



Gateshead GP patients survey

The impact of COVID-19

About Healthwatch Gateshead

Healthwatch Gateshead is one of 152 local Healthwatch organisations established throughout England on 1 April 2013 under the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We have a dual role to champion the rights of users of publicly funded health and social care services for both adults and children, and to hold the system to account for how well it engages with the public.

We collect feedback on services from people of all ages and communities. We do this through our network of voluntary and community sector organisations; during events, drop-in sessions and listening events at a range of venues across Gateshead; online through the feedback centre on our websites; via social media; and from callers to our information and signposting helpline. As part of the remit to gather views, we also have the power to ‘enter and view’ services and conduct announced and unannounced visits.

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Introduction

In late May 2020 CBC Health GP Federation contacted Healthwatch Gateshead to ask us to develop and deliver a survey for GP patients across Gateshead. The federation was aware that all GP practices have had to significantly change the support they offer to patients due to the COVID-19 pandemic and felt it was important to understand the impact on patients, in particular, what had worked and what had not. It also wanted to understand what would encourage patients to return to their surgeries as we begin to move into the post-pandemic phase.

The survey was an opportunity to learn from patients' experiences of changes due to COVID-19 and to understand what will work best for them in the future. We have had a very tight turnaround with this report. The information it contains is needed immediately to help inform the decisions GP practices have to make as they plan their services for the post-pandemic phase.

Methodology

During discussions between Healthwatch Gateshead and CBC Health GP Federation, it was agreed that the survey would be online, using SurveyMonkey, with a hard copy version also available. We created a draft survey and shared it with CBC Health GP Federation and GP Practice Managers in Gateshead. Amendments and additions were incorporated and a final version was ready by mid-June. The survey went live on Monday 15 June 2020 and remained open until Tuesday 30 June.

The survey was promoted on all of Healthwatch Gateshead's digital platforms. The weblink was circulated to Gateshead GP practices, which were asked to promote within their patient populations. The survey was also emailed to practices so that copies could be printed and used as required. These were to be posted or scanned and emailed to us for inclusion in the data analysis. In the end, however, no hard copy versions were returned.

When the survey closed, 204 people had responded. We are happy with this number of respondents for a survey with a short turn around period and limited opportunities for promotion.

Just over 82% of survey respondents were women, meaning male views were very under-represented in the results. The age spread is better and was as follows:

Age	% of respondents
18 - 24	2.18%
25 - 49	30.81%
0 - 64	37.84
65 - 79	28.11%
80+	1.08%

Just over 20% of respondents described themselves as having a disability. However, the ethnic spread was also of concern; almost 97% of respondents described themselves as White British. Likewise, people with a different sexuality were also under-represented; 95.5% of respondents described themselves as heterosexual.

A reason for this may be due to current restrictions on our usual working practices. In normal circumstances we would actively seek out the views of minority communities and other 'seldom heard' groups. Although we shared the survey link with local community groups, our more proactive engagement work (getting 'out there' and talking to people) has not been possible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These issues, plus the fact that 204 respondents, whilst good, is still a small sample, mean that we cannot say the findings are a true reflection of the experiences of all GP patients in Gateshead. What we can say is that they are the views, experiences and issues identified by the 204 people involved.

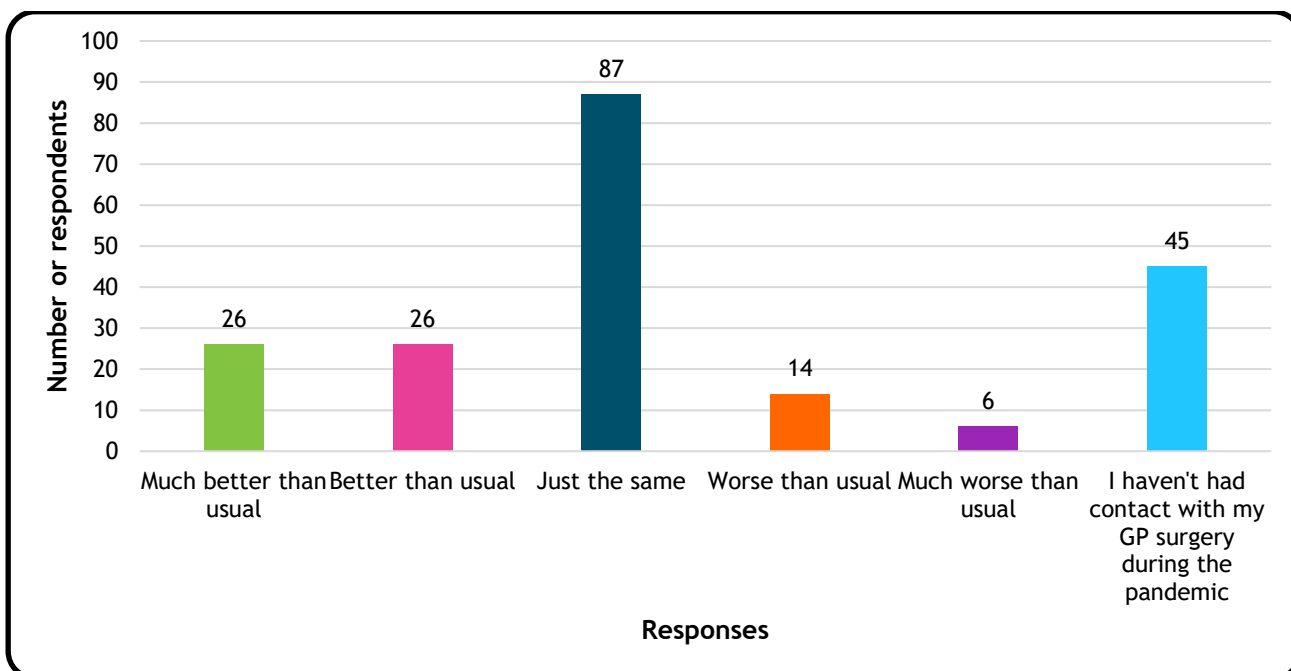
Survey findings

The survey contained both open and closed questions and the results are summarised below. The closed question responses are presented in graph form alongside explanatory text. For the open questions (which asked respondents to explain why they answered closed questions as they did or asked for their ideas or views) we have shared the points raised by more than one respondent. We also identified the number of times they were mentioned – you will notice that the numbers do not add up to 204. This is because some people identified several issues in response to a single question, and others chose not to answer some of the questions.

Finally, we have included some direct quotes which we hope will add meaning and depth to our findings.

Questions

1. If you have had contact with anyone from your GP surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic, please tell us how you found the experience



The most striking thing that emerges from this question is that almost 70% of respondents stated that their experience of contacting their GP during the pandemic was either the same as usual or better, with fewer than 10% of respondents stating that their experience was worse than usual. This is a very positive result. Although most people stated that their experience was just the same, they often stated that it always is a very good experience

2. If your experience was better than usual, please tell us what made it better

The findings below show that the speed of the response was a major positive for people who felt the experience was better than usual. Many people also commented on the positive attitude of both reception staff and clinicians and the convenience factor was also significant

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Response was quicker than usual	25
Positive staff attitude	11
It was easier	10
Less time wasted travelling and waiting at surgery	8
I felt safe	8
Helpful, sympathetic GP	7
More time with GP	2

What people told us:

“I phoned the doctors and within TEN minutes the doctor phoned me back for a telephone consultation, I was referred to Blaydon primary care centre, within an hour I was seen and then sent to Q E. Amazing service.”

“They’ve just been so proactive and really positive in their approach.”

“I managed to get my call through straight away. Spoke to a doctor within 15 mins and was at the surgery within the hour.”

3. If your experience was worse than usual, please tell us what made it worse

The findings below show that, for some people, not being able to see their GP face to face was a real problem. Some also struggled with explaining their problem over the phone or online.

It has not been within the scope of this piece of work to correlate answers against age profiles. While we can suggest that it may be older patients who find the absence of face to face contact most challenging, this doesn’t apply to all older patients as the numbers below are quite small when compared to the number of older patients (54 respondents were aged 65 and over) who completed the survey.

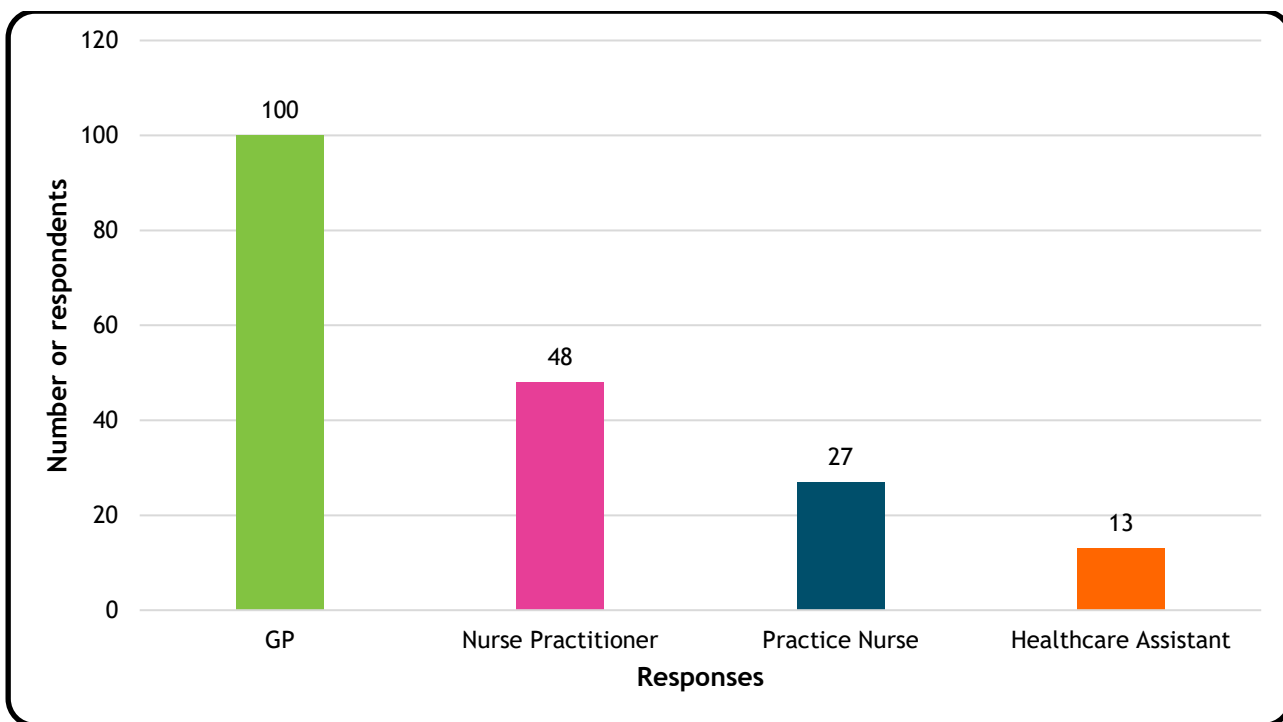
Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Not being able to see my GP face to face	6
Difficulty explaining my problem over the phone/online	4
Changes to/errors with my medication	3
System changes generally	2
Waiting for call backs	2
Feeling that long-term conditions are no longer a priority	2
Having to attend a different surgery	2

What people told us:

“Not being able to speak to the doctor face to face. Also found the online questions didn't leave room to properly explain the problem.”

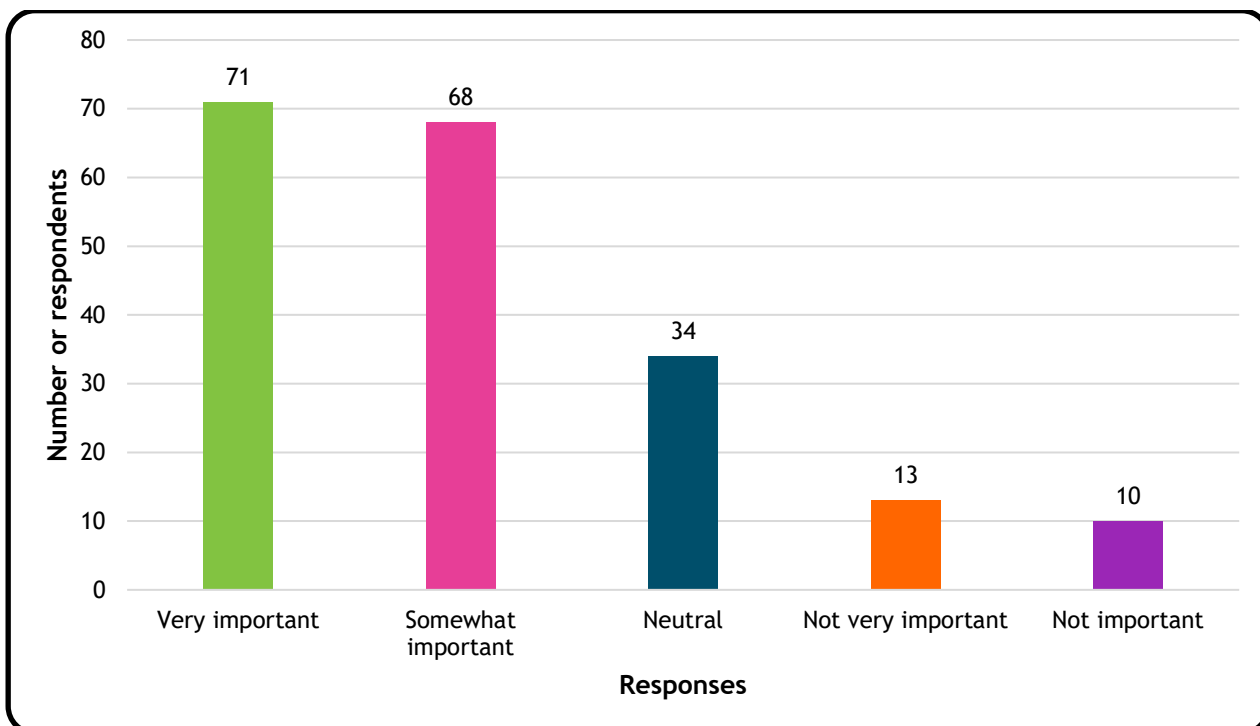
“The only thing I struggled with was the signage on your main entrance. There are too many contradictory posters so I stood for about five minutes trying to decide whether I could enter or not.”

4. Please tell us who you consulted. If you have seen several people, please tick all you have seen.



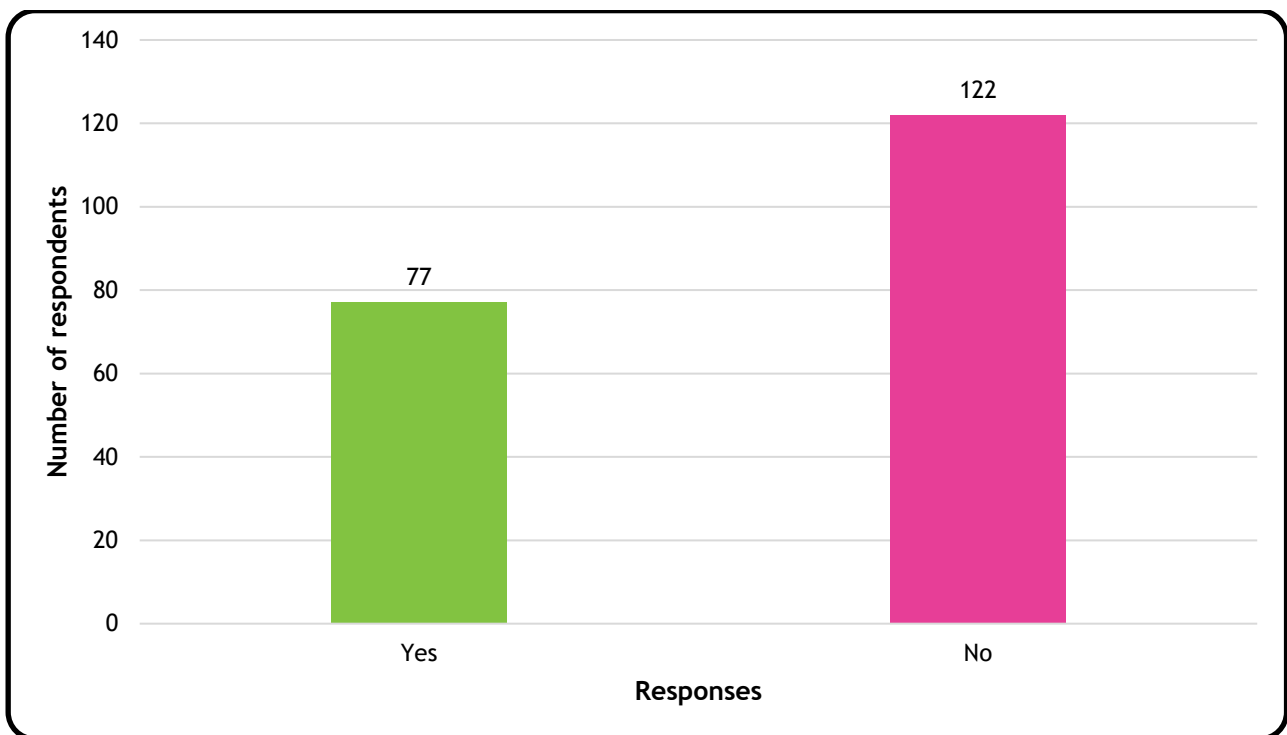
It would be interesting to compare pre-pandemic and current ratios of consultation with different health professionals to see if there have been significant changes. However, Healthwatch Gateshead does not have access to this information.

5. How important to you is it that you see your usual GP, Nurse Practitioner, Practice Nurse or Healthcare Assistant?



The most striking point is that over 70% of respondents felt it either ‘very’ or ‘somewhat important’ to see their usual health professional. However, we have to view this result within the context that over 82% of respondents to the survey were female. We know from a previous survey on GP appointments¹ that being able to see your usual GP is more much important to women than to men.

6. Have you avoided seeking advice about a health problem from your surgery, during the pandemic?



It is somewhat concerning that almost 40% of respondents, a significant minority, stated that they had avoided seeking advice from their surgery about a health problem during the pandemic. We hope that the findings from this survey will help practices put in place measures to stop this and encourage patients to seek help when they need it.

7. If you have, please could you tell us why you stayed away? (e.g. afraid you may be asked to attend surgery or the practice may be too busy to see you)

The responses show that most people avoided contacting their GP because they were concerned about how their practice was coping with the pandemic. People either didn't want to add to what they perceived as a heavy workload or didn't want to further burden their GP with what they believed was a minor problem. A smaller, but still sizable, group of people were concerned about their safety and wanted to minimise their chances of catching COVID-19.

¹ Healthwatch Newcastle (2016) 'GP appointments: What do Newcastle patients want?' <https://tinyurl.com/yxgdf4ma>

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
My problem not important enough at this time	23
Didn't want to add to GP's workload at this time	18
To reduce my chance of infection	8
Because I didn't feel safe	7
Because I couldn't see a GP face to face	6
Because I didn't have confidence in the practice	6
Because it's too complicated to get an appointment	5
Because I'm shielding	4
Increased social anxiety due to COVID-19	3
Unable to see my usual GP	2
Aware that routine procedures have stopped	2

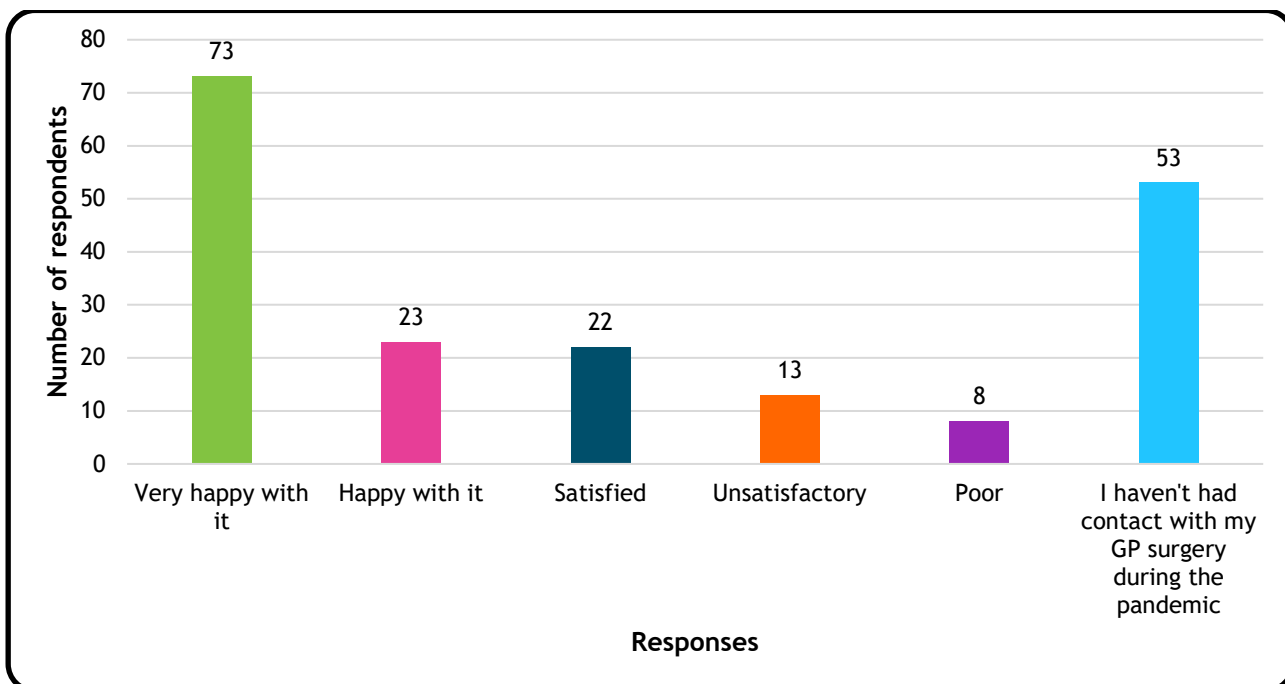
What people told us:

“I didn't want to add to the horrendous task the NHS has faced in recent months.”

“I was afraid that I'd be asked to attend and therefore catch COVID-19.”

“Don't want to waste precious time and appointments on something that isn't urgent!”

8. If you have had a remote consultation (e-consult, telephone or video) with your GP surgery during the COVID 19 pandemic, please tell us how you found the experience



This was a positive result, with over 60% of respondents either 'very happy', 'happy' or 'satisfied' with their remote consultation. A further 27.6% stated they hadn't had contact with their surgery, leaving only 11% who felt their remote consultation was 'unsatisfactory' or 'poor'.

9. Please tell us more about your experience

The findings show that most people had a very positive experience of remote consultation, in particular, they found it efficient and effective and also quick and convenient. However, some stated they still needed to visit their surgery. Others stated they preferred face to face consultations and several experienced problems with technology.

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Efficient & effective	18
Quick	14
More convenient	11
Excellent	10
Positive staff/GP attitude	8
I still had to visit the surgery	6
Prefer face to face	6
Easy to arrange	6
Problems with technology	6
Negative staff/GP attitude	5
Unable to speak to GP of choice	3
Inconvenient wait for call back	2
GP failed to call back	2
No confidence in new system	2

What people told us:

“It was extremely efficient. I texted a photograph of my son’s rash which the Doctor examined whilst I was still on the phone. Anti-virals were then prescribed for him and sent to our local pharmacy that day.”

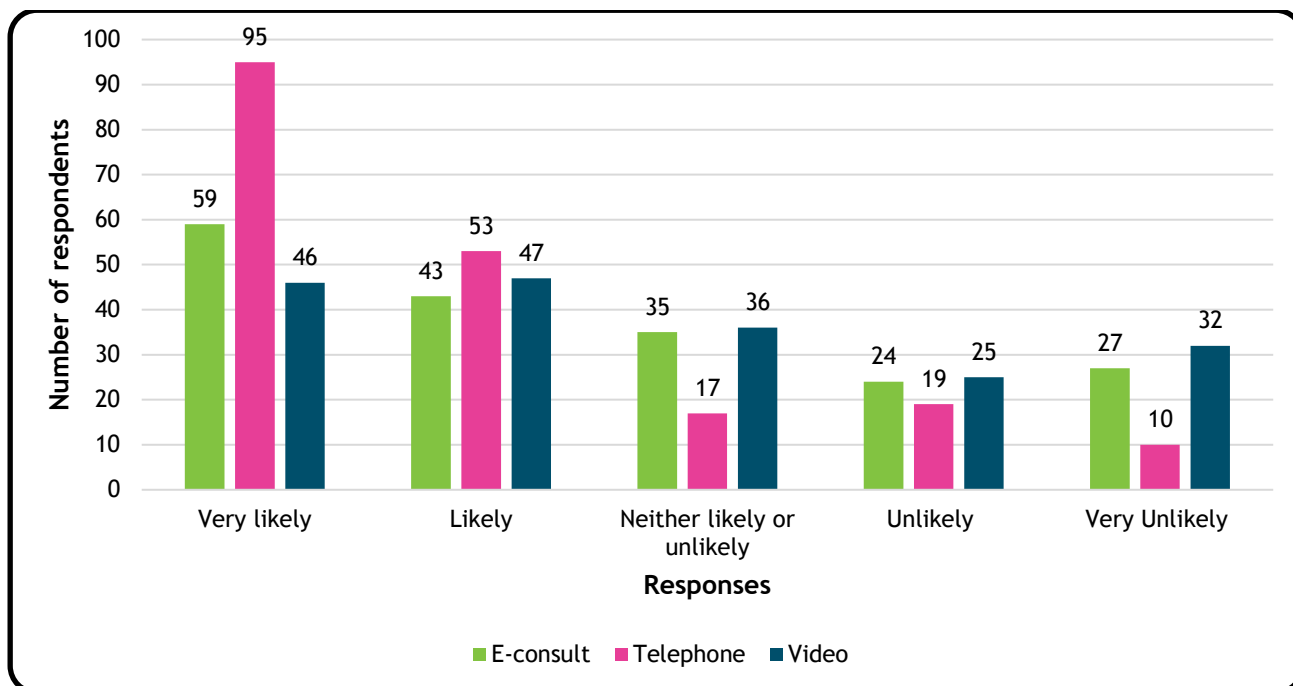
“Asked for lady GP for personal problem, given a man and told to take ibuprofen.”

“I’ve used e-consult for myself twice and for my partner once. Had telephone appointments for both my children. On all occasions the treatment we received were excellent!”

“I had an issue with my eye, but obviously the GP couldn’t examine my eye over the phone, so I didn’t find the telephone consultation that useful in that situation.”

“Kind concern. Immediate attention. Fast results.”

10. How likely would you be to request a remote consultation in future?



Again, a positive result; patients were more likely than unlikely to request a consultation in the future for every type of remote consultation. Telephone consultations were most popular, with e-consult just slightly more popular than video consultations.

11. Please tell us why (e.g. because you don't have access to the technology needed for a video consultation)

What is interesting is that more people provided negative reasons, even though the previous questions showed that respondents were generally more positive than negative about remote consultations. There were concerns about using technology: some people didn't have access to the required devices, some lacked the capacity or confidence to use them and others just didn't like remote consultations and would always prefer face to face.

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Don't have the technology or the skills	22
Prefer face to face consultations	19
Don't have the confidence to use new technology	12
It's easier for me	11
It's a more efficient way for GPs to operate	8
Don't like consulting my GP this way	7
It's not appropriate for my condition	7
It's more convenient	5
It's quicker	5
It would depend on the problem	4
It's safer	3

What people told us:

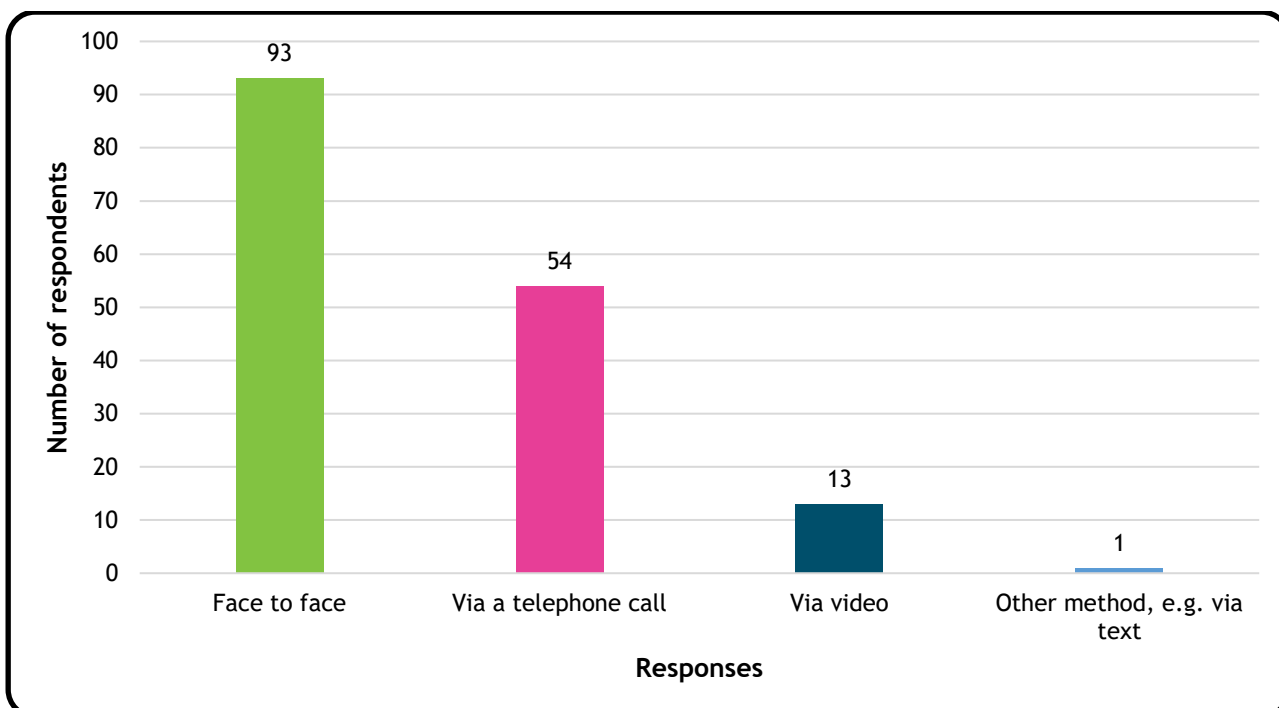
“There is a place for video consultation but it definitely isn't for everyone. My mum’s experience was for a skin condition. It would have been extremely difficult to show the rash without someone else holding the phone. Also for those with hearing difficulties it is not acceptable at all. The technology isn't available to all.”

“I used telephone consultations a lot pre-pandemic, which suited me. It's nice to be able to deal with the problem over the phone without wasting time on travel with a child tagging along, etc. It takes ten mins rather than an hour of my time with a child...”

“Less time sitting in waiting room where germs will be circulating. If GP runs late it won't affect me as telephone is mobile. I can largely go about daily business whilst waiting for call.”

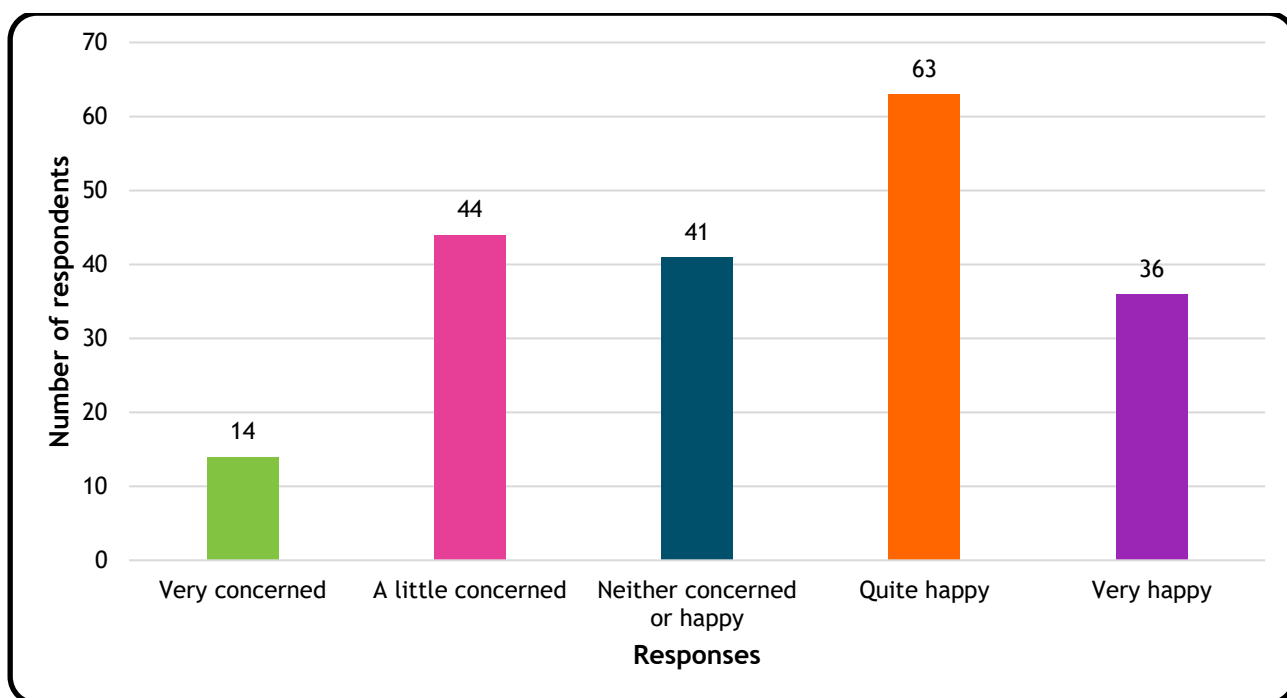
“I have the technology but have no confidence in this practice. Also, I'm hard of hearing which can make video calls difficult.”

12. If you have a long-term condition would you prefer your long-term conditions review to be:



Face to face was the preferred option for long-term condition reviews, which may reflect the age profile of those with long-term conditions. Another factor could be the more complex nature of some long-term conditions, which people believe require a face to face review. However, a third of respondents were happy with a telephone review.

13. Now that lockdown is easing, how concerned are you about coming back into your GP surgery



Interestingly, the above graph shows that exactly half of the respondents were ‘quite happy’ or ‘very happy’ to go back to their surgery. A further 20% were neither concerned nor happy, with 30% showing some level of concern. However, 30% is a significant minority and requires further consideration.

14. If you are concerned about visiting the surgery, please explain why

The findings show that many people were still worried about catching COVID-19 and it is this, rather than concerns about visiting their surgery specifically, that is the issue. A smaller number did express concerns about how safe an environment their surgery could provide.

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Still worried about catch COVID-19	20
Worried about coming into contact with other people	14
Concerned about hygiene standards	6
Still shielding	4
Small waiting room	3
GPs still need to focus on the pandemic	2
Increased anxiety	2

What people told us:

“There are still so many things, items many people touch (door handles, chairs etc), which I don’t think they are getting disinfected. That concerns me a lot.”

“I worry that other patients aren’t following social distancing rules or may go to the surgery with COVID symptoms.”

“Because I’m high risk and haven’t left my home for over 12 weeks, don’t want to catch COVID at this stage’.”

15. If you are happy to come into the surgery, please explain why

Many of those who were happy to visit their surgery felt that way because they were confident that their surgery had put appropriate measure in place, they trusted their surgery and felt safe visiting it. For others, their need/want to see their GP appeared to be a major motivating factor, while a small number appeared to just not be concerned about COVID-19.

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Confident with systems that surgery has in place	33
I want/need to see my GP face to face	18
I feel safe	16
Trust the surgery will ensure patient safety	14
I’m happy to comply with all safety requirements	8
I’m not worried about COVID-19	3
I’ve already had the virus	2

What people told us:

“I have had the precautions put in place by the surgery explained to me, and I feel confident that these are adequate and will be adhered to.”

“I have confidence in the systems that are in place but I had confidence before. It’s about common sense.”

“Because this whole “Pandemic” lockdown is a farce, all deaths are a tragedy but at a rate of 0.04%, the fear of everything it will cause and the economic repercussions will far outweigh the virus.”

16. Please tell us what your GP surgery could do to make you feel happier about accessing GP services

Many respondents felt that there was nothing further their surgery could do, presumably because they were happy with the measures already in place. The implementation of further safety measures and ensuring people's compliance were also mentioned.

People also took the opportunity to mention issues which appear in all the surveys we carry out with GP patients: ease of getting an appointment, being able to see your preferred clinician, a more positive, understanding attitude and better telephone systems. Interestingly, a small number of people also suggested improvements to digital services so for some patients this is clearly the way forward.

Points raised more than once	Times mentioned
Nothing more they could do	22
Ensure patients and staff adhere to all safety measures	12
More appointments available	22
Allow fewer people into the waiting room	8
Improved staff/GP attitude	6
Access to my preferred clinician	4
Timely appointments and call backs, so less waiting	4
Easier to get through on the phone	4
Triage by professionals	3
Use social media and apps to communicate with patients	3
Online access to appointments, records and test results	3

What people told us:

“Nothing. They are already doing a GREAT job.”

“My surgery has far too many patients and not enough doctors, you wait a month to see someone. Improve waiting times, open longer hours, get more doctors.”

“Use of self-booking and limiting people in the waiting area, if the surgery is running late, a text message to reduce the number of people in the waiting area.”

“Strict monitoring of how many patients attending. Strict monitoring of wiping of any surfaces touched by patients.”

Summary of findings

The following emerged as the main findings from our survey:

- Overall the results were very positive. Every question asking about people's experiences of accessing services during the COVID-19 pandemic had more positive than negative responses.
- Most people appeared to have embraced the new ways of working, which they found quick, efficient, convenient and safe. Most people would be happy to continue accessing services in this way.
- Face to face consultations, preferably with their usual clinician, remained very important to a sizable minority, particularly for long-term condition reviews.
- Some people had concerns about returning to their surgery, but for many this seemed to be because they were worried about catching COVID-19 in general rather than specific concerns about visiting their surgery.
- Safety measures were seen as important, but most people were confident that their surgery had this in hand.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Gateshead would like to thank all those who took the time to complete our survey. We are grateful to the GP practices that promoted the survey and assisted people in completing it.

Finally, we would like to thank Dr Stephen Kirk for the short video he provided to help us promote the survey online – we're sure it helped!

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