

Summary report into findings of use of digital consultations and access to Primary Care

August 2020

1. Introduction

Covid-19, also known as coronavirus, has meant that NHS healthcare staff have needed to use different ways of providing clinical consultations to ensure that patients still get the healthcare they need. As well as the traditional methods such as face-to-face; GPs, nurses and hospital staff have been using other, safer ways to consult such as telephone, online or video consultations.

In June 2020, NHS County Durham alongside Sunderland and South Tyneside Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) undertook a collaborative piece of research to understand the general public's thoughts of the different ways people can consult with a healthcare professional at their GP practice.

The public engagement ran from the 10th June to 3rd July 2020 and comprised of an online survey for members of the general public to complete as well as a series of telephone interviews with some individuals who have accessed their GP practice since the Covid-19 lockdown on the 23rd March 2020, and some who haven't.

The engagement methodologies used were an online survey, telephone interviews and an independent research company was commissioned to provide an independent report of the findings looking at the qualitative and quantitative data.

In total, 1710 members of the public responded to the survey, 1157 for County Durham with 19 individuals participating in the telephone interviews from across the ICP area.

2. Key themes

Summary of findings for County Durham

- Since the Covid-19 lockdown on the 23rd March, 50% had contacted their GP practice for themselves, whilst 9% had done so for a family member and the equivalent proportion for both themselves and a family member. Just under a third had not needed to contact their practice during this time (30%).
- The majority contacted their practice by phone (86%), whilst 10% completed an online form, known as an eConsult. The remaining respondents 4% provided another response.
- Two thirds of those who contacted their GP practice were offered an appointment for a face-to-face, telephone or video consultation (61%), whilst 28% received a sick note or prescription without an appointment. Furthermore, 8% were provided with some information so they could self-care, 4% were signposted to another service and 9% said other.

- Where it was suggested individuals should make an appointment, 67% were offered a telephone consultation, 37% a face-to-face consultation and 7% a video consultation. Only 26% had a choice of how their appointment could be carried out.
- Of those who had a digital consultation during lockdown, the greatest proportion would recommend telephone consultations to family and friends with 85% very / fairly likely to do this. This compares with 70% who would recommend video consultations and 66% online.
- Prior to completing this survey or contacting their GP practice during lockdown, 84% of all respondents were aware that their GP offers telephone consultations, with awareness of online and video consultations notably lower (36% & 16%, respectively).
- When asked to describe their views, respondents were most positive about telephone consultations with 84% of all respondents describing them as very / fairly positive. This compares with 74% who held positive views about video consultations and 62% online consultations.
- The highest proportion would be happy to use telephone consultations in the future (85% very / fairly happy), compared with 76% for video and 65% for online.
- Respondents identified **many benefits of digital consultations**, the key ones being:
 - staff and patient safety – reducing the spread of infection through minimising face-to-face contact,
 - providing quicker access and timely responses to patients' queries / concerns,
 - being more convenient as well as reducing the need for patients to travel.
- Many also felt that they provide benefits for practices themselves including:
 - reduced footfall,
 - more efficient use of staff's time,
 - more effective triage and
 - improved attendance rates
- Respondents **identified the main challenge with regards to use of these consultation methods** as:
 - patients not having access to the internet / technology and/or having the ability to use them.

Specific concern was expressed about the elderly, as well as other vulnerable groups such as those with a disability or learning disability, in relation to this.

Other frequently **identified challenges** included:

the difficulty and/or anxiety that some patients will have in communicating via these methods, internet connection and/or technology issues

the inability for clinicians to perform physical examinations or diagnostic assessments as well as conditions being misdiagnosed or missed.

- Key suggestions made were:
 - to encourage more people to use these consultation methods in the future included making more people aware of them and the benefits of using them,
 - patient education,
 - as well as enabling patients to speak to a clinician at their GP practice in a shorter timeframe using a digital consultation method, than waiting for a face-to-face appointment.
- With regards to flu vaccinations and how they might be delivered differently this year due to Covid-19. Most feel:
 - their GP practice is the most suitable place for receiving this (76%)
 - 29% would find their place of work suitable
 - 32% a drive through centre
 - Approximately a quarter were happy for this to take place in their home (26%),
 - at a community venue (24%)
 - another GP practice building (19%)
 - 8% said other, meaning they do not want to have their flu jab or suggested the following ideas / places:
 - Pharmacy
 - Mobile unit
 - Health clinic
 - Self administer

The full detail of the finding can be found in the full report, appendix 1.

3. Benefits and Challenges

Many benefits of digital consultations were identified for both patients and GP practices; the key ones are summarised in the table below.

Key benefits of digital consultations	
Patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safety – reduces the spread of infection through minimising face-to-face contact• Provides quicker access and timely responses to queries / concerns• Convenience and flexibility• Reduces the need for patients to travel to their practice• Easier access for those who find leaving the house difficult• Reduces time spent waiting in GP practices• Improves access through greater choice• Reduces the need for patients to take time off work• Effective for simple queries and/or those that don't require a physical examination
GP practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safety - reduces the spread of infection through minimising face-to-face contact• Reduces unnecessary footfall• Reduces pressure with less patients requiring face-to-face appointments / appointments being allocated to those with more serious conditions and/or those requiring a physical examination• Allows more efficient use of staff's time• Allows clinicians to triage patients more effectively• Improves attendance rates• Enables practices to support more patients• Allows practices to operate more flexibly

In contrast, individuals identified a number of challenges relating to the use of digital consultations, the main one being patients not having access to the internet / technology and/or the ability to use them. Specific concern was expressed about the elderly population, as well as other vulnerable groups such as those with a disability or learning disability, who are felt to be much less familiar with and/or have limited access to this technology.

Key challenges of digital consultations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patients not having access to the internet / technology and/or having the ability to use them

- Difficulty and/or anxiety that some patients will have in communicating via these methods
- Internet quality and/or technology issues
- Use limited to conditions / queries where a physical examination is not required and/or less serious conditions
- Conditions being misdiagnosed or missed
- Strong preference, amongst some individuals, for face-to-face engagement
- Issues for those with visual / hearing impairments as well as language barriers
- Clinician unable to observe body language and other visual cues

Suggestions made to encourage more people to use digital consultation methods in the future included;

- Raising awareness of the availability of these methods and the benefits of using them
- Educating patients in how to use them
- Enabling patients to speak to a clinician at their GP practice in a shorter timeframe using one of these digital consultation methods, than waiting for a face-to-face appointment
- Directly encouraging patients to give these methods a try, with the hope that positive experiences result in repeat use and recommendations to family and friends.

Participants who had not accessed their GP Practice were asked in a telephone interview about their thoughts of digital consultations. The views of people were varied:

“The more forms of communication the better; I’m open minded to them all” (County Durham, male aged 55-64)

“The proposal has potential it’s just the elderly that won’t be happy about using it” (County Durham, female aged 65-74)

“Older generation being given the chance to practice the methods prior to needing to use them, probably not good to figure out something new whilst poorly” (County Durham, female 55-64)

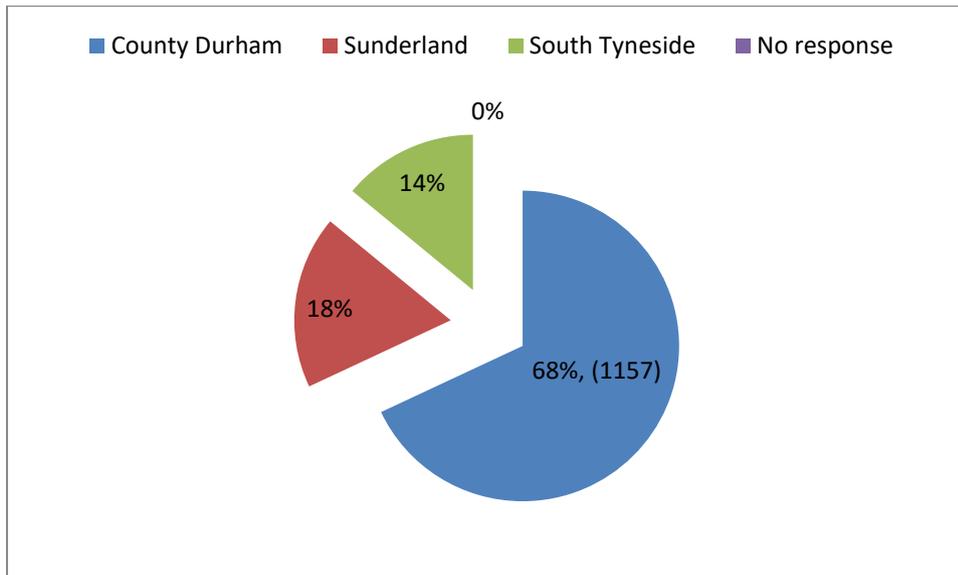
The full report gives more details on the views of people and their behavior.

4.0 Demographics

4.1 From the survey

A total of 1710 individuals responded to the survey; 68% (1157) lived within County Durham, 18% in Sunderland and 14% in South Tyneside.

Table: Area of residence (N=1710)

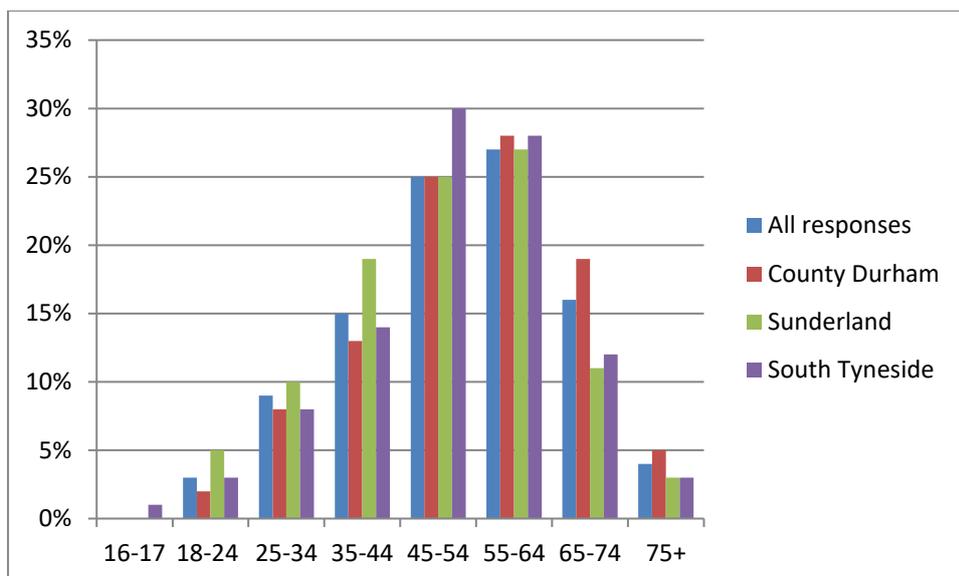


The demographics of respondents are summarised below and highlighted for County Durham, with a full breakdown available in the full report.

- The majority of the overall sample were female (79%). A slightly higher proportion of females completed the survey in County Durham (76%). All indicated that their gender matched their sex registered at birth.
- The age group with the most respondents was those aged 55-64 years (28%), this was closely followed by those aged 45-54 years (25%). Slightly smaller proportions were aged 65-74 years (19%) and 35-44 years (13%). The lowest proportions were aged 18-24 years (2%), 25-34 years (8%) and 75 years or over (5%).

There was slight variation in the age of respondents by geographical area with Sunderland having a higher proportion of respondents aged 44 and under (35%, compared with 27% in South Tyneside and 24% in County Durham), whilst County Durham had a higher proportion of respondents aged 65 and over (24%, compared with 15% in South Tyneside and 14% in Sunderland).

Figure: Age distribution of all respondents (total survey – 1437 for County Durham 958)



- Just 2% indicated that they were pregnant or have had a child in the last year.
- Most respondents were married in County Durham (63%), whilst 12% indicated that they were cohabiting, 10% single and 8% divorced or civil partnership dissolved. No one was in a civil partnership.
- Under half of the respondents indicated that they had a disability, long-term illness or health condition (43%). There was slight variation for the three areas with **County Durham** having the highest proportion (45%) and Sunderland the least (36%). It is likely that this could be explained by the observed variation in age by geographical area i.e. Sunderland having the highest proportion of those aged 44 and under and County Durham the highest proportion of those aged 65 and over.
- Most didn't have any caring responsibilities in County Durham (63%), whilst those that did were most likely to be a primary carer of a child or children aged between 2 and 18 years (20%).
- The vast majority of the County Durham sample were White (98%) and stated being heterosexual / straight (97%).
- Two thirds were Christian (64%), whilst 33% had no religious beliefs, 2% other.

4.2 The telephone interviews

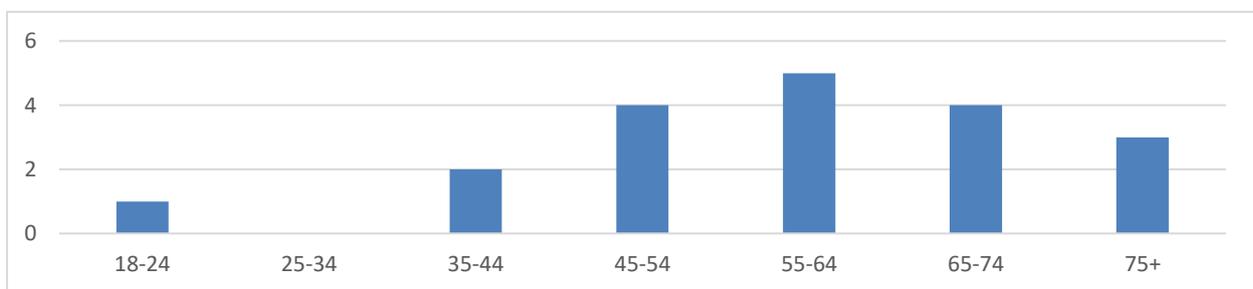
A total of 19 individuals participated in the telephone interviews, the demographics of these are summarised below:

- 12 females and 7 males
- 17 were White (British, Irish, European or other) and 2 Asian / British Asian

- 11 had a disability, long-term illness or health condition
- 5 had caring responsibilities
- 18 were heterosexual or straight and one a gay man
- 13 were Christian, whilst 6 had no religion
- 11 were married, 5 single, 2 widowed or a surviving partner from a civil partnership and 1 divorced or civil partnership dissolved.

The age distribution of participants is shown in the figure below, with most falling within the 55-64-year-old age group, closely followed by the 45-54-year and 65-74-year-old age groups.

Figure: Age distribution of participants (N=19)



5.0 Key findings

The key findings and discussion were around:

- the awareness of digital consultations
- contact with the GP Practice
- views of digital consultations
- encouraging more people to use digital consultation
- behaviours during the covid-19 lockdown

6.0 Recommendations

It is recommended that the CCG considers the findings in this report to understand how they can continue to make improvements to services for their communities and patients.

It is also recommended that this engagement work is repeated on an ongoing basis in order to understand behavioural change. It is also suggested that the patient survey is aligned to any future practice staff surveys so that further analysis can be made on any potential changes to operating models within primary care.