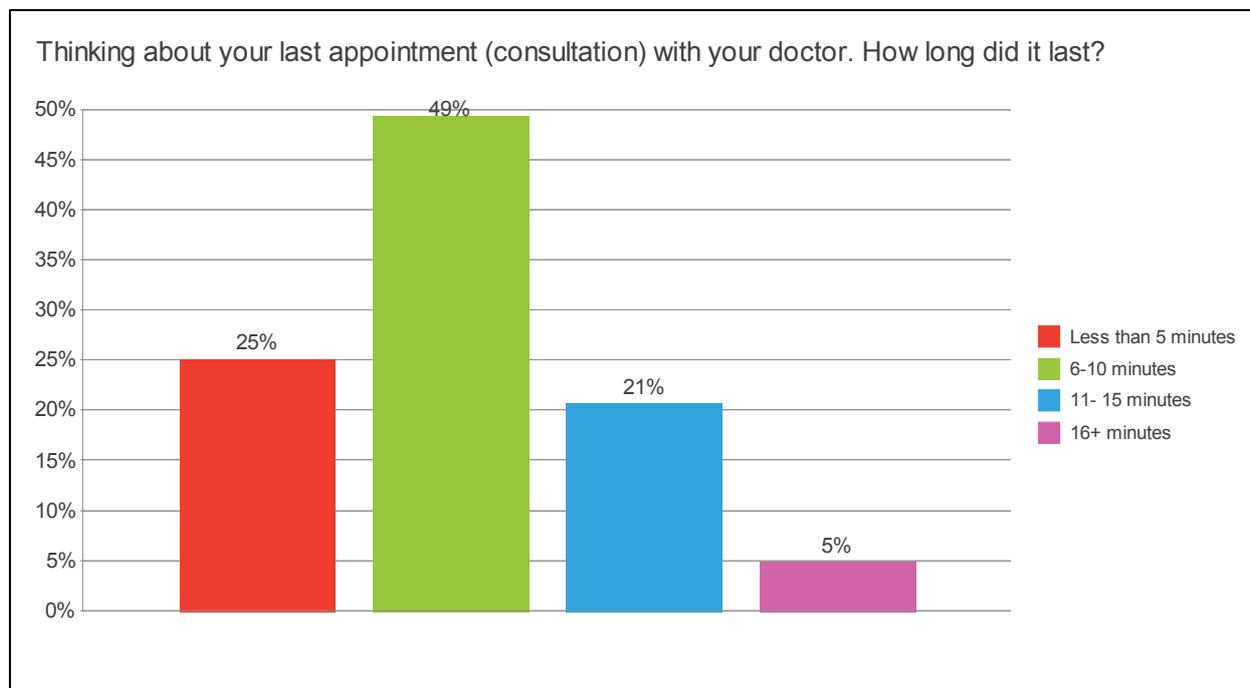


Healthwatch Comment

As can be seen from the chart above, patients are generally tolerant of waiting times of up to 10 minutes, as they appreciate the Doctor is seeing other patients who perhaps require that extra attention. Beyond 10 minutes the dissatisfaction rate grows quite quickly. Delays can happen, that is a fact of life. Making sure that people are told the reason for the delays allows them a choice, wait or re-book for another time. People like to be kept informed!



Q11) Thinking about your last appointment with your doctor. How long did it last?



49% of consultations lasted 6-10 minutes and 25% lasted less than five minutes which seemed to be balance off against the 26% of appointments that lasted longer than 10 minutes

Survey Comments

"GPs never have enough time for you. You can only see a doctor for "one" problem in "one" visit-no more"

"My Practice has a person centred commitment to patient care and communication"

"The Doctors at my surgery are all good and I don't mind who I see"

Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

The single complaint per consultation rule has caused some concern among patients. Some practices have a "double appointment" system but this not a common process.

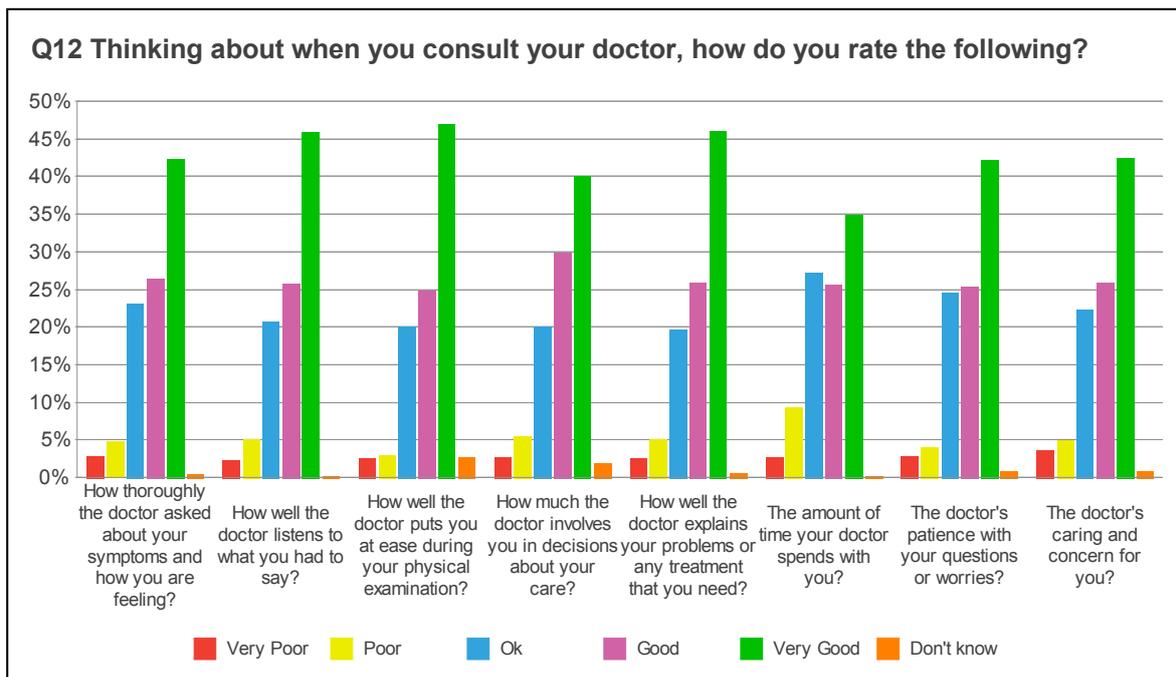
Double slots should also be made available and promoted to People with a Learning Disability/Learning Difficulty in order for them to have enough time to ask and answer questions.



Question 12 asked a series of questions on how people rated their GP on eight aspects of the consultation.

Some people commented that it was hard to assess this because they did not see the same GP at each appointment. Patients reported that they like to see one particular GP in order to build up a relationship and knowledge of their medical history.

Q12) Thinking about when you consult your doctor, how do you rate the following?



12a) How thoroughly the Doctor asked about your symptoms and how you are feeling.

68% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 8% rating their doctor as 'Poor' or Very Poor'

12b) How well the Doctor the Doctor listens to what you had to say.

72% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 7% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

12c) How well the Doctor put you at ease during your physical examination

72% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 6% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

12d) How much the Doctor involves you in decisions about your care

70% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 8% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.



12e) How well the Doctor explains your problems or any treatment that you need

72% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 8% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

12f) The amount of time your Doctor spends with you

61% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 12% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

12g) The Doctor's patience with your questions or worries

67% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 7% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

12h) The Doctor's caring and concern for you

69% rated their doctor 'Good' or 'Very Good' while 9% reported 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

Survey Comments

"I am very happy with my GP Practice"

"Dr X is a brilliant Doctor"

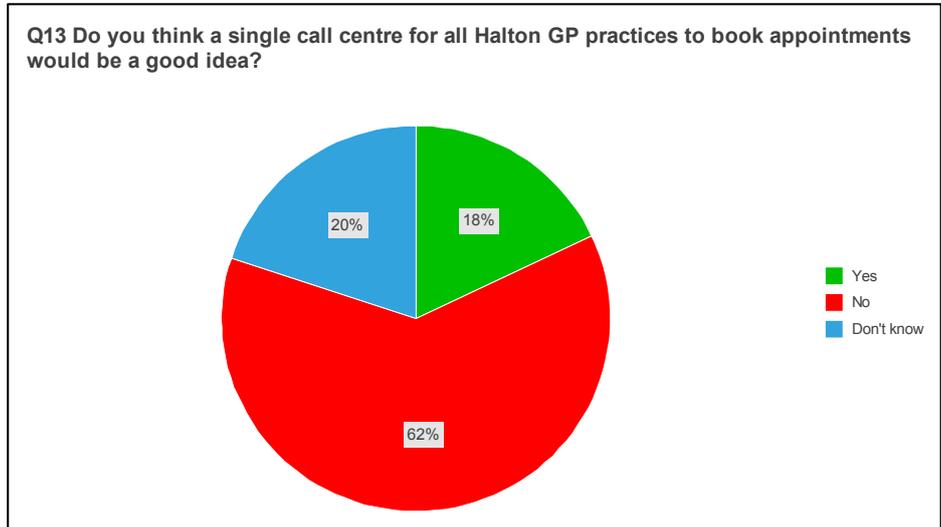
"It depends on the doctor I get as to how happy with the service I am -the last doctor I saw was good and listened, so I reflected that in my answer. However some doctors at my practice don't listen as well."

Healthwatch Comment

Generally, our local GP's are rated really highly by their patients, when they can get to see them! As can be seen from the figures for this set of questions, the satisfaction ratings for the Doctors in Halton Practices are all high, ranging from 61% to 72% 'good' or 'very good'. The lowest 'positive' ratings were to do with the amount of time spent with the Doctor and this is no doubt a result of the high demand for face to face consultation. This repeated the general response given to Question 11.

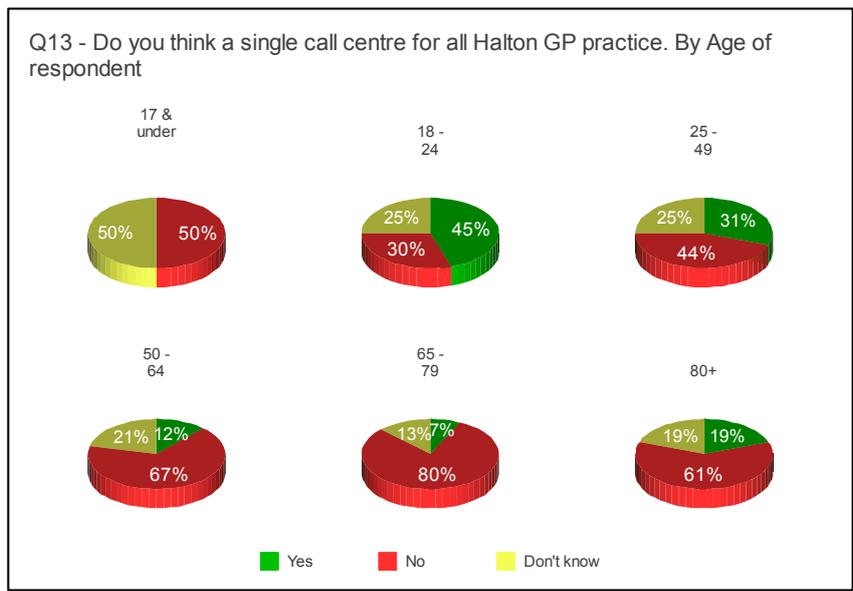
Questions 13 to 19 concern patient views regarding booking appointments.

Q13) Do you think a single call centre for all Halton GP practices to book appointments would be a good idea.



62% did not like this proposal. Possible causes:

- Could be insufficient information, existing problems of booking appointments are multiplied up if more people are trying to get through to one centre.
- Do not know if number of phones in the call centre will be sufficient to get through any better than current situation.
- How will the number of phones needed be assessed?
- Will on-line booking be affected by a call centre?
- Will on-line appointment booking allow patients to book appointments at other practices?



When we looked at the responses by each age group it revealed:

- age 65-79 80% thought it was a bad idea
- age 50-64 67% thought it was a bad idea
- age 25-49 44% thought it was a bad idea
- age 18-24 45% thought it was a good idea

Possible reasons could be that older people prefer to see their own doctor or visit a practice they are familiar with.

Whereas younger people do not mind which doctor they see and access to treatment may be their main priority.

Survey Comment

'On the centralised appointment booking point I've put 'don't know'. If such a service was to work better than the present one I'd whole heartedly approve of it!'

Healthwatch Comment/Recommendation

CCG to take on board patient views on this question. Mitigate patient impact if this proposal is to proceed.

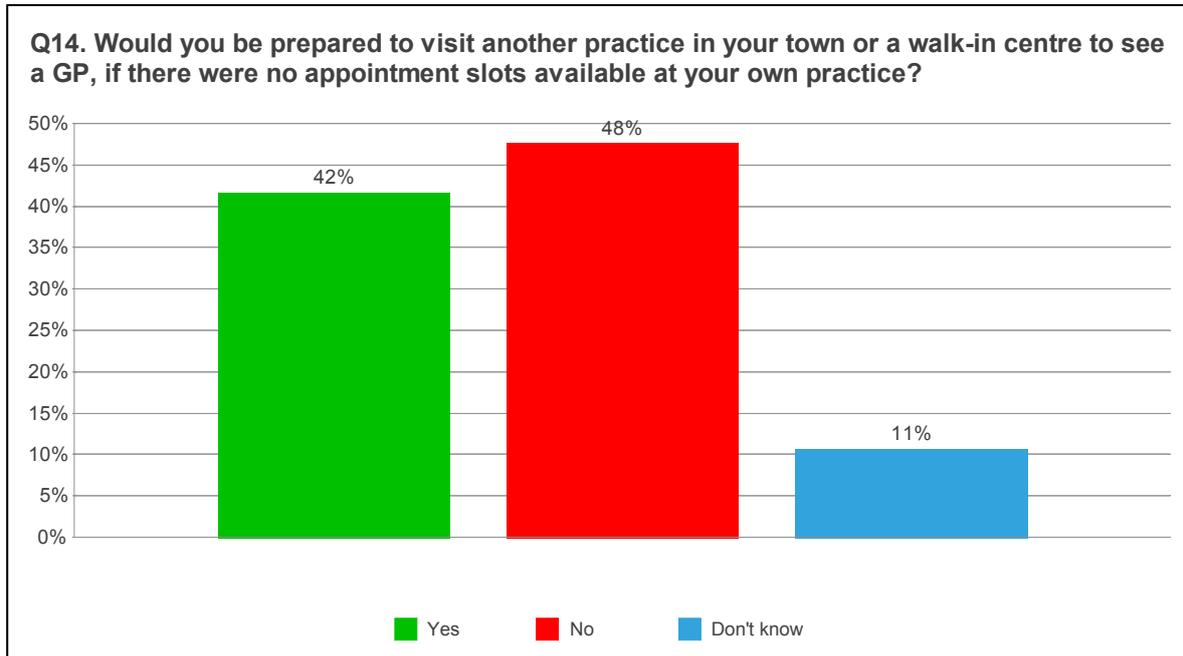
Despite the shortcomings with the telephone booking systems, people are comfortable contacting their own GP Practice for appointments. Unless there are obvious benefits to the patient, (i.e. getting an appointment when they want and with who they want), we can't see a majority of people supporting this.

Whilst Healthwatch understands the predicted shortage of GPs over the longer term, the general public of Halton may not be aware of this.

If the single call centre option was to proceed, more in depth information showing the key reasons should form part of publicity material. Including consultation with interested parties so that all concerned fully understand the reasoning behind the initiative.



Q14) Would you be prepared to visit another practice in your town or a walk-in centre, if there were no appointment slots at your own practice.



48% would not wish to visit another practice or walk-in centre.

Healthwatch Comment

There are a few possible reasons for the 48% 'no' response.

- A fear that their medical records wouldn't be available if they visited another practice or the walk-in centre.
- Some patients, particularly older patients, prefer seeing their own doctor.
- Patients with more complex health conditions, or those without access to a car may prefer to wait and see their own GP.
- Patients who don't have access to a car may also have concerns about travelling to another practice, or the walk-in centre.

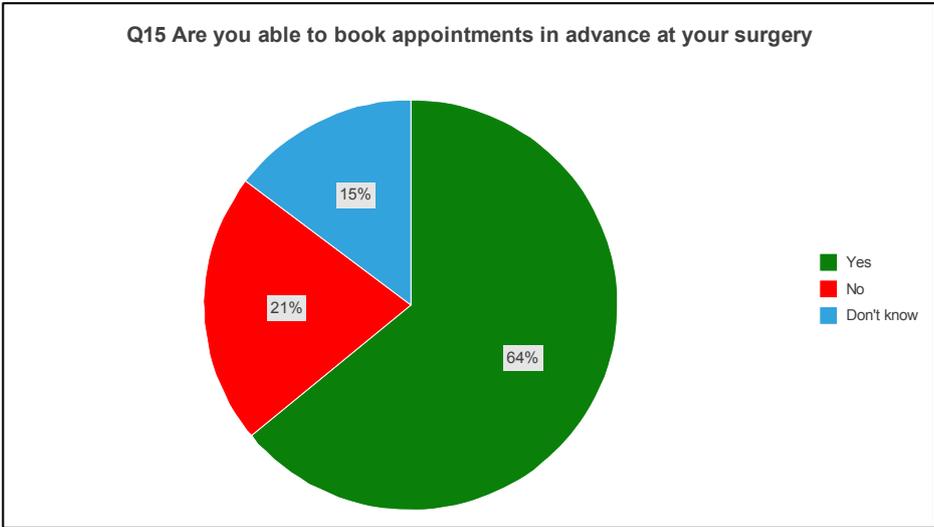
There is a hearts & minds battle to win with the public if this proposal and that of the soon to launch urgent care centres are to succeed. The benefits to the public need to be actively promoted.

Survey Comment

'I find it impossible to get to see a doctor at this surgery... Our practice routinely directs me toward the walk-in centre.'

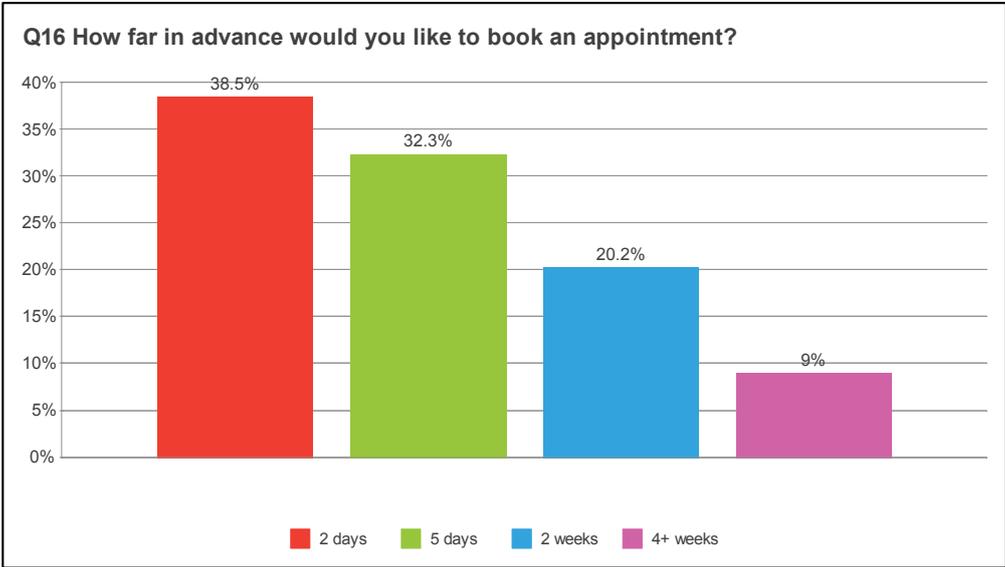


Q15) Are you able to book appointments in advance at your surgery for non-urgent appointments.



64% of patients said they were able to book in advance at their surgery for non-urgent appointments.

Q16) How far in advance would you like to book an appointment.



Nearly 71% would like to be able to book a non-urgent appointment within 1 week, 30% would like to be able to book longer than 1 week in advance.



Survey Comments

Do not like that you are put through to an automated service to try and get an appointment. When you do it is usually for 3 weeks in advance so you have to visit in person at opening time to try and obtain an earlier appointment'

I find the automated system doesn't help you to choose the doctor you want - he is never available'

It is also difficult to make a non-urgent appointment with a GP for up to 2 weeks in advance. My last appointment I had to wait 4 weeks!

The next available appointment was 2 weeks later and this was with a practice nurse so I just accepted it.

Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

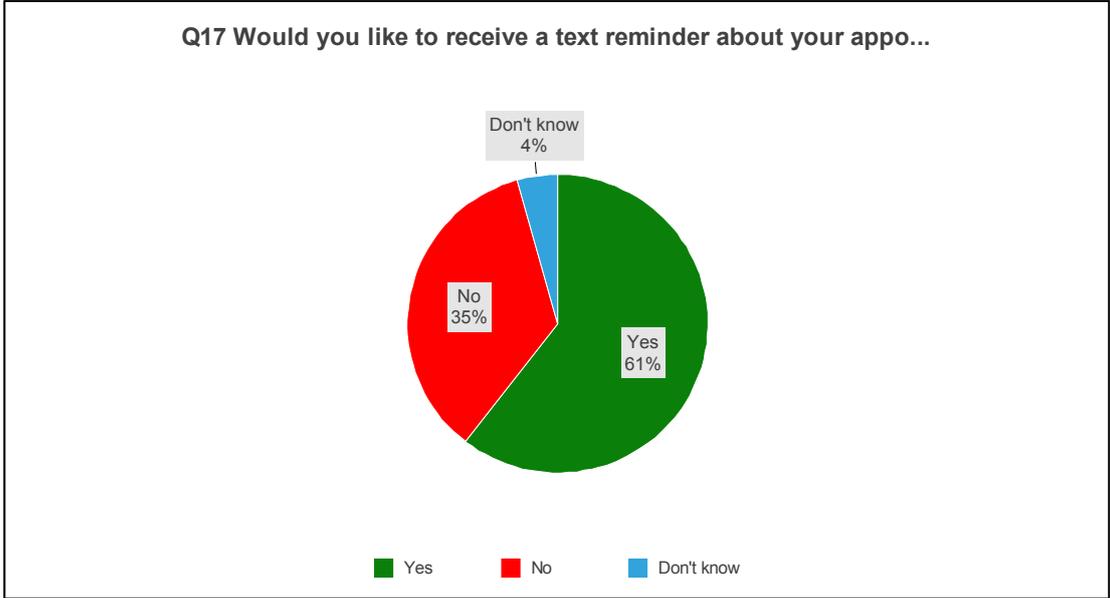
From the responses received there seems to be some confusion over this service. Patients at the same practices gave different answers. Some said they could make advance appointments, some said they couldn't and as always some people were unsure.

We'd like to see clear information on whether patients can make advance appointments, and more importantly, how to make advance appointments.

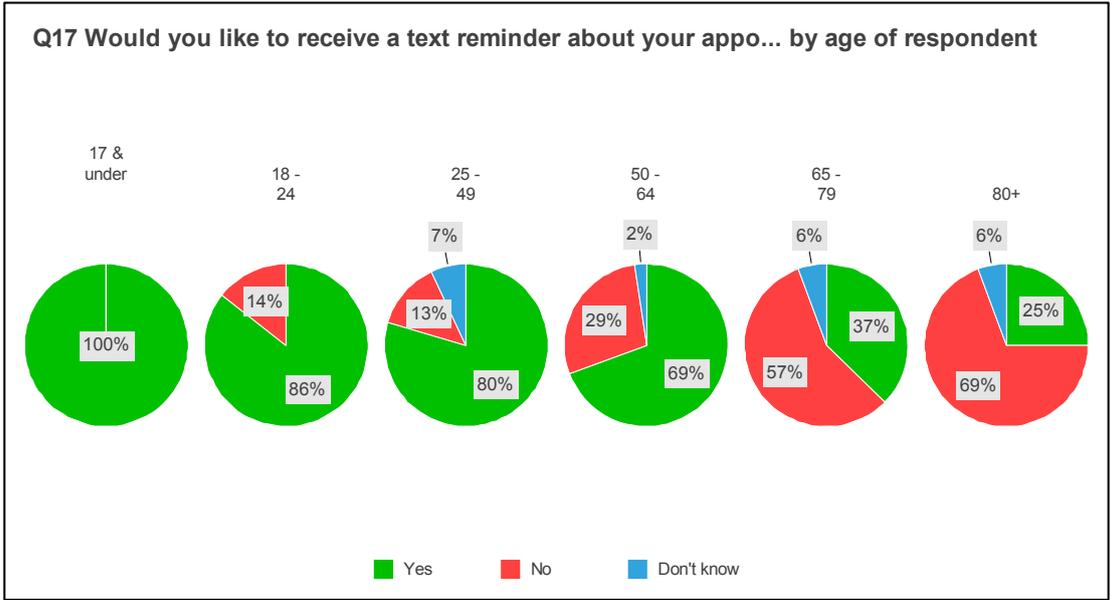
We are aware that the DNA (Did Not Attend) rate increases with advance appointments and we feel that this is something that individual patients need to take responsibility for as well. Text reminders for advance appointments may reduce the rates of DNA.

Presumably the 21% who said their practice doesn't offer advance appointments end up accessing their GP by using the urgent same day appointment system?

Q17) Would you like to receive a text reminder about your appointment.



61% of patients would like the option of a text reminder for their appointment.



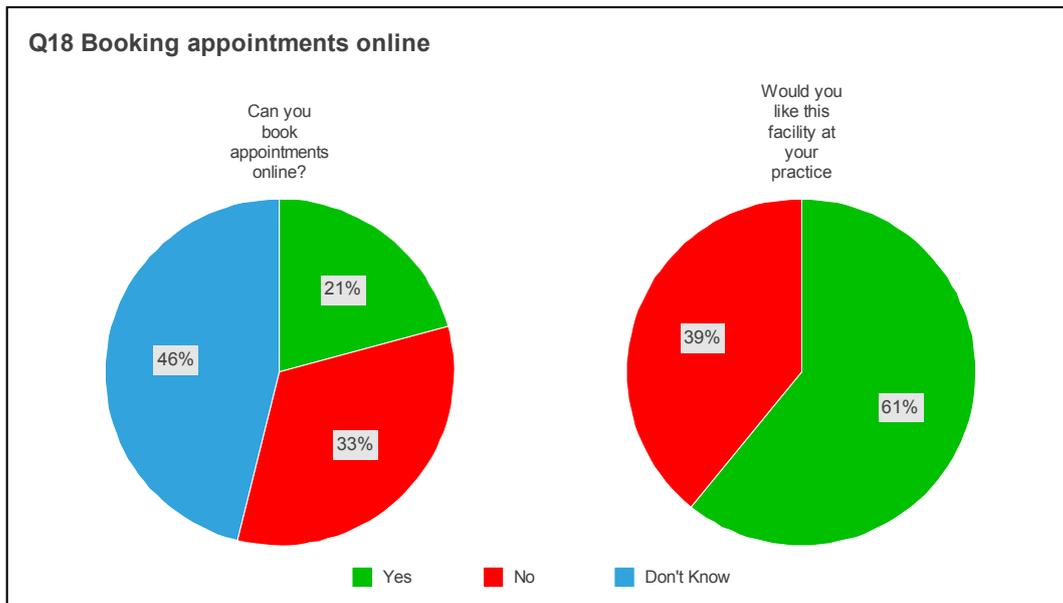
Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

Breaking the responses down by age group, (see chart above), we can see that this option is favoured mainly by the under 65's. We would expect it to be optional to sign up to a text reminder service so people would have the choice as to whether to take advantage of this service or not.

Currently not all practices offer this service. In those that have, not all people are aware of them or have signed up for it yet. Those practices that don't yet have this facility should actively look into providing this service.



Q18a) Can you book appointments on line?



Only 21% of patients said they were able to book appointments online. Our background research has shown that currently 60% of local practices offer this facility.

46% of patients did not know if appointments could be booked on line.

Those people who answered 'No' or 'Don't Know' were asked a supplementary question 18b

Q18b) If not would you like this facility at your practice?

61% of those who answered 'No' or 'Don't Know' to question 18a would like to have the option of online appointment booking.

Q18a&b) Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

Information regarding on-line booking may not be currently advertised in the practices. GP practices should raise awareness with patients of this facility.

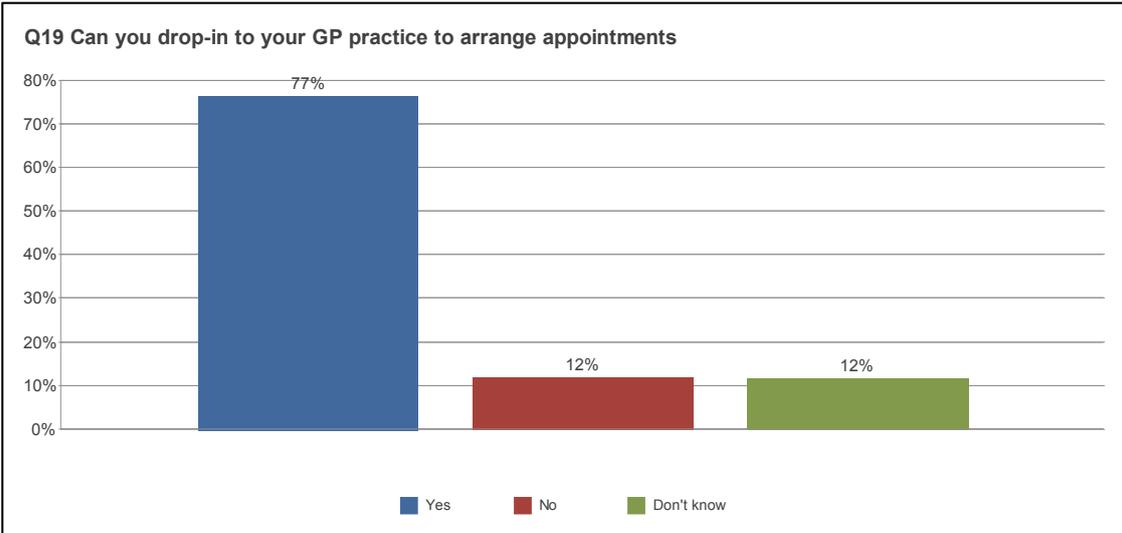
Recognising that we live in an 'online' age, it will become increasingly important to offer online booking for appointments.

Healthwatch Halton is aware that from April 2015, all GP practices will have to offer patients the opportunity to book appointments online, order repeat prescriptions online, and have access to their medical records online. According to our research 10 out of 17 local practices currently have an online appointment booking service operating. More needs to be done to make sure the systems used will be user friendly and encourage patients to take advantage of the online service.

Practices should always remember though that not all patients will have internet access, therefore online booking should be just one of a range of ways that patients can book appointments.



Q19) Can you drop in to your GP practice to arrange appointments?



77% of patients can drop in the practice to book appointments. It is not clear if this applies to same day booking between 8am to 8.30am or dropping in to book a non-urgent appointment any time of the day? Additionally not all patients may have access to a telephone.

However, the facility is good!



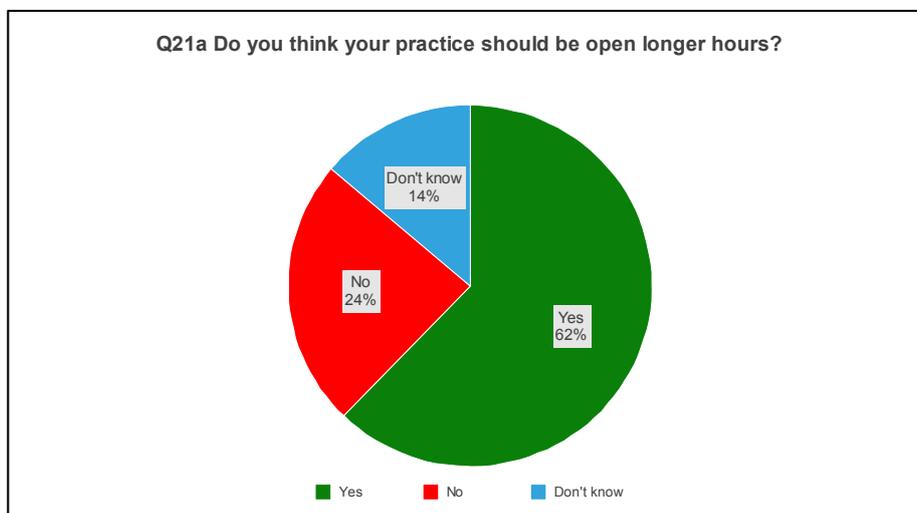
Questions 20 and 21 provide patient feedback on the opening hours of GP practices.

Q20) Do you know the opening hours of your practice?



77% of those surveyed knew the opening hours of the practice.

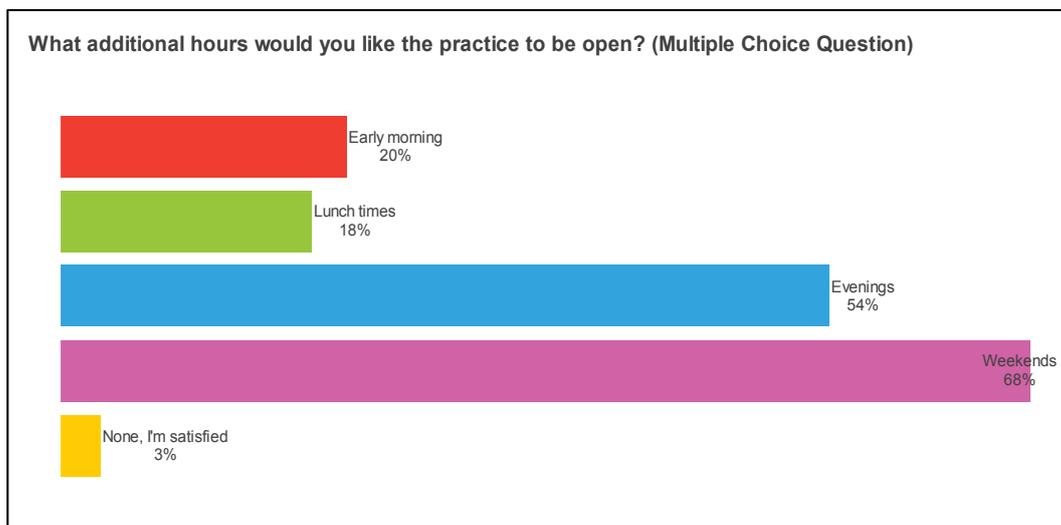
Q21a) Do you think your practice should be open longer?



62% of respondents wanted longer opening hours at practices. We followed up this question with a supplementary question for those who answered 'Yes'.



**Q21b) What additional hours would you like the practice to be open?
(Multiple Choice Question)**



Of those people who wanted their practice open longer hours, the most popular option was weekend opening, followed by evening opening.

Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

While we are pleased to see that the vast majority of patients know the opening hours of their local GP we are concerned that almost 1 in 4 people aren't aware of the opening hours.

Consideration to be given to longer GP practice opening times. With changing work patterns etc. for many people it isn't always easy to arrange appointments at times to suit. We would like to see research carried out into the options for increased opening hours.

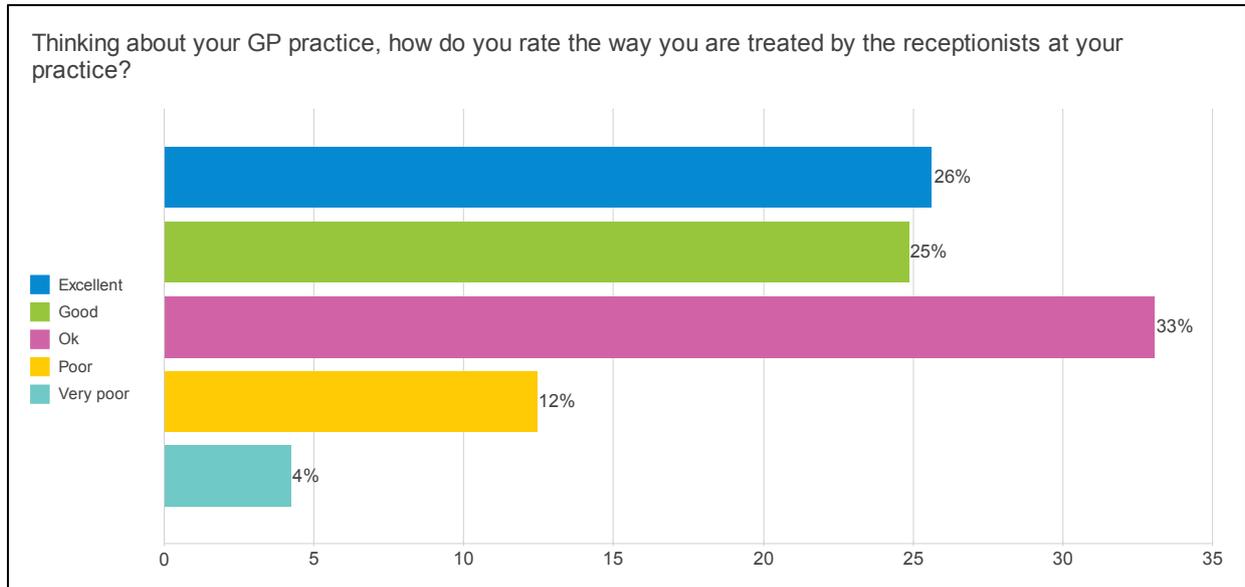
Review GP practice opening hours to ensure that additional opening hours are widely available in the borough, if not uniformly across the borough.

Practices should consult with their patients, possibly through their PPG, to identify popular methods of booking appointments and adopt a variety of the most popular methods so that patients have choice in how they can book an appointment: including in person, by phone, by text and online booking. The particular needs of those, for example with visual impairment or deafness, should be adequately accommodated for within these options.

It would also be of a benefit to see a list of opening hours of GP practices, as well as those of the walk-in centre and minor injuries unit, published on a regular basis within the local press.



Q22) Thinking about your GP practice, how do you rate the way you are treated by the receptionist at your practice?



- 51% of respondents rated the way they were treated by the reception staff as 'excellent' or 'good'.
- 16% of respondents rated the way they were treated by the reception staff as 'poor' or 'very poor'.
- 33% of respondents rated the way they were treated by the reception staff as 'ok'.

Survey Comments

'The receptionists at times can be abrupt, intrusive, unhelpful and unprofessional.'

'Some of the reception staff are really nice and helpful, some are not and refuse to give you an appointment unless you beg'

'The staff are very friendly and very helpful'

'I sigh inwardly when I call up and I recognize this particular receptionist as I know I will have a battle on my hands to get an appointment.'

'The receptionists are always pleasant and chatty'

'Receptionists need to understand that the patients are customers not a hindrance'



Healthwatch Comments / Recommendations

Breaking these figures down by each practice shows up a wider variance, with 6 practices receiving less than a 50% 'good' or 'very good' rating for their reception staff.

We understand that reception staff are 'on the front line' when dealing with patients, who by definition will generally not be feeling too well when they contact the practice. Allowing for this, we still find that too many patients receive a poor level of customer service.

NHS England's 'Improving General Practice - A Call to Action, Phase 1 Report', published in March 2014, stated, *'we will develop quantifiable ambitions for improving overall patient experience of general practice services. This will focus on improving experience of access to services, which we know in turn is linked to convenience of getting an appointment, ease of getting through on the phone and the helpfulness of receptionists.'*

We look forward to these ambitions becoming a reality.

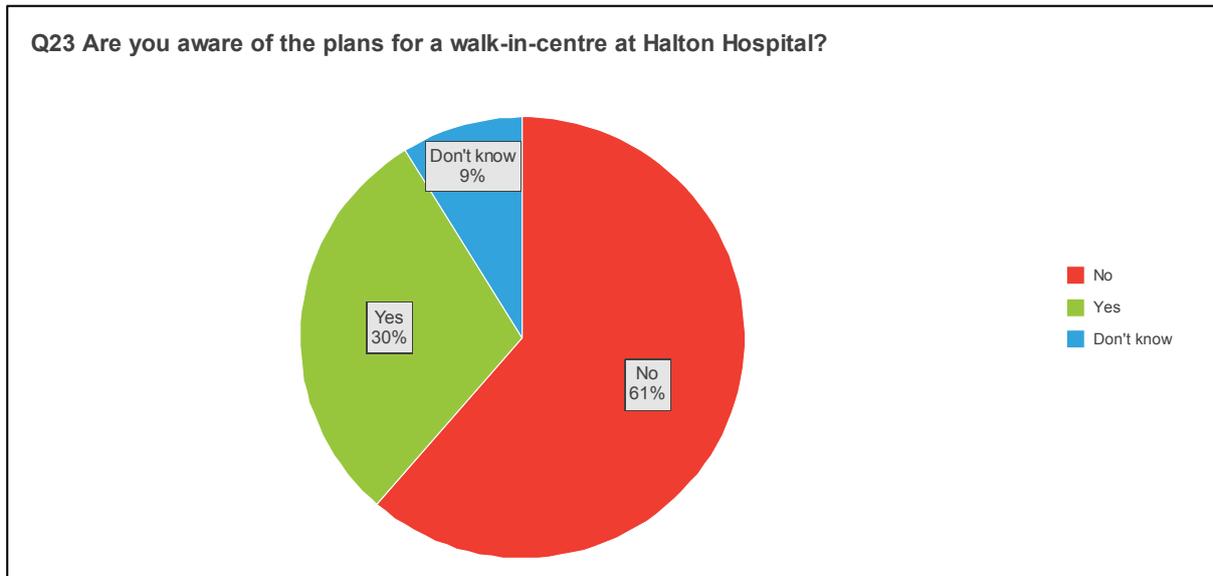
There are obviously some very good reception staff working in our local practices, we'd just like to see a more consistent level of good customer service for all patients across Halton.

We would support one of the approaches listed in Appendix A of NHS England's, 'Improving General Practice - A Call to Action'⁷, being adopted locally, namely,

'A group of practices pool their resources to plan and deliver relevant professional development for their staff. This can easily be aligned with existing priorities for service improvement, and integrated into wider moves to establish a culture of continual learning and improvement. It is easier to ensure it is relevant to the needs of primary care and may be cheaper and more convenient than external CPD opportunities.'

⁷ NHS England - Improving General Practice - A call to action Phase 1 report March 2014 - <http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/emerging-findings-rep.pdf>

Q23) Are you aware of the plans for a walk-in-centre at Halton Hospital?



30% of respondents said they were aware of plans for a walk-in centre/Urgent Care Centre at Halton Hospital.

Healthwatch Comment/Recommendation:

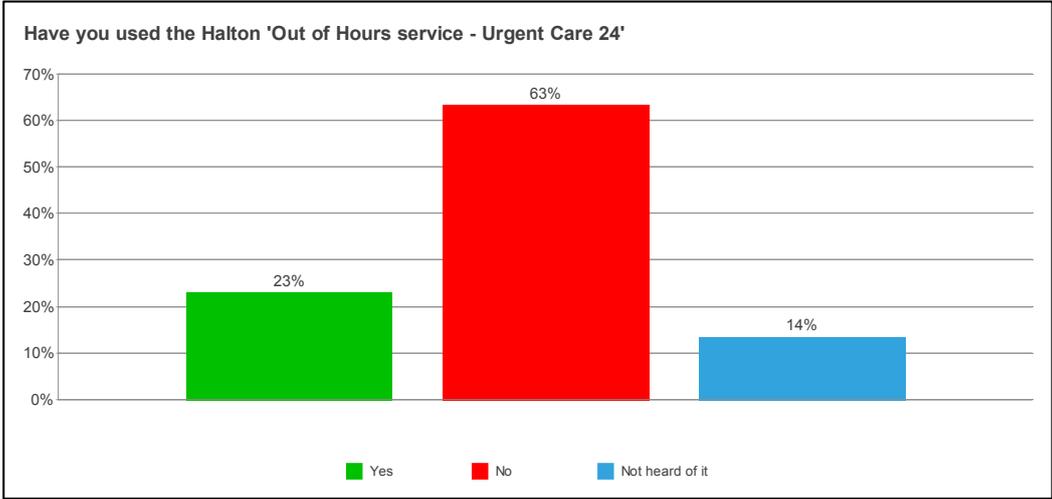
Currently the only 'Walk-in Centre' for Halton is based in Widnes. There are plans underway to open two new 'Urgent Care Centres (UCC)', one in Runcorn & one in Widnes by 2015.

The Widnes UCC will replace the Widnes Walk-in Centre and the Runcorn UCC will be based in Halton Hospital, replacing the existing Minor Injuries Unit.

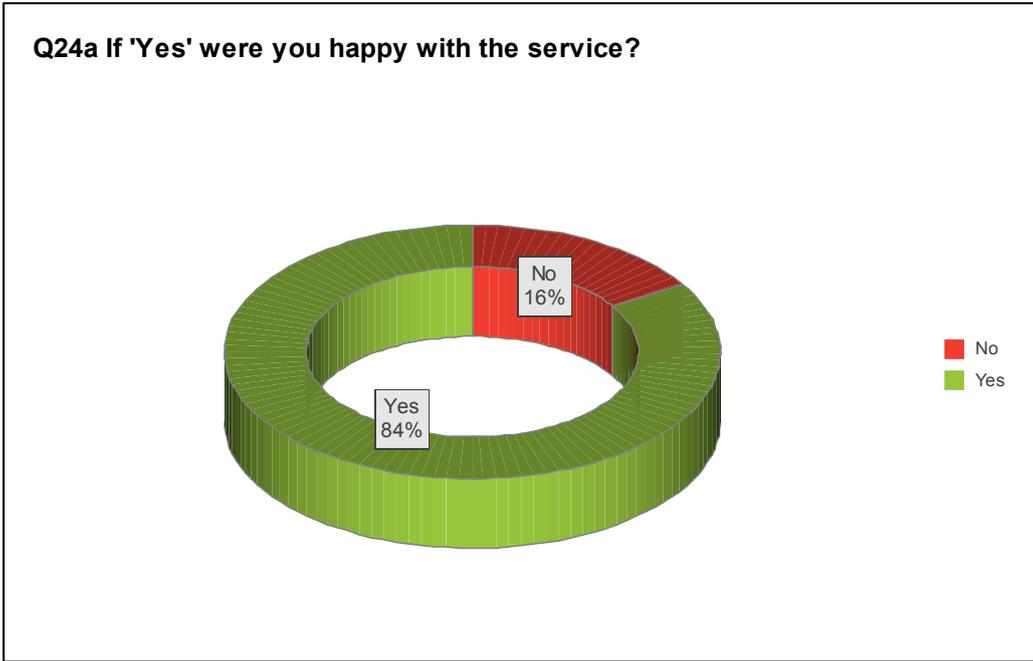
In the run up to these two units opening, we would like to see a borough wide awareness raising campaign to ensure members of the public know what services they will provide and how and when to access the services.



Q24) Have you used the Halton “Out of hours service - Urgent Care 24” in the last 12 months?



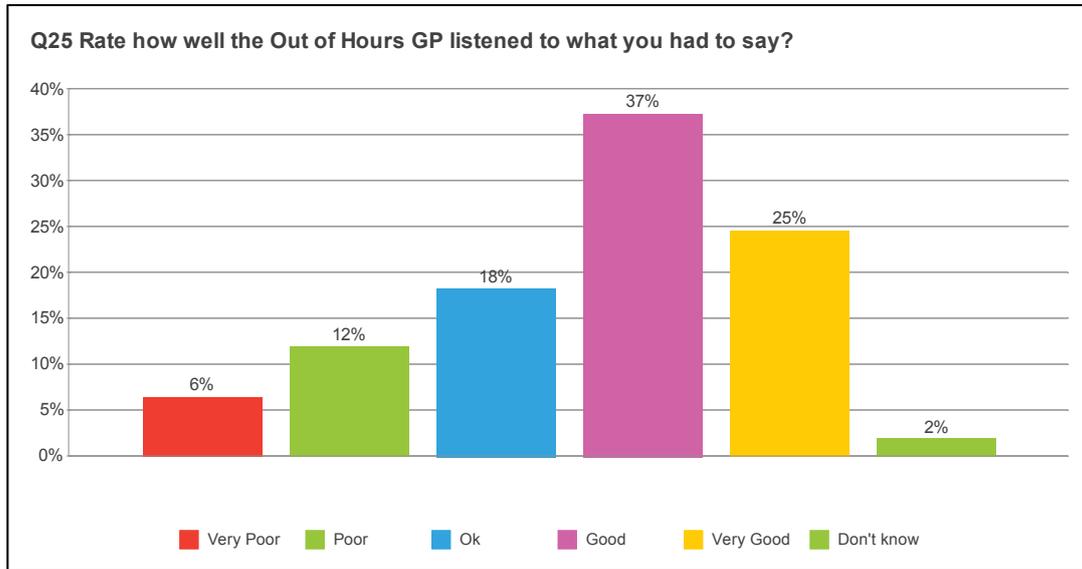
Q24a) If yes, were you happy with the service.



Of the 23% of patients who had used the Out of Hours service, 84% were happy with the service.



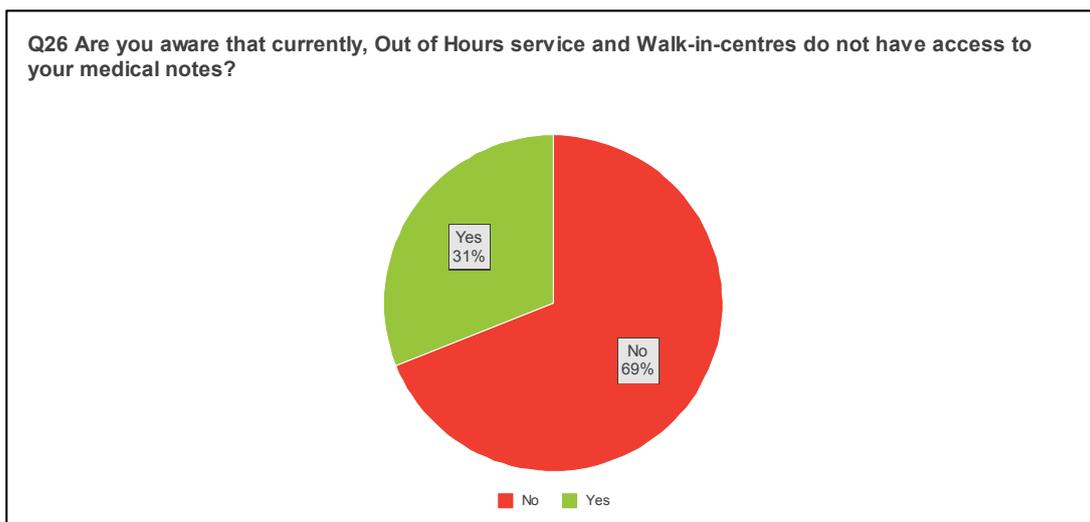
Q25) Thinking about when you've used the Out of Hours service, how do you rate how well the Out of Hours GP listen to what you had to say?



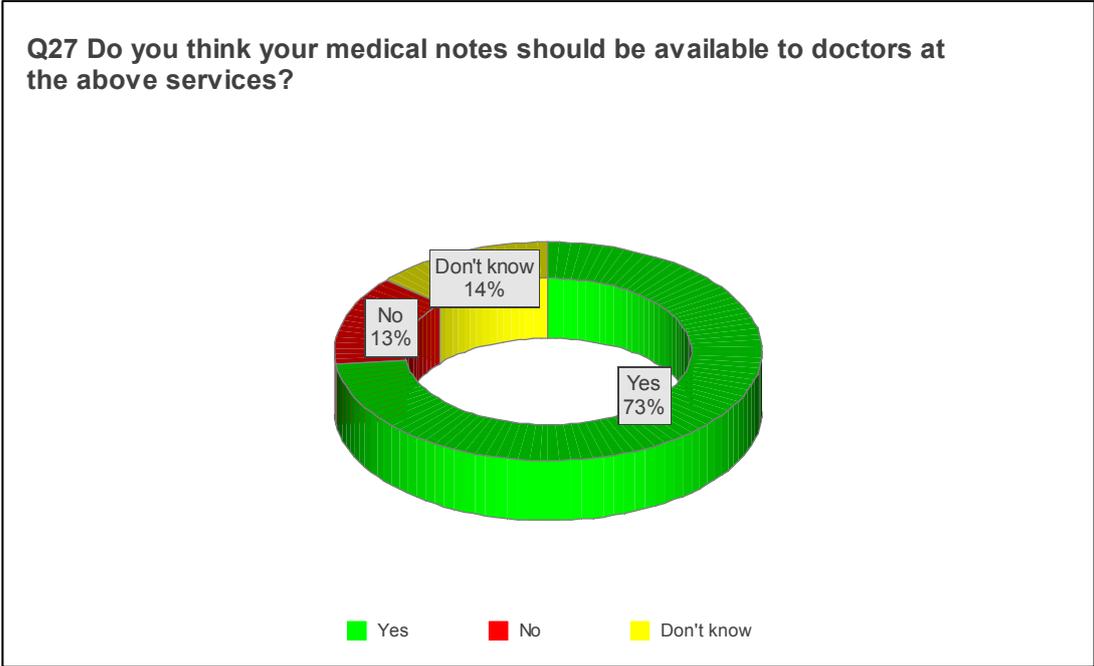
Question 25 was a supplemental question for those people who had used the Out of Hours service during the previous 12 months. While 84% of people were happy with the overall level of service (Q24a), only 62% of patients rated the GP as 'good' or 'very good' at listening to what they had to say (Q25).

18% of patients rated how the GP listened to what they had to say as 'Poor' or 'Very poor'. A further 18% answered 'Ok'.

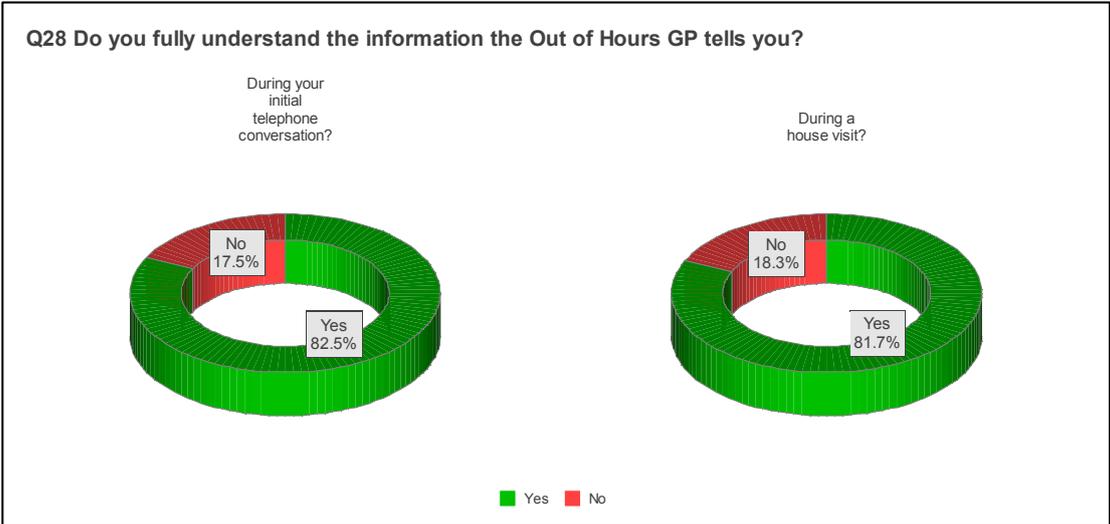
Q26) Are you aware that currently, Out of Hours service and Walk-in Centres do not have access to your medical notes.



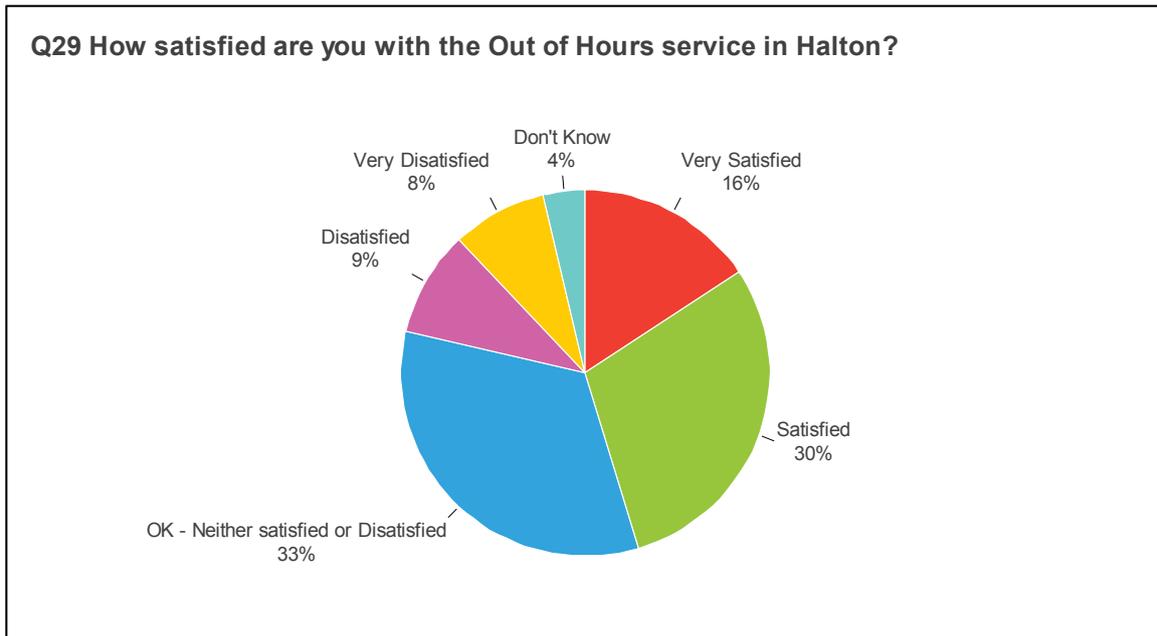
Q27) Do you think your medical notes should be available to the doctors at the above services?



Q.28a & b Do you fully understand the information the Out of Hours GP tells you? a) During your initial telephone conversation? b) During a house visit?



Q.29 How satisfied are you with your Out of Hours service in Halton?



Healthwatch Comment - Out of Hours Service (Q24, Q25, Q28, Q29)

Overall the satisfaction rate with the Out of Hours (OOH) service was good with 84% being happy with the service (Q24a) and 62% being happy with how the OOH GP (Q25) listened to their concerns.

While we are very pleased to note that the majority of people find the service clear and easy to access there are still a significant percentage of people who are finding the service fails to meet their needs.

Whereas Q24 asked for a 'Yes' or 'No' answer to see if people were happy with the OOH service, Q29 broke this down into a wider scale of satisfaction. 46% were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the service, but we still had a figure of 17% who felt let down by the service.

The responses to Q28 show that 18% of people do not fully understand the information the Out of Hours GP tells them either during their initial telephone conversation or during a house visit (Q28a & b). Why would this be? Why would they not understand the information given to them?

Health Professionals should be aware that many patients do not understand medical terms or jargon. Medical Conditions etc. should be explained in easily understood terms.

The public expectations of modern business environments desire performances to be greater than Ok. Therefore we expect there is work to do for improvement in this service.

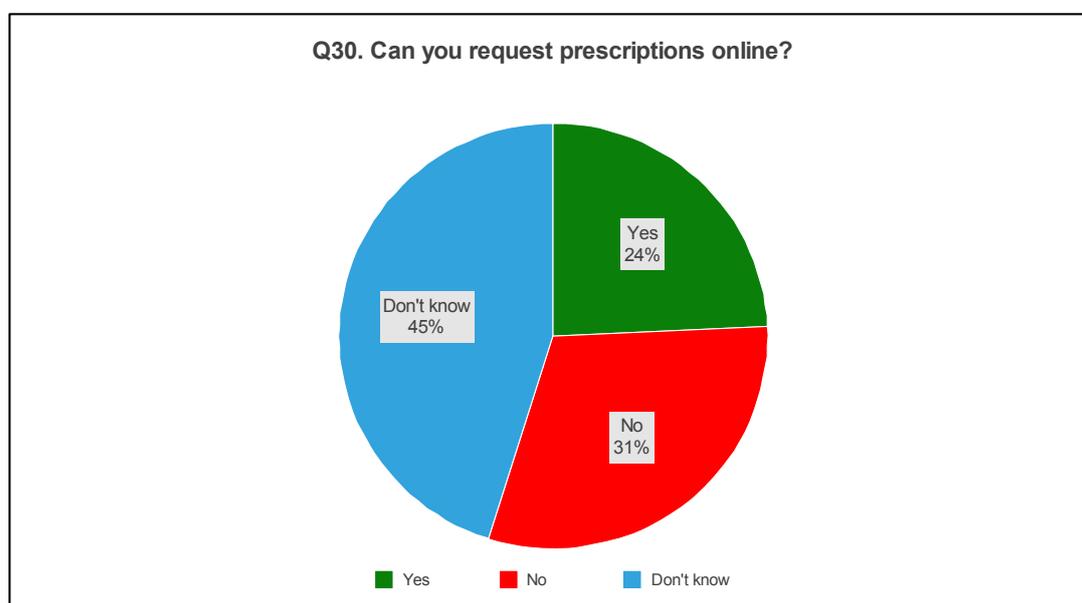
Healthwatch Comments (Q26 & Q27)

Less than 1 in 3 people (Q26) were aware that their medical records weren't available for the Walk-in Centres and Out of Hours service.

From the responses to Q27 we can see that a large majority of patients, 73%, would like a system in place that would allow the Out of Hours service and Walk-in Centre / Urgent Care Centres to have access to their medical notes to aid their consultation and diagnosis.

This would presumably spill over to proposals to pool GP practices covered in Q14. Potentially this would require all GPs serving a particular pool of patients to have access to patient notes for that pool.

Q 30a) Can you request prescriptions on line?



Survey Comment

In theory you can book appointments and order prescriptions online but the security is ridiculous. I bank and shop online with no problem but cannot log on to the new system. They ask over 5 security questions and it makes it impossible for me to get online, even as a regular computer user.'

Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

Just under 1 in 4 people said they were able to request repeat prescriptions online. Yet our survey, Q30b, shows 75% of respondents would like this option.

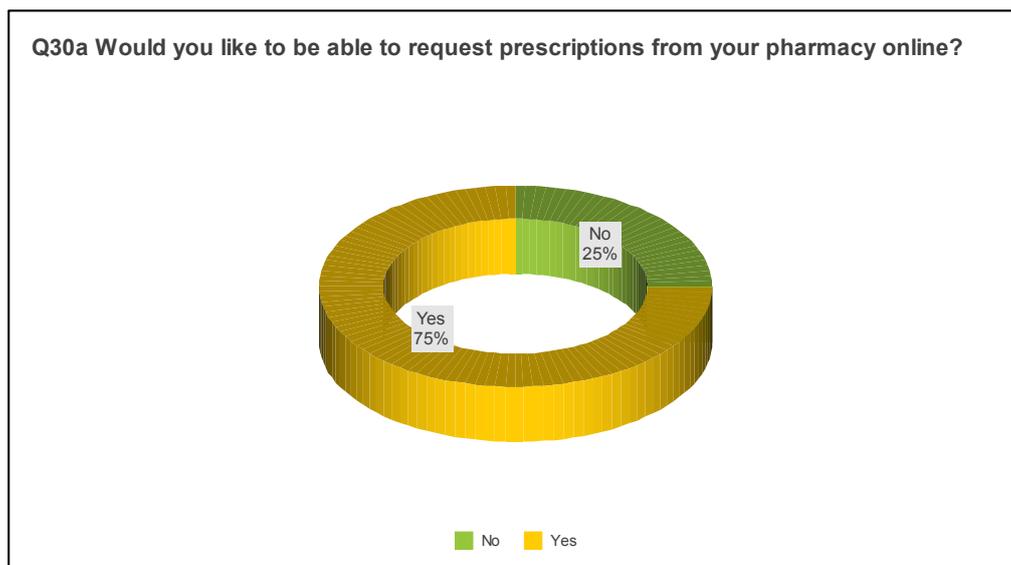
Healthwatch Halton is aware that from April 2015, all GP practices will have to offer patients the opportunity to order repeat prescriptions online.

According to our background research 60% of local practices have introduced online ordering for repeat prescriptions. It seems that a lot of patients at practices in the 60% aren't yet aware of this service. For those practices that already offer this facility it appears there is still a lot of work to do to make patients aware of it.

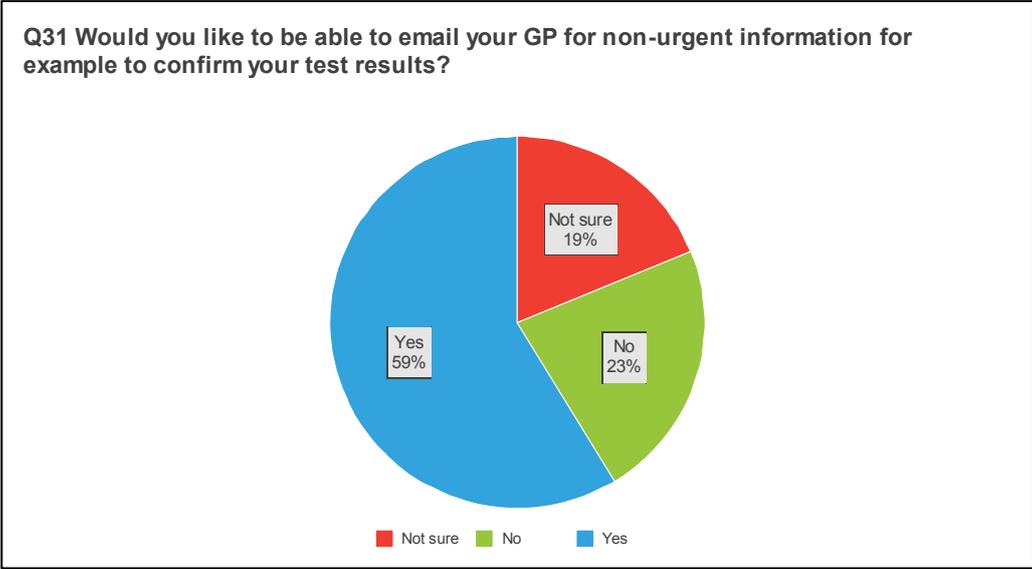
For those practices that are planning to implement this by April 2015 we would recommend that they actively promote this new facility for patients as widely as possible.

As with telephone appointment system, accessibility and ease of use for patients is paramount.

Q30b) If not would you like this facility at your practice?



Q31) Would you like to be able to email your GP Practice for non-urgent information, for example to confirm your test results?



59% of respondents would like the option to be able to email for non-urgent information. When we looked at responses from the under 50 age group those in favour rose to 77%.

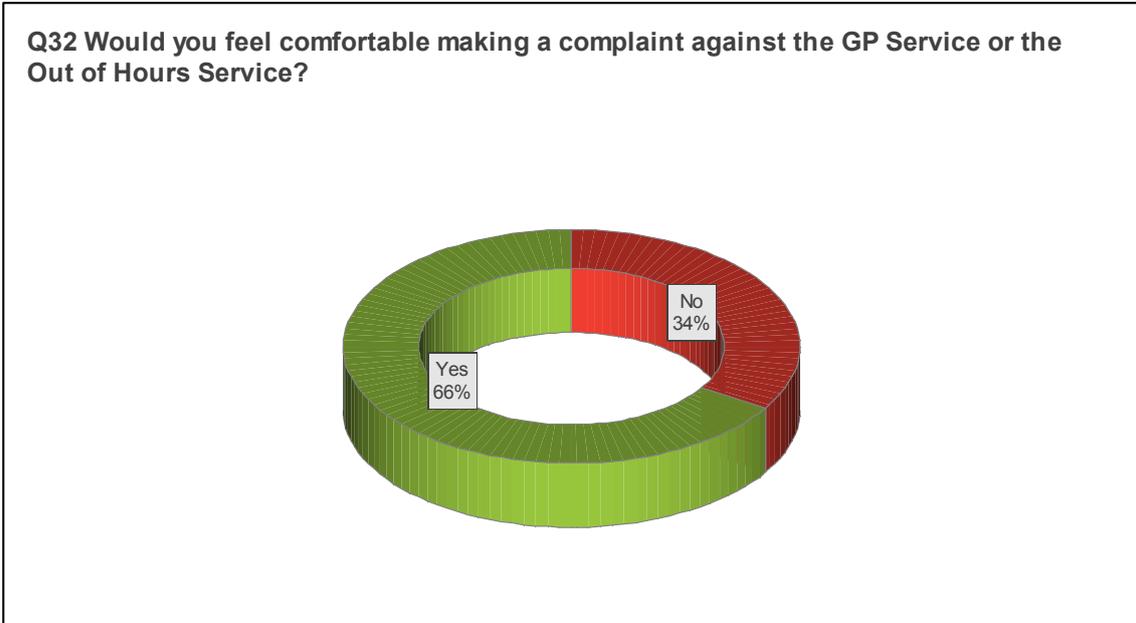
Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation

As with our comments to Q18 we would encourage practices to actively look into this option.

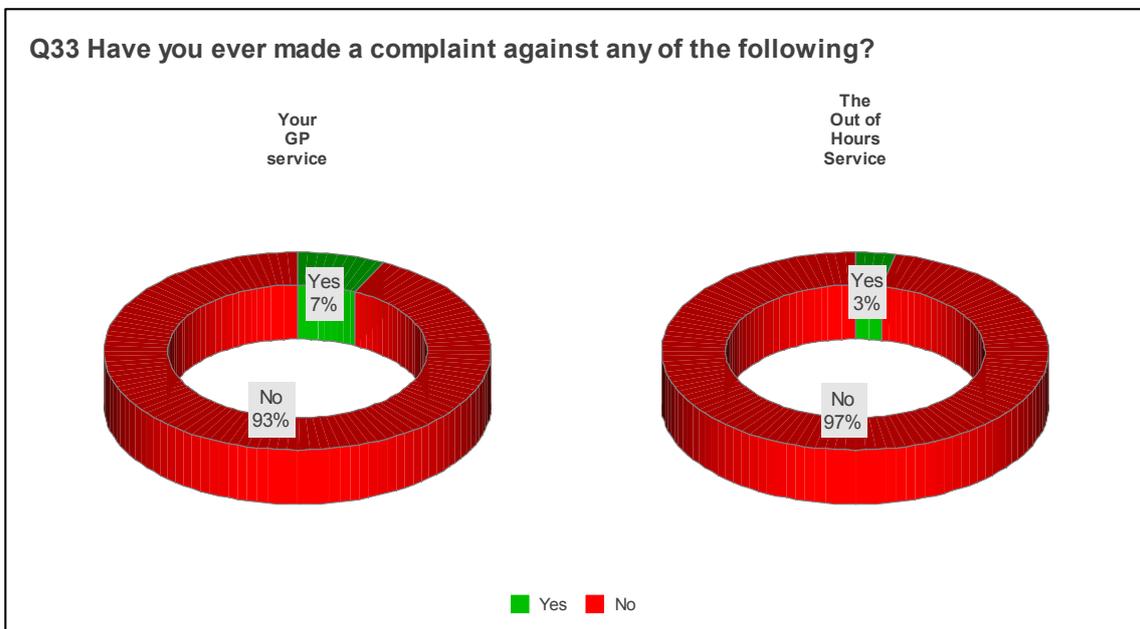


Questions 32 to 35 cover the complaints system, our comments and recommendations are at the end of this section.

Q 32) Would you feel comfortable making a complaint against a GP Service, or the Out of Hours Service?



Q33) Have you made a complaint against any of the following?



Whereas 18% of people were unhappy with the OOH service only 3% had ever made a complaint against it. The figures for complaints about the GP service are more broadly in line with the percentages given in answer to Q12.



Q33c) If 'Yes' were you happy with the way your complaint was dealt with?



Almost 1 in 3 respondents were unhappy with the way their complaint was handled.

We asked those people who answered 'Yes' to Q33c why they weren't happy. Some of the comments are listed below.

Survey Comments

'There was lengthy correspondence with Chief Executive and no outcome.'

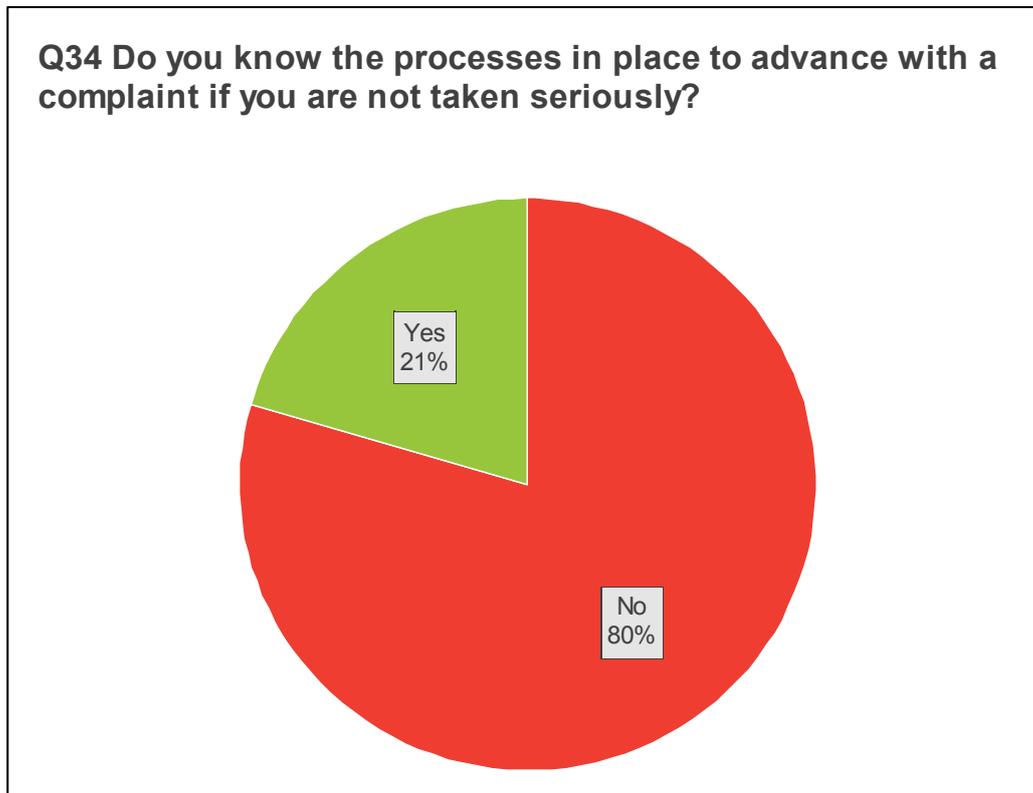
'Say that a person higher up would call you back, and not once did.'

'After a complaint about a surgery receptionist - "the way she spoke to me" - I was assured I would be contacted, but was not.'

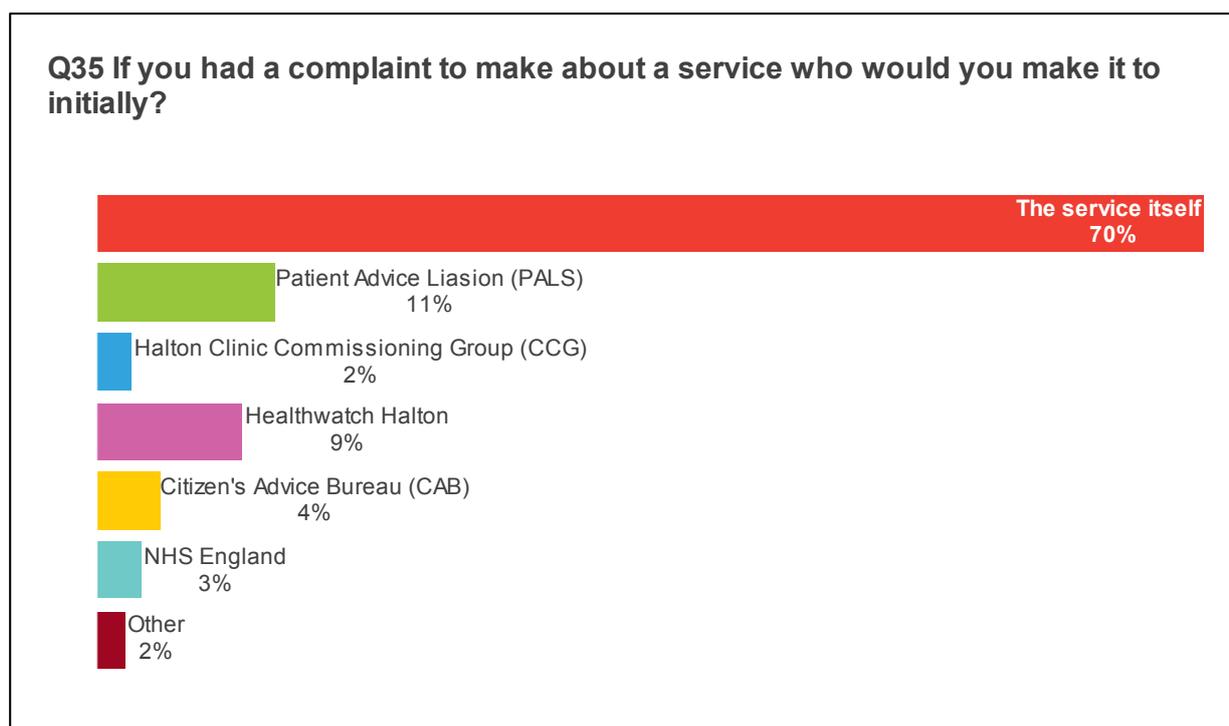
'No reply from emails'



Q 34) Do you know the process in place to advance with a complaint if you are not taken seriously?



Q 35a) If you had a complaint to make about a service who would you make it to initially?



Healthwatch Comment / Recommendation - Q32 to Q35

While there is a majority at 66% who would be comfortable making a complaint, over 1 in 3 people would feel uncomfortable making a complaint. Almost a third of the respondents also said they were not happy with how their complaint - concerning GP services - was dealt with. We find this unacceptable, we believe these levels of dissatisfaction would not be tolerated in other organisations/businesses.

This echoes research carried out by Healthwatch England Research in October 2013⁸ which showed that 1 in 3 people report having experienced or knowing someone who has experienced poor care. Yet a YouGov survey, commissioned by Healthwatch England, of 2076 UK adults showed that less than half of those who had a bad experience between 2010 and 2013 actually did anything to report it.

As with our comments on previous answers, there are many reasons people don't complain about poor service. The results of the Healthwatch England 'You Gov' survey showed that 2 in 5 (43 per cent) said this was because they didn't know how to complain or provide feedback and half (49 per cent) said it was because they lacked confidence that their complaint would be dealt with effectively or thought

Ideally, it should be a straight forward process to raise a complaint with a local service, currently it is anything but.

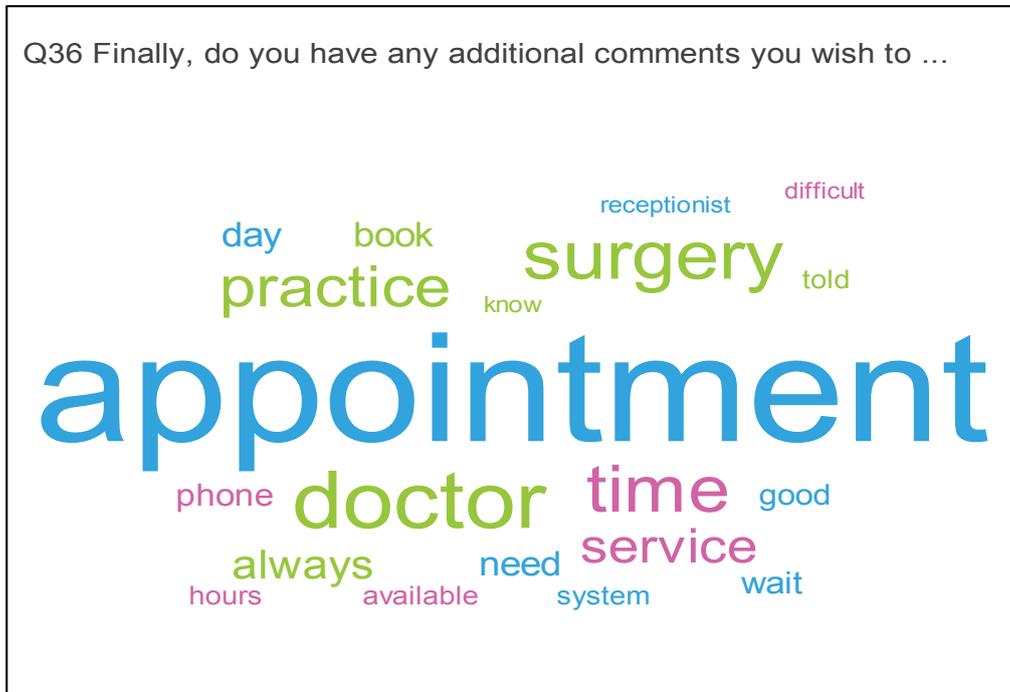
We would like to see a simplified complaints process. One which would allow members of the public to easily raise any concerns they may have. We would also suggest that training of a consistently high standard is offered to all relevant staff in GP practices on complaints handling and customer service.

⁸Health and care complaints system is 'utterly bewildering' for people - 20th March 2014
<http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/news/health-and-care-complaints-system-utterly-bewildering-people>



Q36) Any other comments?

The 'Cloud' diagram below highlights the most commonly used words in the comments received for Q36.



We've listed a few of the survey comments below.

'I think more slots for appointments are needed.'

'Would like to be able to speak to the doctor him/herself if need be. Receptionist should not give their own recommendations regarding if a doctor is needed or not. Be more understanding of carers needing to book appointments that fit in with them to sort out someone to sit in while they attend.'

'Out of hours provision is not as good as before the change.'

'The receptionists think they are God and have terrible attitudes.'

'On the whole, services in my GP's are excellent. Receptionists always very helpful and cheerful.'

'I am very satisfied with my local GP Practice - it is easy to get to and the staff are friendly and very helpful. My GP is familiar with my medical history. I would not change or go to any other practice.'

'I think the NHS on the whole has brilliant and committed staff who deserve to be recognised as such. Considering the size and complexity of the NHS I think they do very well on the whole and people are treated well.'

'Trying to get an appointment at my Practice is like winning the Lottery!'

Acknowledgements:

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