

# **Healthwatch Wirral**

## **Musculoskeletal self-referral pathway review**



**January  
2026**

**healthwatch**  
Wirral

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# Executive Summary

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This report presents the findings from calls made by Healthwatch Wirral to Wirral residents who self-referred into the Wirral Musculoskeletal (MSK) Service at Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. The self-referral service was available for the following GP practices during its trial stage: Civic Medical Centre, Eastham Group Practice, Greasby Group Practice, Heatherlands Medical Centre, Marine Lake Medical Centre, Myrtle Group Practice, Orchard Surgery, Prenton Medical Centre, Spital Surgery, Sunlight Group Practice, Upton Group Practice, Villa Medical Centre, and West Wirral Group Practice.

The purpose of Healthwatch Wirral's calls was to understand people's experience of the self-referral process, including its ease of use and any accessibility challenges they may have faced. This report provides a snapshot of those experiences. A more comprehensive evaluation of the overall self-referral process is recommended to analyse its effectiveness in full.

To ensure data security, a Data Sharing Agreement was implemented, with personal data being transferred securely, stored in protected files, and destroyed after use. Only anonymized raw data was retained for analysis.

A total of 133 patients were contacted. Of these, 32 did not respond and 11 declined to participate, resulting in 90 completed responses.

Overall, the findings indicate that most patients found the self-referral process straightforward and easy to complete. However, some reported difficulties with digital-only channels, which highlights the importance for multiple referral options to avoid worsening health inequalities for those who struggle digitally. Respondents generally reported good accessibility to service locations and expressed positive sentiments about staff friendliness, which contributed to a smoother referral experience.

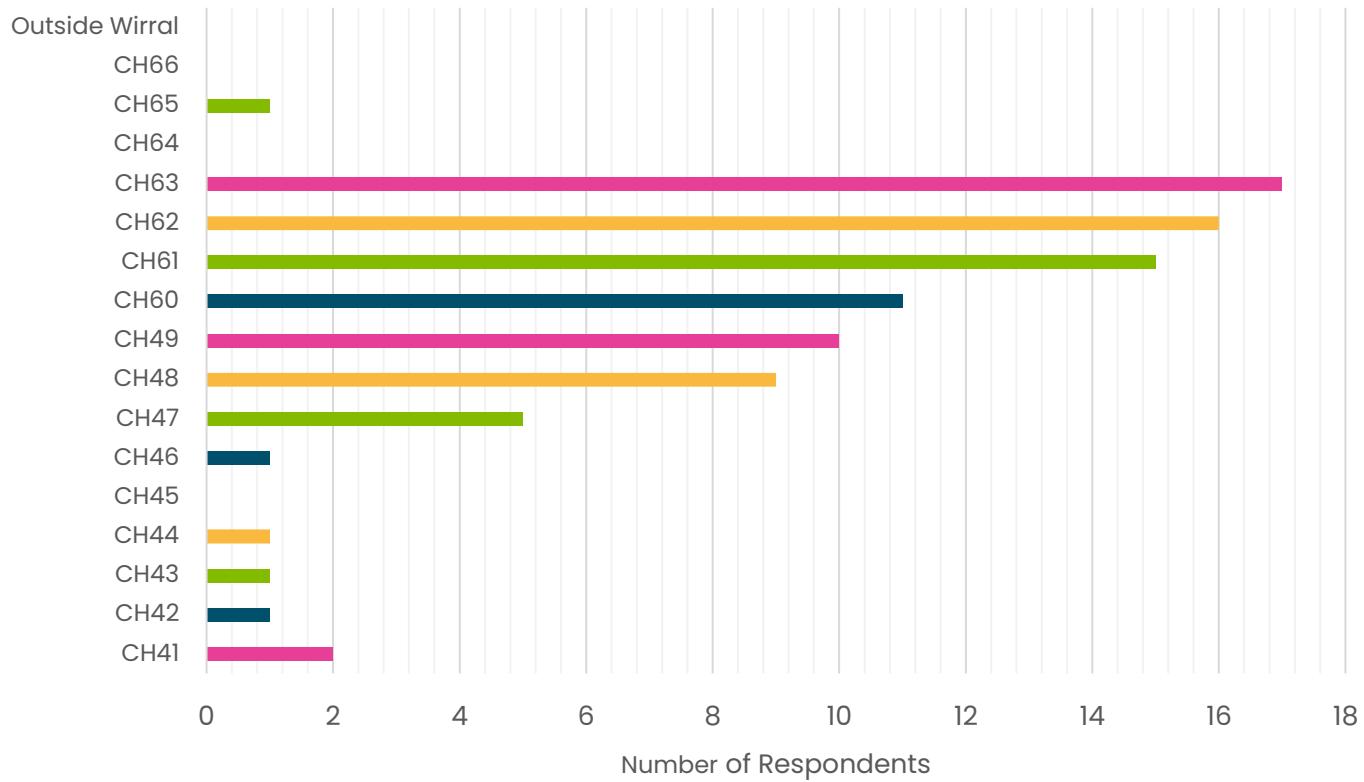
Moreover, Healthwatch Wirral recorded that negative feedback focused on long waiting times and limited appointment availability as only 45.6% (41 out of 90) of respondents had received an appointment at the time of completing the telephone survey.

As the MSK self-referral process is currently within its trial phase, Healthwatch Wirral recommends undertaking a full impact assessment prior to extending the model out to other GP practices in Wirral. It is recommended to evaluate:

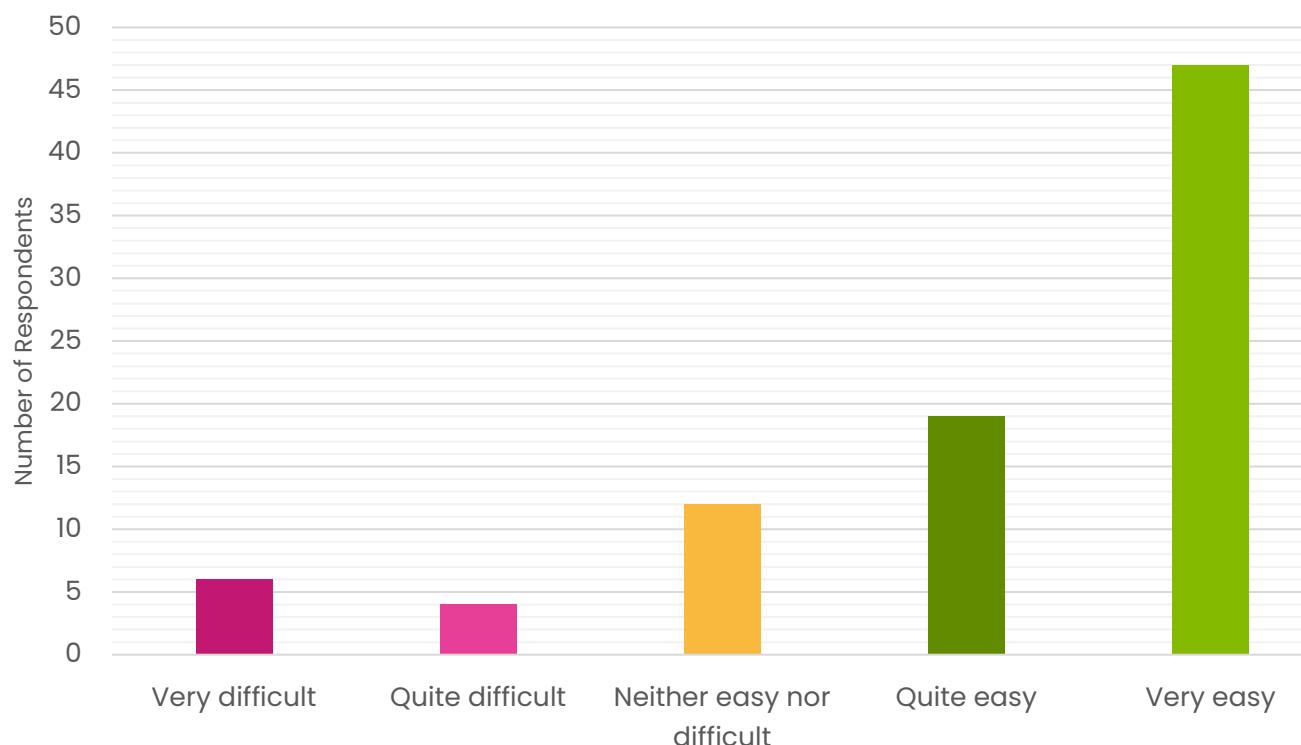
- Waiting times for patients who self-refer compared with those referred by a healthcare professional.
- Waiting times for patients who self-refer compared with GP practices that offer in-house physiotherapy roles as part of their additional services.
- Pathways for patients presenting with non-musculoskeletal issues, including:
  - How these issues are identified during the self-referral process,
  - How these issues are identified during any physiotherapy treatment,
  - How patients are informed,
  - How primary care is notified and liaised with,
  - The appropriate pathway and who is responsible for any potential follow-up care.
- Enhancing the self-referral questionnaire process by adopting a structured, adaptive clinical assessment. This means an adaptive questionnaire model which changes the questions based on the patient responses to improve the effectiveness and appropriateness of the self-referral.
- Whether the self-referral process is equally accessible to all population groups, especially those who may be digitally excluded, to not unintentionally widen health inequalities.
- How often self-referrals are clinically appropriate compared with referrals from healthcare professionals, and the effect this has on individuals.
- How the self-referral model affects the wider system, including changes in physiotherapy demand and any operational impacts on GP Practices or those delivering physiotherapy treatment.

# Findings

## Q1. What are the first four digits of your postcode?



Q2. How easy did you find it to make the referral for yourself?



Q3. Can you tell us why you found making the self-referral easy or difficult?

Themes	Positive	Negative
Ease of process (simple/clear/quick)	47	3
Appointments unavailable / long waits	0	8
Support from GP/others (links or completed)	6	1
Technical or form issues	0	4
Communication / notifications lacking	0	3
Awareness of self-referral	1	1
Finding the link / confusing first page	0	3
Accessibility / channel preference	1	1
Had to use both online and phone	0	1
Multiple issues require separate referrals	0	2

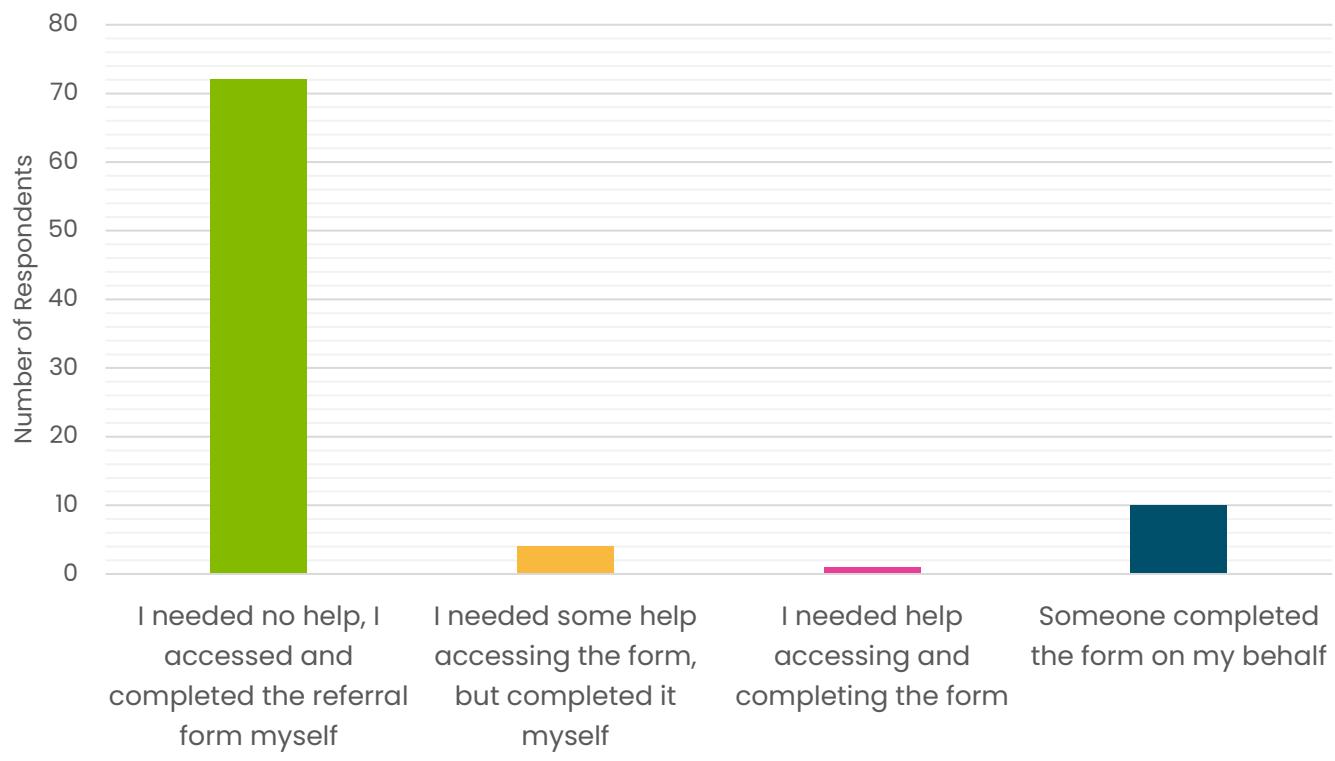
Positive Responses	Count
A family member did it for me.	1
Because I was given a link and able to book own appointment immediately	1
Clicked on link...easy	1
Did not know I would have to self refer, thought GP would do it.	1
Easy process online	1
Easy to access the form from the link I received. The form itself is easy and you can add as much detail as necessary which is very useful	1
Easy to do	1
Easy to do by link	1
Easy to follow - straightforward. Was told what to do, easy process	1
Followed instructions and no problem	1
Got info easily and GP sent me the link	1
GP did the referral for us	1
GP sent me link and it was straightforward to follow	2
Husband helped	1
I found it very straightforward and self-explanatory	1
I was quite easy	1
I would say it was quite easy	1
Instructions clear & laid out simply	1
It was easy to access online and the answers were easy to complete	1
It was easy to do	1
Online easy process	1
Pretty clear on instructions and what to do	1
Quick, and easy	1
Quite straightforward, easy to follow referral process.	1

Really easy to do	1
Really good	1
Received link via BLINX, which took me straight through to right page	1
Seemed quite quick	1
Simple	2
Straightforward	17
Text message, very quick	1
The self referral was done by the GP practice themselves, then I followed the info on my NHS app.	1
The self referral was fine.	1
The website had no complications - very straightforward.	1
Very easy	3
Very effective	1
Very good as hard of hearing	1
Went online and straightforward	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>

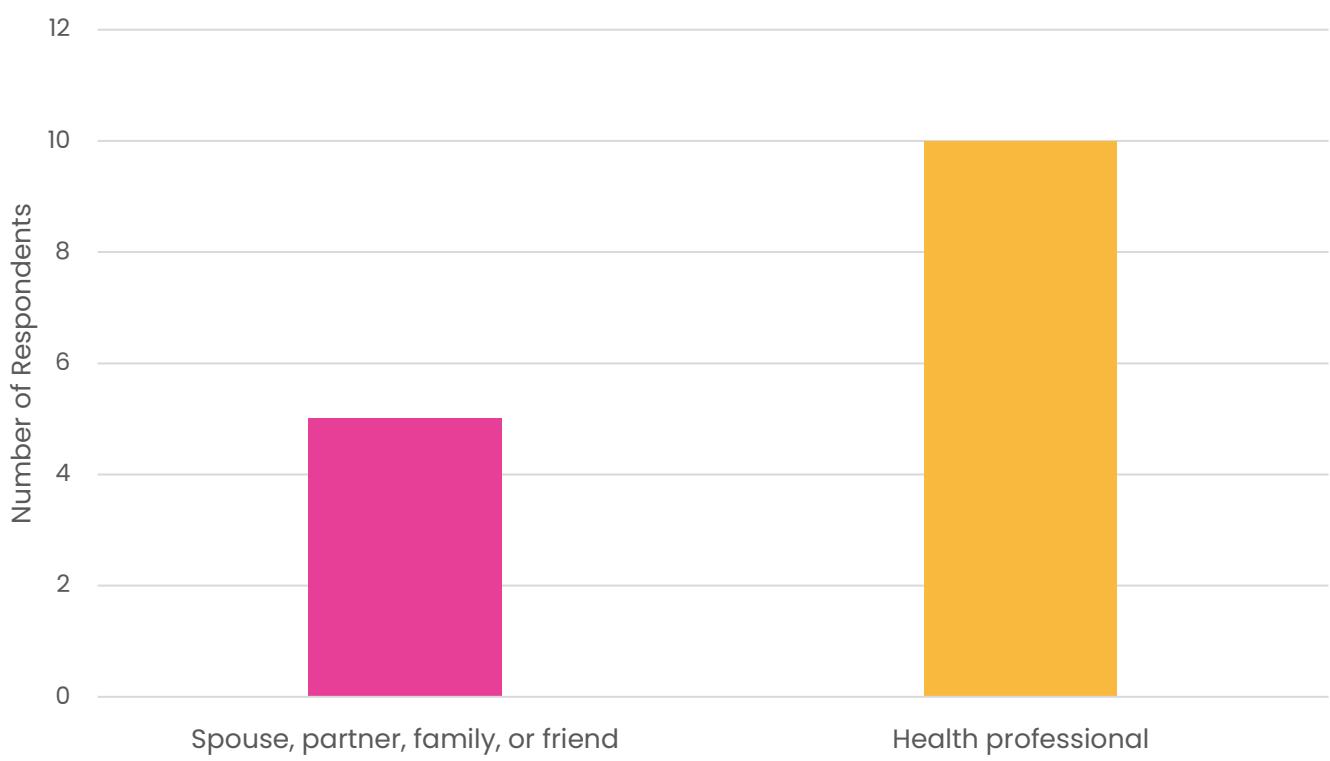
Negative Responses	Count
I cannot recall any issues, apart from there's no feedback online to say how you'll receive the appointment information, or how long it might take before you hear back. An electronic response would be better	1
Computer code error when tried online, so phoned directly to book	1
Confusing as the questions would not allow me to enter all of the details in space provided	1
Contacted GP for appointment then had to go fill another form in. Had to do separate appointments for different parts of body. 13 week wait.	1
Didn't realise that you had to scroll down to bottom of page to click referral button	1
First page confusing	1
Getting appointment nearly impossible	1
I did not follow through with the referral as my condition got better	1
I don't like using screens if I don't have to due to having Glaucoma. Prefer using phone, or having face to face appointment.	1
I have ADHD so found the process very hard as I could not get it to work. I think for me I would prefer to be referred by my GP	1
I work at WUTH and already seeing a physio for a problem, and because I had another problem I had to do another referral	1
It was easy to go onto the internet and insert code, but have not yet had any response (apart from to wait until December)	1
No appointments available. Been over 6 weeks trying to get one	1

no appointments available so had to phone	1
Once I knew about the self-referral, the form was relatively easy, and I was told I'd be contacted by post within a week. I was surprised not to get a text or other online notification. The letter arrived with a link to make an appointment, but no appointments were available. I chased it up, to be told that an appointment should become available in about 12 weeks. Found the time waiting between communications and appointments very frustrating and the condition is becoming more painful and debilitating. It was also frustrating that my GP didn't seem to be aware of the self-referral process when I first contacted them about my condition, and it would have saved time to know about it earlier	1
Received link from hospital and followed it easily. Think it would be more difficult for elderly and those not familiar with IT	1
Self explanatory when I actually found the link on GP's website, it was not clearly there and I had to search. Other people may find it impossible to find	1
There were no appointments at all, done twice	1
Venues not available so not had appointment yet	1
When I logged in, was told NHS number was not needed, then afterwards was told NHS number was needed	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

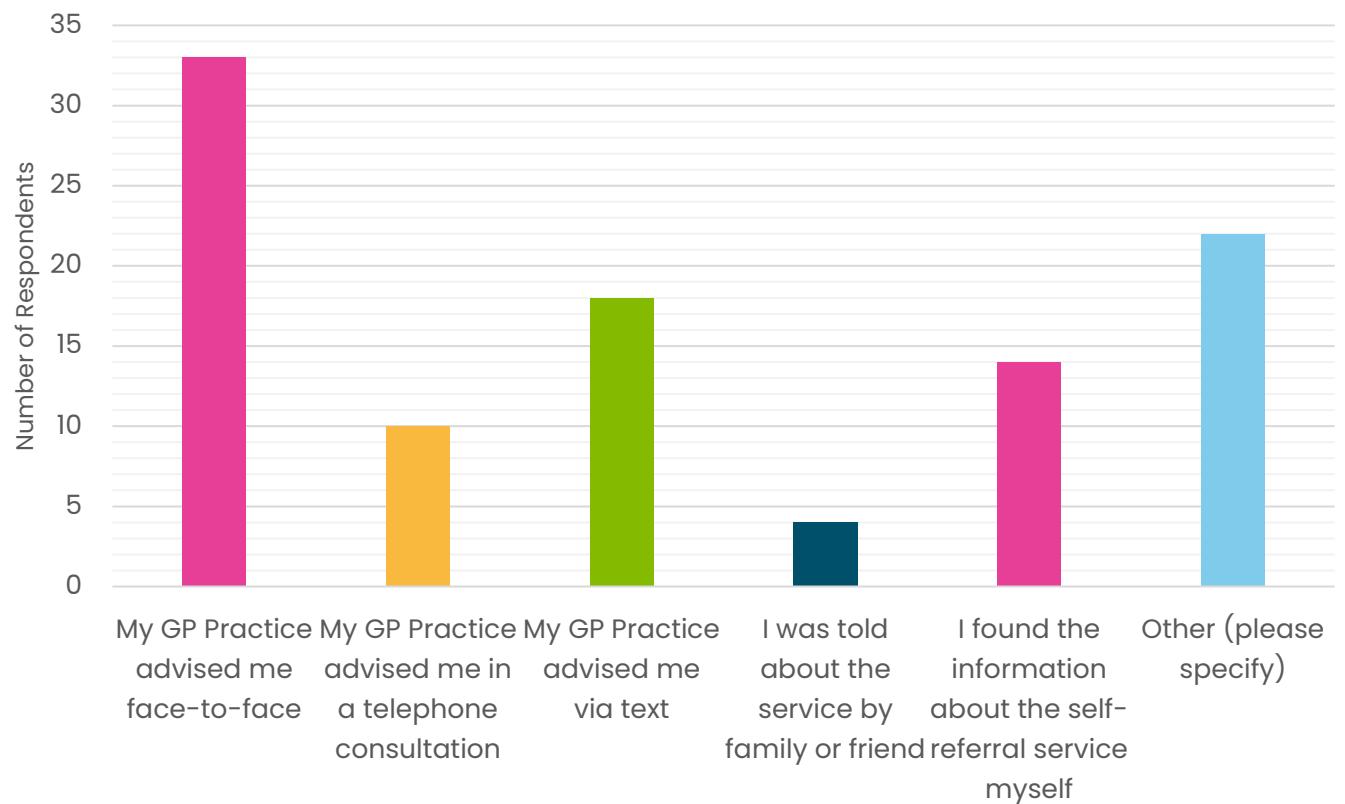
**Q4. Did you need any help accessing and completing the referral form?**



**Q5. If you need help completing the referral form, who helped you?**

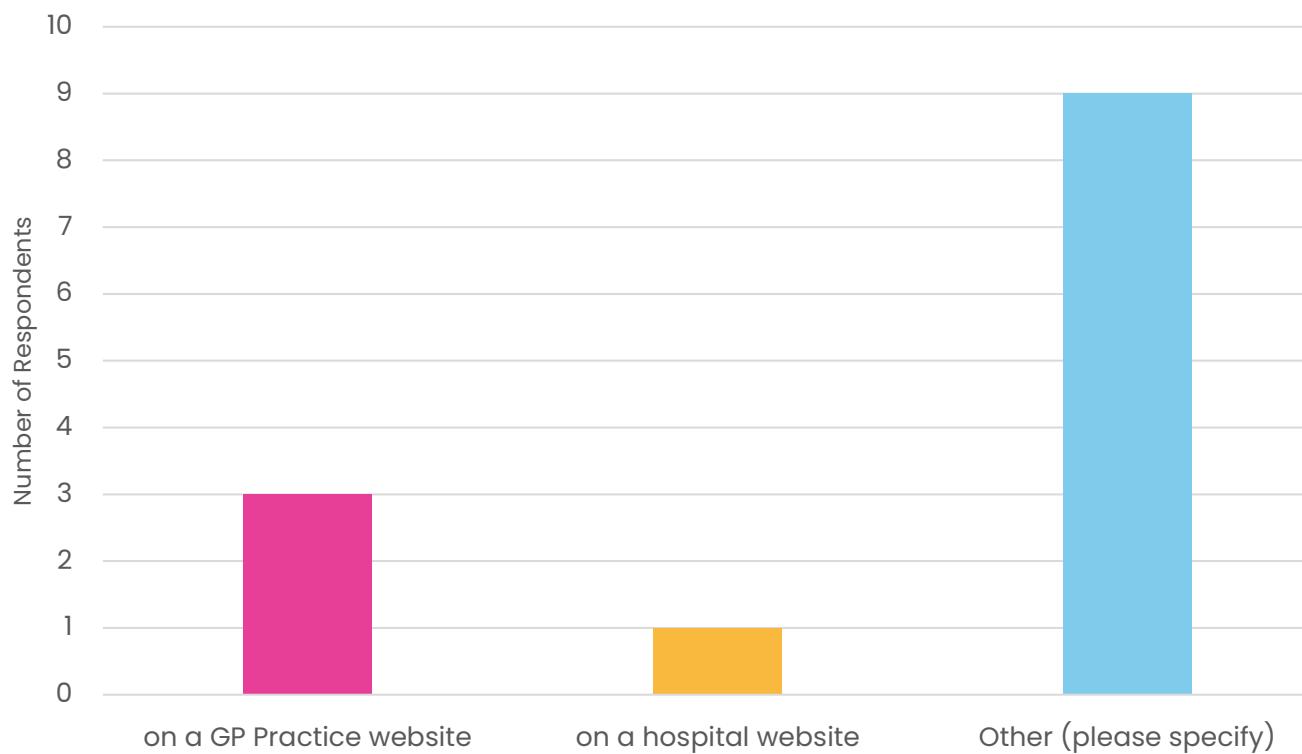


## Q6. How did you find out about the self-referral process?



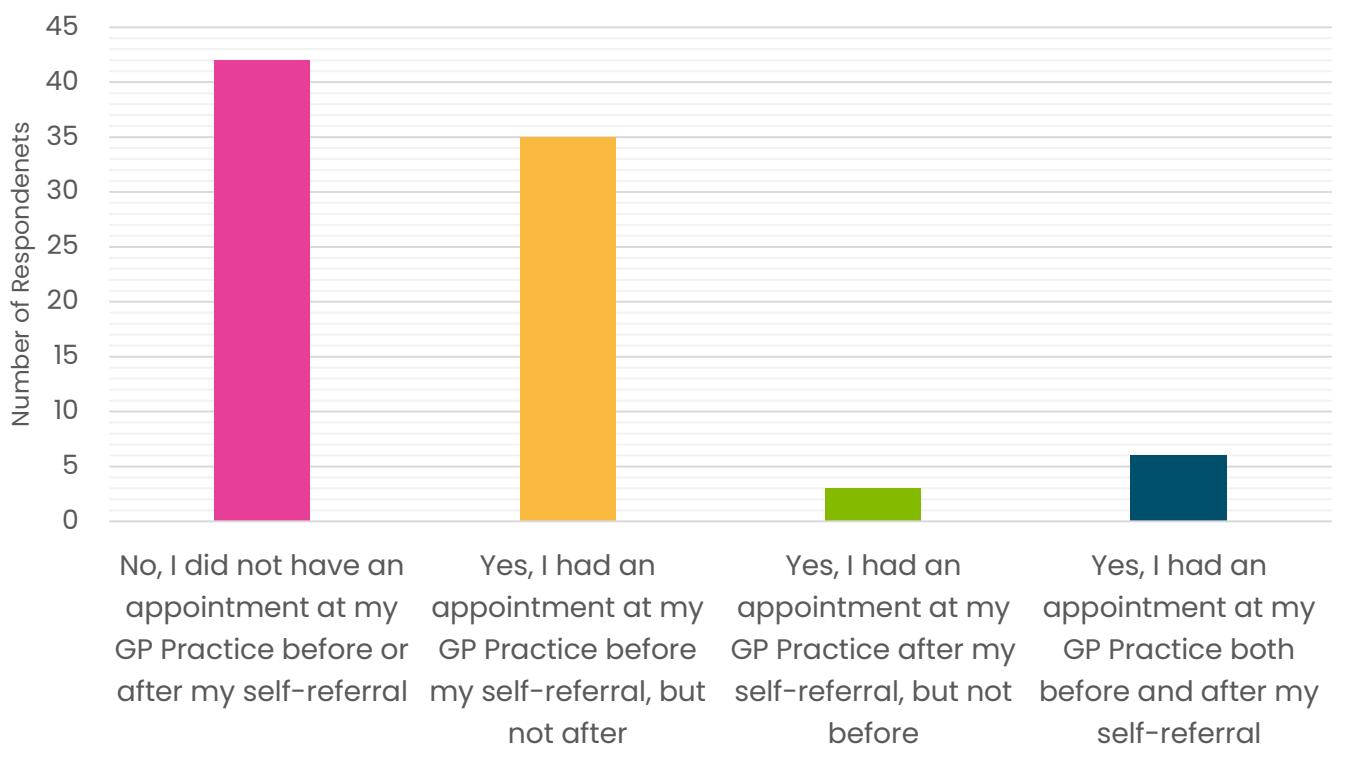
Other	Count
BLINX	<b>3</b>
Don't know	<b>2</b>
eConsult	<b>1</b>
Facebook	<b>1</b>
Nurse Practitioner	<b>2</b>
Online	<b>2</b>
PATCHs	<b>7</b>
NHS App	<b>2</b>
Work in Primary Care	<b>2</b>

**Q7. If you found the information about the self-referral service by yourself, how did you find it?**

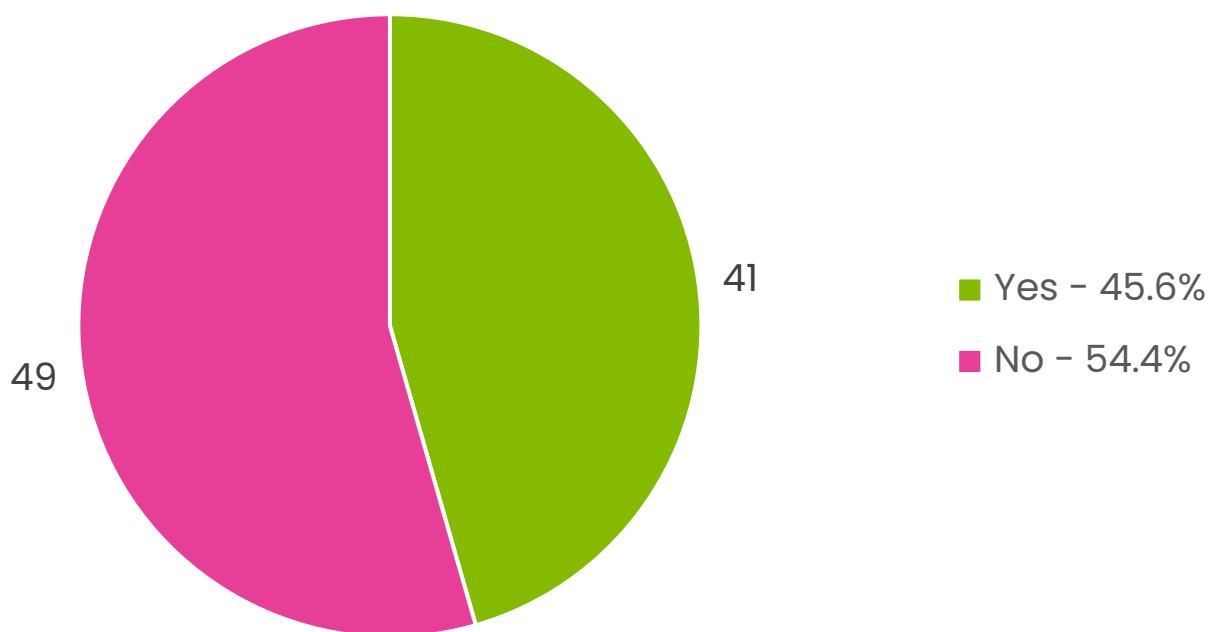


Other	Count
GP	1
GP Waiting Room	1
eConsult	1
PATCHs	3
NHS App	2
Facebook	1

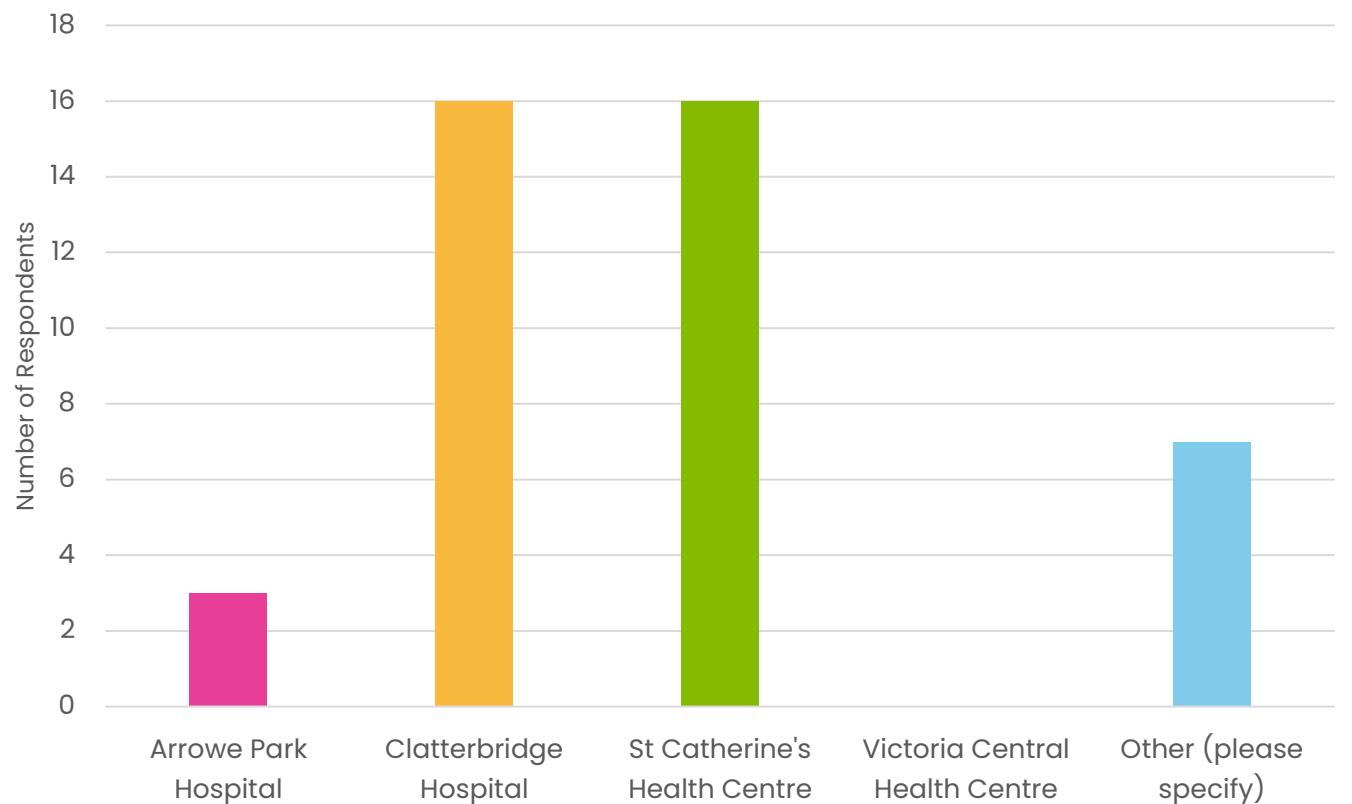
**Q8. Have you had a GP appointment **about your MSK issue**, before or after making your self-referral?**



**Q9. Since making this referral, have you attended an MSK appointment yet?**

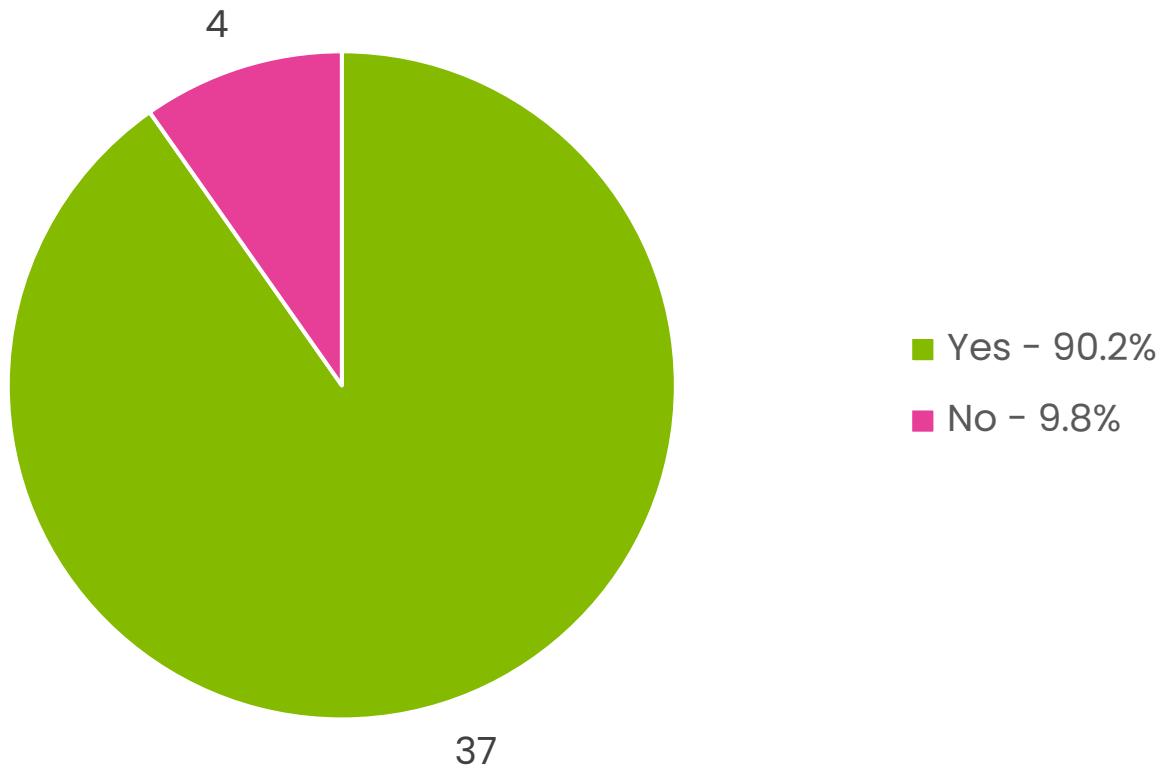


Q10. Which site did you attend for your MSK appointment?



Other	Count
Moreton Community Clinic	1
Both St. Catherine's Health Centre and Clatterbridge Hospital	1
Eastham Health Centre	4
Spire Murrayfield	1

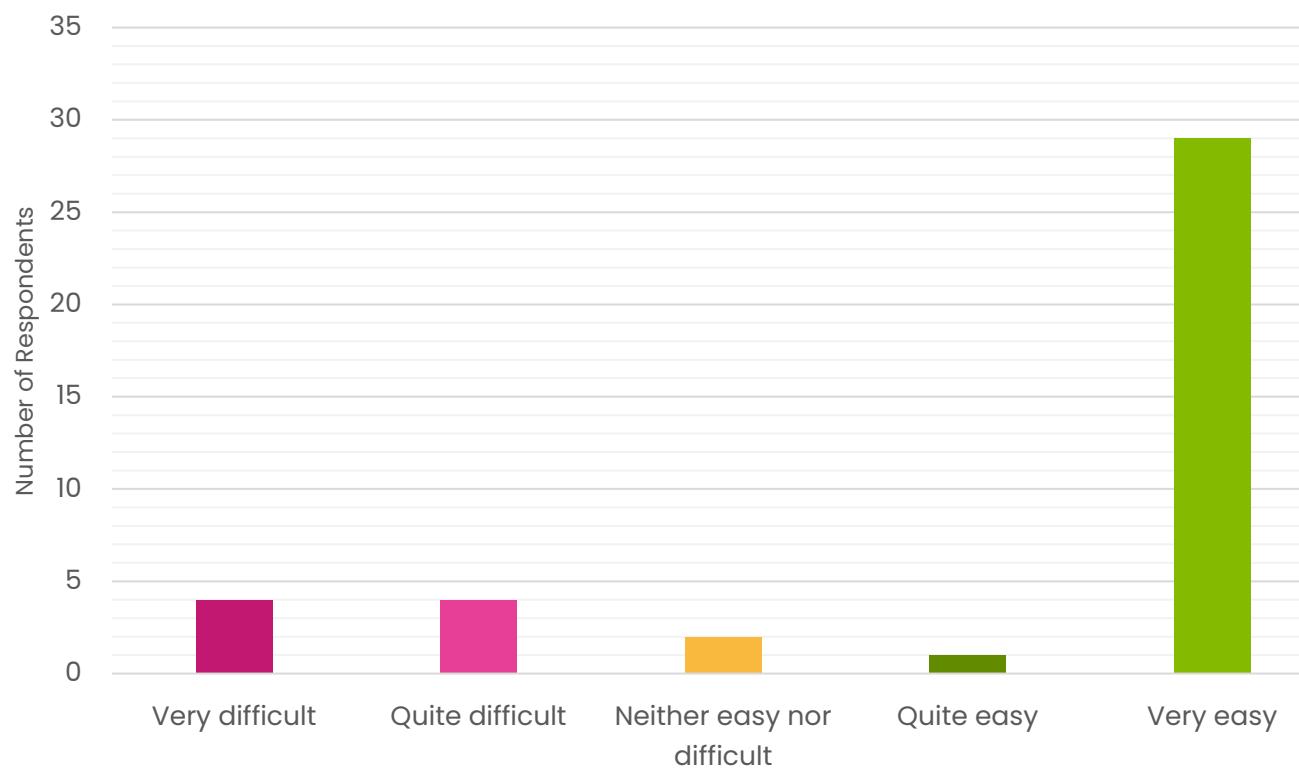
Q11. Was this location convenient for you to travel to?



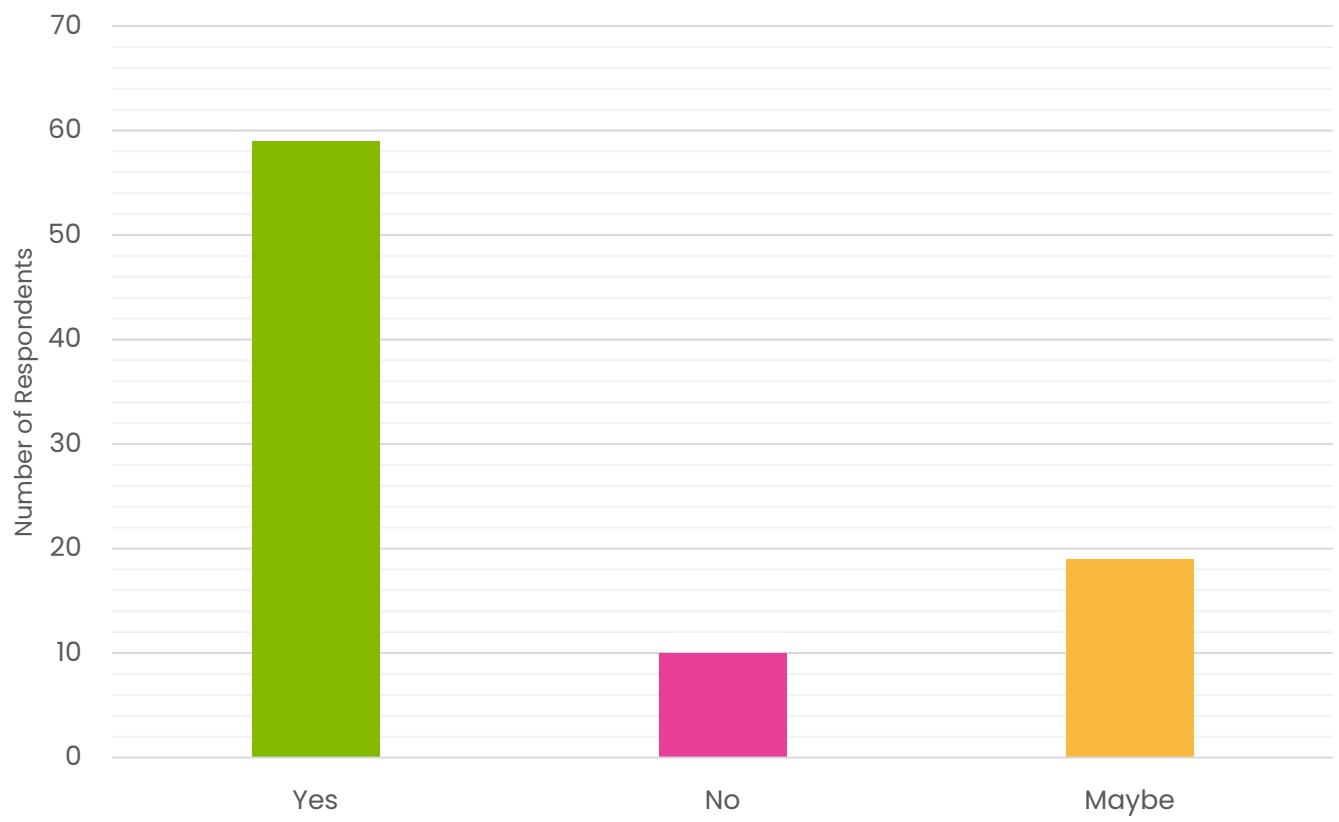
Q12. Why was the location not convenient?

Negative Responses	Count
A bit difficult as I do not drive	1
Harder to get to	1
Clatterbridge would have been better	1

**Q13. When you went into the building, did you find it easy or difficult to locate and access the correct department?**



**Q14. Would you recommend the self-referral process?**



Q15. Any additional comments, feedback, or suggestions you may have about the MSK self-referral process?

## Positive Responses

Clatterbridge is not well signposted, there is no sign for MSK, and the Reception desk was closed so I had to ask staff walking by in the corridor. Overall it's a good referral process and a very good service.

Fine if you are confident online

Brilliant service

Easier to do myself rather than going to GP

Quick, easy and the staff very pleasant

Thought it was very good

Very happy

Staff were fabulous and reception staff were very friendly and smiley

Very easy process

Been fine for us

Got seen quicker than expected within 6 weeks

No issues at all

Praise for the physio I saw, process did not take long, waited around a month for appointment. Very pleased

Slight delay in getting appointment. I am dyslexic so that is why my wife completed the form for me

I had not heard anything, and a friend phoned them for me, I got an appointment 2 days later. I'm not sure how long i would have had to have waited if the phone call hadn't been made

I got seen very quickly and it was an easy process.

I self-referred easily and I felt I heard back quickly and got an appointment through in good time. I found my way easily to the correct department at Clatterbridge because I was already familiar with the site. The Physiotherapist I saw was very kind and thorough and offered me good advice

Stops wasting time, very satisfied patient

Easy to use

Much easier than going to see GP

It's better and positive that followed up by text / letter

It was easily done, and I feel it would be easy even if someone needed help to complete the online form.

Quite straightforward and easy to do it

Worked like clockwork for me - very easy. Whole process worked really well but was simply unsure whether to expect online response after initial self-referral, and how long to wait for this

Very good , very pleased

Didn't have to wait long, so happy about that

All good, very pleased to be seen so quickly

Would definitely recommend the self-referral process - it's easier than having to go through your GP each time. It is easy for busy, working people to use, and the triage seems good

It is a quicker way to do things and "you know it's done".

All went fine

Very happy with the whole process

**Total**

**32**

## Neutral Responses

They could let you know with some sort of acknowledgement that they have received your information and give you an idea of time waiting for an appointment

I have not yet completed the self referral form so I can't comment

If you are going to offer this service then at least make sure there are appointments available for people

Prefer face to face appointments

I would recommend to those who are able to use computers

Should employ someone to do referrals

No further feedback

I did not see any signage at Clatterbridge Hospital for the Physiotherapy Department until walking around and I was right outside of it

Cancelled as did not feel like I needed it now

Not had great improvement as yet, only had one appointment

Make signage better at Clatterbridge Hospital site. I would use the MSK self -referral service again, but perhaps not for very complicated or urgent issues. The person I was referred to at Clatterbridge was excellent

No appointment at St. Catherine's or Clatterbridge and none available so on the waiting list

It would be useful to get better updates about the MKS referral. I still need a GP appointment but cannot get one at present

I cancelled my MSK referral appointment because my symptoms had gone away

Needing a scan so having to go through process to see MSK

I do not recall making a self-referral

**Total**

**17**

## Negative Responses

1st page not self explanatory

Do not feel it is the patient's responsibility to do the referral, should be done by GP after a face to face appointment

For older people think it would be confusing

Got to be re-referred as when I tried to complete the form (twice) it said there was nothing available and to try later. I have ADHD and find it hard to remember to do these things. I think face to face appointments for referrals work much better

Had to go privately and feel that I should have been seen by a health professional in first instance rather than having to do this myself. I was told I would have to wait around 12 weeks to be seen and my condition was getting worse and needed attention

Hard for people with eyesight problems to do themselves

Have chased 2-3 time weekly and have been told I will not hear back before end of January, and that appointment won't be before February. it seems to be a good idea, but in practice I'm left unsure whether to continue to do excercises and what will happen. The staff on the telephone have all been very pleasant

I am still awaiting for appointment and I called today to chase. Was advised on list but there is a wait of 9 weeks plus

I did not follow through with the referral as my condition got better

I found it frustrating to find there were no appointments available at any of the service sites. I also wish I knew where I currently am "in the system" - I feel I'm "in the ether" and I'm left wondering how long it will take

I found it very frustrating that there were no appointments available and if you have a number of issues, you can't be seen about them all at the same time.

I needed an appointment for 2 different areas on my body. I was told that i would need to do 2 separate referrals and have 2 different appointments. I then received a letter saying one of these appointments had been cancelled and when i phoned to query this i was told that they would see me for both issues at the same appointment. I think that should have been stated at the time of referral as it's wasting time. I have not yet had my appointment, it should have been last week, but i had to change as i had another appointment. I am now going next week

I've had a negative experience - I received what looked like an "automated" letter giving a link to the website. When I checked the website, there were no appointments available, which is a shame: I felt the letter got my hopes up that an appointment would be available. When I rang the number given to check, they reiterated that no appointments were available and that they would hope to contact me again in about 2 months. I feel that perhaps some people "overuse" the MSK service, to the detriment of others left waiting in the queue

My appointment at St Cath's was cancelled by them "Due to unforseen circumstances" - and they've informed me they will contact me when they are able to offer me an appointment. I felt disappointed about this and wished I'd now opted for the other site (APH) that was available when I first booked. I cannot find a way to rebook via any self-referral links I received. I hope I won't have too long to wait, and I'm left a bit unsure who I should contact to find out

My GP practice was supposed to have referred me to the MSK service, but they didn't and my GP only told me about the option for self- referral after I had complained to them about their delay. The self-referral was easy for me to complete. I am disappointed that I've not heard any updates yet, and was hoping to get some sort of acknowledgment - and a timescale for how long I may be waiting would be useful, too. I do realise that NHS Depts are busy and have backlogs, but an update would help me to manage my expectations

No appointments available so i could not complete the self referral. I have tried phoning to make one too and been told there are none available until the new year and that they will contact me. I have been waiting over 6 weeks

referred in August and tried to do self referral. no appts at st caths or clatterbridge so left it and tried again. finally made one for 4th dec which was cancelled by them, then got one for 11th and that was then cancelled. Letter received for 19th jan so hoping it doesn't get cancelled

I requested a referral to arrowe park, to orthapedics and felt like it took a lot longer than necessary as i saw the physio twice before they referred me

Self referral not worked very well for me as i have been in agony and had to see a chiropractor privately as i was unable to walk and needed help with the pain. This has cost me £750. I have an appointment next week which i am hoping will be helpful. Suggest having a chiropractor clinic in A&E to help people who are in pain

Still waiting for appointment and in a lot of pain. Been waiting for 2 months and still not heard anything.

The link from the final text did not work - had to phone up to make the appointment

The self referral process is potentially a good option- especially as it hopefully frees up time for GPs, but the process needs to work better - waiting to receive a letter through the post is long-winded, and the lack of availability of appointments and the waiting times between communications is frustrating, as is having to chase up replies by myself

The self-referral process is easy if you have IT skills - I feel it would not be easy if someone didn't know how to use a computer.

My first MSK referral appointment was at APH (parking was difficult at APH), then I had 2 appointments at St Caths and was told I needed to go to Clatterbridge for an X-Ray and there was no need to pre-book. At Clatterbridge I found it hard to locate where to go - was first told to go to Diagnostics A, then Diag A staff told me to go to Diagnostics B where staff said I should have pre-booked an appointment, but was gratefully told they would fit me in. During the X-Ray process at Clatterbridge, I was told that this particular type of X-Ray could have been undertaken at St Caths as they have the same equipment and skills, without the need for me to go to Clatterbridge

The waiting time between referrals and between appointments is a long time. Staff have been lovely, the physiotherapists have been nice and helpful

They did not really do much for me when i went to the appointment and i was told they could not do any more for me

Think it could do with being monitored and if anyone can self refer who does not need to be seeing a physio then this could cause other people to have problems getting an appointment.

Tried to book within the 48 hour window and it said there were no appointments available, i kept trying and managed to get one in the end, this could be confusing for some people.

Unsure if self-referral could have delayed things, rather than going through my GP. I was hoping to have received some kind of communication by now, at least to say how long the waiting time is, just in case I may want to make alternative arrangements.

Waited 6 weeks so far and not heard anything about an appointment

Was unable to make a booking for Clatterbridge or St Catherine's as per self-referral web link. Still waiting for referral appointment, 6 weeks later. It would be useful to receive some kind of interim update; even if it was just to say "you'll hear back soon".

Would recommend for those au-fait with IT but feel some without OT skill would struggle. Getting updates after the referral process has started would be beneficial if you're left waiting and wondering whether things are progressing

**Total**

**31**



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