

# Local people's experiences of booking a GP appointment



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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all Healthwatch Enfield volunteers who committed their time and energy to helping us with data collection and data inputting for this project. We would also like to thank the GP practices in Enfield who supported this project and welcomed us into their practice to talk to their patients.

# Executive Summary



Healthwatch Enfield's latest research shows that many patients across Enfield face significant challenges when trying to secure a GP appointment. Moreover, the experience is inconsistent across the borough and tends to be worse for people in the deprived 'Eastern corridor' of the borough.

Local people's real life experiences are therefore at odds with the stated ambition of the local NHS (North Central London Partners in Health and Care) to deliver consistent, quality services throughout the whole of North Central London. **This could contribute to the inequalities that people in Enfield experience in their health outcomes.**

With the recent introduction of the NHS app<sup>2</sup> and the roll out of the DoctorLink<sup>3</sup> system (a booking system incorporating a symptom checker) and the move to increased on-line booking, the continuing use of the telephone as the preferred method to make appointments also needs to be considered.

Healthwatch Enfield proposes working with GP practices and patients across Enfield to explore these matters further, in pursuit of easier access

to GP appointments, a better, more consistent experience for local patients, and the promotion of greater health equality.

## Key Findings<sup>1</sup>

Healthwatch Enfield heard from well over 1,000 local users of 16 GP practices that participated in our research.

- One third of patients find it difficult to book a GP appointment.
- Those in Enfield's deprived Eastern corridor report greater difficulties in booking GP appointments.
- Given the lack of better alternatives, two-thirds of people say that they book a GP appointment by phone, despite stating that this is difficult....
- ....but fully one-fifth of people, more likely to be older people, find that the most sure way for them to secure an appointment is to go to the surgery to book in person.
- There is also inconsistent access to actual appointments; Eastern corridor residents tend to wait longer to see their GP, as well as finding it hard to book.

<sup>1</sup> Healthwatch Enfield's research was focused on the practicalities of booking appointments and did not include an analysis of the adequacy of the number of appointments available, which may well be a contributory factor to some of the difficulties experienced.

<sup>2</sup> More information is available at [www.digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app](http://www.digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app)

<sup>3</sup> More information is available at [www.doctorlink.com/patients/](http://www.doctorlink.com/patients/)

- Less than one-third of patients were seen within two days, but there was huge variation among practices.
- More than 60% of patients who responded reported that they had heard of GP access hubs that offer supplementary GP appointments from four locations across the borough. Well over half of these patients had used them to secure an appointment.
- Patients were aware that there may be an underlying shortage of appointments, but nevertheless thought that systems could be improved and put forward some suggestions.
- explore our provisional finding that patients of larger practices find it harder to arrange GP appointments;
- build on our report on *'Using Technology to Ease the Burden on Primary Care'*<sup>4</sup> to understand how digital technology may be able to help;
- consider what steps need to be taken to ensure that investment in new initiatives such as the GP App and the DoctorLink system are implemented in a patient-friendly way; exploring the availability of appointments using digital technology including DoctorLink and NHS app to match volumes and times with patient's needs

#### Proposed Actions

Healthwatch Enfield is offering to work together with GP practices and patients across Enfield to develop ways that patients' access to GP appointments can be improved, contributing to reduced health inequalities.

We propose that we:

- undertake further work to understand more fully the issues faced by patients seeking to access appointments, exploring what contribution is played by, for example, the different booking systems used by different practices;

- work with patients and practices to co-design workable improvements that will reduce service inconsistency and improve patients' experience of accessing their GP.

We hope that GP practices in Enfield will be willing to support us to do this work.

If the numbers of NHS GP appointments available in Enfield are, in fact, sufficient to meet need, then improved arrangements should lead to fewer problems and greater consistency across the borough in accessing GP appointments and contribute to reduced health inequalities.

<sup>4</sup> The report can be accessed at [www.healthwatchenfield.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Healthwatch-Enfield-Using-Technology\\_FinalSpreads.pdf](http://www.healthwatchenfield.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Healthwatch-Enfield-Using-Technology_FinalSpreads.pdf)



# Introduction

*‘A GP or General Practitioner is a doctor who looks after the health of local people and deals with a wide range of health issues such as general health advice, contraception and maternity services and vaccinations. If the GP cannot help they may refer you to a hospital for tests or treatment’<sup>5</sup>. According to the NHS, ‘your surgery should be able to offer you an appointment to see a GP or another healthcare professional quickly, if necessary’<sup>6</sup>.*

Access to primary care services is a topic often raised with Healthwatch Enfield by local residents. As the front door to non-emergency NHS care, GP practices are the one health service that most individuals use, regardless of health status, age, ethnicity or locality. Most of the feedback we have received to date relates to struggles faced by Enfield residents with accessing GP appointments.

This feedback has been echoed in the latest national GP Patient Survey results for Enfield, which suggests that despite a large proportion of Enfield respondents trying to access an appointment within the past 3 months (62%), only 24% of these rated their overall satisfaction of trying to get a GP appointment as very good (compared to national average of 30%, GP Patient Survey, 2018). Just 18% of these individuals said that it was very easy to get through to their GP practice on the phone (compared to national average of 22.8%, GP Patient Survey, 2018)<sup>7</sup>.

In order to amplify the patient voice, we wanted to listen to patients’ experiences of booking a GP appointment in the borough and collect an accurate, robust evidence base. Sixteen GP practices<sup>8</sup> partnered with NHS Enfield Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Healthwatch Enfield to establish an evidence base with a view to work alongside patients to co-design solutions to secure improvements in respect of their experience in booking appointments.

This report details the findings of Healthwatch Enfield’s engagement with local people to listen to their experiences of booking a GP appointment and to start conversations with patients on potential, tangible improvements that could be implemented to make the experience of the booking process better.

<sup>5</sup> Based on information available at [www.enfieldccg.nhs.uk/gp-practices.htm](http://www.enfieldccg.nhs.uk/gp-practices.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Based on information available at [www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/gps/gp-appointments-and-bookings/](http://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/gps/gp-appointments-and-bookings/)

<sup>7</sup> NHS England (2018), GP Patient Survey

<sup>8</sup> An invitation to participate in the project was distributed to all GP practices in the borough



# Methodology

Between August and September 2018, Healthwatch Enfield engaged with Enfield patients to listen to their experiences of booking GP appointments. Specifically, patients were asked about:

- how they booked their appointment
- how long they had to wait for their appointment
- if they wanted their appointment sooner
- how easy they found it to book their appointment
- how their GP practice could improve access to appointments

We contacted all 46 GP practices in Enfield to request expressions of interest for active participation in the project. A total of 16 GP practices agreed to take part.

Through hosting 37 engagement sessions, we spoke to patients face to face in local GP practice waiting rooms, A&E department, leisure centres, colleges and community events. In addition, we also provided collection boxes for paper surveys and access to an online questionnaire.

As we held some engagement events that were not targeted at a specific practice, we ended up speaking to patients from all 46 GP practices in Enfield, not just the 16 participating practices. Any data collected from individuals registered at GP practices from neighbouring boroughs has been removed from our analysis.

We also asked participating practices to send us information about how they release their emergency, routine and online appointments.

Due to the voluntary nature of individuals’ participation in the conversations, a standard set of data was developed but a complete set was not collected for each individual. Therefore, the sample size varies depending on information provided. Not all data will tally due to rounding.

This report collates and articulates the findings from listening to 1,071 people.

## Findings

# Overall experience of booking a GP appointment

Based on the analysis of feedback shared with Healthwatch Enfield by 1,071 individuals, local people have mixed experiences of accessing primary care services.

Figure 1. How did you find the process of booking a GP appointment?



*'It was very easy and quick'*

*'It was relatively easy, I was able to book for the day I wanted'*

*'It is easy because I book through the phone'*



*'Find it very difficult at 8am, generally kept waiting as phone engaged and when I do get through there is several calls in front of me before I can speak to reception.'*

*'Very very hard, queues of people call before 8am, otherwise when and if you get through ppointments are all gone'*



Individuals' experiences of booking a GP appointment varied based on the GP practice they are registered with, their age and the locality<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> 'OK' was a patient defined measure of how they found the process of booking a GP appointment

<sup>10</sup> Wards in the East of the borough, such as Edmonton Green, Upper Edmonton and Lower Edmonton, rank among the 10% most deprived wards in England. Wards in the west of the borough, such as Cockfosters, Grange Park, Highlands and Winchmore Hill, rank among the least deprived wards in England. Source: Enfield Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), [www.new.enfield.gov.uk/healthandwellbeing/jsna/topics/demography/](http://www.new.enfield.gov.uk/healthandwellbeing/jsna/topics/demography/)



Figure 2. Percentage of patients reporting their experience of booking an appointment as easy

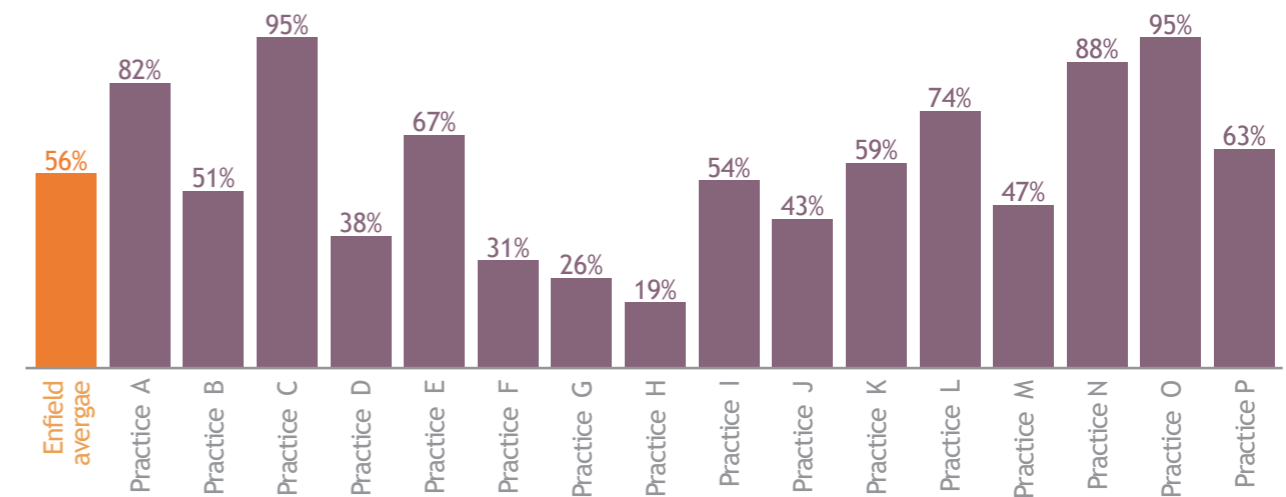
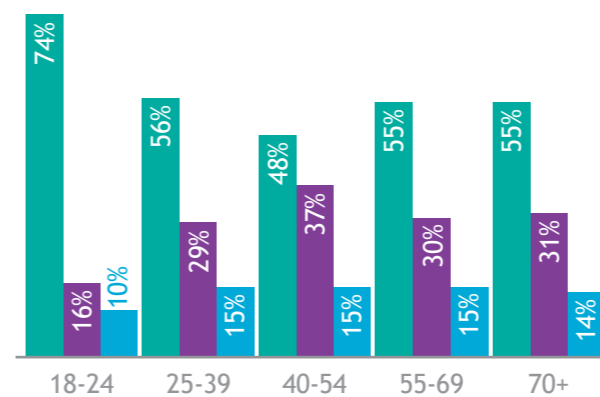
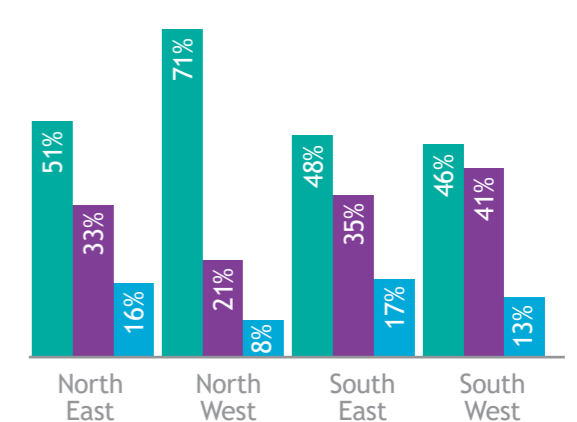


Figure 3. People's experiences of booking a GP appointment, by characteristics

### BY AGE GROUP



### BY LOCALITY



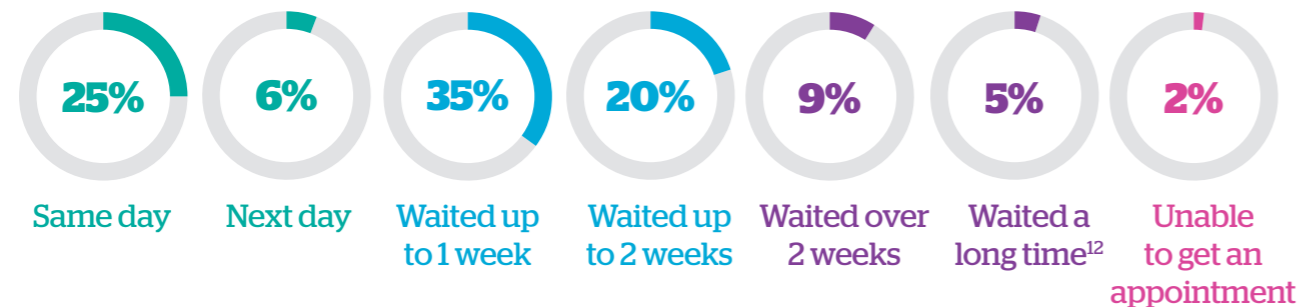
- found it easy to book their GP appointment
- found it difficult to book their GP appointment
- found it 'OK'<sup>11</sup> to book their GP appointment

<sup>11</sup> 'OK' was a patient defined measure of how they found the process of booking a GP appointment

# Waiting time for appointments

Healthwatch Enfield's research found nearly half the individuals (49%) who shared their experiences wanted an appointment sooner than the one they were given.

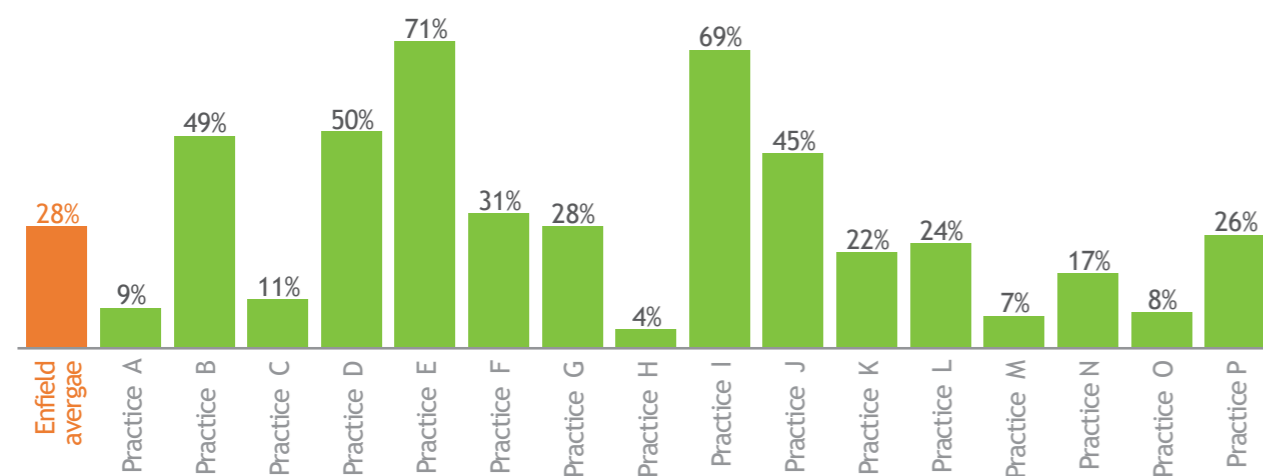
Figure 4. How long did you wait for a GP appointment?



Individuals phoning for an appointment were more likely to get a same day or a next day appointment than people using other methods, namely in person or online. One in three patients who booked their appointment over the phone got a same day or next day GP appointment.

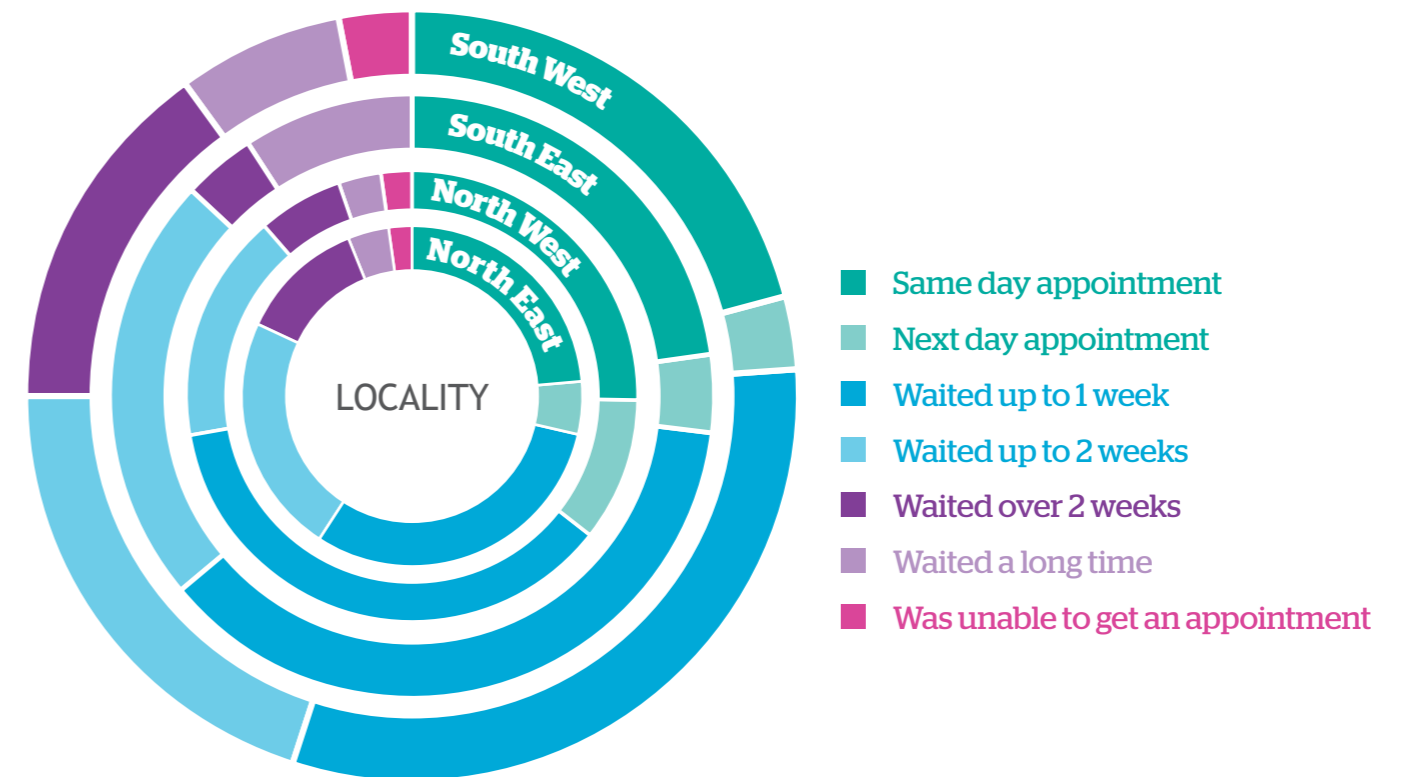
According to the analysis carried out by Healthwatch Enfield, the waiting time for a GP appointment in Enfield is dependent upon the practice that individuals are registered with and the locality. Individuals living in the more deprived areas of the borough are having to wait longer to access primary care services.

Figure 5. Percentage of patients getting a same day appointment



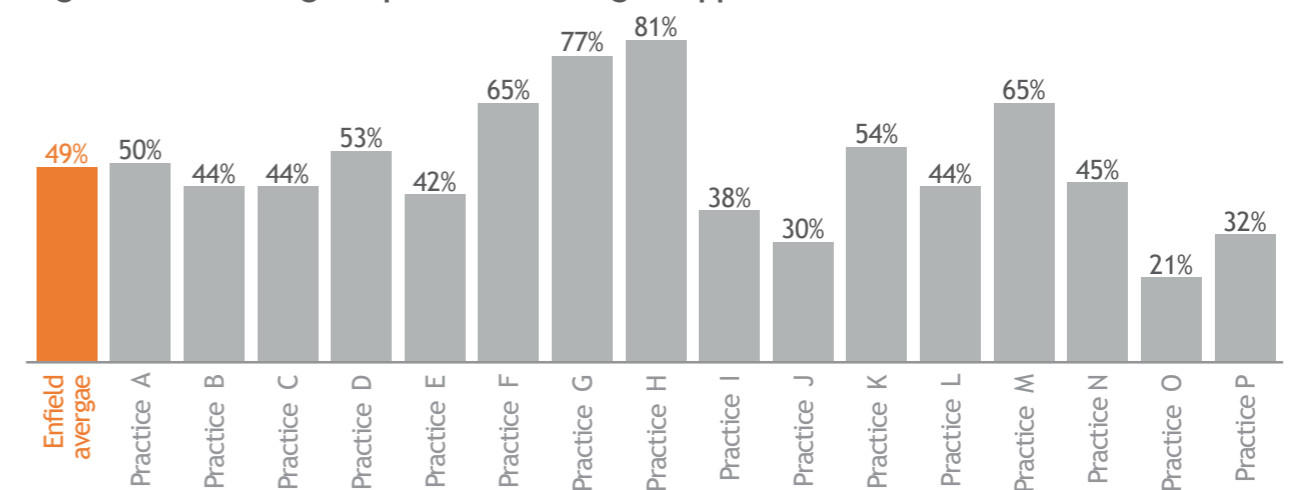
<sup>12</sup> 'Waited a long time' was a patient defined measure of waiting time for a GP appointment

Figure 6. Waiting times for appointments by locality



Almost 1 in 2 Enfield patients (49%) wanted their appointment sooner. The percentage of patients wanting their appointment sooner varied between practices.

Figure 7. Percentage of patients wanting an appointment sooner



# How do local people book GP appointments?

Figure 8. Method of booking a GP appointment

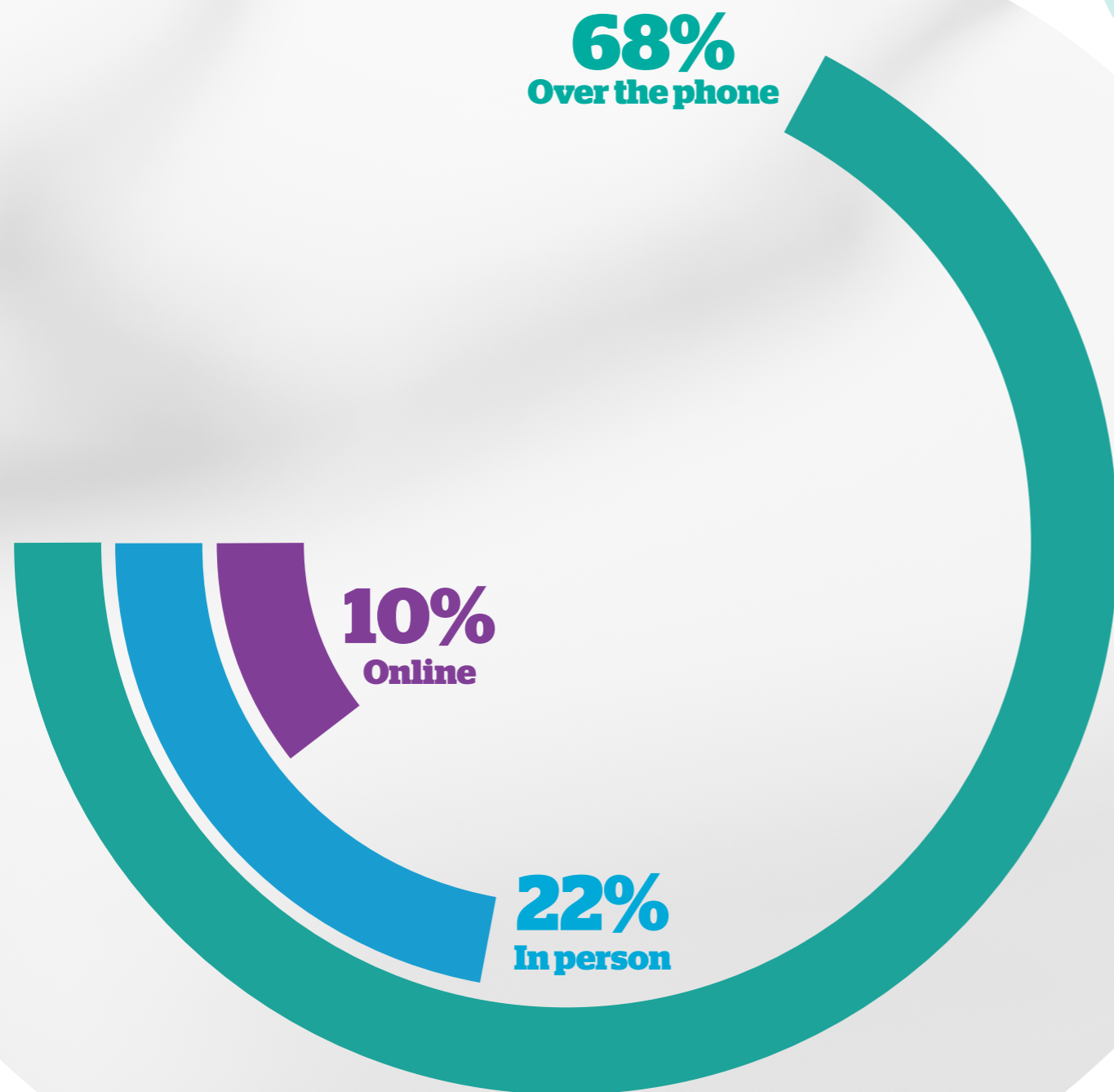
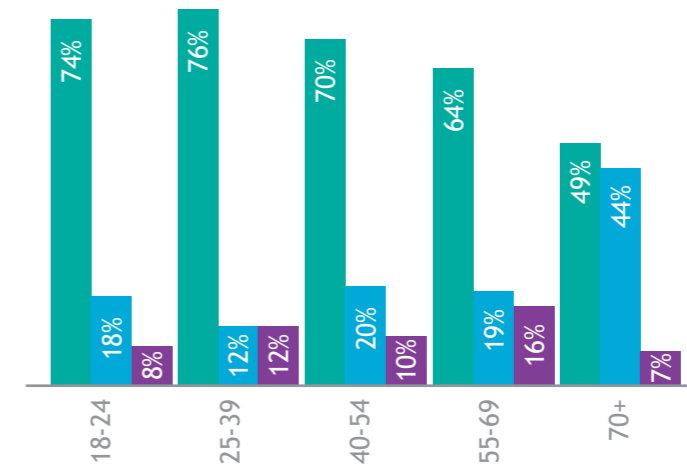


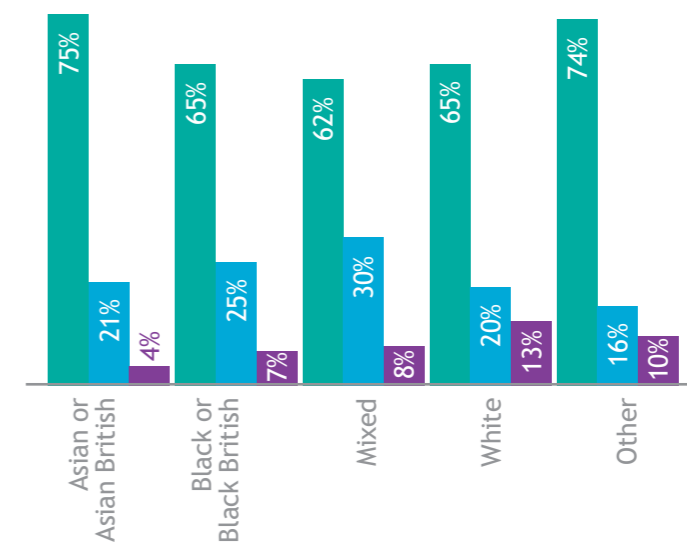
Figure 9. Method of booking a GP appointment, by characteristics

■ Telephone ■ In person ■ Online

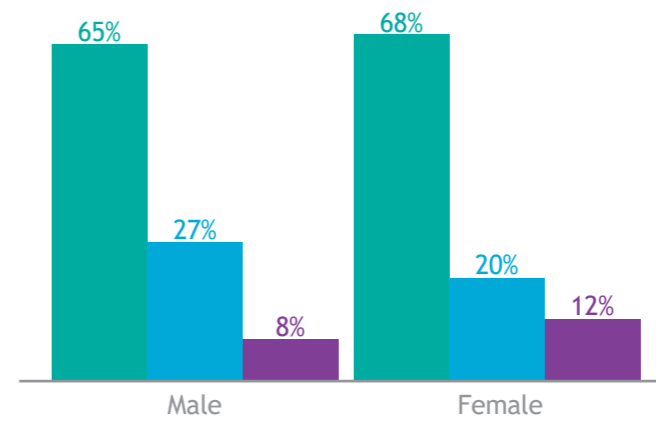
### BY AGE GROUP



### BY ETHNICITY



### BY GENDER



## Booking an appointment over the phone

Overall, booking a GP appointment via telephone has been rated as the most difficult way of communicating with and accessing primary care services in the borough, based on the information collected and analysed by Healthwatch Enfield.

Despite this, it is also the most common method of booking a GP appointment in the borough with, on average, two in three patients choosing to book their appointment this way. However, this varies depending on the GP surgery ranging from 50% to 97% of patients choosing telephone as a method of booking appointments.

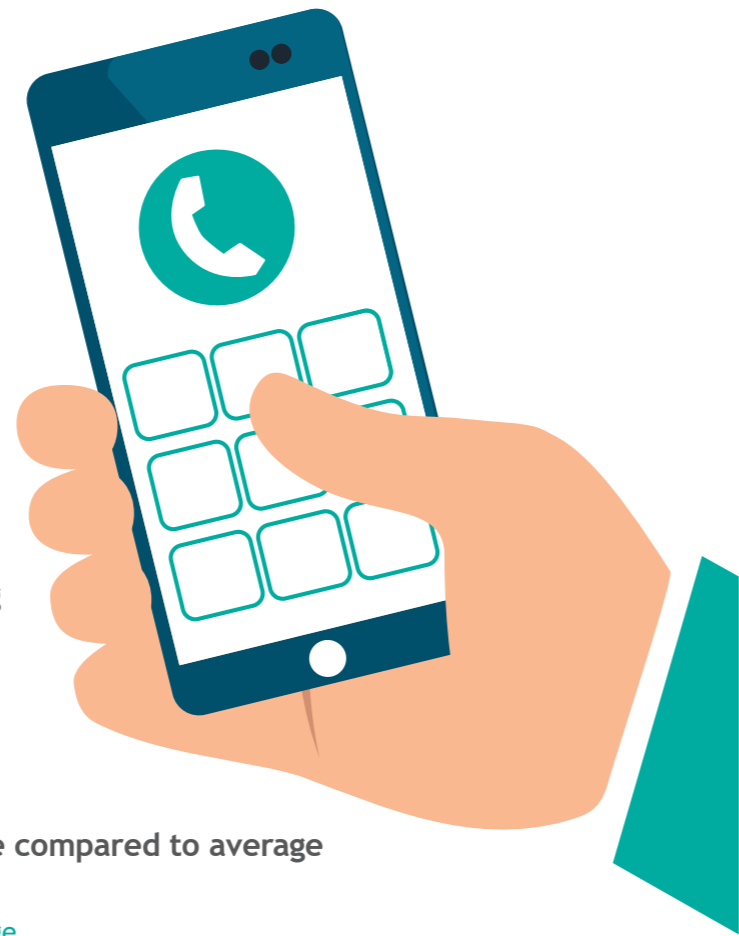


Figure 10. Reported ease of booking via phone compared to average

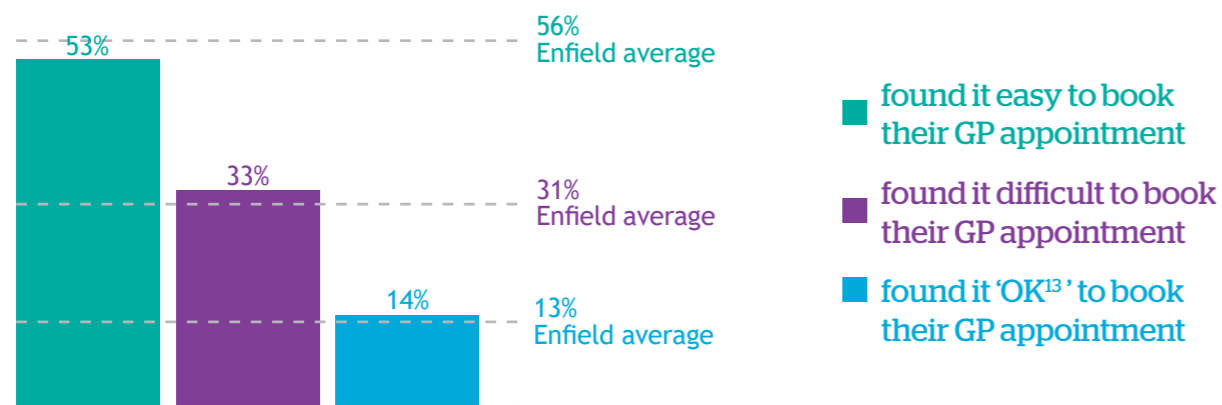
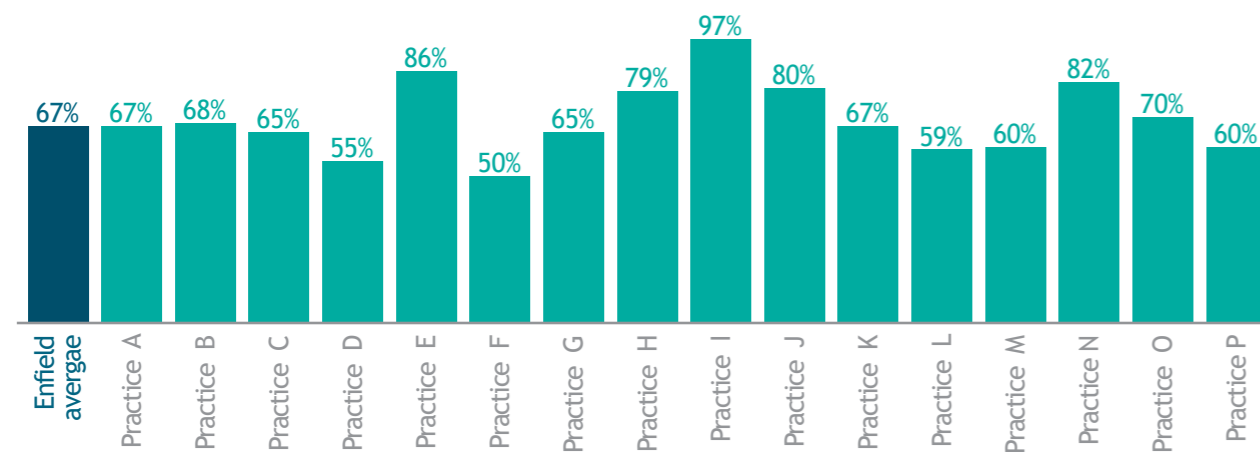
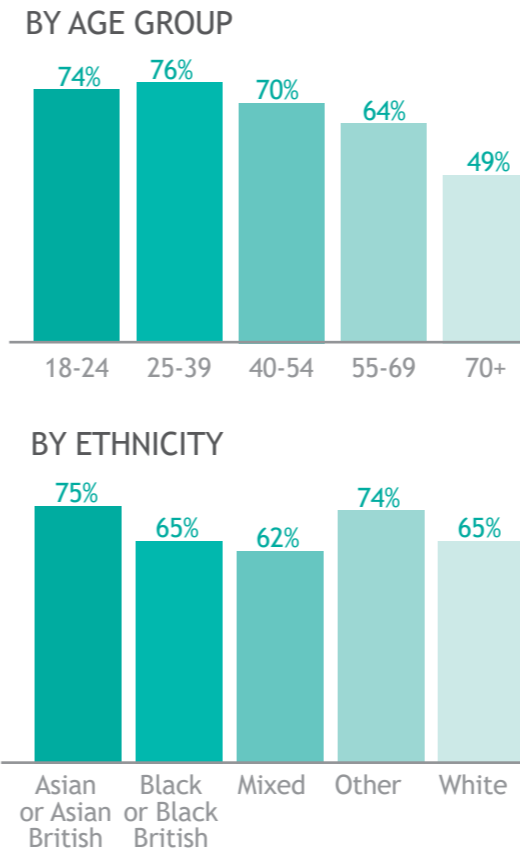


Figure 11. Percentage of patients booking appointments over the phone



13 'OK' was a patient defined measure of how they found the process of booking a GP appointment

Figure 12. Percentage of patients that booked their GP appointment via telephone, by characteristics



In addition to differences in the numbers of patients who choose to book appointments via the phone based on their registered GP practice, further analysis of data reveals that individuals' age, ethnic origin and locality<sup>14</sup> impact the choice of method of booking.

Even though telephoning a practice is the most common method of securing a GP appointment, local people told Healthwatch Enfield it causes individuals the most struggle, with one in three facing difficulties. These primarily focussed around securing same-day appointments and on:

- (1) long waits on the phone, getting through to be then told there are no available appointments left

*'Rang at 8am, appeared to have got through, rang about 40 times then cut off.'*

*'Not easy at all. 49 attempts to be told no appointments left'*

- (2) having to phone at 8am to secure a same day appointment

*'I am doing the school run at 8am so if I want to make an appointment, I have to alter my plans for that morning e.g. get someone else to do the school drop off or drop off late and be late for work.'*

*'It's not very easy or convenient, as there is only an hour to get through from 8-9am'*



14 Wards in the East of the borough, such as Edmonton Green, Upper Edmonton and Lower Edmonton, rank among the 10% most deprived wards in England. Wards in the west of the borough, such as Cockfosters, Grange Park, Highlands and Winchmore Hill, rank among the least deprived wards in England. Source: Enfield Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), [www.new.enfield.gov.uk/healthandwellbeing/jsna/topics/demography/](http://www.new.enfield.gov.uk/healthandwellbeing/jsna/topics/demography/)



## Booking an appointment in person

Analysis of data gathered by Healthwatch Enfield revealed that booking a GP appointment in person is the second most common way of accessing primary care with more than one in five people (22%) choosing to book their GP appointment this way. For many, this is an alternative booking method, based on their previous, negative, experiences of attempting to secure a GP appointment over the phone.

*'Always have to queue at least 15 minutes before opening time of surgery because I cannot get through on the phone'*

*'Impossible to get through on the telephone to book an appointment. My husband had to queue up before 8am in person to get one for me'*

## RECEPTION

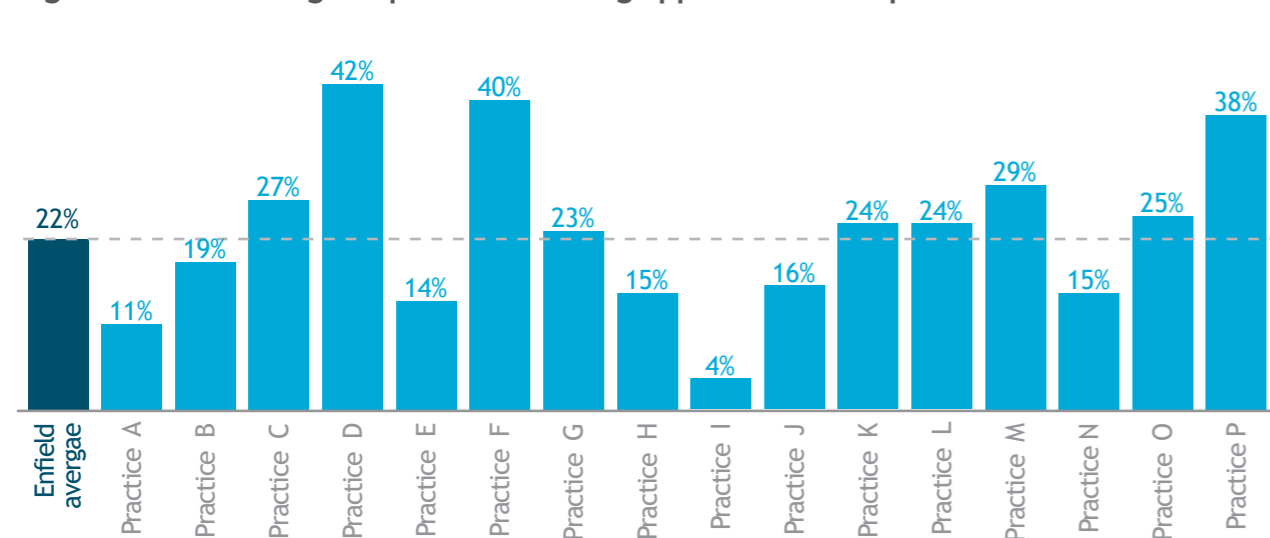
*'They start taking calls at 8am but its constantly busy so I have to book it in person and have to get there by at least 7.45 to make sure I get a booking'*

*'It is not easy I have to come in any weather and line up outside the surgery'*

The proportion of patients who told Healthwatch Enfield that they choose to book appointments by visiting their practice, varied and ranged from 4% to 42% per practice, with an average of 22% across Enfield as a whole.



Figure 13. Percentage of patients booking appointments in person



In addition to differences in the proportion of patients who choose to book appointments by visiting the surgery, an analysis carried out by Healthwatch Enfield revealed that individuals' age and ethnic origin also has an impact on the choice of method of booking.

Figure 14. Percentage of patients that booked their GP appointment in person, by characteristics

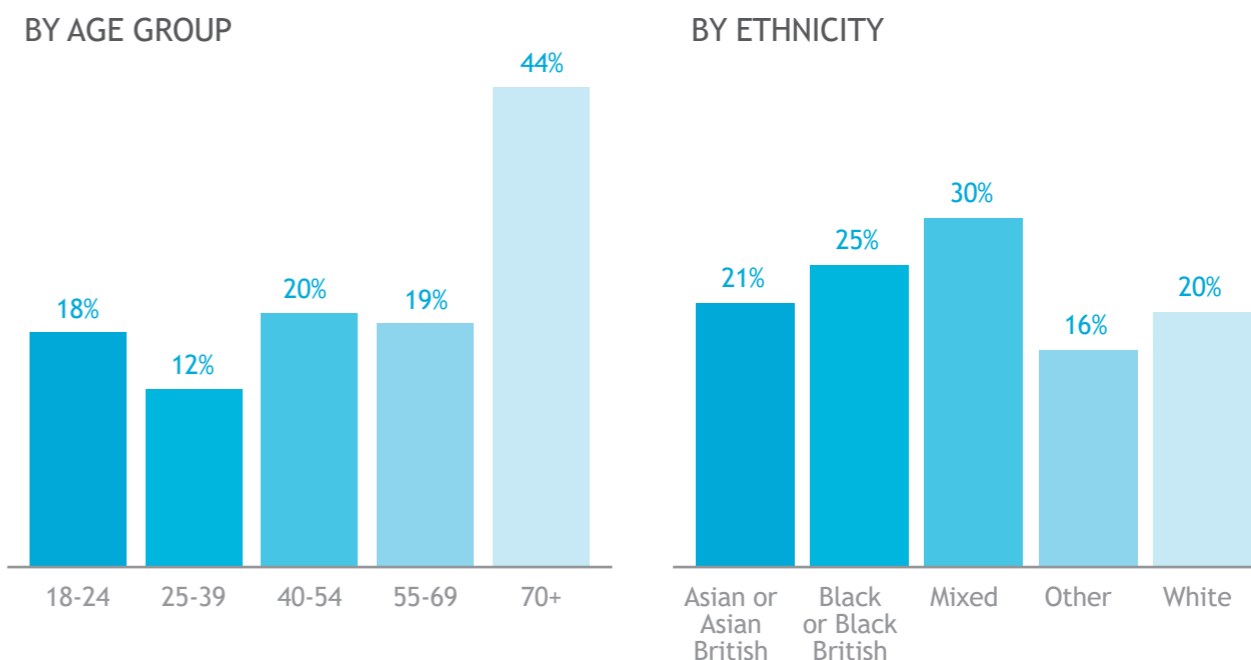
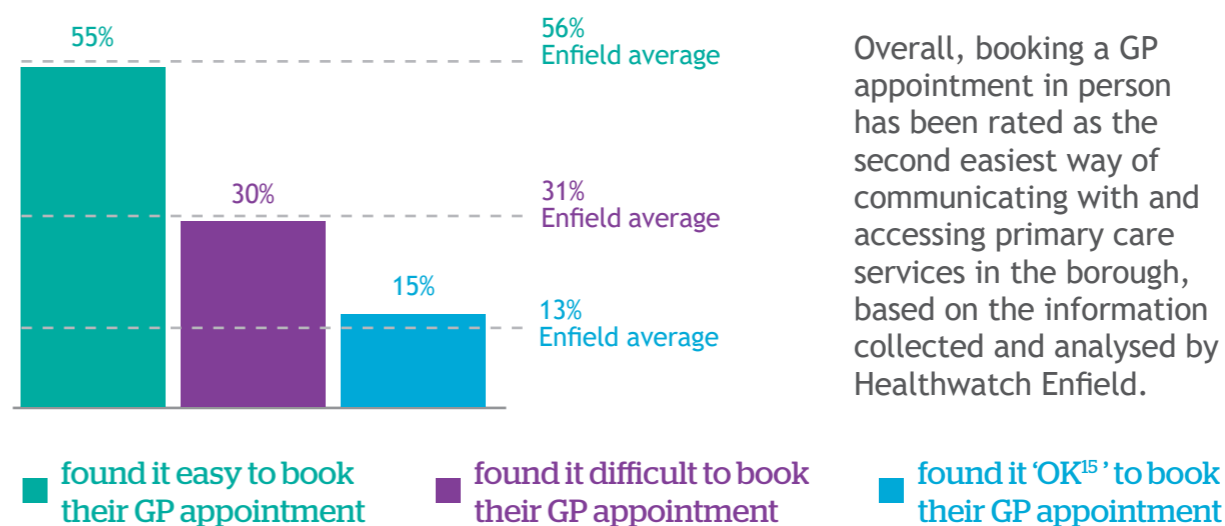


Figure 15. Reported ease of booking in person compared to average



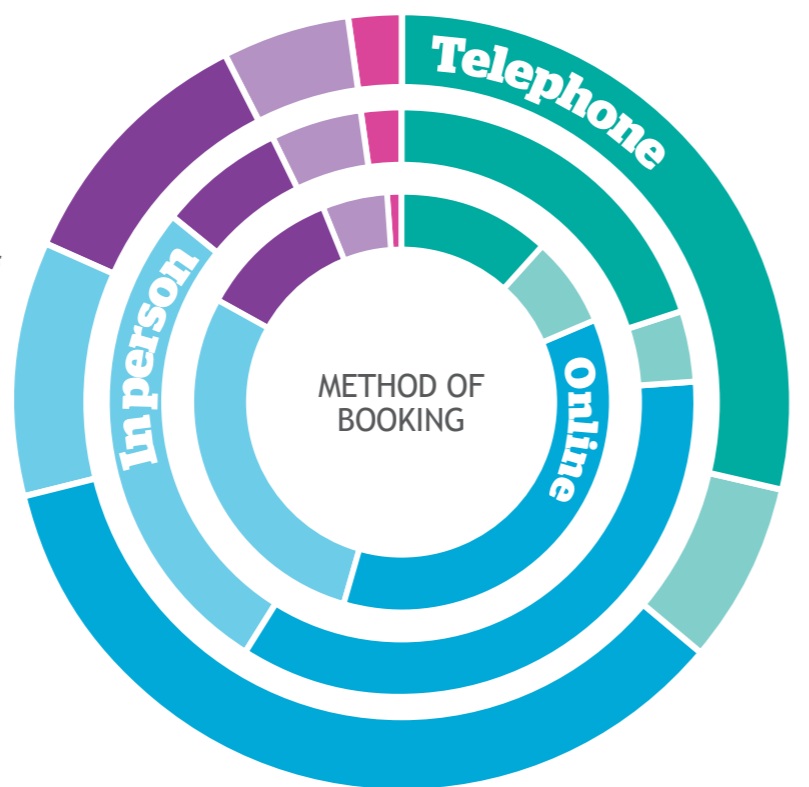
<sup>15</sup> 'OK' was a patient defined measure of how they found the process of booking a GP appointment

## Booking an appointment online, and awareness of the online service

Based on the data gathered by Healthwatch Enfield, booking a GP appointment online, is the least popular method utilised by local residents with, on average, one in ten using the service to book their last appointment despite 76% of respondents telling us about being aware of GP online services.

Booking a GP appointment online was rated as the easiest method of accessing primary care services (compared with booking via a telephone or in person) with almost 75% of those who used the service, reporting a positive experience. Although individuals booking through this method had to wait longer for their appointments.

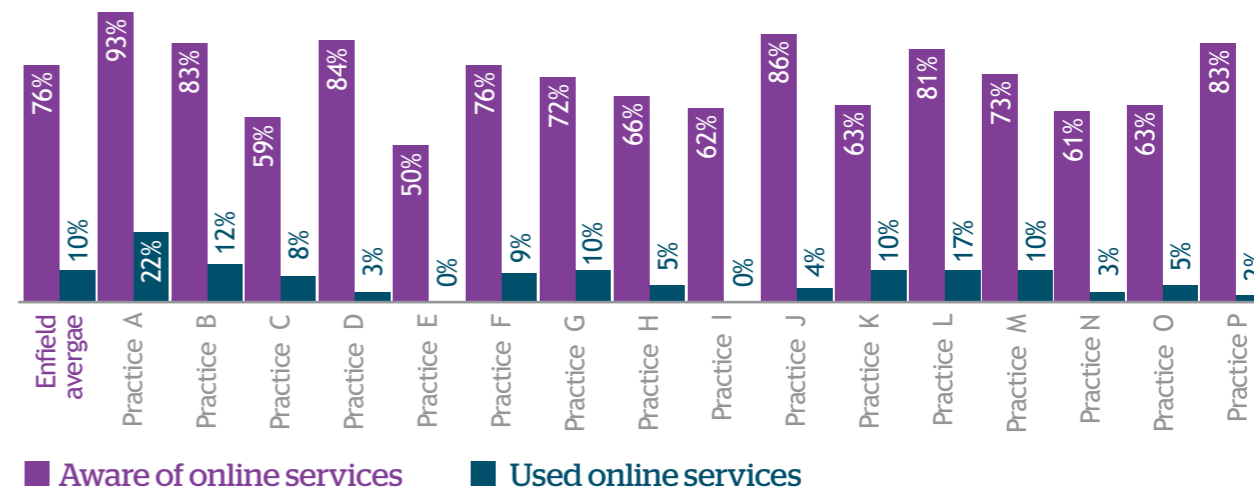
Figure 16. Waiting times for a GP appointment based on method of booking



- Same day appointment
- Next day appointment
- Waited over 2 weeks
- Was unable to get an appointment
- Waited up to 1 week
- Waited up to 2 weeks
- Waited a long time

The numbers of patients who told Healthwatch Enfield that they chose to book appointments online varied, and ranged from 0% to 22% with an average of 10% across the 16 practices that we worked with in the borough.

Figure 17. Percentage of patients who have used or are aware of online services



The uptake of GP online services seems low when compared with levels of awareness, ranging from 50% to 93%. However, this could be attributed to individuals' previous experiences.

*'I can never get an appointment slot online'*

*'I tried to book an appointment online and couldn't get one until 2 weeks'*

*'Tried to use it to book an appointment but they were for 4-6 weeks' time.'*

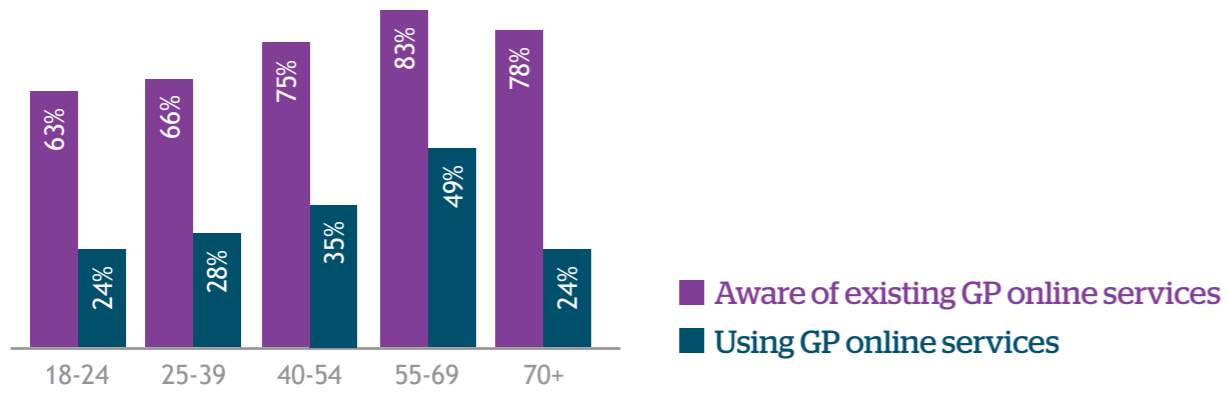
*'You do not get same day appointments online'*

*'You can't book nurse online'*

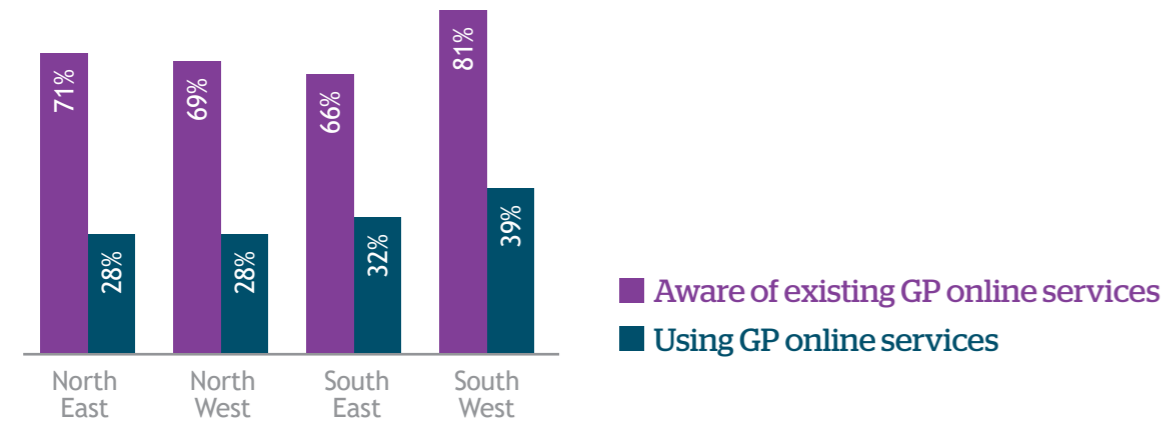
In addition to differences in the numbers of patients who are aware of or choose to book appointments online, further analysis of data reveals that individuals' gender, age and locality also affect the choice of the method of booking appointments.

Figure 18. Awareness and uptake of GP online services, by characteristics

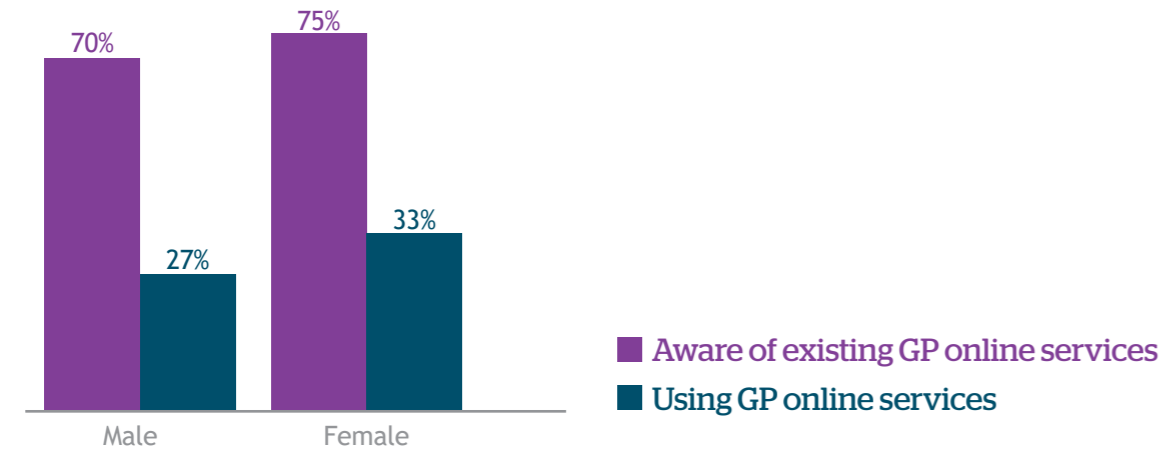
BY AGE GROUP



BY LOCALITY



BY GENDER



# Primary care GP access hubs - awareness and uptake of accessing GP appointments outside the patient's own practice

Primary care GP access hubs offer “urgent and routine appointments with a local GP or nurse, either same day or in advance at any one of four primary care GP access hubs, making it much easier to get the care you need when you want it at a location that is convenient for you.

“Patients registered with an Enfield GP practice (or those resident in Enfield but who have yet to register with an Enfield GP practice) can book an appointment at the service.

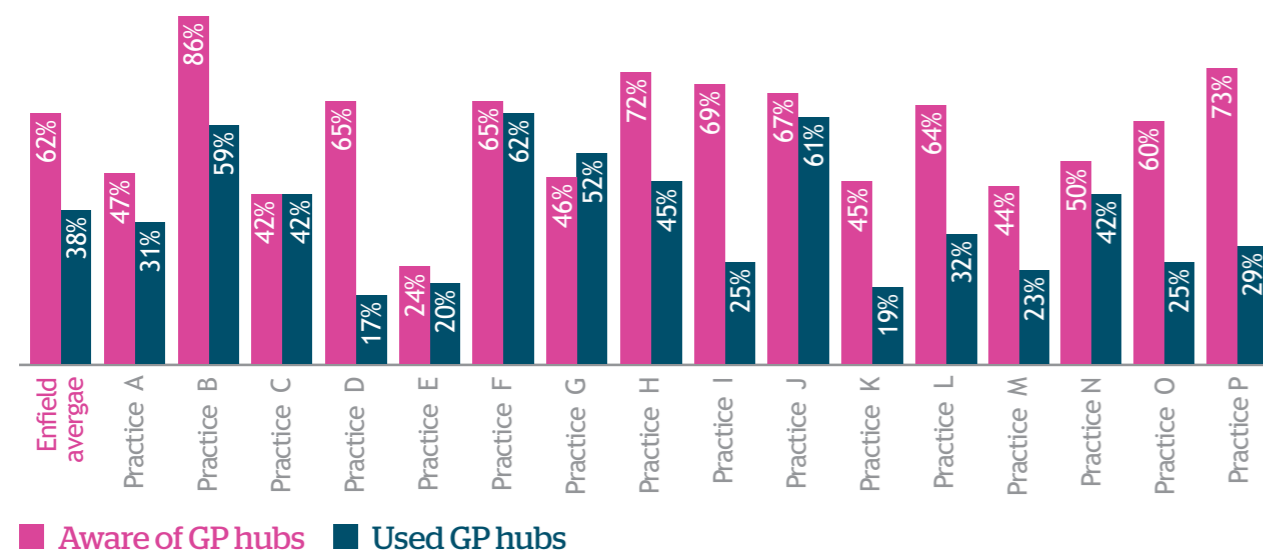
“Hub opening hours are 6.30pm - 8pm weekdays and 8am - 8pm weekends and

public holidays<sup>16</sup>.”

Based on feedback from the 1,071 residents who engaged in conversation with Healthwatch Enfield, on average, 62% of local people reported knowing about primary care GP access hubs whilst 38% had used the service.

Awareness and uptake of primary care GP access hub appointments varied depending on the method of booking, GP practice the individuals are registered with and also individuals' gender, ethnic origin and locality where they live.

Figure 19. Percentage of patients who have used or are aware of GP hubs



16 Based on information available through NHS Enfield Clinical Commissioning Group at [www.enfieldccg.nhs.uk/primary-care-gp-hubs.htm](http://www.enfieldccg.nhs.uk/primary-care-gp-hubs.htm)

## METHOD OF BOOKING

Figure 20. Percentage of people aware of primary care GP access hubs



Figure 21. Percentage of people using primary care GP access hubs



Figure 22. Percentage of patients who have used or are aware of GP hubs, by characteristics



The co-location of a primary care GP access hub with a GP surgery seems to be the biggest factor in increasing levels of awareness and uptake of the service.

With, on average, 38% of individuals reporting having used a primary care GP access hub previously compared with awareness of 62%, Healthwatch Enfield looked into why the relatively high level of awareness had not yet converted into a higher rate of conversion into attendances at the hub. The reasons include:

- preference to see ‘own’ GP
- lack of information on how to access the service or what the service offers
- inability to secure an appointment at all or at a suitable time
- inability to book online
- distance to travel to hub location

*‘I don’t know enough about it and it makes me feel like it will possibly have long waiting times like in A&E.’*

*‘Not suitable locations as no direct transport link suitable when feeling ill.’*

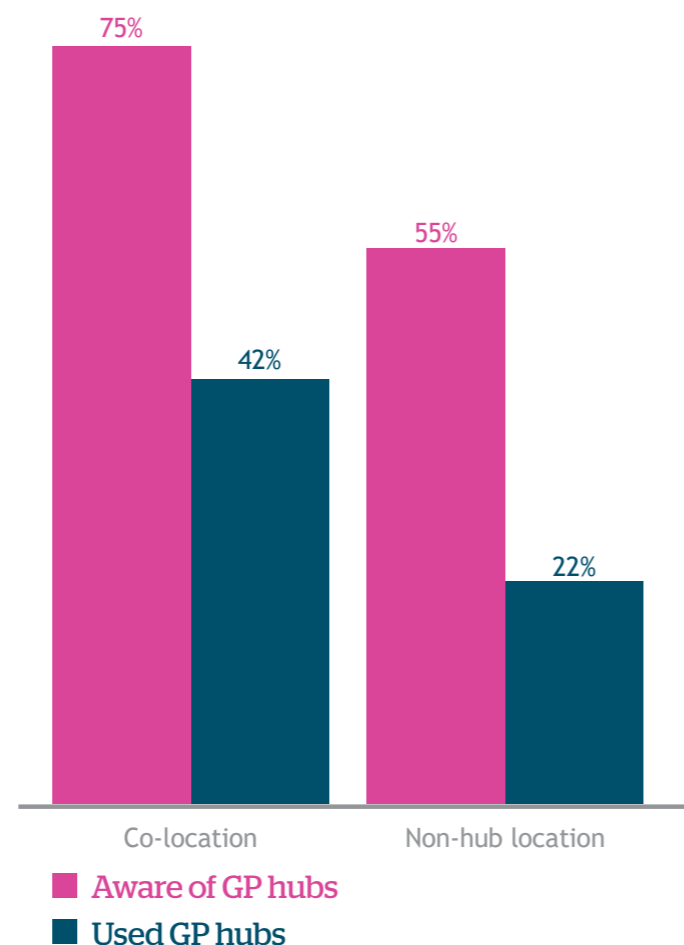
*‘I asked to access this and was told there were no appointments’*

*‘Don’t know much about it, i.e. where, when, how to book’*

*‘Not sure if they can access my records’*



Figure 23. Awareness and uptake of GP hubs based on co-location



## Conclusion and next steps

From listening to 1,071 Enfield residents about their experiences of booking GP appointments, it is clear that many patients do report a positive experience of accessing primary care. However, we also found that a proportion of Enfield residents struggle to get a GP appointment. These findings highlight the need for consistency across Enfield GP practices, to reduce the risk of health inequalities in accessing primary care depending on which practice an individual is registered with.

It appears patients have individual preferences as to whether they book their appointment via the phone, in person or online, and this is dependent upon their age, gender and socio-economic status. Patients told us how all methods of booking a GP appointment present their own unique challenges and suggested ways of how these could be realistically addressed.

At present, the telephone is the most usual method of booking an appointment (68%), more needs to be done to make it a more positive and productive experience. We propose that ways to achieve this be co-designed with patients.

Efforts also need to be made to incentivise online services - patients who use this system find it easy but cannot get a same-day appointment this way. However, practices of course need to try and balance the number of appointments available online and by phone so that neither group is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged.

Healthwatch Enfield is offering to work with practices to complete mapping about how individuals access services now and how (working and co-designing with patients) GP surgeries can improve access thereby encouraging patients to use the full range of options available to them. Healthwatch Enfield can draw on the findings reported in our *‘Using technology to ease the burden on primary care’* report<sup>17</sup> to inform mapping activity. This work would support NHS Enfield Clinical Commissioning Group in its efforts to promote to patients the uptake of the NHS app<sup>18</sup> and the Doctorlink<sup>19</sup> ‘symptom checker’ system which aims to divert patients who do not need to see a GP.

<sup>17</sup> The report can be accessed at [www.healthwatchenfield.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Healthwatch-Enfield-Using-Technology\\_FinalSpreads.pdf](http://www.healthwatchenfield.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Healthwatch-Enfield-Using-Technology_FinalSpreads.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> More information is available at [www.digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app](http://www.digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app)

<sup>19</sup> More information is available at [www.doctorlink.com/patients/](http://www.doctorlink.com/patients/)

This report can be made available in alternative formats, such as easy read or large print, and may be available in alternative languages, upon request.

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