Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

PHSO survey: complaining about the NHS during the coronavirus pandemic

Since publishing this report, we have changed our name to the **Public Service Ombudsman**.

Our role and the service we provide remain the same.

Public Service Ombudsman

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic had an unparalleled impact on NHS services and on the people who use them. In August 2022, PHSO carried out research to better understand what impact the pandemic had on public attitudes towards complaining about the NHS.

We also asked respondents about:

- their attitudes to complaining about the NHS currently and during the pandemic
- how satisfied they were with the NHS organisations they used or had contact with during the pandemic.

Yonder Research conducted the survey on our behalf. It conducted an online poll of 2,087 adults in the UK or Great Britain (aged 18+) between 8 and 9 August 2022.

We found that:

Just under half

47%

of respondents would complain if they received poor service from an NHS organisation

Just under a third

30%

of respondents would have complained if they received poor service from an NHS organisation during the coronavirus pandemic

Just under three-quarters

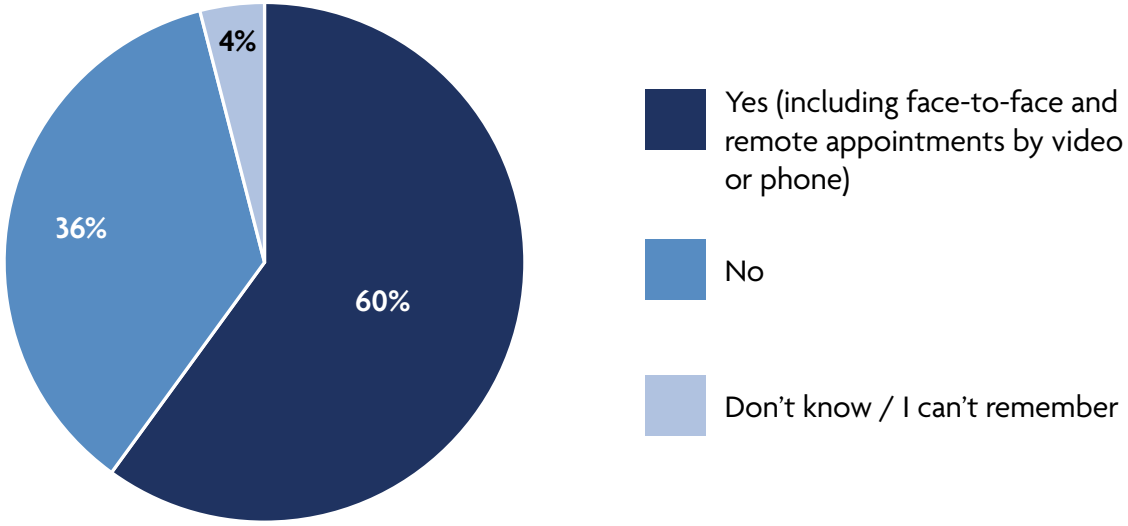
74%

of respondents who used NHS services during the pandemic agreed they were happy with the service they received

Attitudes towards complaining

We asked respondents whether they had any face-to-face or remote appointments by video or phone during the pandemic. Just over half (60%) said they had some form of contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic, while just over a third (36%) had no contact.

Figure 1: Contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic (all respondents)



Did you use or have contact with any NHS organisations during the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022)? (Weighted base = 2,087.)

Respondents said they were less likely to complain if they experienced poor service from NHS organisations during the pandemic. Just under a third (30%) agreed they would have made a complaint if they experienced poor service from an NHS organisation during the pandemic, while over a third (35%) disagreed.

Just under half (47%) agreed they would complain currently if they experienced poor service from an NHS organisation, while a fifth (20%) disagreed.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards complaining about poor NHS service (all respondents)

During the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022), I would have complained if I experienced poor service from an NHS organisation

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
9%	21%	25%	24%	11%	9%

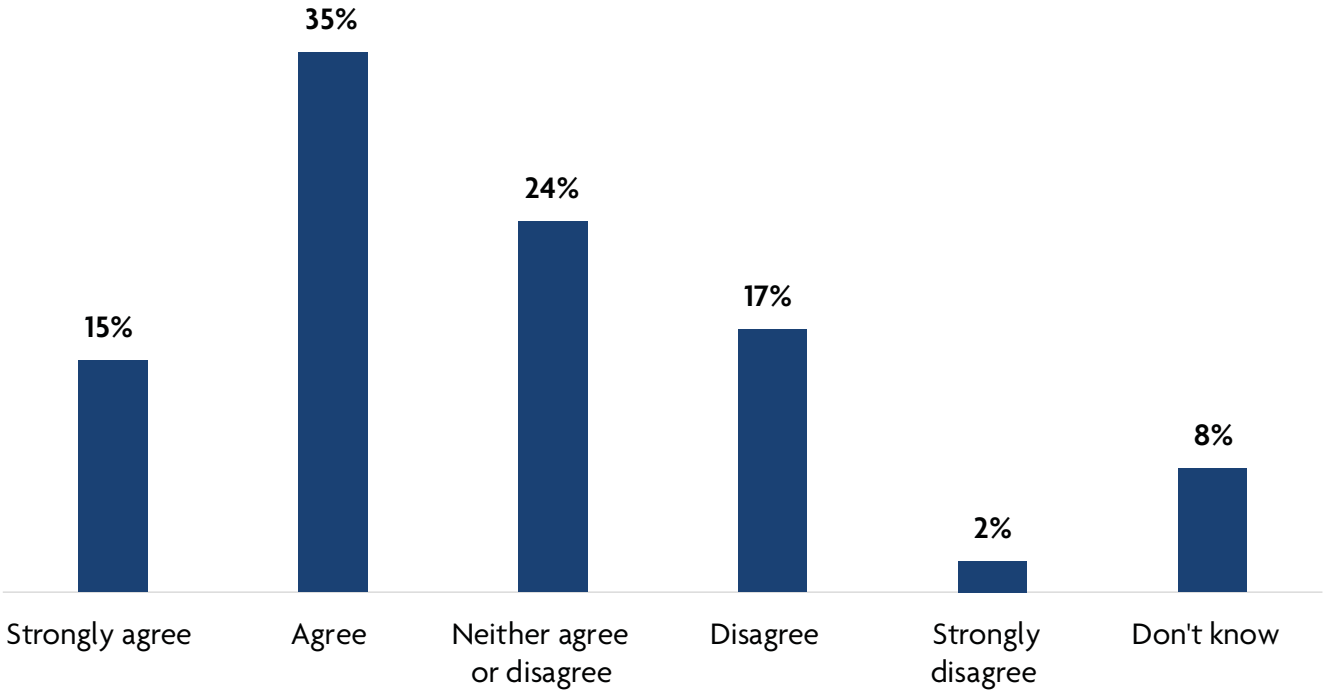
Currently, I would make a complaint if I experienced poor service from an NHS organisation

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
13%	34%	24%	15%	5%	9%

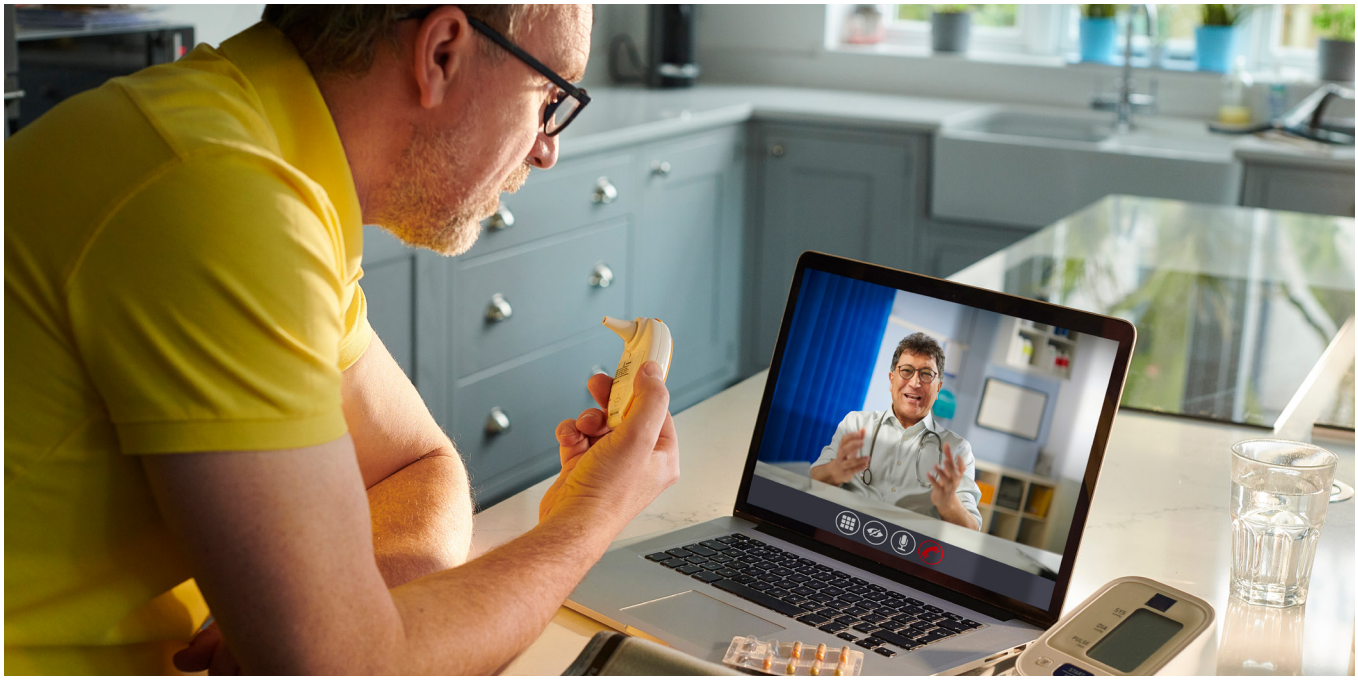
Attitudes towards complaining during the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022) and currently (August 2022) (weighted base = 2,087).

We asked respondents who had remote appointments by video or phone during the pandemic if they would complain if they received poor service during an NHS remote appointment. Half (50%) agreed that they would complain, while just under a fifth (19%) disagreed.

Figure 3: Attitudes towards complaining about remote appointments during the pandemic



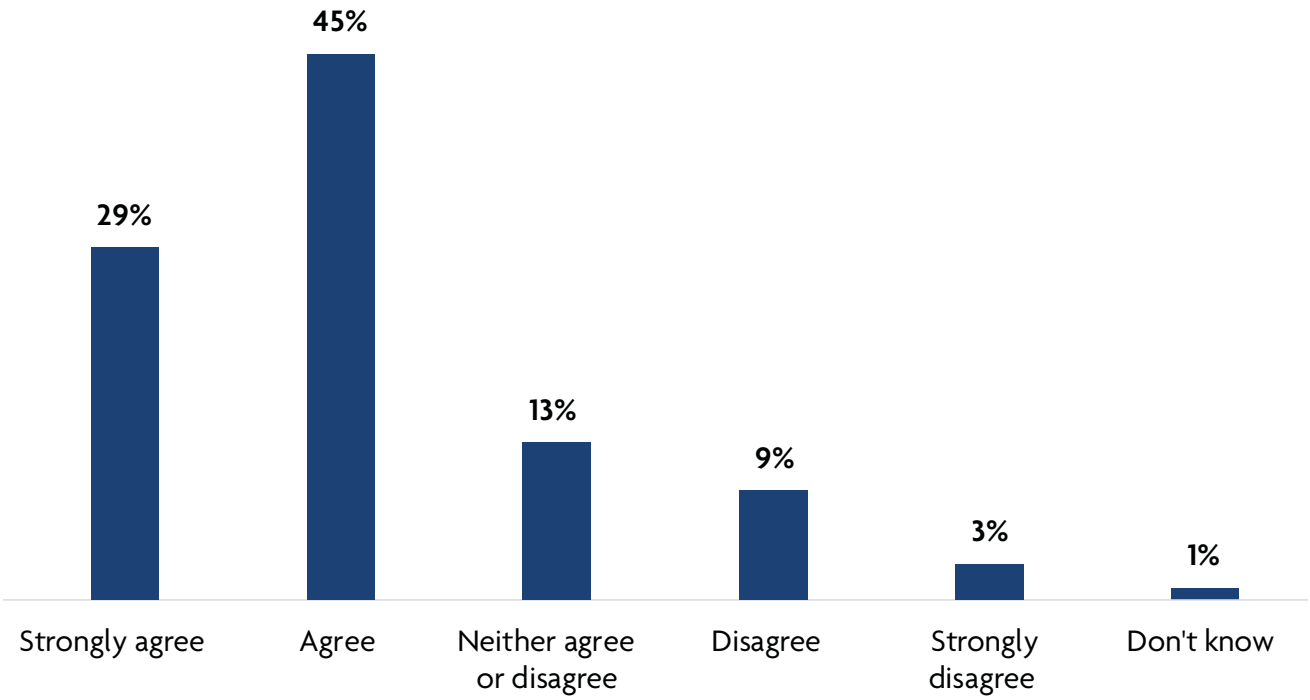
I would make a complaint if I experienced poor service during an NHS remote appointment (weighted base = 822).



Satisfaction with NHS services during the coronavirus pandemic

We asked members of the public who said they had used or had contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic about their satisfaction levels. Just under three-quarters (74%) agreed they were happy with the service they received during the pandemic, while 12% disagreed.

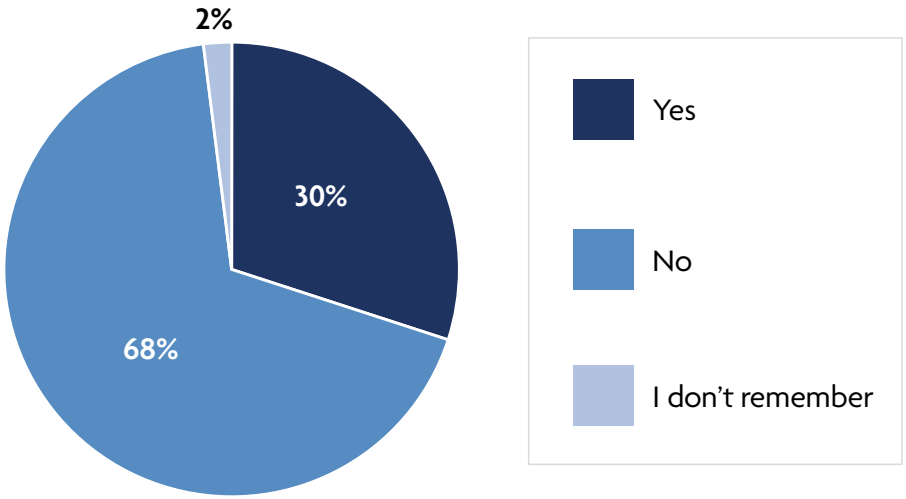
Figure 4: Satisfaction with NHS service received during the pandemic



I was happy with the service I received from the NHS organisation(s) I used / had contact with during the coronavirus pandemic (weighted base = 1,258).

Over two-thirds (68%) who said they were unhappy with the service they received from NHS organisations during the pandemic did not make a complaint.

Figure 5: Understanding whether people who were unhappy with the service made a complaint



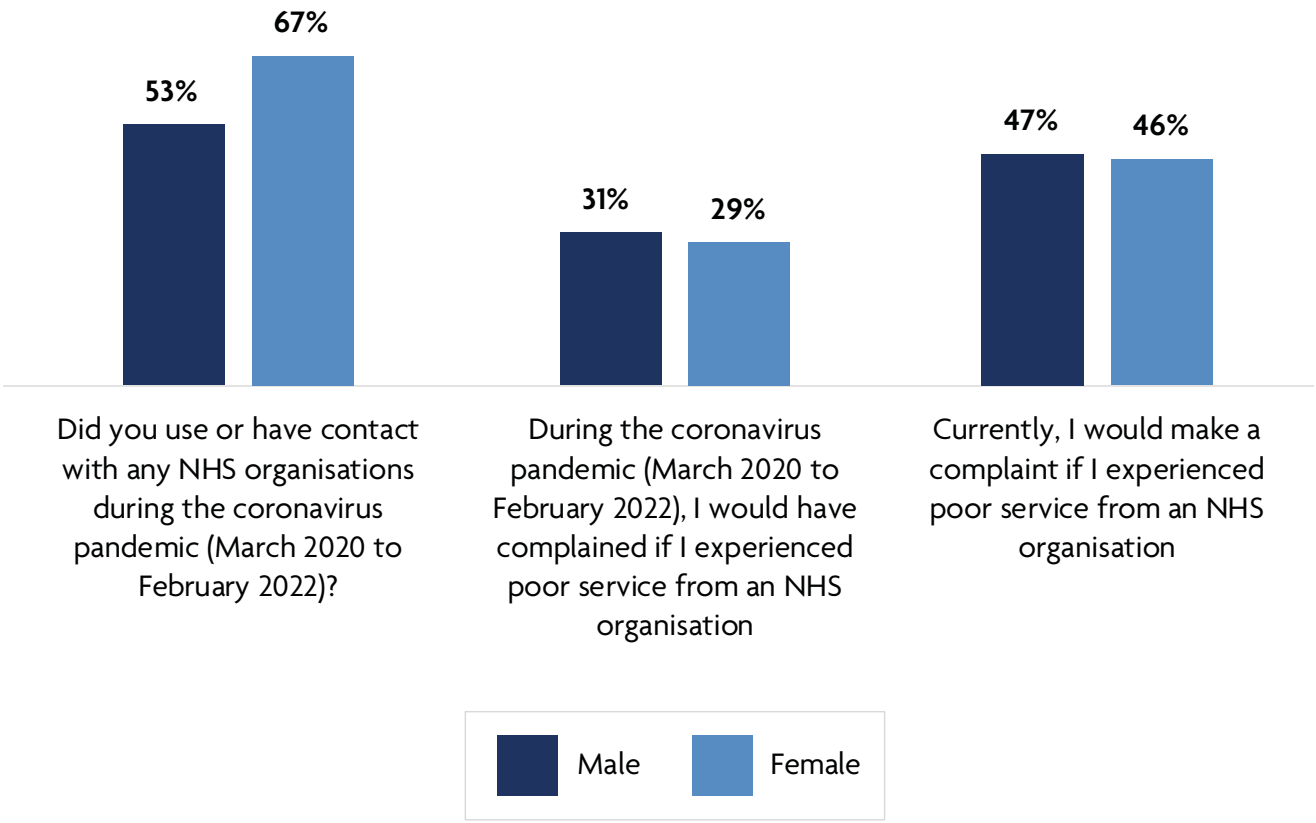
You said that you Disagree / Strongly disagree that you were happy with the NHS service you received, did you make a complaint about this? (Weighted base = 151.)

Understanding who is more or less likely to complain

Our analysis found that several demographic groups who were more likely to use or have contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic were less likely to complain during the pandemic or currently.

Female respondents were more likely to have used or had contact with the NHS during the pandemic compared to male respondents. They were also slightly less likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic, and to agree they would complain currently.

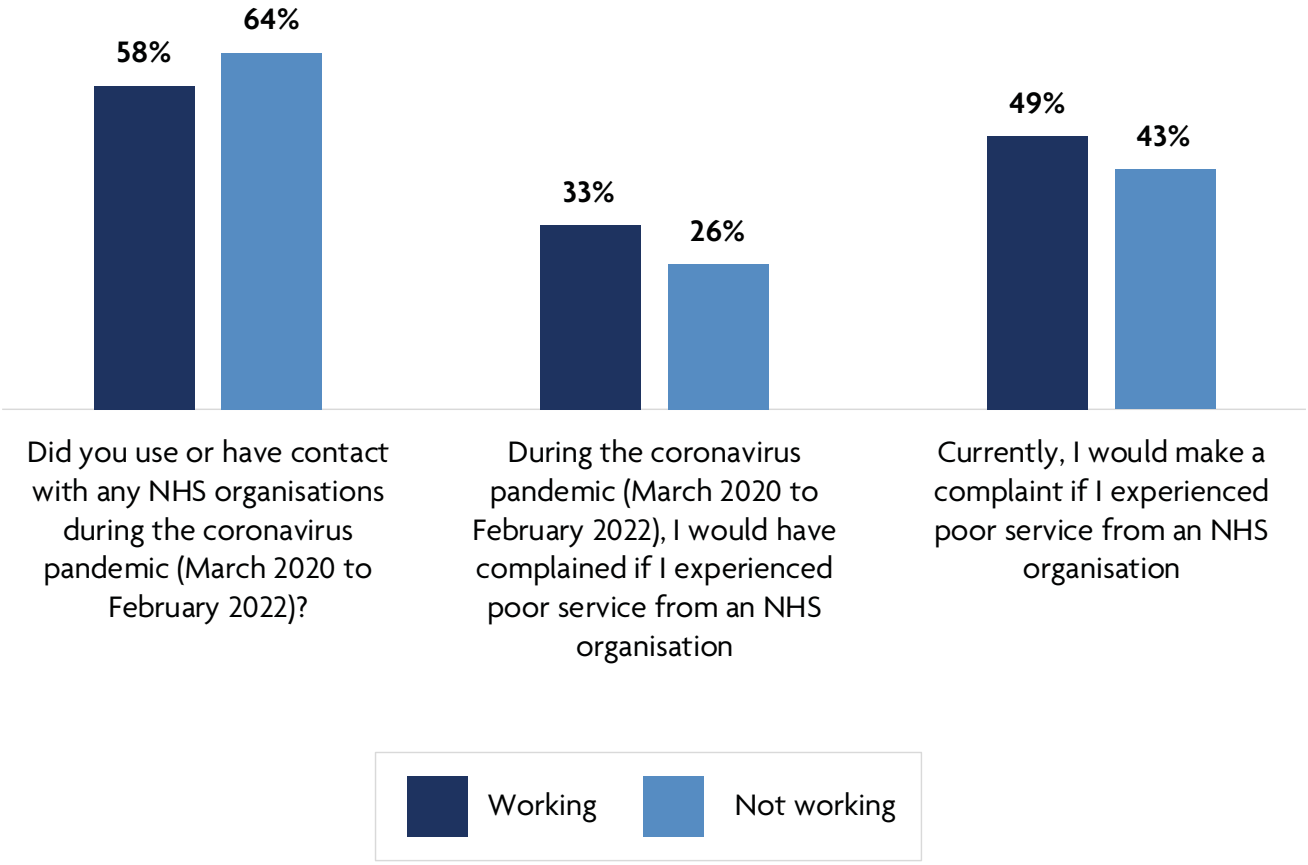
Figure 6: Contact with the NHS and attitudes towards complaining by gender



Respondents who selected Yes or Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. Note: results for respondents who did not identify as 'Male' or 'Female' are not included due to the low number of respondents (11).

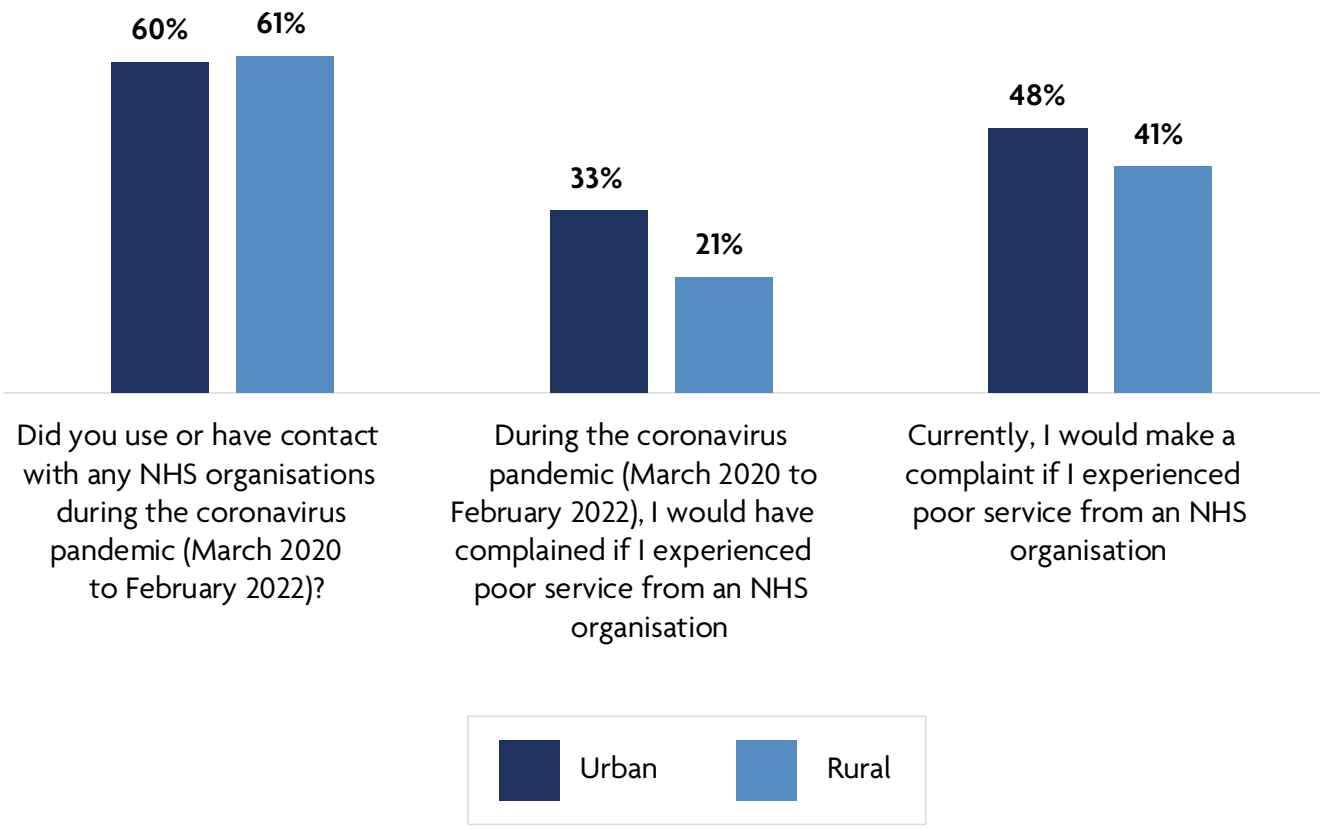
'Non-working' and 'rural' respondents were more likely to have used or had contact with the NHS during the pandemic, and less likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic or currently.

Figure 7: Contact with the NHS and attitudes towards complaining by employment status



Which of the following best describes your current working status? (Respondents who selected Yes or Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. 'Working' respondents includes respondents who stated they were working full or part-time. 'Non-working' respondents includes respondents who said they were not working and seeking or not seeking work, retired with state or private pensions, and house persons.)

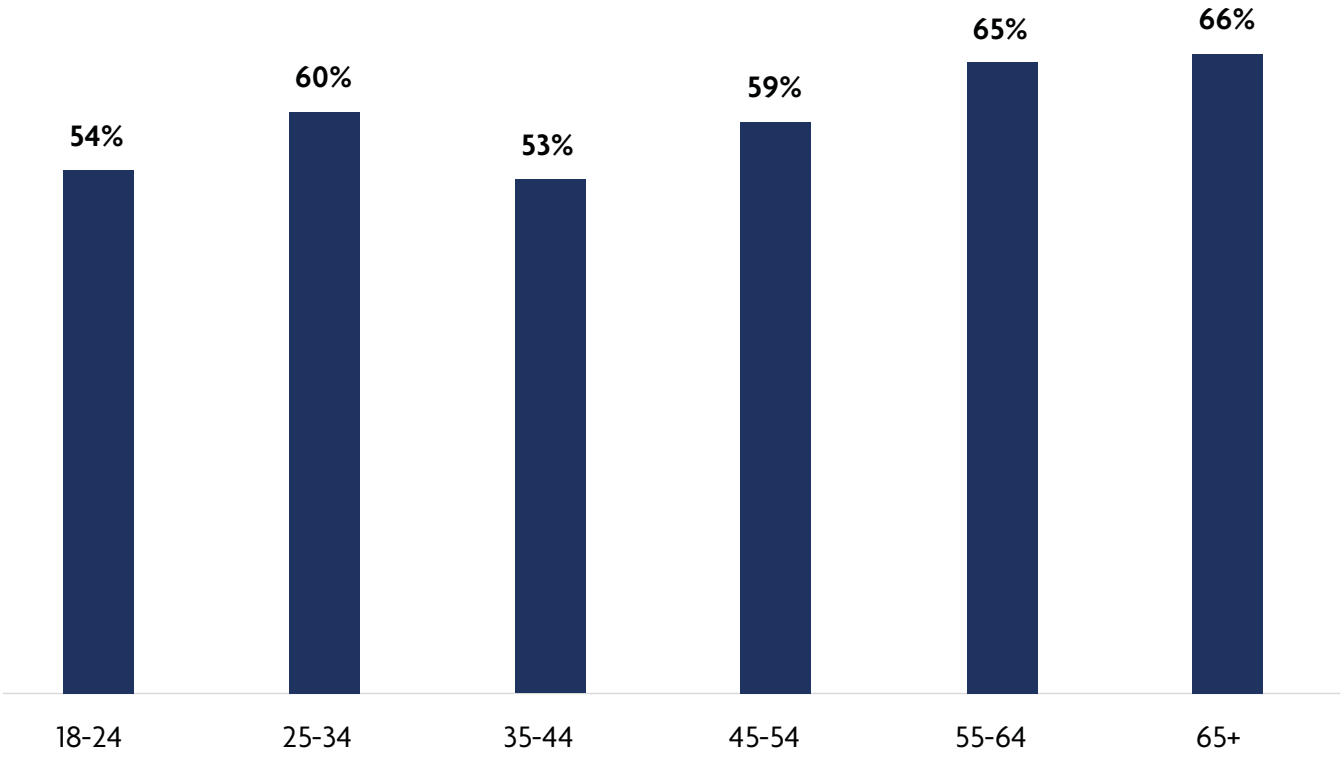
Figure 8: Contact with the NHS and attitudes towards complaining by urban or rural area



Which of the following best describes where you live? (Respondents who selected Yes or Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. 'Urban' respondents includes those living in areas with populations over 10,000 and in town and fringe areas. 'Rural' respondents includes those living in villages, or a hamlet and isolated dwelling.)

Respondents aged 55 to 64 and 65+ were most likely to use or have contact with the NHS during the pandemic compared to other age groups.

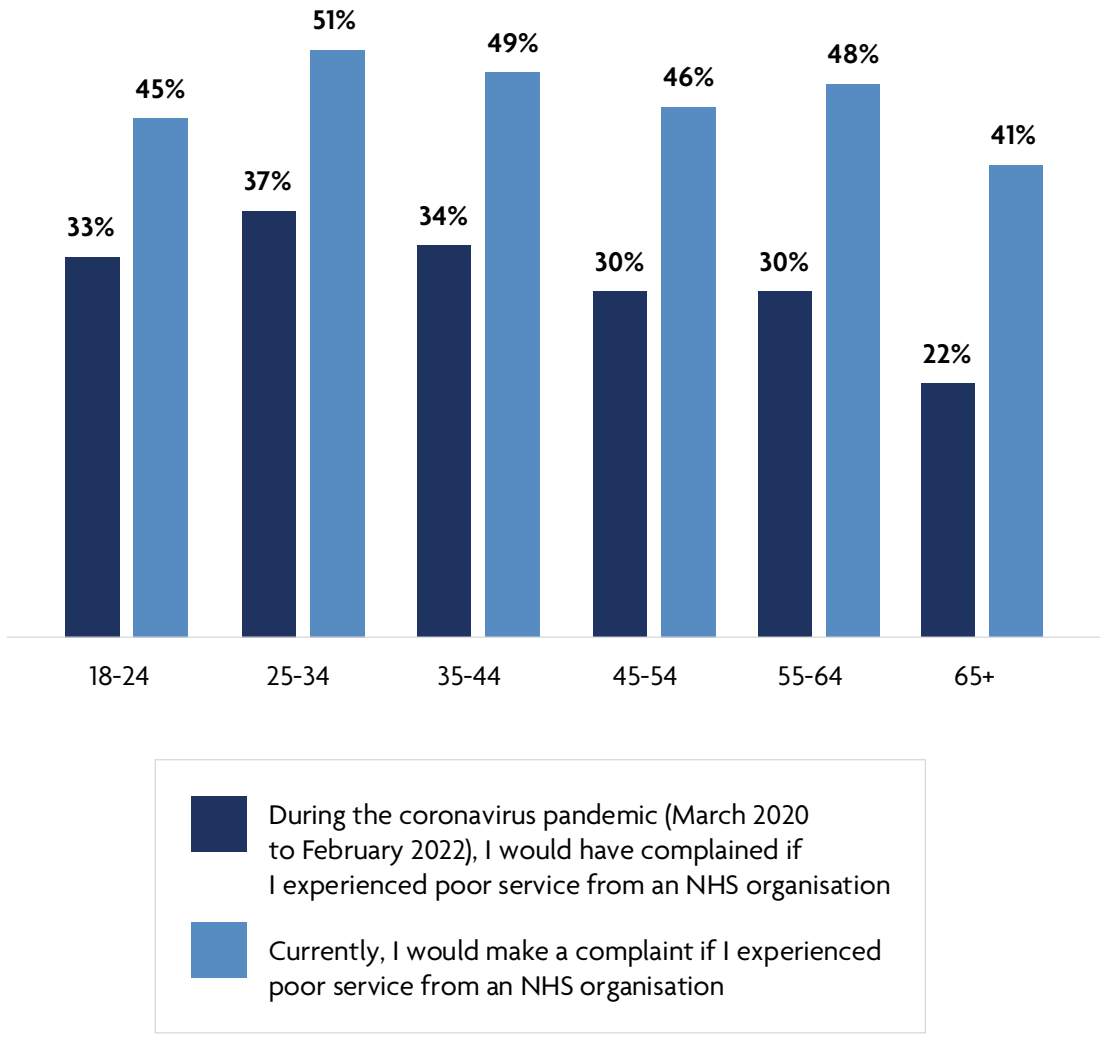
Figure 9: Contact with the NHS by age



Did you use or have contact with any NHS organisations during the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022)? (Respondents who selected Yes. Weighted base = 2,087.)

Those in the 65+ age group were least likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic compared to other age groups, and least likely to agree they would complain currently.

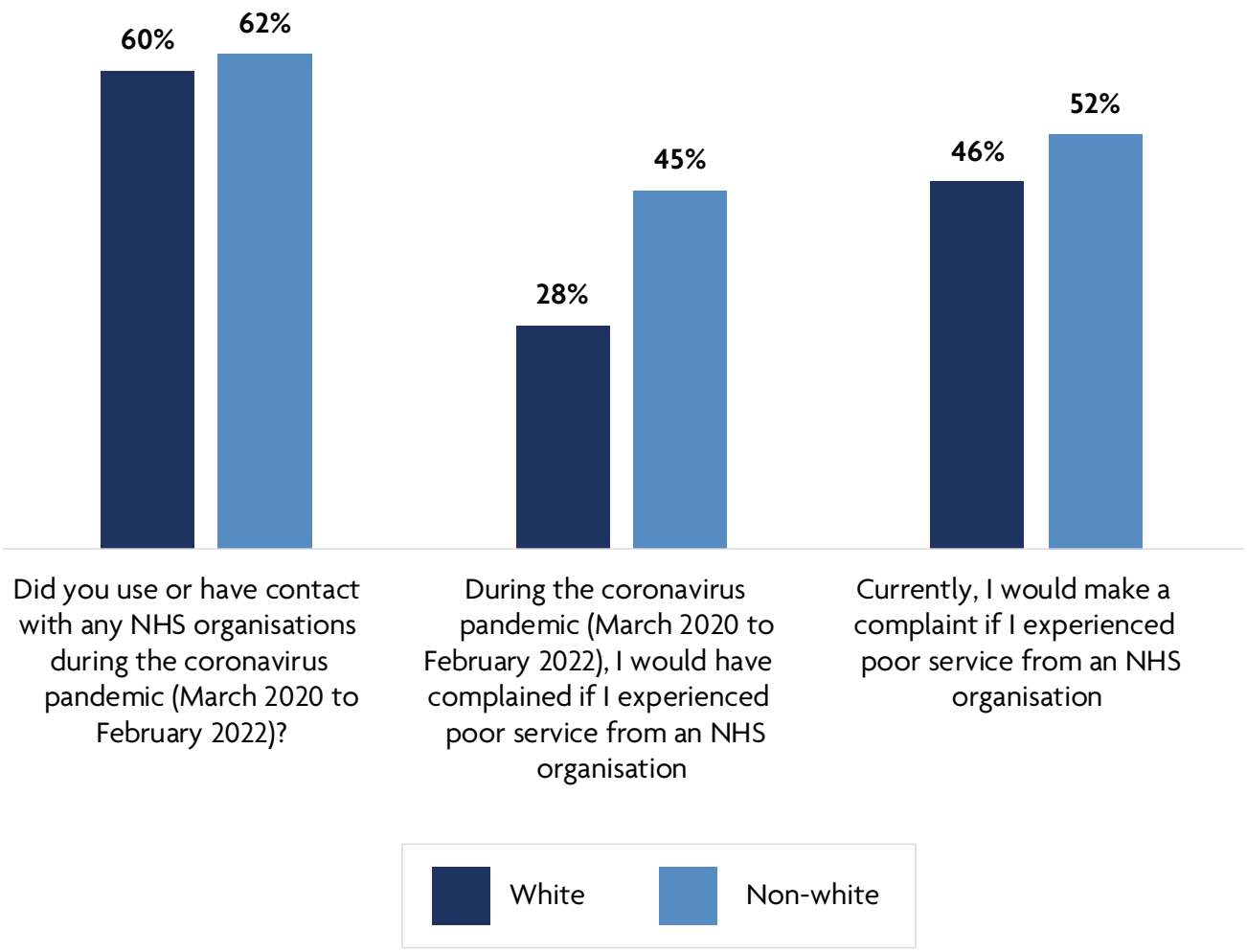
Figure 10: Attitudes towards complaining by age



Respondents who selected Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087.

Non-white respondents were more likely to have used or had contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic compared to white respondents. They were also more likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic, and to agree they would complain currently.

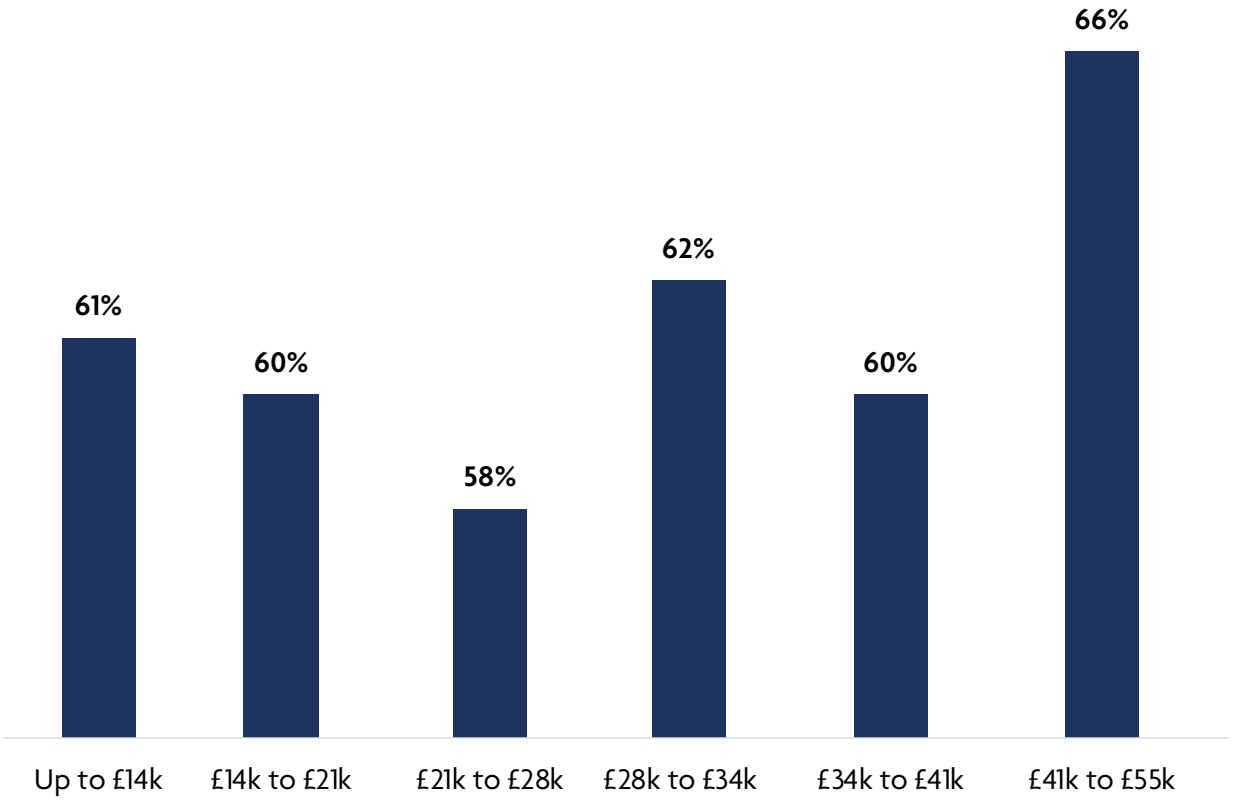
Figure 11: Contact with the NHS and attitudes towards complaining by ethnicity



To which of the following ethnic groups do you consider you belong? (Respondents who selected Yes or Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. 'Non-white' respondents include Mixed, Asian, Black, Chinese, and Other respondents. Due to low base sizes, we grouped these respondents together for comparative analysis.)

Wealthier respondents (with a combined annual income before tax of £41k to 55k) were more likely to use the NHS compared to respondents with lower annual incomes. They were also more likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic and to agree they would complain currently.

Figure 12: Contact with the NHS by combined annual pre-tax income



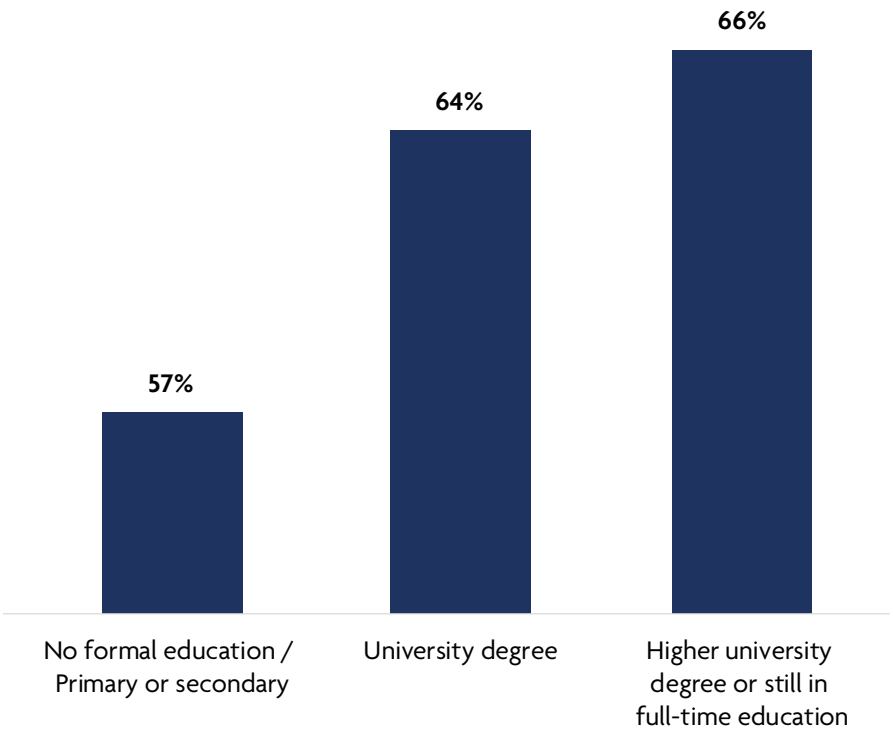
Did you use or have contact with any NHS organisations during the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022)? (Respondents who selected Yes. Weighted base = 2,087. Due to low base sizes, we combined some respondent groups for comparative analysis.)

Figure 13: Attitudes towards complaining by combined annual pre-tax income

Respondents who selected Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. Due to low base sizes, we combined some respondent groups for comparative analysis.

Respondents with a university degree or higher were more likely to use the NHS during the pandemic than those with no formal education or educated to primary or secondary level.

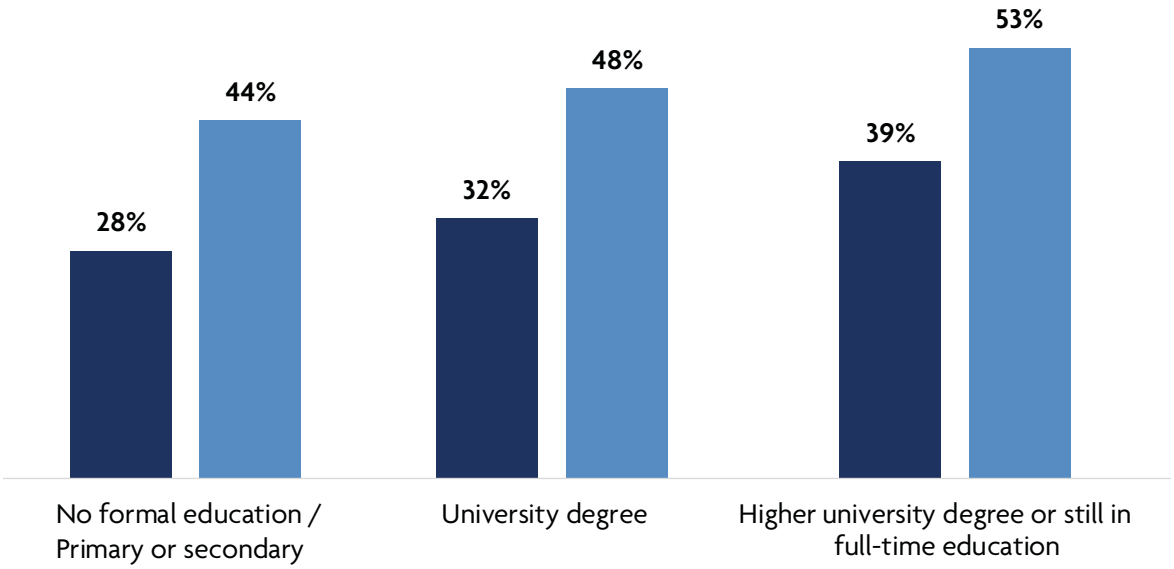
Figure 14: Contact with the NHS by level of education



What is the highest educational level that you have achieved to date? Did you use or have contact with any NHS organisations during the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022)? (Respondents who selected Yes. Weighted base = 2,087. Due to low base sizes, we combined some respondent groups for comparative analysis.)

Respondents with a university degree or higher were more likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic, and complain currently, than those with no formal education or educated to primary or secondary level.

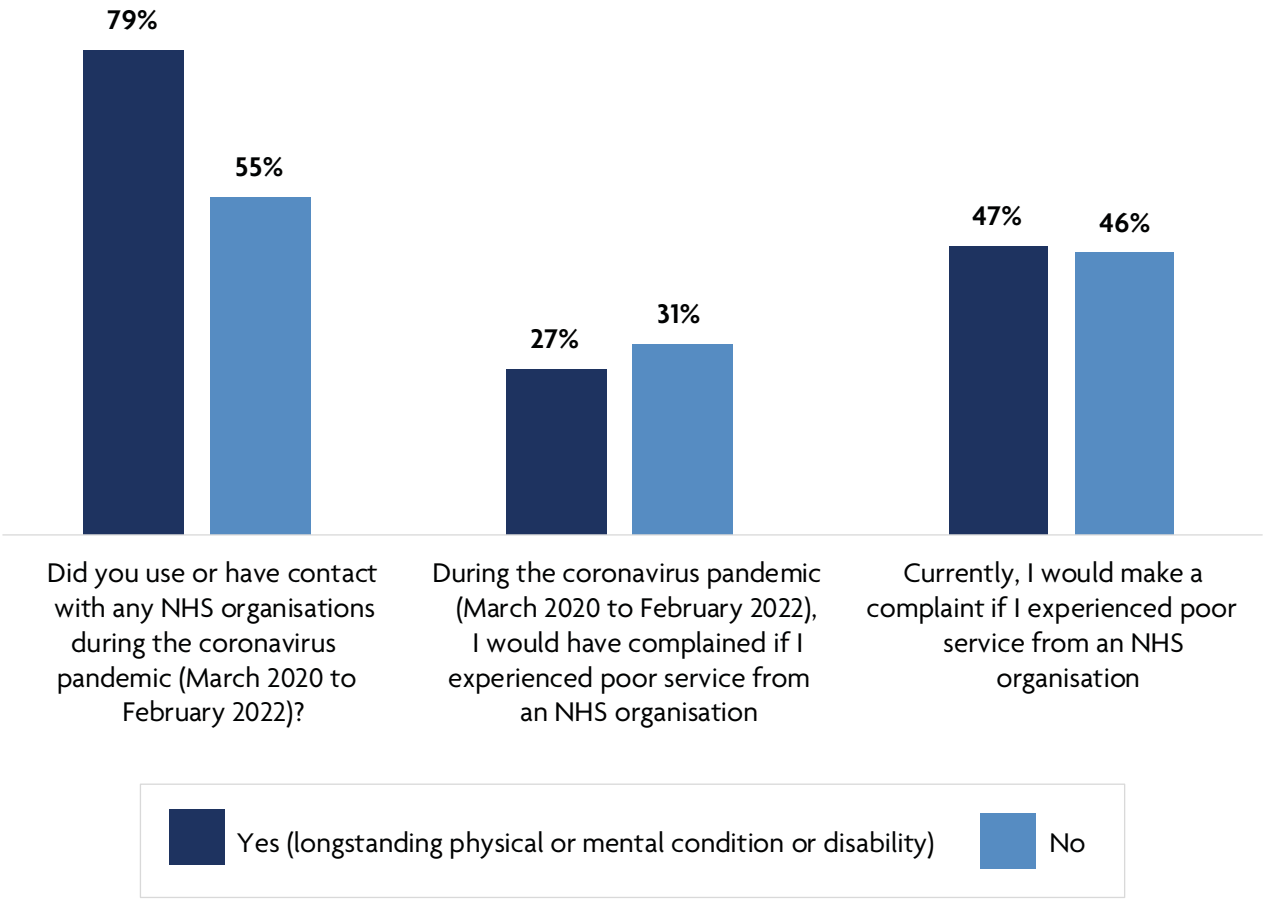
Figure 15: Attitudes towards complaining by level of education



What is the highest educational level that you have achieved to date? (Respondents who selected Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. Due to low base sizes, we combined some respondent groups for comparative analysis.)

Respondents with a longstanding physical or mental condition or disability were more likely to have used or had contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic. They were less likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic compared to respondents with no longstanding physical or mental condition or disability, but they were slightly more likely to agree they would complain currently.

Figure 16: Contact with the NHS and attitudes towards complaining among people with a longstanding health condition or disability



Do you have a longstanding physical or mental condition or disability? (Respondents who selected Yes or Strongly agree / Agree. Weighted base = 2,087.)

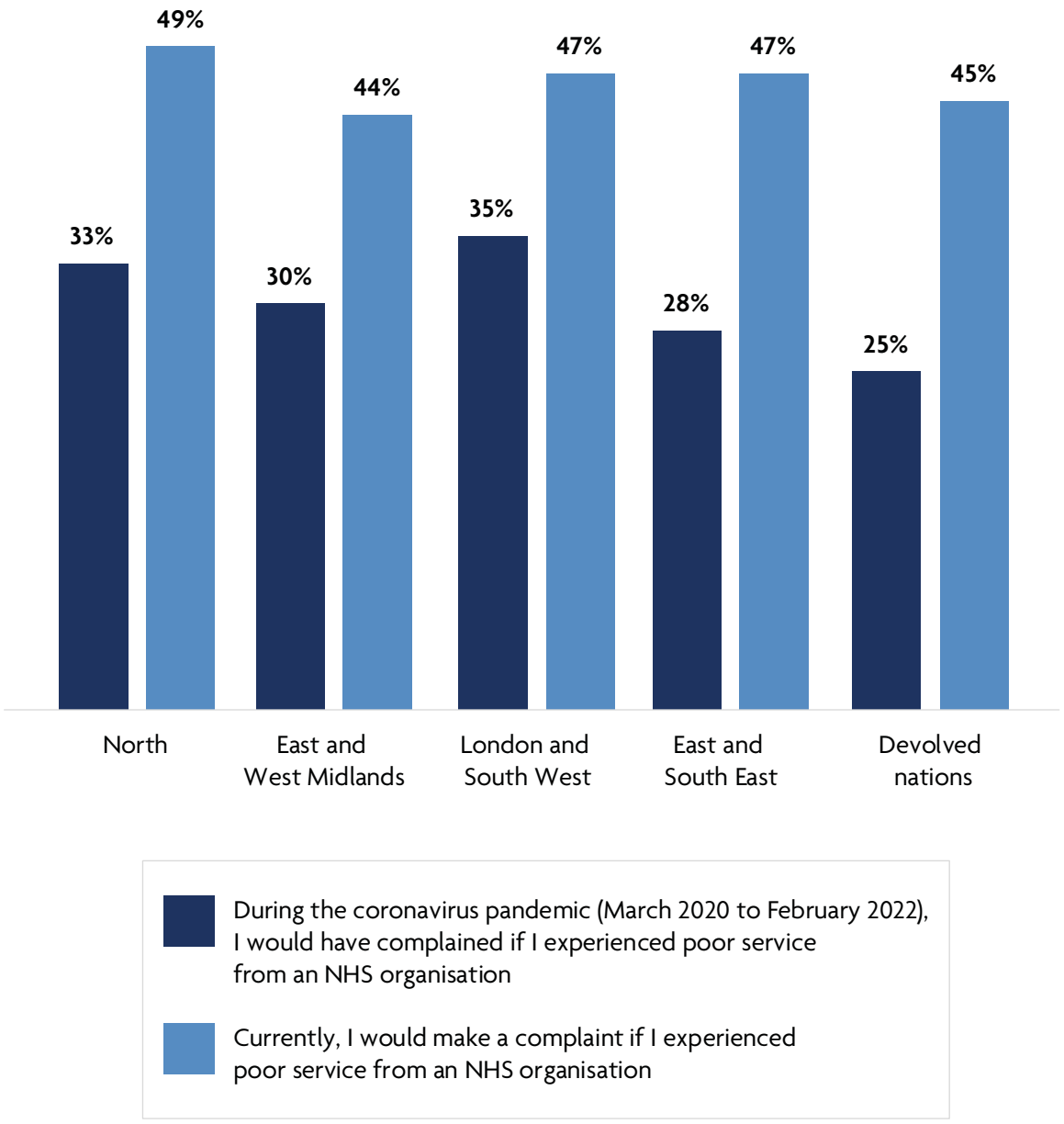
Respondents based in the East and West Midlands and London and the South West were most likely to have used or had contact with NHS organisations during the pandemic.

Figure 17: Contact with the NHS by region

Did you use or have contact with any NHS organisations during the coronavirus pandemic (March 2020 to February 2022)? (Respondents who selected Yes. Weighted base = 2,087. Due to low base sizes, we combined some respondent groups for comparative analysis.)

Respondents based in London and the South West were most likely to agree they would have complained during the pandemic. Respondents based in the North of England were most likely to agree they would complain currently compared to other regions.

Figure 18: Attitudes towards complaining by region



Respondents who selected Strongly agree or Agree. Weighted base = 2,087. Due to low base sizes, we combined some respondent groups for comparative analysis.

Learning from this research

The NHS was under enormous pressure and strain during the pandemic and the public rightly supported their hard work. The hesitancy to complain during the pandemic is no doubt connected to the public's understanding of, and respect for, the NHS at a very difficult time.

However, it is vital that lessons are learned about how to improve our health services both in normal and extraordinary circumstances, especially as another pandemic or national emergency is inevitable at some stage.

We hope the insight from this survey will help all public bodies, not just those in health, make sure they are doing all they can to make it easy for everyone to complain and to welcome those complaints as a way to improve their services. New Complaint Standards for the NHS set out how organisations can do this and provide quicker, simpler and fairer complaint handling.

How we did the research

Yonder Research (formerly known as Populus) carried out the research for us. It is a founder member of the British Polling Council and follows its rules.

The survey defined the period of the coronavirus pandemic as March 2020 to February 2022 (when domestic legal restrictions ended and the Government confirmed COVID-19 would be treated the same as other infectious diseases, such as flu). It defined NHS organisations as including:

- NHS GP practices and dentists
- NHS trusts
- NHS ambulance services
- NHS mental health trusts.

The 'base' is the number of people asked a specific question. Yonder Research adjusted this ('weighted' it) to make sure the sample we used represented the population of Great Britain as closely as possible – this is the 'weighted base'.

Yonder Research took its targets for quotas (the number of responses needed from different groups of people, such as males and females) and weights (values used to adjust the sample to represent the population) from the Publishers Audience Measurement Company (PAMCo) survey. This is a face-to-face survey where participants are members of the UK population selected at random. It is conducted every year with 35,000 adults.

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