



Not just a patient: GP support for carers in Croydon

Carers' Information Service
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1. Introduction

'Over 33,000 carers in Croydon provide unpaid support to a friend, family member or neighbour - that's around 10% of the local population. Due to the higher health risks of caring for someone, it's crucial that carers receive the right help and healthcare to meet their needs.'

We hope that this research will shed light on GP support for carers in the borough, enabling partners, practice managers and health decision-makers to make more informed choices about the nature and delivery of services. We also hope that GPs and practice staff will become more aware of the issues and challenges affecting carers at their surgery. By working together, we can ensure that both carers and the patients they care for are empowered to look after their health and wellbeing.'

Helen Thompson
Carers' Information Service Manager

1.1. About the Carers' Information Service

The Carers' Information Service provides information, advice and support to unpaid carers in Croydon looking after someone who needs support due to illness, disability or old age. The service runs the Carers Support Centre, the one stop shop for carers in Croydon. The Carers' Information Service is part of The Whitgift Foundation.

1.2. Carers in Croydon

A carer provides unpaid support to a family member, friend, partner or neighbour who needs help due to illness, disability or old age. There are over 33,000 carers in the London Borough of Croydon; just under 10% of the local population (ONS, 2011). Of these carers, 5512 are registered with the Carers' Information Service (CIS), although this does not reflect the total number in contact with the Carers' Information Service (2017).

Carers support people with a wide range of needs and conditions, **saving the NHS and state services an estimated £132 billion each year** (Buckner, L. and Yeandle, S., 2015). This is the equivalent of **over £600 million annually in the London Borough of Croydon alone** (Buckner, L. and Yeandle, S., 2015).

1.3. GP services in Croydon

There are currently 57 GP practices in Croydon, with 403,045 registered patients according to NHS England. These are split into six cluster networks to cover each area of the borough. (*Our GPs*, Healthwatch Croydon, 2016)

In September 2016, local patient health and social care champion Healthwatch Croydon released a report on the patient experience of GP services in Croydon. The feedback from patients was mostly positive, with many patients commending the knowledge and professionalism of their GP. However, patients did **'voice concerns over telephone access, receptionists making 'clinical' judgements, and waits of weeks for routine**

appointments.' (*Our GPs*, Healthwatch Croydon, 2016). The views of carers should therefore be seen within this broader context.

1.4. Our research

The Carers' Information Service conducted a survey in March 2017 to provide a snapshot of carer healthcare and support from GP services in the London Borough of Croydon. The survey was sent to carers registered with a GP in the London Borough of Croydon via the Carers' Information Service mailing list, and was available in both a paper and electronic format. A total of 205 adult carers responded to the survey.

2. Background

2.1. Carer health risks

According to the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) carers' guidance, *Supporting Carers: An Action Guide for General Practitioners and Their Teams*, carers have an increased risk of a number of health conditions, including back pain, stress, depression and strokes (2013). This is based on a number of studies, particularly when carers are providing substantial or unsupported care. For example:

- A four year study of 392 carers and 427 non-carers aged 66-93 found that **carers providing high levels of care who reported feelings of strain had a 63% higher chance of death** in that period compared to non-carers (Beach, S. and Schulz, R., 2010).
- **Carers providing high levels of care had a 23% higher risk of stroke** (Hayley et al., 2000).

These studies are reinforced by carers' own reports on their health:

- A national survey by Carers UK et al. of over 3000 carers found that **83% of carers felt that caring had a negative impact on their health, rising to 87% for mental health (2012)**.
- **Three in five carers say that they have a long-term health condition** (61% compared with 52% of non-carers) (*GP Patient Survey*, Ipsos MORI 2016).
- Carers are more likely than non-carers to report problems with pain and discomfort to their GP (57% of carers compared to 45% of non-carers) and depression and anxiety (39% of carers compared to 30% of non-carers).

These national trends are reflected on a local scale. The Croydon Carers Strategy (2011-2016) found that a quarter (26%) have a long-term illness, 24% have a sensory impairment, 21% a physical disability, and 11% a learning disability or mental health problem. Almost one in 10 carers surveyed (9%) were in bad or very bad health.

2.2. The 'crucial role' of GPs in carer healthcare

"The carer's primary care team has a crucial role in... supporting and maintaining carer health and wellbeing [and]... in identifying carers." (*An integrated approach to identifying and assessing carer health and wellbeing*, NHS Carers' Toolkit, NHS England, 2016)

In the NHS Carers' Toolkit, NHS England strongly recommends that health and social care organisations such as GPs work together with other partner agencies in identifying, assessing and supporting the wellbeing of carers. This is in line with statutory guidance to the Care Act 2014, which emphasises the importance of GPs as a first point of contact with services (Department of Health, 2014).

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) *Supporting Carers* guidance similarly stresses the key role played by GPs in supporting carer health. Good practice highlighted in the RCGP guidance recommends that GPs:

- Proactively identify carers using their service.
- Direct carers to local carer and patient support services.
- Work collaboratively with carers on patient care.
- Are aware of mental health issues for carers and screen annually for depression.
- Provide access to flexible appointments to fit in with caring responsibilities.
- Ensure carers' overall health is properly monitored, for example by issuing reminders to carers to have an NHS health check and a flu jab.

On a local level, carers in Croydon have identified better GP support as beneficial to their needs. The 2017 *Carer Engagement* report from Croydon Council, based on a borough-wide survey and a series of focus groups, recommended that the council should 'work with GP practices to identify carers earlier' and that 'GPs should promote carers services and refer carers to the Carers' Support Centre on George Street.' (2017)

Supporting carers is not only beneficial to carers themselves; it also benefits the cared for person and the NHS. Research shows that good carer support can reduce hospital admissions, in both carers and cared for patients (Purdy, 2010). A 2016 report on A&E admissions from Carers UK, *Pressure Points*, found that **over half (55%) of carers surveyed said that more support for the cared for person could have prevented admission into hospital.**

As well as reducing pressure on services, there is some evidence to suggest that effective support for carers can lead to long-term financial savings for GP practices and clinical commissioning groups. For example, according to NHS commissioning guidance, **putting carer support in place to prevent long-term health risk saves around £4 for every £1 a CCG spends** (NHS England, 2014).

2.3. Preventative health care - health checks and carers

NHS Health Checks are a preventative health tool designed to screen and reduce the risk of common long-term health conditions in adults in England aged 40 - 74 without a pre-existing condition (*NHS Health Check*, NHS England).

The number of eligible people being offered an NHS Health Check in the London Borough of Croydon has been historically low. In 2013, a report by Diabetes UK found that Croydon was the second-lowest borough for NHS Health Check uptake in Britain (Fisk, 2013). Croydon still has one of the lowest NHS Health Check take-up rates of all the London boroughs, with 5.4% of the eligible population being offered an NHS Health Check in 2016. This is a lower than surrounding London boroughs, including Lambeth, Merton and Sutton (NHS England, 2017).

Offering the NHS Health Check has been shown to have a measurable impact on carers' ability to take informed self-care of their own health. For example, a 2011 study by the University of Leeds looked at the outcomes of health checks and carer breaks on 18,653 carers at 25 Carers' Strategy Demonstrator Sites developed by the Department of Health. Out of the carers who took part in the health check during the study, 'a quarter said that how they looked after their health and the amount of exercise they took had improved' four months after their check (Yeandle and Wigfield, 2011)

Similar trends have been identified in a local context. In 2015, the Carers' Information Service was selected as a venue for NHS Health Checks in Croydon. Over the course of a 12 month period, the NHS Health Checks provided found higher levels of a number of long-term health risk factors than the general UK population, including inactivity, obesity and high blood pressure. For example:

- Out of a total of 175 checks provided to carers registered with a GP in Croydon, 23% were found to have an elevated blood pressure (To Health Ltd., 2015). This is significantly higher than the 2015 UK average of 18% for men and 12% for women (NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, 2015).

- 35% of carers were inactive, compared to the national average of 19% for UK men and 26% for UK women (The Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2013).
- 28% of carers had a BMI of 30 or higher compared to 24.8% of the UK population (The Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2013).

Whilst this data may not be representative of the entire carer population in Croydon, these statistics highlight an above average level of risk factors linked to common long-term health problems such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and stroke. It is therefore essential that carers are given access to preventative health measures, such as the NHS Health Checks, to spot and combat these increased risks, in line with RCGP guidance.

3. Carers' experience of GPs in Croydon

3.1. Positive experiences of healthcare

Carers were generally positive about their experience with their GP regarding their healthcare. Showing understanding challenges of caring and making necessary adjustments to meet carers' individual needs and those of the person they cared for had a significant positive impact on carers' perceptions of their GP.

Carers' comments:

'Always superb care for both me and my mum.'

(Carer for an adult with a physical disability)

'My GP is fantastic very sympathetic to my needs as a carer and that of my son's.'

(Carer for an adult with a physical disability)

'Our GP service is very caring towards us. They take the time to listen to our needs. They always make sure we are taking care of ourselves.'

(Parent carer for two disabled children)

'My doctor cares for carers. They understand what a carer ha[s] to put up [with].'

(Carer for two adults with multiple health conditions)

3.2. Carer support

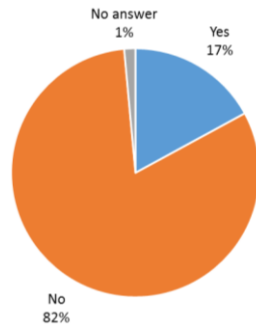
"I feel that [the GPs] don't care about either mine or the person I care for's needs. I only go to the GP if [I have] absolutely no choice (I usually use NHS 111 or walk-in)."

(Carer)

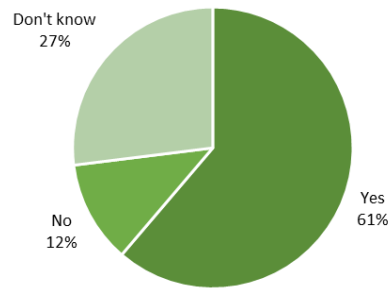
3.2.1. A need for further support

Despite primarily positive comments on GP healthcare, the majority of carers surveyed were not receiving specific information and support for their needs as carers. **Of the carers we surveyed, 82% had never been informed of carer support via their GP.** This is in spite of the fact that the majority of carers (61%) stated that their GP was aware of their caring role.

Has your GP informed you of local carer support in Croydon?



Does your main GP know you are a carer?



Carers who weren't being supported expressed concern and frustration at their GP's lack of acknowledgement of their caring role:

Carers' comments:

'Despite the fact I am a registered carer and it is on [their] computer [that] my son has autism, my GP surgery does not recognise me as a carer and the reception staff have no awareness when it comes to autism.' (Carer)

'...they did not think that [my son having] Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) counted me as being a carer.' (Parent carer)

'It felt like a long time until the practice recognised 1/ my husband's illness 2/ my role as his carer.' (Carer)

3.2.2. Realistic expectations

Despite these concerns, carers are acutely aware of the pressures GP surgeries are under and the majority acknowledged that GPs were generally doing their best. As one carer commented, *'Although I have not seen anything for carers support in reception areas and my doctor did point me to other services, I came across them myself. I just think [doctors] are far too busy looking at medical needs of person.'* Another carer suggested that surgeries may simply not realise what is available locally: *'[My GP is] extremely helpful - but I am not sure they are aware of all services available.'*

3.2.3. Information gap

The most frequently identified form of support that carers wanted to see from their GP was better signposting to local carer support. **Almost half (49%) of carers wanted to be signposted to local carer support by their GP, with a further 39% asking for information for carers available in the reception/waiting room area of the surgery.**

3.2.4. A&E prevention

Providing support for carers not only benefits carer health; it can also reduce A&E admissions. According to Carers UK 2016 *Pressure Points* report, **55% of carers who had taken the person they care for to A&E in the past 12 months believed their admission could have been prevented with more support.**

Both the NHS Carers' Toolkit and national RCGP *Supporting Carers* guidance recommend that it is good practice for GPs to direct carers to sources of local and specialist support, both for their own needs and for the needs of the cared for person. It is therefore clear that the issue lies less in GPs not realising carers are carers, but rather in GPs realising their 'crucial role' in directing carers to the help and support they need.

3.2.5. The impact of unsupported caring on carer wellbeing

A number of the carers we surveyed were experiencing significant strain and psychological distress as a result of their caring role. This is not uncommon; **around 40% of carers show signs of psychological distress and/or depression** (Pinquart, M., Sorensen, S., 2003).

Carers' comments:

*'My GPs are very good but **they do not understand the stress I am under and do not encourage me to talk to them about my many problems.**'* (Carer for three adults)

*'My GP keeps assessing me with anxiety or depression scales. **Does not ask about stress related to my daughter's mental health issues.** He also does not refer me to [the] medical specialist resources I need. **I think they see parents with [children with mental health problems] as histrionic, [with] no referrals made for supportive services for me or my daughter.**'* (Carer for young person)

*'I am 70 [and] sick myself, had [a] heart attack and open heart surgery, since becoming a carer six years ago. My mum is 92 with many health problems. I have not been offered any help from either my GP or my mum's... **My mother is difficult and my life is on hold and I could scream sometimes.**'* (Carer for parent)

Carers in this situation felt that their GP did not acknowledge the impact caring has on their mental health and wellbeing, and prescribed medication without addressing or acknowledging the root cause. They wanted to see a greater understanding of the challenges and strains of caring from their GP, and an increased readiness to direct them to further help for their specific caring needs. Directing carers to appropriate carer support would go a long way towards addressing these concerns.

3.3. NHS Health Checks and flu jabs

Due to the additional health risks of caring, NHS England and RCGP *Supporting Carers* guidance recommends that carers are offered an NHS Health Check and a flu jab to monitor their health. Yet despite these recommendations, **59% of carers surveyed who are eligible for the service have not been offered an NHS Health Check by their GP and over a third (35%) have never been offered the annual flu jab.**

Given the higher health risks linked to a caring role, it is concerning that carers are not being offered basic preventative healthcare measures to help them take care of their own health. Of those surveyed, **32% of carers felt that their GP could support carers better by offering them the NHS Health Check and flu jab**, empowering them to take care of their own health and wellbeing through proactive healthcare monitoring. Whilst it is clear that not all carers want to access these services, there is an urgent need to provide carers with the right information so they can make informed healthcare choices.

Carers' comments:

*'Generally good support from GPs, however **little monitoring of my health as a carer or checks on family's ability to cope.**'* (Carer)

'My GP does not acknowledge the importance of [the] health of carers. I have been diagnosed with hypothyroidism since I took on my carer role but my GP does not show any interest or proactiveness in offering me better, regular checkups.' (Carer)

'Everyone at the practice has been very kind and helpful at all times in regard to [my husband's] needs. However, in view of my own past medical history I would like to be offered [an NHS] Health Check.' (Carer)

3.4. Partnership in care? Supporting the cared for person

Information regarding the healthcare of the cared for person is a key priority for carers. Of those surveyed, **39% of carers wanted their GP to provide them with information related to the health condition/disability of the person they care for and 32% wanted their GP to share information about their healthcare, with the patient's consent.**

The RCGP *Supporting Carers* guidance states that: **'the relationship between carer and GP practice is a special one and should be recognised as a partnership in care.'** This is not always the case. Whilst the majority of carers were positive about their GP, some felt their GP did not listen to their concerns regarding cared for person's care and treatment, leaving the carer out of the conversation. Taking the carer's views into proper account would help alleviate these carers' concerns, treating the carer as a truly equal partner in the patient's care.

Carers' comments:

'Information should be consistent, not depending on a specific GP.' (Disabled carer)

*'GP made a referral to CAMHS for my son. **Doctors didn't listen properly and didn't seem interested in my concerns.***' (Parent carer)

'When I've gone with my son with a particular problem, they give us their solution (medication) but do not address the root nor have any follow up. My son refuses to take the medication, so we are back to square one.' (Parent carer)

*'I was very pleased with the service offered by my GP when my mother was first diagnosed. **However, I am sometimes not informed about decisions relating to my mother's healthcare.** Although I have asked to be informed due to the nature of my mother's illness. **For instance she's been given blood tests by the district nurse without my knowledge, which led to confusion and embarrassment for me at a subsequent hospital appointment I attended with my mother.***' (Carer)

*'**Neither the person I care for or I have been informed about anything about their care plan.** I have not had any contact from my local GP to inform me what the person I care for is entitled to or could receive support for. **Some care services from Croydon are excellent but I haven't received acceptable support from my local GP.***' (Carer)

One carer noted a particular issue regarding communication between her GP and hospital services. She felt her mother's needs were disregarded by the GP, leading to delays in her mother being readmitted to hospital:

*'**My elderly mother, I don't feel her GP takes interest in her.** I had to call them recently and was told the GP would phone back. The GP phoned back at 8pm (8 hours later) to discuss her health issue.*

The following day I had to call the GP out again. They came to assess her and felt she should not have been discharged from Croydon University Hospital and would forward mum onto the Rapid Response Team (RRT). The RRT phoned within an hour of the visit and was told they needed to blood test, as my mum was very dehydrated they could not take blood but would come the next day. The RPT came to get blood but was unable to get enough, but felt my mum needed to be readmitted to hospital (discharged the previous Friday) but wanted to speak her GP to find out if he felt my mum needed to be readmitted.

*After the RRT left, my mum's health deteriorated and I had to call the emergency services via Careline. An advance paramedic came out and assessed my mum's needs and felt due to the lack of fluids and food over the last 24 [hours] she should be readmitted and [an] ambulance was called for. Before the ambulance came the RRT called and told me she had not heard from my mother's GP, which I was not surprised [about] as **I don't feel they take her serious[ly] enough due to her age as this is not the 1st time they have called back so late in the day.** Finally my mother was admitted and is currently having treatment.' (Carer for mother)*

By keeping carers informed and valuing their input, GPs may be able to improve outcomes for both patient and carer. As the RCGP *Supporting Carers* guidance states, **'finding ways to share information appropriately can make a critical difference to the ability and confidence of carers in their caring roles.'** (2011)

3.5. Appointments and home visits

Availability of appointments and waiting times was an issue for over a third of carers, with **38% wanting appointments outside usual hours** and **32% wanting longer appointments**. Many carers struggled to fit in appointments around a busy and demanding caring role, and found that the usual appointment time was not long enough to discuss the health needs of the cared for person.

Carers' comments:

'I often have to wait weeks for appointments as I have such a small time frame I can attend appointments without taking my daughter, who I care for, with me. She goes to school an hour away from where we live and this leaves me with 3 hours. I have had to wait 4 weeks for an ECG... which the doctor told me I would have to wait only 7 to 14 days. I also usually wait until I have a few problems as then I only need one appointment but [the appointment times] are not usually long enough for this.' (Parent carer)

'No more than 1 condition per appointment is not always possible otherwise we would be there all the time. They always put 'mother is concerned' making me sound as if I'm making things up.' (Carer)

*'Appointments at more convenient times and making it easier to get repeat prescriptions would make life easier along with **slightly longer appointments and a chance to talk to GP about, but without, the cared for.*** (Carer)

'I do think the NHS would do better if we could have longer appointments.' (Carer)

A number of carers experienced substantial difficulties getting a face-to-face appointment with their GP at all:

Carers' comments:

'GPs need to make themselves more available. I can only speak to my GP over the phone.' (Carer)

'You have to wait about 3 - 4 weeks to see a doctor unless it is an emergency.' (Parent carer)

'The appointments at my surgery are not very good. You cannot book appointments when you want. You have to [be on the] phone on the day.' (Carer)

'Poor in book[ing] appointments.' (Parent carer)

*'I am usually asked to ring the surgery at 8am, but in vain. **So I ring the surgery day after day, until I am lucky.**'* (Carer)

A number of carers experienced difficulties obtaining a home visit. Carers commented that it took effort and persistence on the carer's part to obtain the home visit, and some carers were unable to get a home visit at all. This issue is reflected on a national scale. A 2016 report from Carers UK found that nearly a fifth of carers (17%) found it difficult or impossible to access a GP out of hours, with many carers expressing frustration that they could not obtain a home visit (*Pressure Points*, 2016).

Carers' comments:

*'Was badly let down. Asked for home visits twice but they refused... **Everyone was passing the buck and I wrote a letter of complaint in the end.**'* (Carer)

*'Even though my GP said he'd help and get a home visit organised, nothing happened. **I gave up and sorted it out myself.**'* (Carer)

*'...generally satisfied, but it can be **difficult to arrange home visits for my wife.**'* (Carer for an adult with dementia)

*'**Doctors will not come out to see my mum but we cannot get her to the surgery.**'* (Carer)

For one carer, difficulties obtaining a home visit has led to the person they care for not seeing a medical professional in a very long time: *'The person I care for has autism and will not go to the surgery. **As a result she has not seen a doctor or nurse for several years.**'* (Carer)

In contrast, surgeries providing flexible, timely appointments and the option of longer consultations were regarded much more positively by carers. Carers told us that offering flexibility and making reasonable adjustments to appointment times is highly appreciated and makes a meaningful difference to their lives:

Carers' comments:

*'My GP is very good and understanding. **She allows time in the appointment to talk, which is very helpful.**'* (Carer)

*'**My GP is responsive to requests for me for later appointments and any other checkups or other requests from me e.g. requested a referral to a continence advisor (though not yet heard from them).**'* (Carer)

*'**We can usually get a same-day appointment with our GP when needed.**'* (Carer)

3.6. Prescriptions

Whilst issues with prescriptions only affected a minority of carers surveyed, those who were affected experienced significant distress. Carers are often required to administer and manage multiple medications for the person they care for, which can be a complex and challenging task. Delays, problems with electronic

prescriptions and mix ups with medication can therefore have a major impact on the carer's health and wellbeing, as well as the patient they are supporting, creating unnecessary stress, confusion and anxiety:

Carers' comments:

'Prescription errors are a problem with our surgery. This a source of stress because my cared for relative suffers from an acutely life threatening rare form of epilepsy and has to be given an enormous cocktail of med[ications] twice daily to control them.' (Carer)

'My only criticism is that that they fail to make good use of the electronic system for repeat prescriptions. Long-term repeat items are too frequently not available because of failure to re-authorise them. This means a journey or a phone call is needed.' (Carer)

'The frustration I experience when ordering repeat prescriptions is intolerable. Either the doctor's surgery blames the pharmacy for missing prescriptions or delays, or vice versa. You have to plan three weeks in advance to ensure there will be no delay in a supply of anything in a regular repeat prescription.' (Carer)

3.7. Listening to carers' needs

Staff empathy was of key importance to carers. A number of carers identified a particular GP or practice staff member who understood their situation and treated them with compassion and respect:

Carers' comments:

'Dr C. looks after my wife and me. She is superb and has been very, very supportive ever since we registered with her. She is caring, but down to earth and competent at the same time.' (Carer)

"The staff [at my practice are] exemplary. Not only is this an efficient practice but everyone cares as well... A while ago one of the nurses pushed me to seek help for a serious problem and she helped solve it for me. Her kind intervention changed my life." (Carer)

Whilst many carers praised the empathy demonstrated by GP staff, others felt that certain GPs showed less patience and understanding. Carers who held negative views of their GP manner frequently highlighted that their GP was 'judgemental' and lacked patience. Some carers commented on a 'luck of the draw' experience, particularly for emergency appointments where they could not see their usual GP:

Not being listened to was another key concern for carers. Of the carers we surveyed, **24% wanted their GP to listen to them better.**

Carers' comments:

'My practice has many GPs. One is excellent but currently on maternity leave. A couple treat you like you're an idiot, or I feel they do. I feel they are treating one symptom alone without taking into consideration how it affects other conditions.' (Parent carer)

'I got the one doctor who I usually avoid like the plague because he is impatient and lacks empathy and is judgmental. He knows the family history and caring situation well. He responded to my desperate request [for an emergency prescription] with 'if you can't organise yourself properly to stay on top of the medication prescription, you're not fit to be his carer'. After traumatising me as is his habit, he did write the vital prescription.' (Carer)

4. Observations

4.1. Informing carers about local support

The majority of comments received by the Carers' Information Service about carers' experience of their GP were positive, particularly in relation to healthcare and overall supportiveness. Of negative comments received, the most frequently raised issue was a lack of specific help and support for carers, followed by issues with appointments and a lack of support for the cared for person.

The most frequently identified way that carers would like their GP to support them is better signposting to local carer support. **Almost half (49%) of carers wanted to be signposted to local carer support by their GP, with a further 38.5% wanting information for carers available in the reception/waiting room area of the surgery.**

4.1.1. Recommendation

The Carers' Information Service would like to see Croydon's GPs informing carers of local carer support, such as the Carers Support Centre, the one stop shop for carers in Croydon. The Carers' Information Service also would like GPs to display information for carers prominently in their surgery, so that carers across the borough are aware of what is available.

The Carers' Information Service is working with GP surgeries and Croydon Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to ensure carers receive the support they need from their GP. GPs and practice managers can access our GP Carers Pack with information, a checklist and resources to help clinical and reception staff inform and support carers at their practice.

4.2. NHS Health Checks and flu jabs

Of the carers we surveyed, **more than half (59%) have not been offered an NHS Health Check by their GP. This rises to 65.7% once carers who are not eligible for a Health Check under the usual criteria are discounted.** Given the increased health risks of carers, particularly those providing substantial levels of care, it is concerning that carers are not being offered basic preventative healthcare measures to help them monitor their own health and prevent future long-term health risks.

Over a third (35%) of carers have never been offered the annual flu jab. Whilst it is encouraging that the majority of carers have been offered the annual flu jab, it is disappointing that a substantial minority have not been informed of their entitlement.

Due to the increased health risks of caring for someone, it is worth considering extending the offer of NHS Health Checks to any carer. A 2013 RCGP report, *Summary report on GP practice journeys towards improved carer identification and support* highlighted the benefits of exemplar practices offering this service to carers, in particular when addressing carer health inequalities.

Informing carers of NHS Health Checks and the annual flu jab would help carers make informed health choices, empowering them to take steps to improve their own long-term health outcomes. Putting these measures in place will also help avoid a crisis situation where a carer's health deteriorates, so they can no longer provide support. Whilst not all carers will take up the offer, carers will benefit from being made aware of what is available.

4.2.1. Recommendation

To ensure carers can take control of their health and wellbeing, the Carers' Information Service would like to see GPs ensure that carers are offered the annual flu jab and NHS Health Check at their practice, and that information is clearly displayed in surgeries informing carers about carers' eligibility for these services.

4.3. Partnership in care?

A lack of information on the cared for person's condition and care plan was a priority issue for carers. Of those surveyed, **39% wanted more information on the condition/disability of the cared for person**, and **32% wanted better information sharing regarding their care and medical treatment**. The comments received illustrated a clear need for better partnership working between carers and GPs, with a greater level of understanding from some GPs of the valuable role carers play in supportive patient care.

4.3.1. Recommendation

The Carers' Information Service would like to see GPs treating carers as equal partners in care, sharing information appropriately in the patient and carer's best interests with informed patient consent.

4.4. Flexible, accessible appointments

Availability of appointments and waiting times was an issue for over a third of carers surveyed, with **38% wanting appointments outside usual hours** and **32% wanting longer appointments**. It was also the third most frequently mentioned theme in the qualitative comments received.

Carers who raised this issue said that they struggled to fit in appointments around a busy and demanding caring role, and found that the usual appointment time was not long enough to discuss the health needs of the person they cared for.

Carers also expressed concerns about home visits. Carers commented that it took effort and persistence on the carer's part to obtain the home visit for the cared for person, and some carers were unable to get a home visit at all. This reflects the wider national picture, with Carers UK recommending a national review within the NHS of out-of-hours services (*Pressure Points*, 2016).

4.4.1. Recommendation

The Carers' Information Service wants to see GP surgeries taking the specific needs of carers into account when managing appointments, in accordance with RCGP guidance. Specifically, practices should ideally provide flexibility for carers who need more time to discuss complex issues. In addition, the Carers' Information Service would like to see surgeries considering the impact on any carers as well as patients when designing and implementing home visiting policies.

4.5. Prescriptions

It was positive to see that prescription errors only affected a small minority of carers surveyed. However, for those who raised the issue, delays and prescription errors caused significant distress and worry, due to the nature of their caring role and the complex medical needs of the person they cared for.

4.5.1. Recommendation

To minimise distressing prescription errors, the Carers' Information Service would like to see GP's implementing Healthwatch Croydon's recommendation that 'safe working practices should be demonstrated [in all GP practices in Croydon], with staff fully trained, and adequate safeguards in place' (*Our GPs*, 2016).

4.6. Listening to carers' needs

Whilst the majority of carers said their GP treated them with understanding, respect and dignity, a significant minority felt that their GP did not listen to them, showed a lack of understanding, did not acknowledge the impact of their caring role or was even judgemental or critical of their ability to provide care.

4.6.1. Recommendation

Whilst it is highly positive to see that many individual GPs are providing outstanding levels of care, the Carers' Information Service is concerned that carers are not always receiving appropriate consideration, compassion and understanding from their GP. The Carers' Information Service would like to ensure that all GPs have appropriate information on carers and that all patient and carer-facing staff read our GP carer checklist to ensure their practice is carer friendly.

5. Conclusion

Overall, carers are broadly positive about the healthcare they receive from their GP, but would like to be informed of carer support available to them. We therefore recommend that all surgeries in Croydon ensure that registered and identified carers are provided with information about the Carers Support Centre, and are referred directly if in need of support.

The Carers' Information Service is working with GP surgeries and Croydon Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to ensure carers receive the support they need from their GP. GPs and practice managers can access our GP Carers Pack with information, a checklist and resources to help clinical and reception staff inform and support carers at their practice.

For more information about the Carers' Information Service GP Project, and for copies of our publications and general information leaflet, contact Amy Deakin on 020 8649 6288 or email amydeakin@carersinfo.org.uk.

6. Methodology

The research was conducted via a self-selecting survey of 14 questions, with the option to provide further comments on the individual's experience of GP services. The survey was available electronically via Google Forms and as a paper copy. It was sent electronically to 2,204 carers on the Carers' Information Service database. It was also made available as a paper copy in the Carers Support Centre and Carers Café.

To ensure a wide range of carers were represented, the survey was circulated to key stakeholders representing specific groups of carers in the borough, including: Parents in Partnership, Kids Croydon and Family Lives Croydon (parent carers), Age UK (older people), Alzheimer's Society Croydon (dementia carers), Mind in Croydon and Rethink Croydon (mental health carers), BME Forum (BAME carers) and Croydon Clinical Commissioning Group (GPs). It was also distributed to local community venues in Croydon, such as the Croydon Healthy Living Hub.

All survey data was collected between **1 March 2017 and 31 March 2017**, and a total of 207 individual responses were received. Two responses were discounted as the carer was registered with a GP out-of-borough, so data was based on 205 responses.

The report was compiled in **April 2017**. It is therefore reflective of the services, data and resources available during this period.

6.1. Key points

- 15% of survey respondents were male and 85% were female.
- 70% of the carers we surveyed were working aged (18 - 64) and 30% were 65 and above (older carers).
- 69% cared for an adult, 24% cared for a child and 5% cared for both an adult and a child.
- 60.2% were caring for 50 hours per week or more, and would be classified as providing high levels of care.
- The majority of carers were caring for someone with autism spectrum disorder (34%), followed by a physical disability (23%) and dementia (20%) respectively.
- 86% of carers had seen their GP for their own health needs in the past twelve months.

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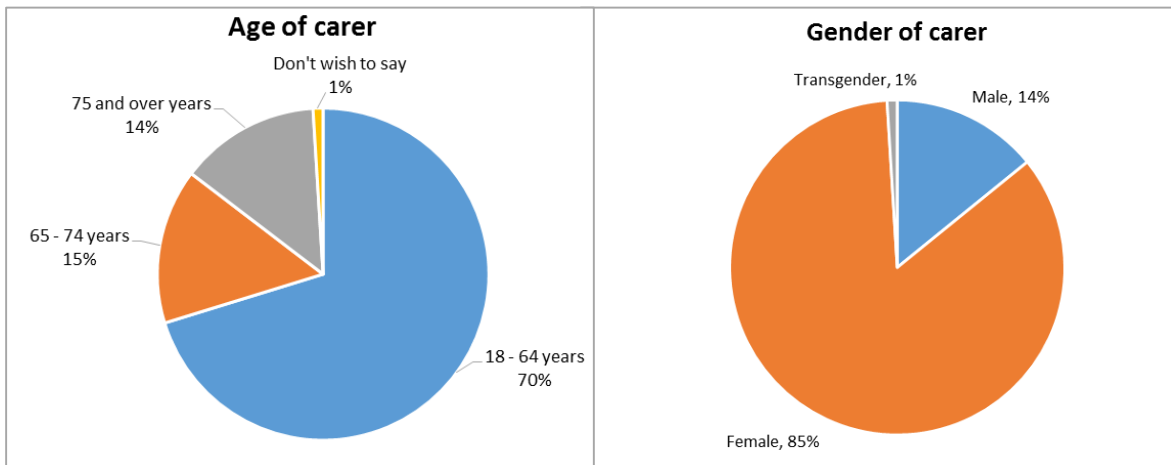
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Appendix 1 - findings

The Carers' Information Service conducted a self-selecting survey of carers registered with a GP in the London Borough of Croydon about their experience using GP services, available in both paper and electronic format. The Carers' Information Service received 205 responses from adult carers in Croydon.

Carer demographics

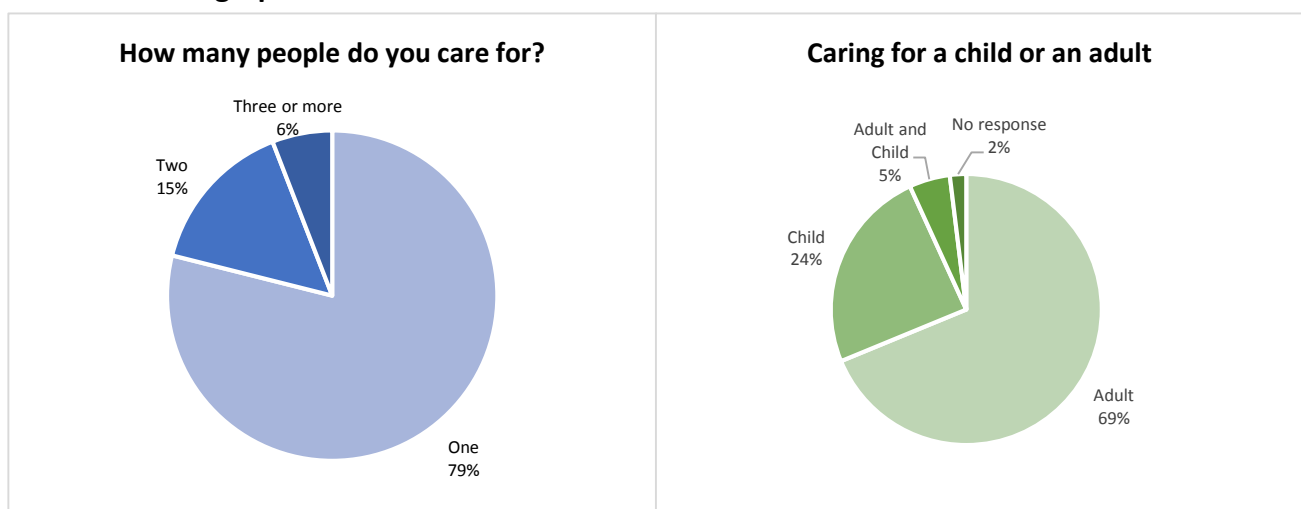


Age and gender demographics of survey sample

14% of carers who responded were male and 85% of carers were female. Whilst women are more likely to be carers than men, this is not entirely reflective of the national caring population; according to 2011 Census data, 58% of carers are female and 42% are male (ONS).

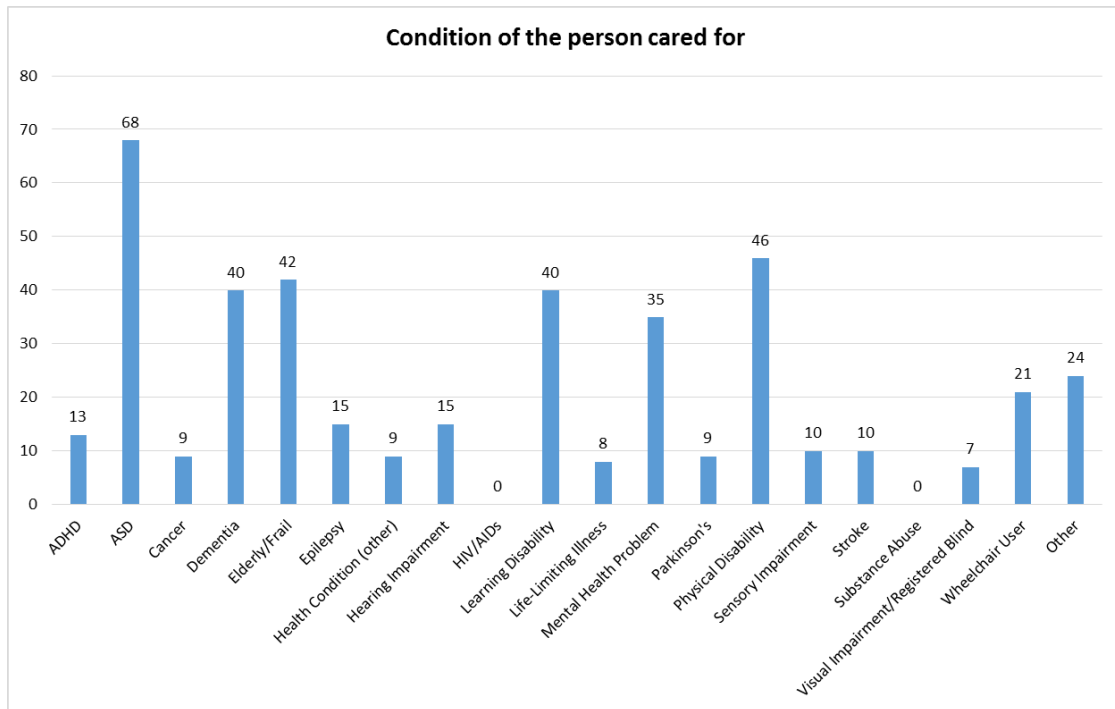
70% of the carers we surveyed were working aged (18 - 64) and 30% were 65 and above (older carers). This is closer to the general population, as the majority of carers are of working age (*Facts About Carers, Carers UK, 2015*)

Cared for demographics



Age and number of persons cared for

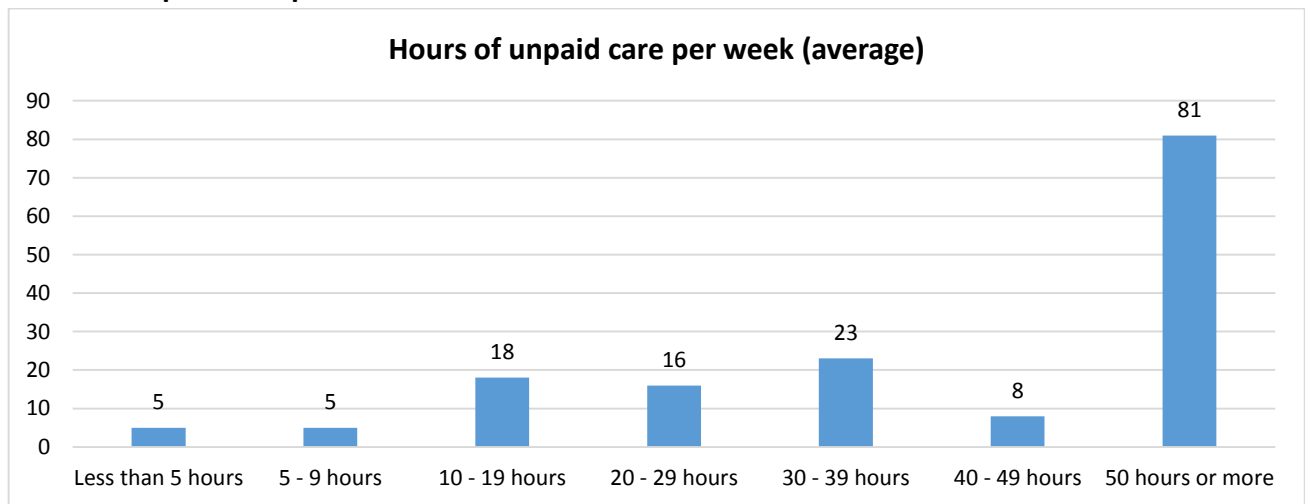
The sample was predominantly carers of adults; 69% of those we surveyed cared for an adult, 24% cared for a child and 5% cared for both an adult and a child. The vast majority (79%) were caring for one person, with 16% caring for two people and 6% caring for three or more.



Condition of the cared for person

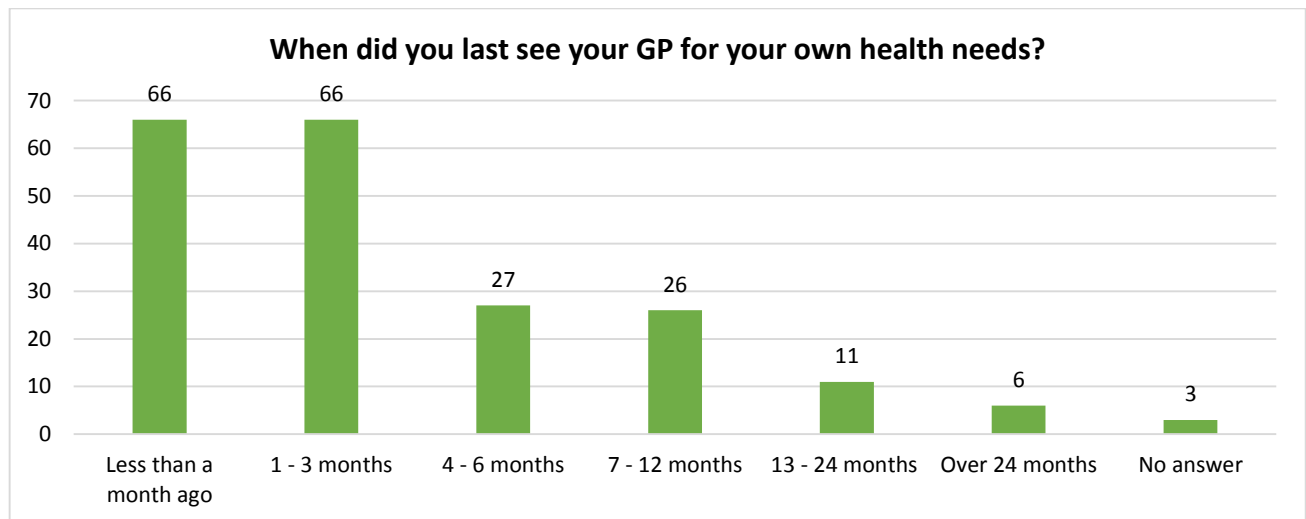
Carers who took part in the survey supported people with a wide range of conditions. The most frequent reason the person they supported needed care was autism spectrum disorder (34%), followed by a physical disability (23%) and dementia (20%) respectively.

Hours of unpaid care provided



Average weekly hours spent on caring responsibilities

Whilst most of the carers we surveyed were not juggling multiple caring roles, the majority were still providing high levels of care, with 60.2% caring for 50 hours per week or more.

GP access

Time since last GP appointment for carer's own health needs (not cared for's)

86% of carers had seen their GP for their own health needs in the past twelve months; this is the same percentage as the *GP Patient Survey 2016*, which found 86% of carers had seen a GP in past twelve months compared to 83% of non-carers. Whilst this may be linked to the carers' increased health risks, the reasons for more frequent appointments are unclear, and require further exploration.

Appendix 2 - data tables

Q1: How old are you?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
18 - 64 years	144	70.2%
65 - 74 years	31	16.1%
75 and over years	28	13.7%
Don't wish to say	2	1.0%

Q2: What is your gender?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Male	29	15.1%
Female	174	84.9%
Transgender	2	1.0%
Don't wish to say	0	15.1%

Q3 - What is the condition or disability of the person you care for? (Select all that apply)		
<i>Response Item</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
ADHD	13	6.8%
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	68	33.7%
Cancer	9	4.4%
Dementia	40	19.5%
Elderly/Frail	42	20.5%
Epilepsy	15	7.3%
Health Condition (other)	9	4.4%
Hearing Impairment	15	7.3%

HIV/AIDs	0	0.0%
Learning Disability	40	19.5%
Life-Limiting Illness	8	3.9%
Mental Health Problem	35	17.6%
Parkinson's	9	4.4%
Physical Disability	46	22.9%
Sensory Impairment	10	4.9%
Stroke	10	4.9%
Substance Abuse	0	0.0%
Visual Impairment/ Registered Blind	7	3.4%
Wheelchair User	21	10.2%
Other	24	12.2%

Q4: How many people are you a carer for?		
Response	Total frequency	Percentage
One	161	78.5%
Two	31	16.1%
Three or more	12	5.9%
Don't wish to say	1	0%

Q5: Are you caring for an adult or a child (under 18)?		
Response	Total frequency	Percentage
Adult	141	68.8%
Child	50	24.4%
Adult and Child	10	4.9%
No response	4	2%

Q6: How many hours of unpaid care do you provide each week (rough estimate)?		
Response	Total frequency	Percentage
Less than 5 hours	5	2.4%
5 - 9 hours	5	2.4%
10 - 19 hours	18	9.2%
20 - 29 hours	16	8.3%
30 - 39 hours	23	11.2%
40 - 49 hours	8	3.9%
50 hours or more	81	60.2%

Q7: Which Croydon GP surgery are you registered with?		
Response	Total Frequency	Percentage
Information not provided	12	5.9%
Addiscombe Surgery	1	0.5%
Ashburton Park Medical Centre	0	0.0%
Auckland Surgery	3	1.5%
Birdhurst Medical Practice	6	2.9%
Bramley Avenue Surgery	1	0.5%
Brigstock Family Practice	4	2.0%

Brigstock Medical Practice	3	1.5%
Broughton Corner Medical Centre	1	0.5%
Coulsdon Medical Practice	3	1.5%
Country Park Practice	3	1.5%
Denmark Road Surgery	3	1.5%
Downland Surgery	0	0.0%
East Croydon Medical Practice	9	4.4%
Edridge Road Medical Practice	0	0.0%
Eversley Medical Centre	6	2.9%
Fairview Medical Centre	1	0.5%
Farley Road Medical Practice	8	3.9%
Fieldway Medical Centre	1	0.5%
Friends Road Medical Practice	2	1.0%
Greenside Group Practice	2	1.0%
Haling Park Medical Practice	0	0.0%
Hartland Way Surgery	3	1.5%
Headley Drive Surgery	0	0.0%
Heathfield Surgery	1	0.5%
Keston House Medical Practice	7	3.4%
Leander Road Medical Practice	3	1.5%
London Road Medical Practice	2	1.0%
Mersham Medical Centre	3	1.5%
Mitchley Avenue Surgery	3	1.5%
Morland Road Surgery	4	2.0%
Norbury Health Centre	6	2.9%
North Croydon Medical Centre	1	0.5%
Old Coulsdon Medical Practice	5	2.4%
Parchmore Medical Practice	5	2.4%
Parkside Group Practice	13	6.3%
Parkway Health Centre (Salerno)	4	2.0%
Parkway Medical Centre (1- Baskaran)	2	1.0%
Parkway Medical Centre (2 AT Medics)	1	0.5%
Portland Medical Centre	8	3.9%
Queenhill Medical Practice	1	0.5%
Selhurst Medical Centre	2	1.0%
Selsdon Park Medical Practice	3	1.5%
Shirley Medical Centre	7	3.4%
South Croydon Medical Practice	1	0.5%
South Norwood Hill Medical Practice	5	2.4%
South Norwood Medical Centre	1	0.5%
South Norwood Medical Practice	0	0.0%
Spring Park Medical Centre	1	0.5%
St James Medical Centre	2	1.0%
Stovell House Surgery	5	2.4%
The Enmore Practice	2	1.0%
The Moorings	5	2.4%
Thornton Heath Health Centre	6	2.9%
Thornton Road Surgery	1	0.5%
Upper Norwood Group Practice	0	0.0%
Valley Park Surgery	3	1.5%

Violet Lane Medical Practice	6	2.9%
Whitehorse Practice	4	2.0%
Woodcote Group Surgery	7	3.4%
Woodside Health Centre (04 Noronha)	1	0.5%
Other	2	1.0%

Q8: Does your preferred/main GP know about your caring role?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	125	61.0%
No	24	11.7%
Don't know	55	26.8%
No answer	1	0.5%

Q9: Has your GP told you about support available to carers in Croydon?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	35	17.1%
No	167	81.5%
No answer	3	1.5%

Q10: If yes, has your GP told you about the Carers Support Centre?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	25	12.2%
No	139	67.8%
No answer	41	20.0%

Q11: When was the last time you went to see your GP for your own health needs?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Less than a month ago	66	32.2%
1 - 3 months	66	32.2%
4 - 6 months	27	13.2%
7 - 12 months	26	12.7%
13 - 24 months	11	5.4%
Over 24 months	6	2.9%
Never	0	0.0%
No answer	3	1.5%

Q12: In the past twelve months, has your GP offered you a General Health Check?		
<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes and I had one	48	23.0%
Yes but I chose not to have one	9	4.0%
No	121	59.0%
Not eligible	21	10.0%
No answer	6	2.9%

Q13: Has your GP offered you a flu jab?
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<i>Response</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes and I had one	94	45.9%
Yes but I chose not to have one	31	15.1%
No	71	34.6%
Not eligible	5	2.4%
No answer	4	2.0%

Q14: What support would you like your GP/GP surgery to offer to help you in your caring role? You can select more than one option.		
<i>Response item</i>	<i>Total frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Provide information related to the health condition/disability of the person I care for	79	38.5%
Share health information with me about the person I care for (with their consent)	65	31.7%
Display information for carers in the reception/waiting room area of the surgery	79	38.5%
Offer me a flu jab/NHS Health Check (if eligible)	65	31.7%
Inform me of sources of support for carers	101	49.3%
Offer appointments at more convenient times (e.g. evenings, afternoons, weekends, etc.)	77	37.6%
Offer longer appointments	65	31.7%
Listen to me better	49	23.9%
Provide a carers' support group	46	22.4%
Nothing - I am happy with the current support provided by my GP	40	19.5%
Other	18	8.8%
No answer	4	2.0%