



ACCESS TO GP SERVICES

Sinn Féin
Survey Findings





Background

Some of the difficulties facing people in accessing their GP have existed before COVID -19. The pandemic however has put additional pressure on GP services impacting our communities.

Shortages in the GP workforce and practice closures have caused ongoing problems for accessing GP services.

Vacancies left by retiring doctors are often not being filled due to difficulties in attracting GPs to rural areas, and into the role of running GP practices.

GP shortages are also making it difficult for people to access services in our towns and cities where health needs are often greatest – e.g. mental health; cancer; addiction; services and so forth.

The COVID pandemic has exacerbated these problems with patients often unable to contact GPs directly or by phone. The cancellation of out of hours GP services in some Trust areas and growing crises in A&E Departments across the north is putting increased pressure on GPs in the community.

Recognising these issues exist Sinn Féin launched a survey to hear the views of people in the community whose health and wellbeing, and that of their families, relies upon access to GP appointments.



GP Survey

The survey received 598 responses – emphasising the importance of GP access to the public.



Due to the restrictions of the COVID pandemic, the survey into GP services was conducted online. We realise that an online survey is not accessible to many GP service users due to technological or broadband access limitations.

The survey was live from June 27 – August 30, 2021.

The majority of respondents use GP services in Mid-Ulster, West Tyrone, Newry and Armagh, with only approximately 7% of respondents from the greater Belfast area council area.



Main Findings

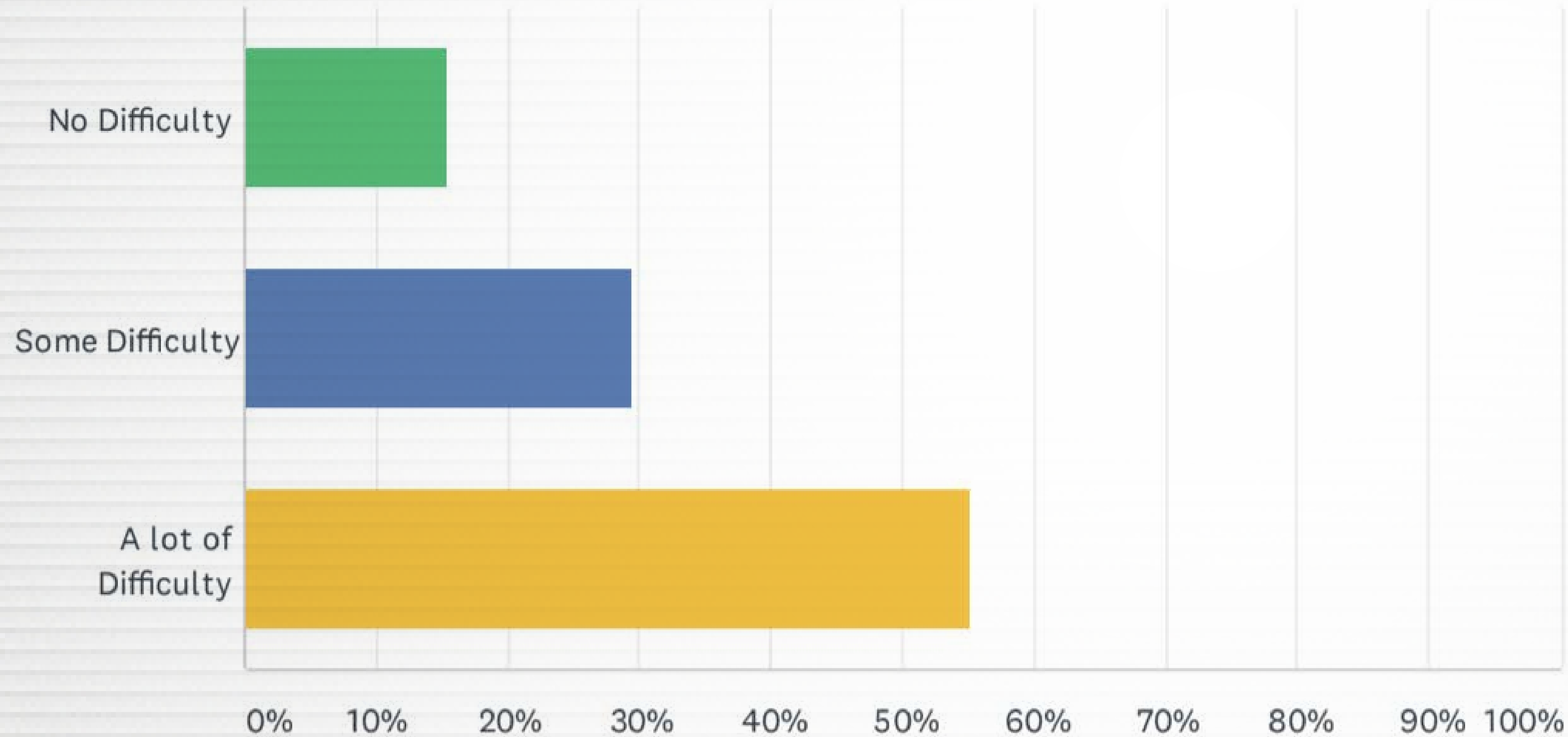




Difficulty in contacting GP

Have you had any difficulties in contacting your local GP practice?

Answered: 598 Skipped: 4



The dominant theme in the responses was the inability to even make telephone contact within a reasonable time. 55.18% and 29.43% (graph, left) reported experiencing a lot or some difficulty respectively. Respondents report waiting days or other extensive periods in getting an answer to their telephone call, and when calls are answered, the clear majority get through to the receptionist and not the GP. Some respondents expressed a reluctance to discuss personal health issues with the receptionist.



Accessing in-person or remote GP appointments

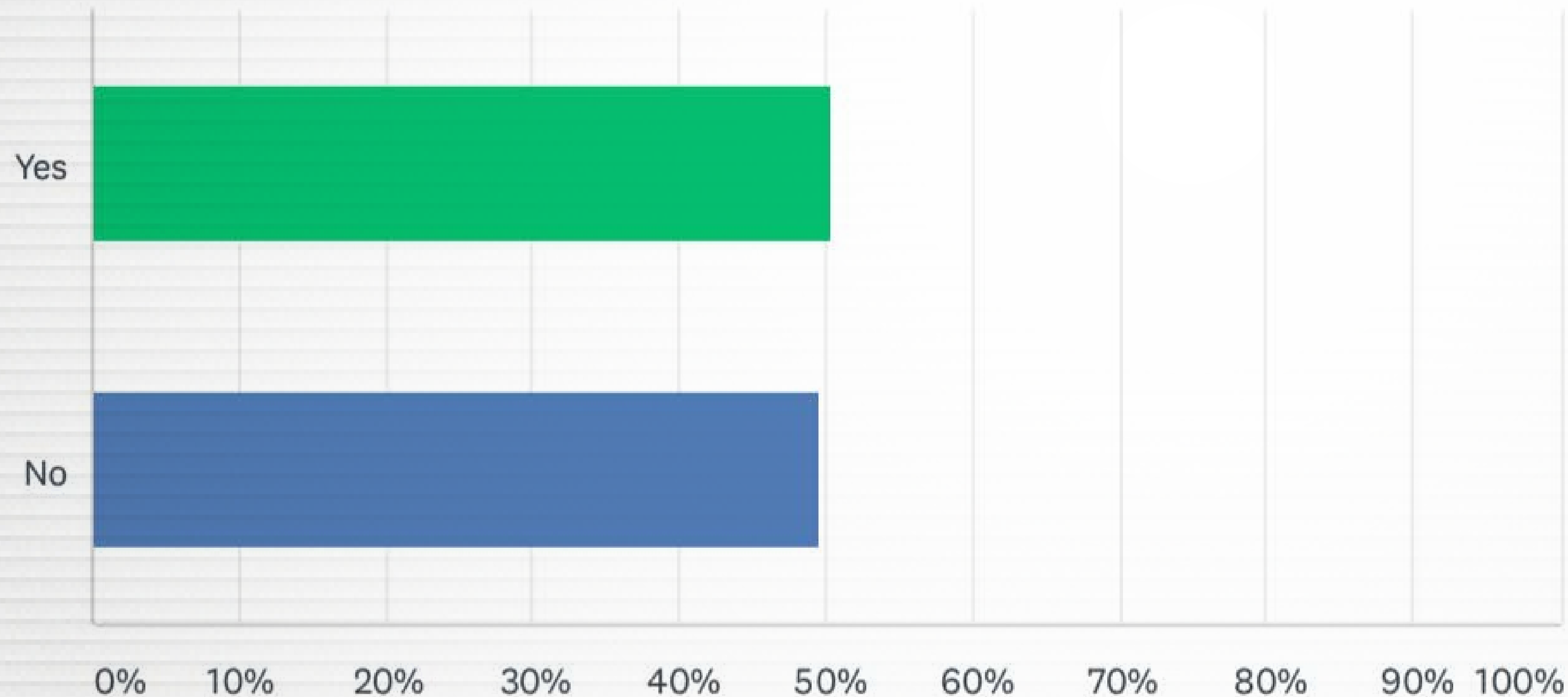
- Findings shows that remote appointments were easier to access than in-person appointments. Many respondents answered that it can take hours to hear back from the GP. Furthermore many identified the inability to even get through to their GP practice on the telephone as the main problem.
- In – person appointments were identified as the most difficult to access with many respondents claiming they waited weeks and others reported not getting any appointment to date.
- Other respondents were directed by GP Practices to Accident & Emergency (A&E) departments and out of hour GP services.



Satisfaction with GP care

Typically, do you receive the treatment and care you need through your local GP?

Answered: 594 Skipped: 8



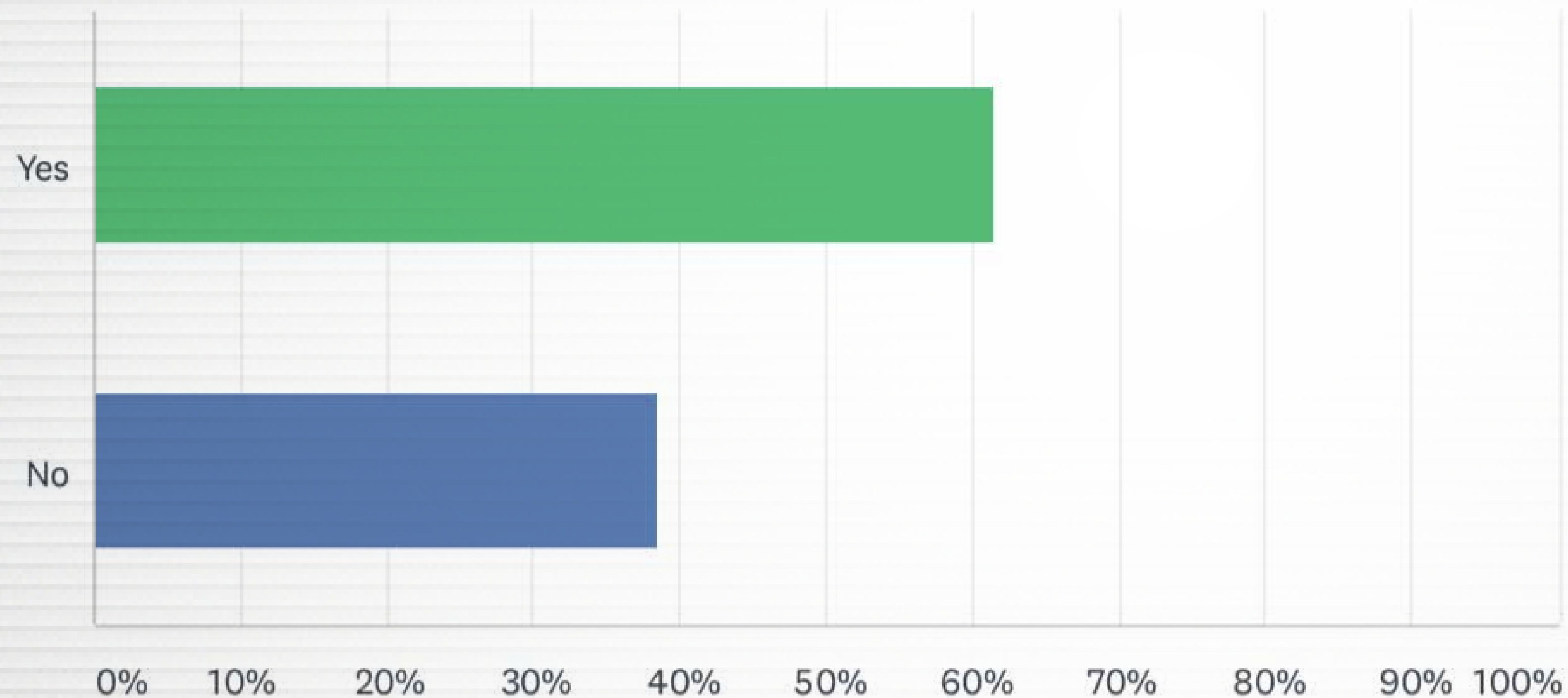
50.51% of respondents believed they receive the care they need from their GP while 49.49% believed they had not.



GP Opening Hours

Has your GPs opening hours caused any difficulty or barriers to you accessing GP services?

Answered: 596 Skipped: 6



The majority of respondents (61.58%) felt that the opening hours have posed a significant barrier to their ability to accessing GP services they needed. Some respondents felt that GP surgery opening hours could be extended to help reduce waiting times and ensure direct access with a GP or other professional.



Lack of Mental Health Support

A common theme emerging throughout the survey was the lack of mental health staff or care available in some GP surgeries. This emphasises the need for investment in the roll – out of Multi- Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) which would not only alleviate the pressure felt by GPs but would give patients access to the various treatments they need, including mental health.





Recommendations

There are a series of problems across the North of Ireland with the provision of GP services.

These problems have increased during the pandemic period.

GP shortages and surgery closures particularly in rural areas, problems contacting GP surgeries by phone, the cancellation of some out of hours GP services, the difficulty in accessing in-person GP appointments, and the lack of mental health staff and care in GP surgeries are issues that are causing significant and increasing concern in communities across the North.

We need solutions.

People need access their GPs to receive the advice and care that they deserve.



Sinn Féin is calling for the Department of Health to:

- **Accelerate roll out of Primary Care Multidisciplinary Teams in GP Practices** - GPs must be supported to manage the growing workload by providing patients with direct, local and timely access to physios, counsellors, social workers, practice-based pharmacists and other professions.
- **Use the HSC Workforce Appeal to recruit and train additional vaccinators to work alongside GPs to deliver booster and flu vaccines** - this will provide a trained group of vaccinators to deliver vital vaccine doses locally, while allowing GPs to focus on community health needs.



COLM GILDERNEW MLA

Chair of Assembly
Health Committee

