



Experiences of Earwax Treatment

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healthwatch
East Sussex

Introduction

Who are Healthwatch East Sussex?

Healthwatch East Sussex (HWES) are the local independent watchdog for health and social care services.

We gather feedback from residents, good, bad and mixed, and make recommendations to change services for the better.

Experiences of Earwax: Our rationale

Over the last year (2023-2024) we've received increased feedback about local audiology services, including challenges in obtaining treatment for a build-up of earwax.

We heard this through enquiries to our Information and Signposting service, Hot Topic meetings and engagement undertaken as part of our 2022 Eastbourne Listening Tour.

Feedback identified:

- **Mixed messaging from GP practices and others about the availability of earwax removal services, who can access them and when.**
- **Confusion as to why some GP practices offer earwax removal, whilst others do not.**
- **Negative impacts on people's quality of life whilst awaiting earwax removal.**

We designed a short survey to capture an increased range of experiences to help further our understanding of this theme and identify areas for further development.

Background

Why is earwax an issue?

Earwax is an oily substance that helps protect the outer ear from dirt and germs, which may naturally move out of the ear on its own, but for some people a build-up may require professional removal.

The [NHS](#) indicates a build up of earwax may be due to narrow or damaged ear canals, hair in ear canals, skin conditions, and inflammation of your ear canal ("swimmer's ear").

Symptoms may include hearing loss, earache, feeling your ears are blocked, ringing or buzzing in your ears (tinnitus) and vertigo (feeling dizzy and sick).

Significant build-up may also delay or prevent a person from assessing hearing or other medical appointments or procedures.

Earwax removal

Treatment for a build-up of earwax may take a variety of forms, including:

- Self-treatment following advice from NHS 111 or other health professionals
- Advice or over-the-counter remedies from a pharmacist
- Ear irrigation (Treatment to flush the wax out with water)
- Microsuction (sucking the wax out with a specialised machine)

If these don't help, you may be referred to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist.



Have you sought help or advice about an ear wax problem in the last two years?

We are keen to hear about:

- Which services you accessed?
- What advice you were given?
- Any treatment you received?

Complete our survey:
<https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/HWESEarWax2023/>

Healthwatch East Sussex are the local independent watchdog for those using health and social care in East Sussex.

healthwatch
East Sussex

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#have your say



What we did

Between November 2023 and January 2024, our short survey asked people to share their experiences of seeking advice or treatment for an earwax problem in the last two years.

We wanted to learn about the effects of earwax build up on people's physical and mental health, how clear and easy it was to obtain treatment and the experiences of different forms of treatment.

People were able to complete the survey online, in print or over the phone.

115 people gave us their feedback.

Our aims:

1. Gather more insight on the themes and experiences we have received from local people about hearing-related services, especially earwax removal.
2. To develop HWES' understanding of public and patient experiences of earwax removal services across East Sussex, including what works well and where improvements may be valuable.
3. To identify further engagement and project opportunities to explore issues related to experiences of hearing-related services and audiology provision.

What we heard – Our key findings

- People experienced a range of symptoms due to earwax build-up including loss of hearing, tinnitus, loss of balance and headaches and often more than one of these symptoms.
- Half of our respondents (52.5%) experienced significant or severe physical impacts due to earwax including: pain, itchy ear and vertigo.
- A third of our respondents (31.3%) experienced significant or severe mental impacts due to earwax including: lack of concentration, anxiety and 'brain fog'.
- Whilst 34.8% respondents found accessing earwax removal Very Easy/Easy, 26.9% found it Difficult/Very Difficult. Barriers included understanding who offers earwax removal and treatment types, appointment wait times and costs of treatment.
- Most people look to their GP when they experience symptoms of earwax build-up and are disappointed if practices have long waits or no longer offer removal at all. Patients are often unclear why some GPs offer earwax removal and others don't.

What we heard – Our key findings

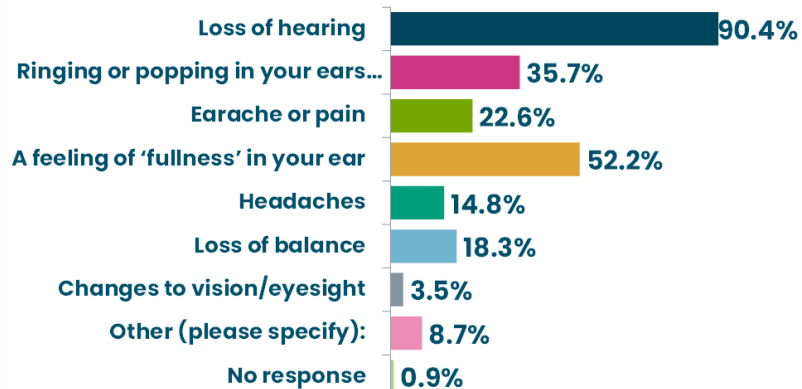
- Where GP practices still offered earwax removal this was often valued for several reasons, including quality of service, provision of self-help advice, consideration of wider symptoms and concerns, as well as being at no cost.
- Communication from GP practices to patients about the earwax removal services they and others offer can be unclear and risks generating further confusion.
- Feedback suggests seeking treatment for earwax can be confusing, challenging to navigate and time-consuming. Clearer guidance on earwax treatment options and how to identify safe and cost-effective services would be valued by patients.
- The most frequent cost for non-NHS earwax removal was between £50 and £75 per treatment, which is unaffordable for some patients, especially frequent users.
- A reduction in NHS [free] earwax removal and increased signposting to private paid-for services may have an impact on health inequalities, especially those on lower incomes or who require frequent treatment.



**How earwax build-up
affects you**

Impacts of an earwax build-up

Please describe the symptoms you experience(d) due to ear wax



Symptoms of earwax

People told us they experienced a range of symptoms due to earwax, and often more than one.

The most common were:

- Loss of hearing
- Feeling of fullness in the ear
- Tinnitus
- Loss of balance
- Headaches

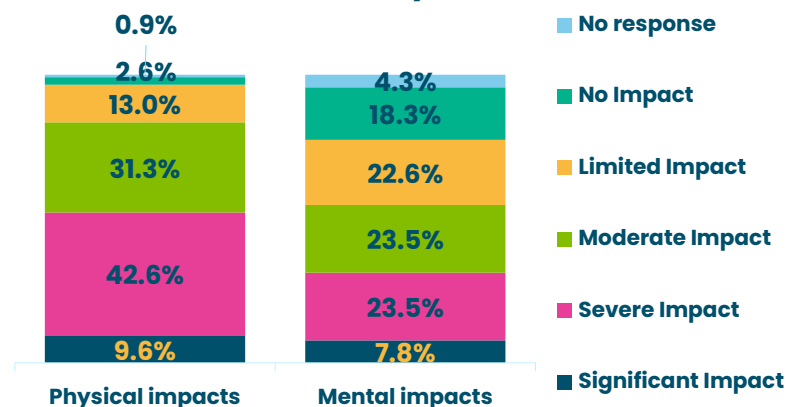
Physical wellbeing

More than half of our respondents (52.5%) indicated that earwax had significant or severe physical impacts on them, including: pain, itchy ear, headaches and vertigo.

Mental wellbeing

31.3% of respondents experienced significant or severe mental impacts due to earwax, including: lack of concentration, anxiety and 'brain fog'.

How does/did your ear wax problem affect you?



The impacts of earwax build-up on you

"Miserable and dangerous. Can't hear when people are calling me when out walking. Driving is trickier."

"Daily pain although low level."

"Bad, despair!"

"Lack of concentration, brain not functioning properly."

"Deafness."

"Chronic pain."

"Difficulty wearing my hearing aids."

"Itchy ear."

"I can't hear the teacher in my class. The seating plan has been adjusted. I am struggling with the learning at the moment."

"It is difficult not being able to hear and it wears you down. I'm tired of the sensation of being underwater, of having tinnitus in my ear and it generally makes me feel less well. I find myself getting angrier quicker. "

"Escalation of confusional state."

"I was without hearing and was forced to cancel appointments etc."

What you told us about experiences of treatment for earwax





Experiences of treatment for earwax

Experiences of treatment for earwax

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [Quality standard 185](#) which relates to earwax removal in adults (published 10 July 2019) makes clear that:

“Adults with earwax that is contributing to hearing loss or other symptoms, or preventing ear examination or ear canal impressions being taken, have earwax removed in primary care or community ear care services.”

Respondents overwhelmingly sought examinations or treatment in primary care settings, with 70.4% looking to their GP practice, 25.2% to opticians and 14.8% to pharmacies. However, we heard that whilst this was smooth and effective in some instances, it was less so in others.

Treatment options

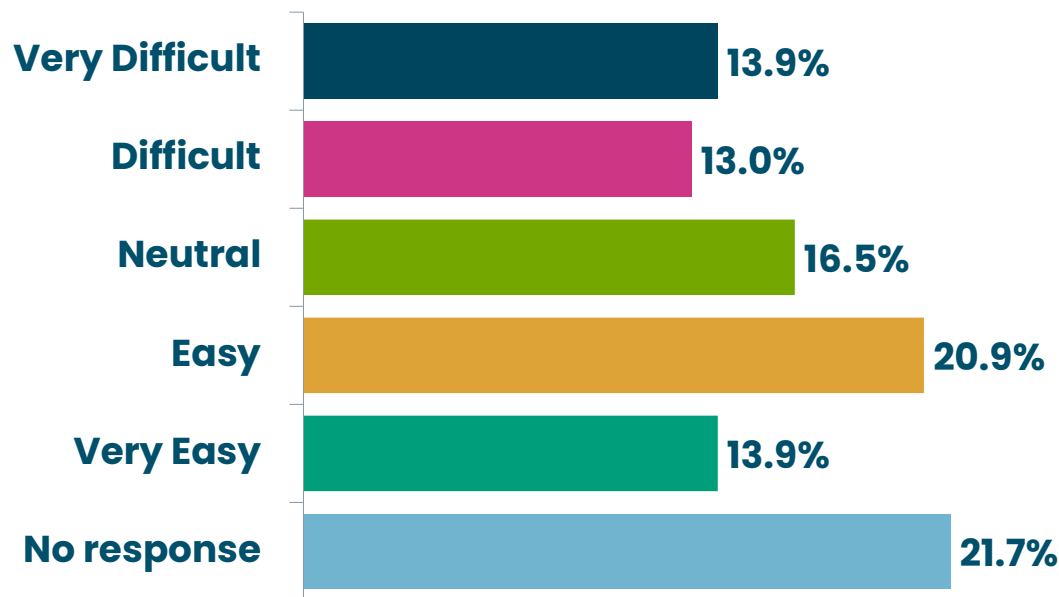
Feedback suggests that seeking support and treatment for an earwax problem and a suitable treatment can at times be confusing, challenging to navigate and time-consuming.

The NHS website encourages self-treatment and the use of pharmacists in the first instance. However, as identified above, many people naturally look to their GP for support with an earwax build-up or the symptoms this can generate.

However, earwax removal is no longer universally offered by GP practices. Our survey findings suggest fewer GPs now offer these services, and those that do may not offer all earwax removal methods. Both factors affect people's experiences of being treated for earwax.

Experiences of accessing earwax removal

How easy did you find it to get an appointment for ear wax removal?



Feedback highlights that the experience of accessing appointments for earwax removal varies greatly.

Of our respondents:

34.8% found it Very Easy/Easy

26.9% found it Difficult/Very Difficult

Barriers we heard include:

- Understanding who offers which earwax removal services and treatment types.
- Challenges getting timely GP appointments.
- GPs not offering earwax treatment/removal.
- Costs of treatment, especially non-NHS services.

Access to earwax removal services

Availability of earwax removal by GP practices

Some respondents were unclear why some GP practices offered earwax removal and others did not, and why some that had previously, no longer did. People were often told their GP practice no longer provides these services, but rarely was this explained (e.g. lack of equipment, training, funding etc.) or detailed signposting information provided.

Healthwatch understands inter-practice referrals should ensure service coverage and patient access to earwax removal, but we received no feedback to indicate this was occurring.

“My GP Surgery does not deal with earwax problems and ask you to get them done privately.”

“GP said I could only have it done privately.”

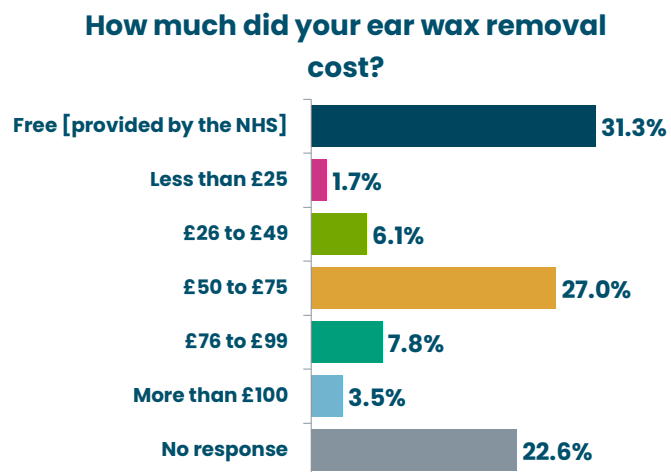
Respondents were often surprised and disappointed to find their GP practice no longer offered earwax removal for free on the NHS, especially if they were signposted to private alternatives which would charge.

“Was shocked I had to pay a large amount of money for wax removal when I have always had it on the NHS at the GP before.”

“My doctors refused to help me saying I was not eligible. I said I was old, and my balance and sleeping was not good . They said again you are not eligible go private. I was upset.”

Costs of treatment for earwax

We heard from 89 people about the costs they incurred for earwax removal. These varied significantly between different providers, ranging from free to more than £100.



44 respondents were treated either by a high street optician or a private health provider.

The most frequent cost for these services was between £50 and £75.

36 respondents indicated they incurred no costs.

They accessed self-help information or advice for free or treated themselves. They were also those treated by GPs or in an NHS hospital for free.

One in five of our respondents had required earwax removal or treatment three or more times in the last two years.

We heard concerns about the impacts of having to pay for earwax removal, especially those who may be disproportionately affected such as hearing aid wearers, those on low income, and/or those who require regular earwax removal.

High street/private services are not evenly distributed and may also incur travel or time costs.

Access to earwax removal services

Where GP practices continue to offer earwax removal, we heard that waits can be long, and this may lead people to use private alternatives instead.

“If I seek an appointment with my GP I'm waiting about 6-12weeks. I have had to pay private for it now and many times before.”

“Although I knew that ear wax removal was free under the NHS, the waiting time offered was too long. I preferred to pay £50+ to have the problem dealt with reasonably quickly by SpecSavers.”

Being able to access earwax treatment via their GP practice was often valued for several reasons, including quality of service, provision of self-help advice, consideration of wider symptoms and concerns, as well as being at no cost.

“We have an excellent service at the Foundry Healthcare in Lewes. They still provide a service for ear wax removal. It is outrageous to have to pay to have it done and probably by someone who is not medically qualified. Many people will not be able to afford it and will then be in a situation where they can't hear very well which is so totally isolating. It also can lead to other health issues.”

“Experienced sudden hearing loss over a weekend. Rang GP on the Monday he arranged a face-to-face appt same day. Diagnosed wax impaction gave prescription for oil and appt for the fri made by GP. Saw nurse on the Friday and ears cleaned out. All wax fell out.”

Access to earwax removal services

In their feedback, respondents identified examples where communication from GP practices to patients about the earwax removal services they offered were not clear and risked generating further confusion.

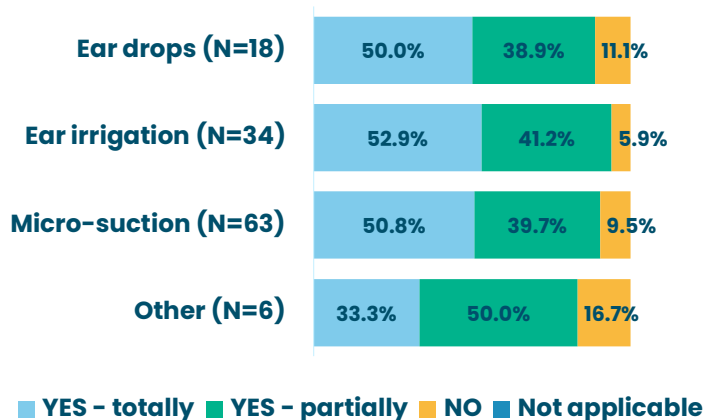
“The receptionist said they no longer provide this service. I tried to book through an opticians and was then told the surgery did do it. I was put on a list by a receptionist but told it would be a long wait. I was then told by a receptionist no one working at the surgery could do it. By chance, whilst having another procedure I was told the staff member treating me was qualified to do it. She said my ears were so bad she would do both then and there. I informed the receptionist who said she would remove my name from the list. I have been contacted twice since then to have my ears done as I have not been removed from the list.”

“Seems like not everyone knows the process when you contact the surgery, and they are busy so delay you. Private providers just want to take money vs assess properly and sort long term solution.”

“Ear wax been an ongoing issue for years. Some advice given depending who you get.”

Experiences of treatment for earwax

Did ear wax removal end your symptoms?



Removal methods

Respondents indicated that all treatments for earwax may end their symptoms, but the method used and its effectiveness may depend on the severity of the blockage. However, initial success may not be total, and people may need to use more than one method.

Removal provider

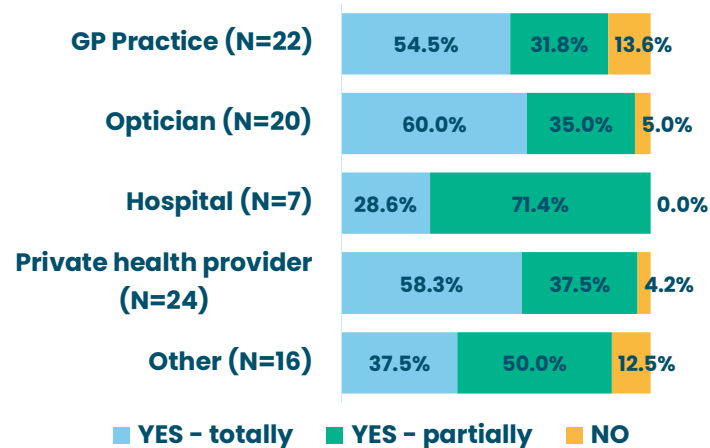
Feedback indicates limited variation in the success rates of earwax removal based on the provider. The exception being hospitals, however, earwax removal in these setting is most likely to apply to those with the most severe or complex cases.

Treatment for earwax

Treatment for a build-up of earwax may include:

- Self-treatment following advice from professionals
- Advice or over-the-counter remedies
- Ear irrigation (treatment to flush the wax out with water)
- Microsuction (sucking the wax out with a specialised machine)

Did ear wax removal end your symptoms?



Experiences of treatment for earwax

We heard that the effectiveness of earwax removal varies. Drivers may include the patient's characteristics and clinical circumstances and the method of earwax removal used.

Self-management

Health professionals may advise people to self-manage their earwax problem based on their symptoms, and for some this generated a successful outcome.

“My doctor prescribed olive oil drops which cleared the wax.”

However, these techniques may not work for everyone, especially those with a frequent or severe build-up, or those who may have difficulties in administering ear drops themselves. This raises questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of these approaches, as well as the steps people should take if the first line of treatment is unsuccessful.

“Used 2 types of drops to sort to no avail”

“I went to a pharmacy they prescribed drops which didn't work. Went to my GP who said I needed micro suction. He said it was NOT free on the NHS. The micro suction was quick and totally painless, and I could hear again. He sucked out one large lump.”

“My wife has been to Boots three times at intervals when oil was applied to soften the wax but, on each occasion, she was told it was too difficult to remove the wax. She now has an appointment with an audiologist who successfully removed all the wax a year ago.”

Experiences of treatment for earwax

GP Services

Where GPs continued to offer earwax removal, we heard they may lack the necessary equipment and trained staff and be forced to refer to audiology or private alternatives.

“My mothers lack of hearing, even with hearing aids - was down to ear wax that the practice nurse couldn't remove. Needed suction. They didn't do it. Ultimately forced to go privately.”

Feedback also highlighted that the need to make multiple appointments is frustrating and a barrier:

“At my GP I would have to have had a doctor appointment first and then wait for another appointment to clear the wax. it all seemed too difficult.”

Hospital/Audiology services

We received very little feedback on people's experiences of earwax treatment in secondary care services. However, the most common theme we heard was around waiting times for appointments.

“We had an awful experience with the NHS. Because my son was 5 years old our GP surgery advised they could not remove the ear wax and referred my son to audiology. The hospital audiology department had a 54 week wait. In the meantime, my son was missing out at school and socially as he could not hear.”

Experiences of treatment for earwax

Private earwax removal services

We heard people's experiences of using private earwax removal services. Whilst effective in many cases, especially for known earwax issues, we did hear concerns from users, including:

Concerns over the objectivity and motivation of providers

"was useful to have wax removed and have hearing test but I felt it was part of a fairly heavy sales pitch to get me to buy very expensive hearing aids; if my hearing declines further I intend to seek an NHS referral."

Limited consideration of wider symptoms

"Private ear wax removal is not cheap but only removes wax doesn't look for an underlying causes as a medical practitioner would."

Wait times

"The doctor doesn't do ear wax removal and I went to spec savers - then referred to a hearing test - so have to wait 20 weeks and a further 20 weeks to be fitted with a hearing aid."

Concerns about the efficiency of not receiving treatment at the first point of contact.

"I went to the GP with earache, who directed me to Specsavers for ear wax removal - it was Specsavers who told me (once they'd removed the wax) that I had an ear infection, so then I had to go back to the drs to get a prescription."

Experiences of treatment for earwax

Ear irrigation and microsuction

We heard a range of experiences expressed about ear irrigation and microsuction as techniques to resolve ear wax build-up.

“I have had problems with ear wax for years. Previously I have had removal from the surgery by irrigation, but they stopped doing it for some time although they now have started doing it again. The last time they did it, it triggered an ear infection and the GP advised to only have the wax removed through micro-suction which the surgery does not undertake.”

“don't really like the water treatment find it painful and unpleasant - had gromits as a child so ear wax has been a constant issue in my life.”

“GP said 3 month wait. Tried a private practice, £75, using suction, which didn't work well.”

“Could not use GP surgery as they do not offer Micro suction for children had to pay privately as my son had impacted wax.”

These comments highlight:

- The importance of patients ear wax issues being appropriately triaged, and the most appropriate solution being used, based on their clinical circumstances.
- The need for patients to be given clear, consistent and robust information on the different techniques for removing ear wax, including any risks, so they can make informed decisions about which to pursue.

6 Conclusions

We have heard how a build-up of earwax affects people's quality of life, including their physical and mental wellbeing. However, people told us that accessing earwax removal in East Sussex isn't always as simple as it might be.

There appears to be a lack of a single, clear and consistent approach to earwax removal across the local health and care system, which makes it challenging for patients, the public and some health professionals to navigate.

A key driver appears to be the significant reduction in GP practices offering earwax removal. Whilst some East Sussex residents benefit from their GP practice providing earwax removal for 'free', others do not, and it is often unclear to patients why this is the case, especially if their practice has previously offered the service but no longer does so.

There appear to be inconsistent explanations given to patients about these changes in provision, and limited public-facing information about how and where to access alternative earwax management and treatment services that are safe and cost-effective.


Clearer guidance could be offered to patients and the public on earwax management and treatment options (for example the pros and cons of microsuction vs ear irrigation), eligibility for NHS treatment, and why provision is changing.

Healthwatch has concerns about the impact a reduction in free earwax removal may have on health inequalities, and would like to see more support for those on low incomes, requiring frequent treatment or in locations which have limited access to such services.



Recommendations:

NHS Sussex

1. NHS Sussex should regularly audit the provision of earwax removal services in East Sussex, to determine if the distribution of removal services and the methods available (ear irrigation, microsuction or manual removal) is effective and equitable for patients.
 2. NHS Sussex should produce clear guidance for the public and patients on the self-management of earwax build-up for all GP practices and NHS services to use, so consistent and safe messaging is provided.
 3. NHS Sussex should clearly communicate how and why services (such as earwax removal) vary between GP practices and collaborate with them to ensure this messaging is consistently provided to patients.
 4. NHS Sussex should engage with GP practices to assess the usage and effectiveness of inter-practice referrals for earwax removal in supporting service coverage and patient access.
 5. NHS Sussex should ensure that NICE guidelines (Quality Standard 185) regarding earwax removal remain integral to commissioning criteria.
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Recommendations:

NHS Sussex

6. NHS Sussex should develop communications to support patients to identify safe and effective earwax removal services. This may include clarifying methods of removal and what to look for when seeking private providers around safety, competency and clinical expertise.
7. NHS Sussex should consider ways to reduce health inequalities for people who may have difficulty accessing NHS and/or private earwax treatment. Equality Health Impact Assessments should be used to review any proposed changes to earwax removal provision.

Primary Care Networks and GP Practices

8. GP practices should provide clear, consistent and unambiguous communications to patients on earwax management and treatment options provided by themselves, and any providers they signpost to.
 9. GP practices should inform all patients where changes are made to the services they deliver and engage with their patient participation group to ensure these are clearly and appropriately communicated.
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Recommendations:

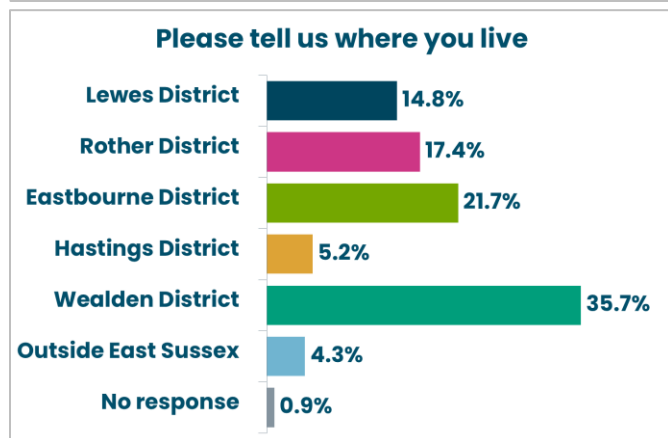
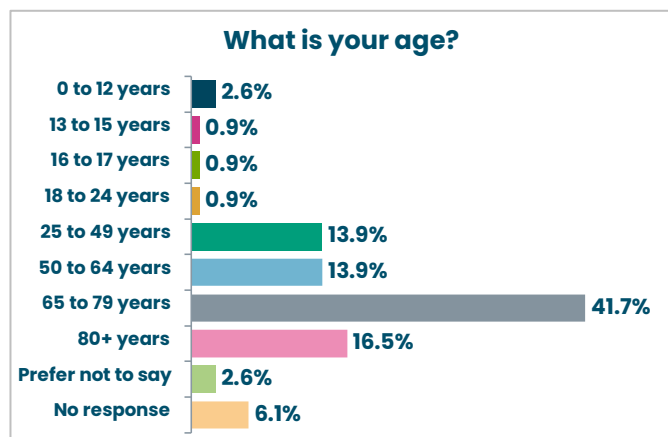
Healthwatch East Sussex

10. Healthwatch should continue to share feedback and experiences of earwax removal (and other audiology) services with NHS Sussex and GP practices to support service development.
11. Healthwatch should continue to monitor feedback on the provision of earwax removal (and other audiology) services to support understanding on their effectiveness, equity and accessibility.
12. Local Healthwatch will share insight and reports on earwax removal/audiology services with Healthwatch England to support national intelligence on this theme.



Who did we hear from?

An equalities breakdown of our 115 respondents is provided below:



- **6.4%** respondents were aged under 18, **28.7%** were between 18 and 64 with **58.2%** over 65. **6.1%** *did not respond*.
- **61.06%** of respondents identified as a woman and **35.40%** as a man.
- **84.96%** identified as White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh, with **5.31%** preferring 'not to say'.
- **36.00%** of respondents lived in Wealden, **21.9%** Eastbourne.
- **66.4%** had a long-term condition.
- **23.1%** were carers.
- **18.4%** were completing the survey on behalf of someone else.

For more information

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