

# **Access to General Practice in Northern Ireland – Act Now’s member survey**

Submission to Public Accounts Committee’s Inquiry into Access to General Practice in Northern Ireland.

March 26th 2025.



Dear Public Accounts Committee (PAC),

In response to your call for submission to the inquiry into Access to General Practice in Northern Ireland, Act Now surveyed our NI-based members on their experience with GP services in Northern Ireland in March 2025.

The below report reveals the results and findings of this survey. 120 members responded to our survey. In order to easily streamline our results with those in PAC's survey, all our questions can be found verbatim. Note, however, we have not verbatim copied all the questions from the PAC survey, selecting instead the most relevant questions for our members.

Act Now is a unique campaigning community in Northern Ireland which gives everyday people here the opportunity to take action and campaign together on the issues that matter to them.

Please consider this report as a submission to the Inquiry into Access to General Practice in Northern Ireland. We hope that the information gathered will be used to inform the recommendations made when the Committee publishes its report in June 2025.

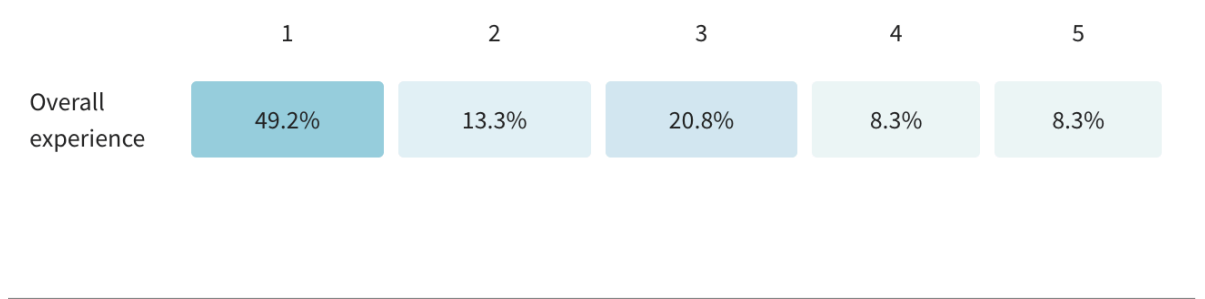
Sincerely and on the behalf of the 120 Act Now members,

Roan Ellis-O'Neill

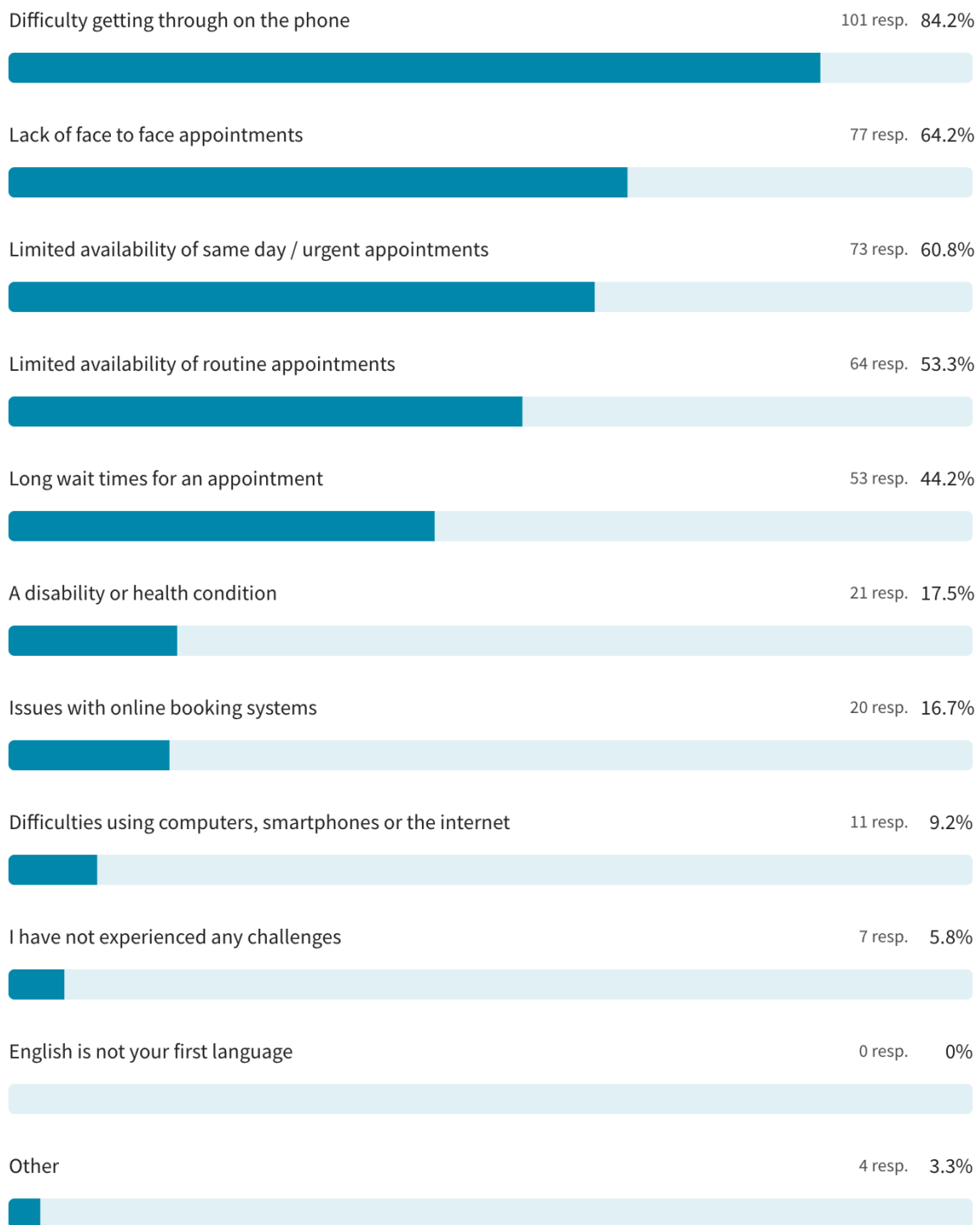
Campaigner

Act Now

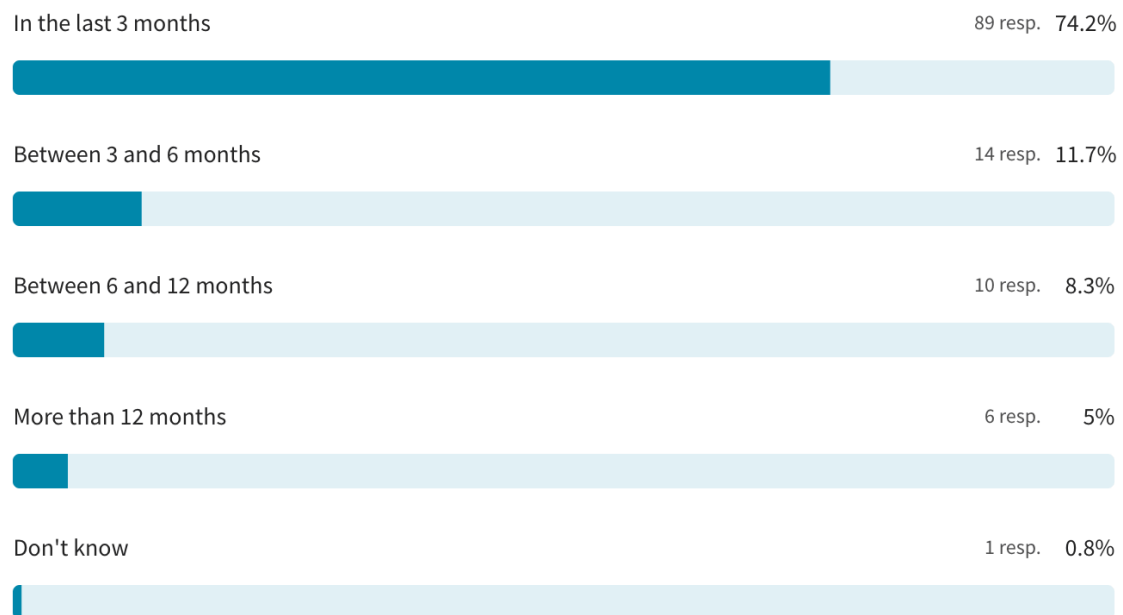
**Q1: On a scale of 1 – 5 how would you rate your overall experience on accessing GP services in the past 12 months? (1 poor – 5 excellent).**



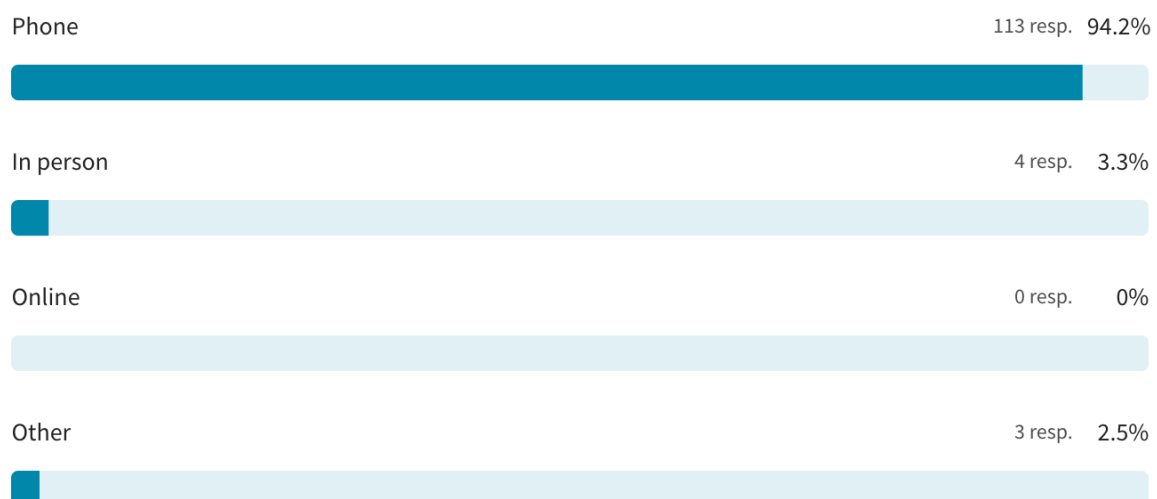
## Q2: What are the main challenges you have faced when trying to access GP Services? (Tick all that apply)



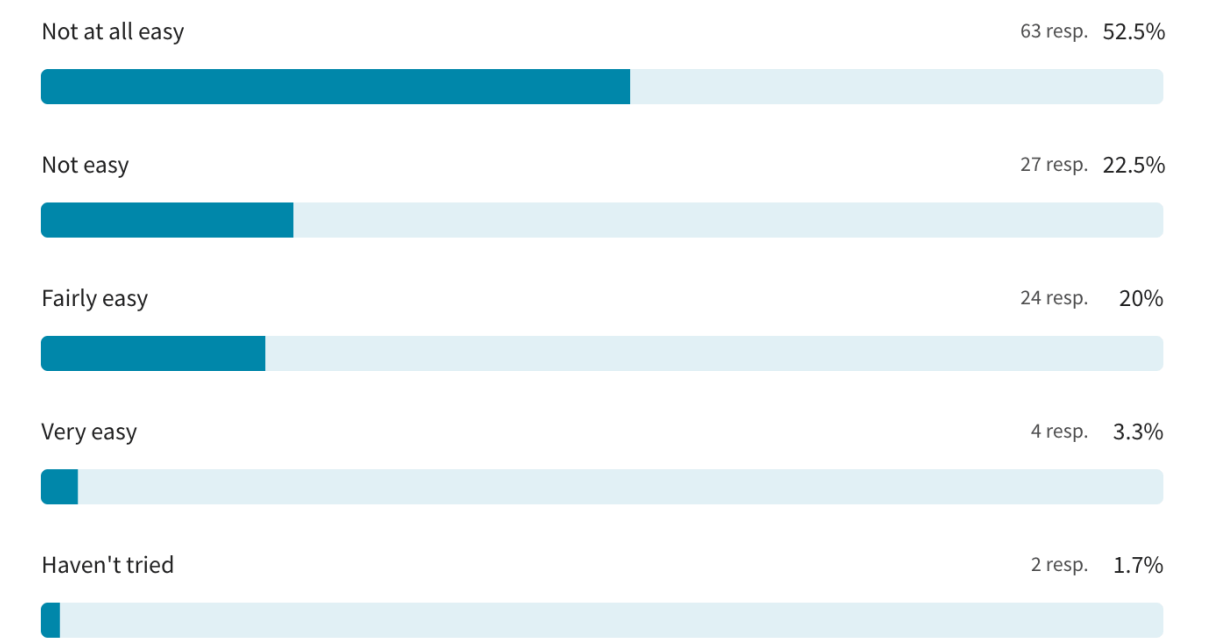
### Q3: When did you last try to make a GP appointment?



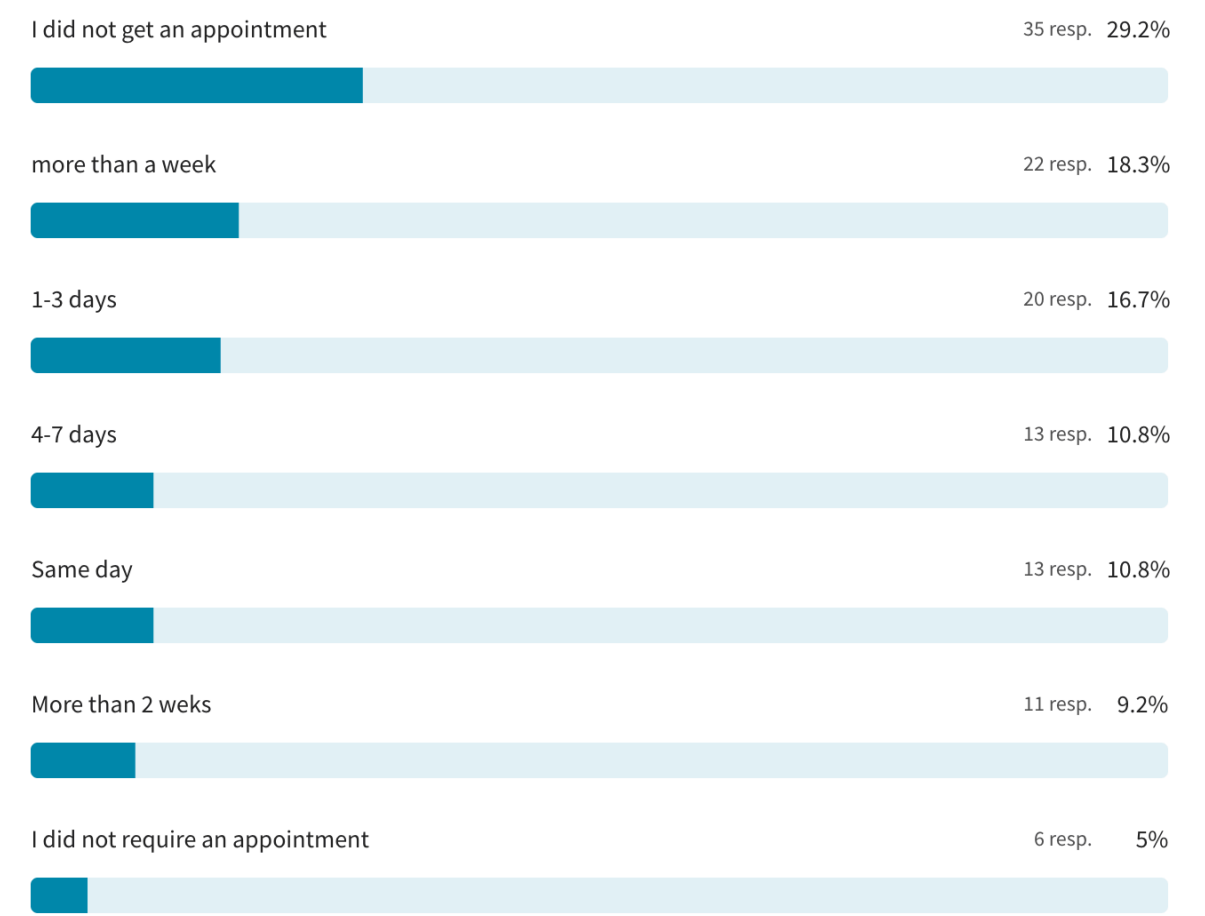
### Q4: How do you usually book an appointment?



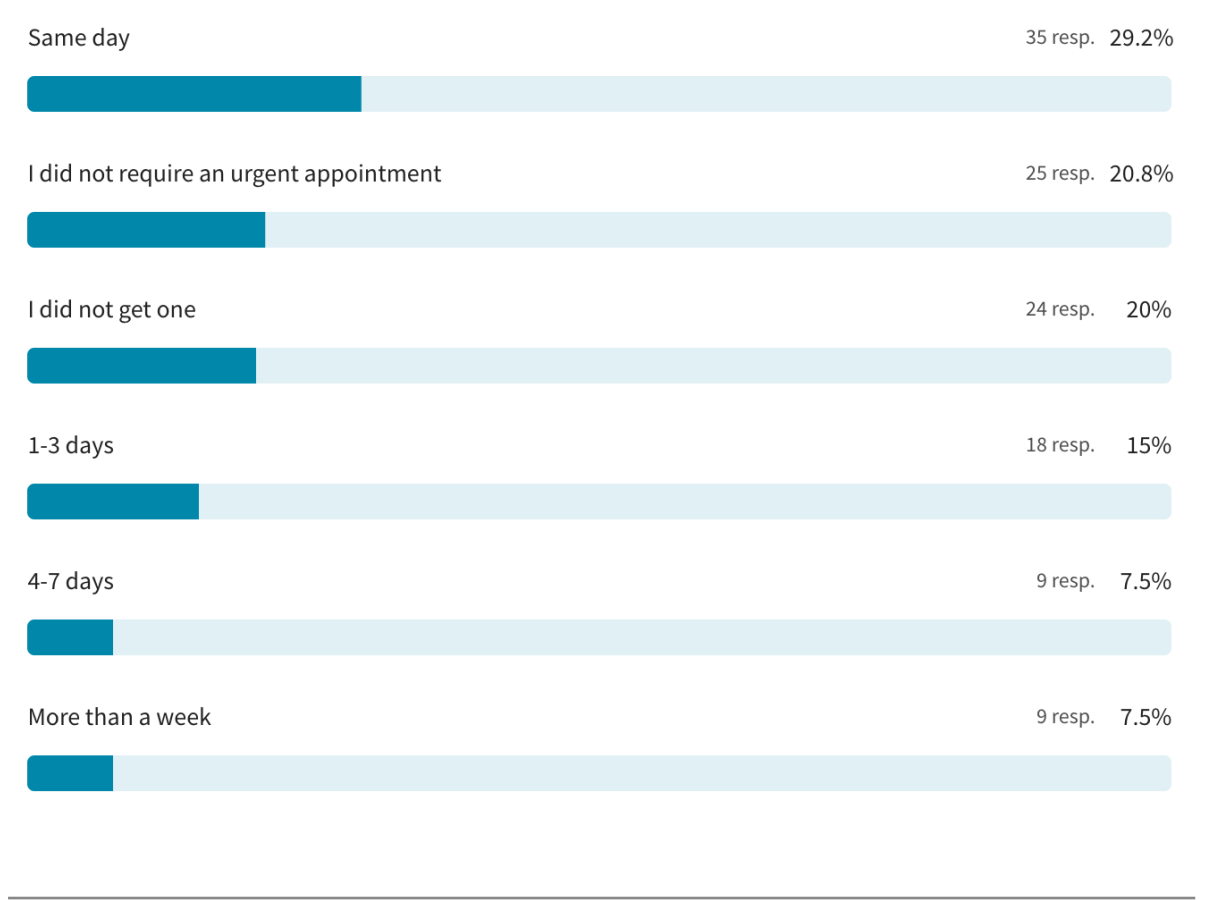
**Q5: Generally, how easy is it to get through to someone at your GP practice on the phone?**



## Q6: How long did you have to wait for your most routine GP appointment?

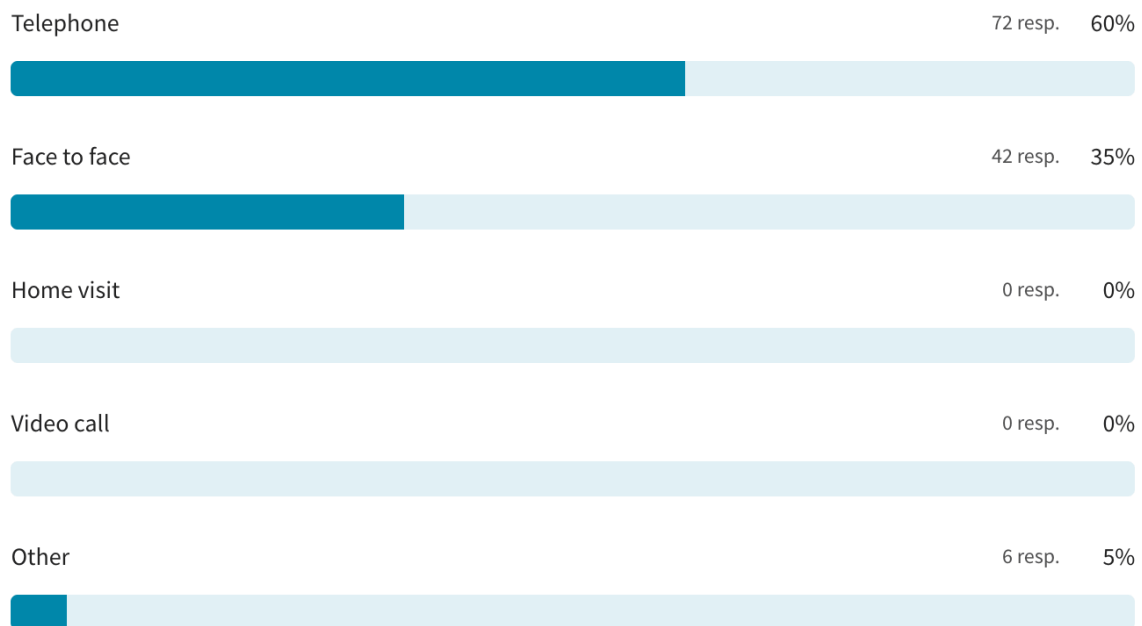


## Q7: How long did you have to wait for your most urgent GP appointment?



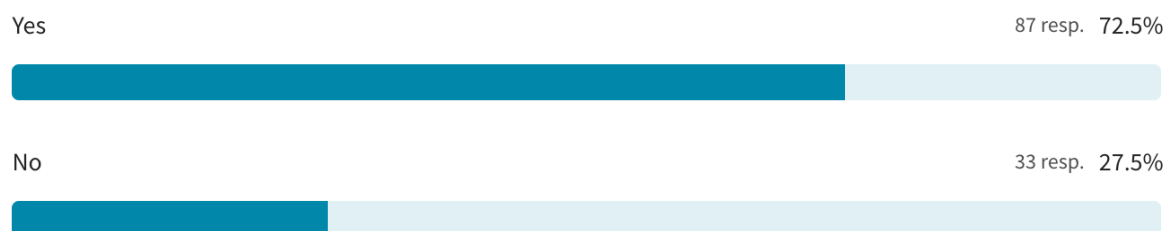


## Q8: What type of consultation was offered for your last GP appointment?



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## Q9: Have you ever had to delay seeking medical help because of difficulties accessing GP Services?

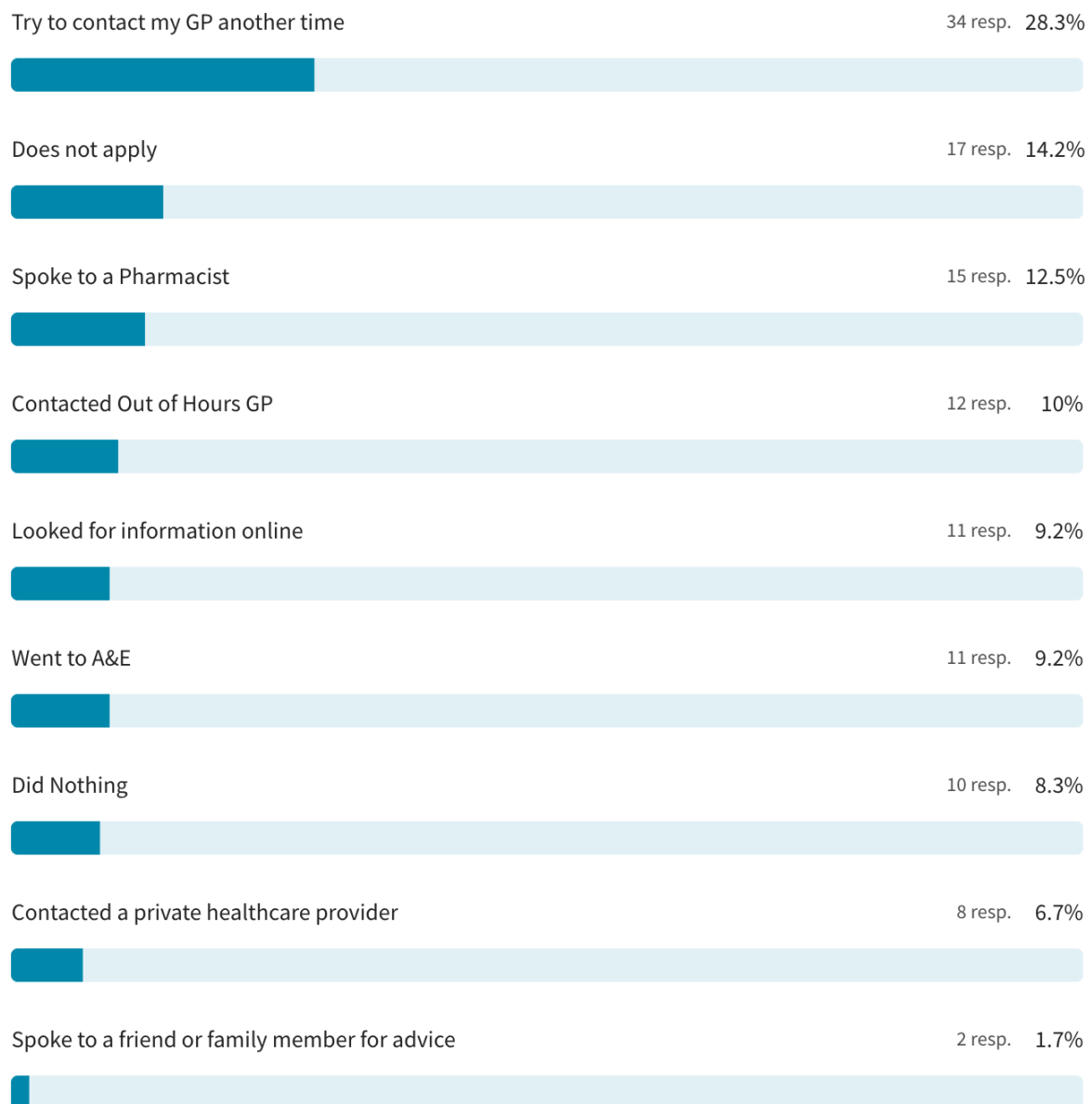


## Q10: If yes, what impact did this have on your health?

See Annex A to read individual responses.

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## Q11: What did you do if you were unable to get a suitable appointment?



**Q12: Did you have any other comments about accessing GP services?**

See Annex B to read individual responses.

## ANNEX A

### Q10: If yes, what impact did this have on your health?

Stress worry

Ended up in hospital for emergency treatment.

Made me feel quite stressed.

Unanswered health problems

I have been on a surgery waiting list for 18 months, no further on, no follow up appointment

Contributed to increased anxiety

too stressful, i just get on with it,

Additional stress when I was already unwell.

Continued severe pain, lack of sleep, decreased mobility, impact upon personal/social life, made me feel as if it really can't be as bad as I was telling the receptionist. I haven't seen a GP face-to-face in over 12 months - only phone calls

Became very ill

Delay in tests being carried out prolonging diagnosis & sometimes severity of condition

Condition worsened

I am still waiting to be called back regarding a kidney issue

I'm still suffering in pain. Couldn't get to even speak to a GP. Was sent instead to the physio who said she would have a telephone appointment with me which never happened.

It caused a great deal of stress as I worried about lack of medication.

I can't take time out of work to stay on hold on the phone so I just don't make an appointment

Not good as I have bowel disease which caused problems. And receptionist should not be allowed our private health details

Considering going private, which I would prefer not to do.

No good. I prefer face to face appointments- very difficult to get

not sure

Feeling unwell for many days. Work missed.

None, because tumour turned out to be benign.

My UTI was more severe .

It caused me terrible stress and anxiety I worried myself sick not knowing what was wrong with me

No access to repeat prescription, negatively affected both mental and physical health

I still haven't got to the bottom of the issue so I cannot yet say but the delays have contributed to my overall poor health becoming much worse

The access point is so stressful as the phone is often engaged so there isn't even adoption of waiting. I can go for days – into a week or two before I finally get to the receptionist. When I do, the service from the GPs is quick and excellent but getting to them is the big problem. Since this new system was set up patients are not allowed to call in person – so there is no way around it. I'm still able to negotiate it all – just about – but I really feel for people who are less able to – the elderly, disabled and those with mental health issues. I've witnessed distressed patients shouting at receptionists and, while this behaviour is unacceptable, it's understandable. Receptionists should not have to be put at risk of this. Please, please, can we go back to being able to call at any time of the day, get through and make an appointment.
More pain
Sick for a little longer
Overall not great.
Went to A & E sat from 5 pm – 9am next day before seen – had breathing problems all night
Mainly anxiety about my condition
Loss of hearing.
Could end up in ED with co-morbid conditions
Attempted suicide
Caused unnecessary worry.
Suffered in silence as mental health deteriorating
With my complex medical conditions I'm finding that I don't contact the doctors cause of the excuses I should go directly to A&E
As I have a long term life limiting disability I held off on ringing my GP because at times it is hard to get an appointment or a call back, I ended up on a longer term of antibiotics
I had to self-medicate, and hope the situation would improve.
Stressful
Placed on wrong waiting list
I persisted with debilitating migraine headaches because I felt that It was not worth the battle to get a GP appointment. I was proved correct when I tried to speak to the GP and failed.
Stressful, upsetting, feeling I was a nuisance
It's a worry not being able to contact the GP for anything. Just can't get through
I was frustrated because I was worrying about something that needed to be sorted. It felt like I wasn't doing something but it wasn't urgent in the sense I wasn't ill, it was about 'women's health' as they term it. When I told them show I repeatedly couldn't get appointments they advised me to call for on the day urgent appointment – but that impacts the system too because I'm taking away someone else's opportunity to get to get an urgent appointment who might be really unwell. It's so broken!
Losing out in medication
On my husbands health it had very serious life threatening effects, ditto my son's, so my anxiety and stress levels have been effected, which has contributed to some of my health issues. My other personal health issues are not life threatening but have definitely been worsened through lack of access, or lack of timely access to medical care.

It was for my daughter. She had a sore throat and it took over 2 weeks to get an appointment.
Rang 4 consecutive days to be told no more appointments available. Ring back 8-30 am tomorrow morning. In the space of 25 min hit redial button 115 times eventually got answer to be told no more appointments available. Drove to the health centre 7 miles away and spoke to reception to be told I could not make in appointment in centre health. Ring back Monday. I showed the receptionist my mobile phone with 115 redial and no comment was made.
Delay in changing meds
It made my illness go on longer
Prolonged pain and worsening of my illness
Progression of condition that should have been treated much sooner along with unnecessary pain and anxiety
More pain, if treatment was available the pain would have been a bit less.
It made my mental health worse- more anxiety. It left me in a lot of pain from endometriosis including stomach pain, back pain. I was unable to walk
failing to follow up on monitoring blood tests and further investigations. Managing menopausal symptoms alone rather than in consultation with a GP
Increased anxiety, lack of sleep, heightened awareness
Very worrying and stressful, had to seek private help
I have COPD and prone to chest infections which impacts on my health
A lot
Increased pain went private
I cannot walk unaided
Unknown
Frustrating
I have a lot of issues I need to phone about but haven't because they don't seem pressing enough to be seen. I'm currently dealing with, vertigo with unknown cause, possible pcOs or endometriosis still waiting for results or appointments on this. And I have stomach issues possibly GERD flare ups that I haven't been able to get a handle on yet
Stressful and worrying. You also need a GP's permission for a pharmacist to help you.
Both physical and mental problems have been made much worse
I'm lucky because I'm financially cosy, articulate and not very unhealthy so far. I persisted and though care was delayed, I think it will be ok. I eventually got an appointment with a trainee GP and instructions about how to pursue an overdue hospital referral
I still have not accessed any HRT 4 years after starting the menopause. Every time I ring, they say I'm ringing at the wrong time, or no appointments. There is no facility for non-urgent appointments. The only pathway is ringing, even though there is a practice website.
Anxiety
Stressful and worrying
Prolonged severe nerve pain

Suffered collapse due to Sepsis and perforated bowell
Health has declined
I have multiple health issues and am in generally poor health. The last major issue I had was a persistent and extremely painful UTI. There are never any same-day appointments, even by phone and even when I ring the moment the practice opens. Very fortunately I was able to pay for a private next-day appointment. If I hadn't been able to see that doctor I don't know what I would have done as I was becoming increasingly weak and dizzy. The continued stress of knowing that it is nearly impossible to get medical help is making things worse. Currently I am struggling with a chronic issue that, while not an emergency, is having a significant effect on my day-to-day life. I rang my GP and the next appointment is a phone call in 4 weeks.
Unsure as I am still waiting
Affected well being, increased frustration and sense of hopelessness
Continuing pain and anxiety
I am disabled, with COPD, chronic asthma, arthritis, sleep apnea etc; nobody seems to be bothered.
I eventually got a face-to-face appointment, and the investigations I required following, but the delay in that first meeting was very anxiety-inducing.
Severe pain and the anxiety of not knowing what's wrong
A deterioration in health
my condition got much worse
A worrying impact.

## ANNEX B

### Q12: Did you have any other comments about accessing GP services?

Will now not try unless it's a life or death issue

I don't go to the Dr unless I really need to. I usually manage my health care myself so if I ask to see a Dr it is because I am concerned. No one wants to put pressure on ER departments but sometimes are forced to.

We are blessed with our health service in Dungiven, from our reception staff to our wonderful doctors and nurses

Appreciated the GP staff.

It's hopeless, I've given up

Lack of appointments, receptionists deciding who gets to speak to a gp is ridiculous

I've lost confidence in being able to contact GP services. I expect to be on the phone for up to an hour, only to find that all appointments have been taken.

no

Don't understand why the standard is still calling to make appointment. Why not use an online form that day rather than waiting for the surgery to open?

Yes, telephone appointments are a waste of time - I could be telling them anything and they can't see the degree of pain on my face. Plus, you don't always get your own GP (who is familiar with my situations), rather you get a GP who is NOT familiar with my medical history, personal situation re multiple caring responsibilities. Why is this being allowed to continue post-pandemic?

It's unacceptable the way things have become

Sometimes receptionists do not have medical training or knowledge & triage is ineffective & causes bad attitude & service

Disgraceful

You pray to God that you've nothing serious because if you do you'll probably just die

It's appalling, especially for the elderly.

I have moved in the last couple of years and both Practices have been brilliant with no issues re access.

It's getting worse.

Everything just seems brushed off e.g. just prescribing more painkillers rather than finding root cause of pain, things are not explained properly

Yes there needs to be medical services in the evenings as well to catch up with people not being seen. They could put in a couple of extra doctors. Also we don't know our doctors now they don't know our medical history over the years and can't be bothered to try. People are dying and A&E services are through the roof because doctors won't see patients that desperately need seen

None

I've been very lucky with my practice - so far

I've had treatment for prostate cancer and have to mention that to get a face to face appointment

No



Receptionists are impatient and rude
Routine service is great. Problem is 8:30am phone lottery and limited number of appointments. I don't mind telephone appointments as a first step.
So far I have tried 4 times this week to get through just to get routine blood test results... the test was 3 weeks ago .
It is a nightmare trying to get an appointment and the receptionists are so nasty if you stand at the counter you are totally ignored they won't speak to you until 9am at 8.31 ALL!!! appointments are gone which is totally impossible I've rang many a morning from 8.25 continually only to be told no appointments left. A few mornings I have gone over and watched with my own eyes the phones ringing and being totally ignored I've even seen phone of the hook and said to the receptionist that the phone wasn't on properly. I don't know what happened to the receptionists they were lovely before covid they couldn't do enough to help you its like they turned into monsters after the pandemic
Trying to see a doctor now is so frustrating To make an ordinary appointment you have to wait sometimes up to 2 weeks, I try not to annoy my doctor so only go if i really need to but doing that has got harder to do
Lack of/no information provided for prescriptions
The waiting time to see a doctor should be a matter of days not weeks
No
<p>Have to wait on the phone in a queue to speak to receptionist at 8.30am, phones constantly engaged, when it frees up and you get to speak to a receptionist all available appointments that day are taken then you have to start the whole process again the following day!</p> <p>If it's a call back you require the same process applies.</p> <p>It's very frustrating and prolongs your pain and adds stress and anxiety to you at a time when you are not able to cope. It's been this way from COVID..... Doctors are seeing less patients now than before covid, the demand to see a doctor has not dwindled since covid, though the accessibility and supply of appointments have. I wish to know how come?????</p>
This service has badly regressed!
Service is totally unacceptable
I said it all at 12
From my own experience I seem to be one of the lucky ones. Friends and family have all told me of much worse interactions with doctors surgeries or lack there of some could even reduce the likelihood of effective treatment for life threatening conditions like cancer. I try to avoid the doctors unless I have no choice.
No
When it is an emergency I get appointment same day. But other than that I would have more chance of winning Euro Millions lottery
I feel very fortunate not to have needed an emergency appointment for the last few years.

Yes I am hard of hearing and can't phone so depend on Gp texting me - but have to go to surgery and ask receptionist for this Gp is very good but receptionist says go to A and E which I won't do after last experience and wait for 21 hours overnight no food or drink just a machine selling soft drinks crisps etc really awful experience for all stuck there some very ill - although they did hand out sick bags disgraceful
No
Cannot understand why this phone before you are seen system is still in place after covid.
I think we have been fortunate that we did but need immediate/urgent help. We have been able to see a GP once we got through on the phone. That is where the difficulties lie. Also difficult to book a non urgent appointment in advance.
I had so many problems I moved surgeries
It is non-existent; you cannot get access to a GP when you need to see them; you cannot get through on the phone; it only a very short window when phone appointments are available and when you try and keeping trying you are told there are no more available slots for a "phone consultation" and to ring back the next day and try again...some of us work for a living and cannot keep ringing GPs when you are meant to be working...the receptionist overall are not very helpful when the GP rings you they are always hurried and don't wish to engage in a phone discussion yet they are getting paid the same amount for a phone consult versus a face to face...COVID and the aftermaths of same are being used by the BMA as a stick to prevent them going back to meeting patients face to face; none of the GPs want to meet their patients; it is an absolute disgrace as a tax payer that we in NI are not getting this basic service...subsequently I end up going to ED or out of hours and my family members and friends and colleagues are doing the exact same. The GPs should be ashamed of the services they provide....we are not cattle going to the vets here...poor care delivery and they do not care as they are still being paid to deliver this shoddy service....something has to change...it is an absolute disgrace and is not just accessing the GP but the treatment room nurse the practice nurse etc...primary care should including preventative care is pivotal in the community to prevent people ending up in secondary care and the hospital setting....this is no longer an option in NI and with my own GPs...
As before
Although a bit of a lottery, getting through for an urgent appointment is usually successful, if time-consuming. Follow-ups are rarely offered. The waiting time for a routine appointment is about two weeks.
Everything is centred around GP practice staff. Always impressing on the need to protect them and to be polite. Whilst this is fair, what about frustrated patients and consideration for them. If I hadn't checked up and asked staff to access my records I wouldn't have known what was wrong with me. Doctors no longer discuss outcomes.
Went to opticians as had rash on face & swollen eyes, they wrote a letter to my GP insisting I be seen, but still got no appointment
Since Covid restrictions have ended I don't understand why the GP surgeries are not open to walk in patients. The public are entitled to know why GP Surgery services are so restrictive.

Sometimes when you ring in the morning you are advised that the surgery does not open to 8.45am, I keep hitting redial both on my house phone and on my mobile and when you get through after the phones are switched on your maybe 18-20 in the queue by the time you get to speak to a receptionist all face to face appointments are gone, sometimes you are told to ring back tomorrow, other times you are offered a phone back, depending on what the receptionist thinks is an appropriate reason for a ring back, you may get a ring back in the morning period before 1pm closing or in the afternoon before 5.30pm closing, by which time the condition has got worse
General lack of interest in me
We spend a lot of time training only to find the newly trained staff are destined for foreign shores . this needs to stop and I have the answer.
Impossible
It used to be quicker but now it takes about 2 weeks.
Excellent GP service but serious problems with follow up specialist care
I haven't been able to see my gp in over a year
There is nothing more stressful than the race to be the first to ring the GP call centre type automated system bang on 8.30 knowing that if you are one minute later you will be caller number 38 and will have to hang on for an hour and half only to be told that all the appointments are gone and if the doctor has time they will call you back within the next 6 hours. I had no call back.
do as much as you can to remain healthy
Terrible service, telephone appointments, cannot see the stress or anxiety experienced when trying to access a GP. Having to hold on phone for up to 1 hour and 10 minutes to try and get an appointment, just to have phone hung up and a recorded message from the GP saying, there are no more appointments for today, try again in the morning. Disgraceful
It is almost impossible to make an appointment. Sometimes I've had to take off a day from work to go in person which they frown upon. There is no online booking system with my practice and changing is no use as the other practises are the same. I did leave a message and was able to get a medical for a driving licence quick enough but was charged £100. It's untenable.
Had a phone call yesterday which was clear and went to the GP to pickup the script which was ready
Having to call at 8am and 11am only in my Gp is so frustrating. I haven't had an urgent need so I have to call at 11am, and I work in the health service - I can sometimes have clients at 11 and cannot decide to delay that so it's really a disadvantage if you're working 9-5 in health care jobs
My GP is very helpful.
Receptionists are not doctors and should not be deciding who can or cannot see a doctor, or deciding what is urgent
If you want an appointment to see a Dr you have to ring between 8-10 am. If you're not well how often are you up at these hours, there are no alternatives just the phone call.  Dr's are very impersonal now since Covid it's all send a picture and we'll give you a script if you need one. I'm the kind of person that only goes to a Dr when I really need one!

No
If calling back can wait nearly all day unable to go out for walk or to keep other appointments
When my husband was dangerously ill we repeatedly had to go to A&E through lack of access to the GP in times of crisis. But also his condition continually worsened because of an inability of GP referrals to have any effect in getting him access to relevant hospital care in the first place. There is not just difficulty in getting access to a GP (which is a time consuming, dangerous farce) but there is a breakdown in the referral processes for GPs to get timely care for their patients. My husband was on an 8 year waiting list to be 'seen' ie diagnosed, for an operation which according to NICE guidelines should have been carried out within in a week. Because we then sought private diagnostic care he got 'bumped' into the NHS system by a doctor working in a private capacity who also worked within the NHS. He then had the operation within months rather than weeks (or 8 years, by which time he would have been dead). If you wanted to use his story it is more drawn out and complicated than I have written here - you would need to talk to him.
The service is awful. It is not the fault of the staff.
It appears too many GP practices are making it more difficult to make appointments and having spoken to friends in different parts of NI it appears the problem is widespread.
Its about time that Drs were open properly again
It feels like they don't want you in the surgery
My GP seems to have a well organised system for getting appointments and to speak to a doctor quickly if required, very different from and better than my wife who uses another local GP.
Apparently GP's are working to strick BMA rules which limits the amount of patients they can see in a day. On my last visit to the GP I was the only patient in a building with seven GPs and 4 reception staff.
I accessed private health service which I cannot actually afford going into debt to do so. I am simply just living and self medicating health conditions but I know that the ramifications of this professional neglect will manifest in the future as was the outcome in the neglected condition that was eventually treated privately . I am far from convinced that GP surgeries are giving their "best efforts" in this situation - it seems that they have made a conscious decision since the COVID restrictions to make an unresponsive and uncaring service permanent . The extent of mistrust in GP services now is widespread in the community
They do the best they can, but not enough staff doesn't help.
They say you can phone from 8:30 but usually you can't get through. There's always about 20-30 people waiting in the queue infront and if you can't get an appointment they tell you to phone another day only to go through the same cycle again
It is so impossible that I currently feel I don't have a GP and don't have access to one and routine checkups or appointments. This is worrying and I just have to hope that everything is okay; I would rather be much more proactive about my health and GP consultations.
Unable to get someone to answer calls sometimes I can ring upwards 50 times in one sitting and get no answer

I have attended my GP surgery for blood tests and as an alternative to GP appointment I now see a pharmacist once or twice a year in the surgery but he is only available once or twice a week although I have spoken to him over the phone although with great difficulty. The receptionists are generally unhelpful and act as a very effective obstacle to obtaining access to a GP or even the nursing staff or other professionals in the practice. Even if I have an adverse test result I am unable to speak to the GP about it. The receptionist instead will seek to provide direction often erroneously. I haven't had a GP appointment in since before COVID and I have given up even trying. The half hour slot for phone calls is impossible to get through. In the times I have been to the surgery for blood tests for example I am shocked at how empty it is and how little face to face appointments are being given - the lack of calls to patients on the digital display and the emptiness is evidence of that. However the GP's are there. Their cars in the car park demonstrate their presence. So what are they doing? Maybe seeing private patients or pharmaceutical sales reps!!!!
No
Difficult to get an ambulance
Long wait to get info from our old practice in England and would like GP help to get hospital referral for my husband who has not seen a specialist for nearly 2 years.
No face to face appointments apparently
No
They offer 1 or 2 at times at midnight online ...I clicked one and it was already taken a few minutes after midnight
I have not had a problem .
As someone on state pension, I find the difficulty in accessing a doctor very concerning (although my GP has recently referred me to hospital outpatients for assessment and treatment)
I am so grateful that for my age my health is so good otherwise the system would be so worrying
The online systems we have don't work. You can't get through on the phone for a visit and there are basically no face to face visits. Only if they need to do a procedure or some sort. I have issues i haven't been able to deal with and could get worse if not diagnosed.
I write to my GP as you cannot get appointments by phone
Our doctors even do home visits the same day.
It needs to be patient friendly and reasonable access for patients to self help with access permission for a pharmacist to help out with repeat prescription etc..
Dreadful. Also being called back - I am often driving- is dangerous for road safety
I belong to Benenden Healthcare and have used it for diagnosis and surgery when my GP referred me for hospital care but the waiting lists were years long. I know it started with trade unions and only does NHS backup rather than full scale private medicine but when I have to use it, I imagine Aneurin Bevan revolving in his grave.
On a general front, GPs are sending too many people to A&E who should be processed by GPs and the wider health system.
Something has to change. If I go into the practice, the waiting room is empty, but you can't book one in person, just on the phone. No wonder emergency departments are at breaking point.

No
FEAR, I have sight imparment, and shoort-term memory probleems. I communicate best if do iit in an unrushed consultation, or in writing - But people no longer reead a report , that includes GPs. Thye live in a world of Sound Bte - Siimple med. conditions, with cures. If I have a telcon., I have the brain pwoer to be politee, but afterwards I recall what I should have asked. - MY BRIAN RUNS AT 1/3 SPEEED, BUT I CO ER UP. I'm a pensioner, I cnnnot afford or indeed see well enough to sue repeated try phones,. Soo the app'ts are fuilled before I get through. O SO I AM FRIGHTEND OOF NEEDING MY GP. AND GP CATERING FOR MY DISABILITES.
Walk ins are just as stressful as trying to phone your GP. Other patients are having the same problems.
The entire system is so restrictive most just live in neglect. Only those who are willing and able will manage, unless they are emergency
A complete shambles.Unable to get the GP i want and also everyday i attend Cityview Medical i see foreign nationals registering ....every day i am told routine appointments are full up but the waiting area is always empty at all times of the day
No
It is very stressful and demoralising
Tried phoning them but most of the time they hung up on me, despite that I called them in the morning.
In my opinion the Kells surgery is very efficient, professional and excellent at assessment be it on the phone or face to face.The two GPS i have attended have been exceptional ie. Dr Greer & Dr Blessed
No
It is a nightmare and makes things so much more difficult and distressing.
Time wasting messages before call is answered which usually takes15 to 20 mins. Can be No1 on the list before call is answered 25+ mins later Receptionist rang me to say Dr would like to speak to me but I was told to ring next day to make an appointment- a complete nonsense of a system. Detest trying to obtain an appointment. Detest the threat messages of removal from practice.
I consider myself lucky my surgery has generally been excellent. Nothing but praise for the way the surgery is run they do try hard under difficult times
Larne Medical Practice has got worse if that is possible
GP services are at the frontline and need extra support. It's a vicious circle. The lack of access means people are getting sicker and spending more time at A&E, hospitalised or suffering. This affects the economy as people are off work and or not contributing to society.
Even though GP appointments are difficult to get anytime I pass the waiting room it is fairly empty. Explain that to me.
Underfunded service
Usually instead of GP I get referred to a nurse practitioner

The lottery style "ring first thing in the morning" appointment process for most issues is quite stressful and I imagine very difficult for those who are not able to call/keep calling at 8/8.30AM. I understand this is helpful in organising more same day appointments, but it may be advantageous to have the option of booking an appointment for a later date.
The 8am rush to get an appointment is ridiculous, something needs to be put in place where everyone gets a better chance for a quick appointment.
Lack of GP service is extremely worrying and frightening
No
It's virtually impossible to get in touch with my GP even for a phone appointment.