

The Lowdown.

UK Government's
Women's Health Strategy:
Call for Evidence

2021

A message from our Founder



Collecting, understanding and sharing women's voices is at the heart of everything we do at The Lowdown



This call for evidence is all about ensuring women's voices are being heard. Collecting, understanding and sharing women's voices is at the heart of everything we do at The Lowdown.

The Lowdown is the world's first review platform for contraception. I built it because women desperately lack data, expert advice and a supportive community to help them navigate their contraception. Since launching in 2019, The Lowdown has been visited by almost 1 million people - and collected over 4,500 reviews on every method and brand of contraception in the UK.

This organic traction and growth of our telemedicine and prescription service speaks to two things. Firstly, the massive unmet demand there currently is for specialist care in this area in the UK. Secondly, how much women need to talk to each other and share their personal experiences when it comes to their contraception.

Some healthcare professionals may be concerned that our review platform puts women off contraception. In fact, all of our insights and these survey results show it does the opposite; it empowers women, enables them to feel in control of their healthcare decisions, and gives them a better understanding of the benefits and options for managing associated problems with contraception.

Let's not dig our heads in the sand here. The contraceptive methods we have available to us simply are not good enough. And as this report shows us, women are crying out for honesty. We need to do away with a paternalistic healthcare system that is nervous about having a nuanced conversation around this topic, and bring contraception and sexual health into the digital and social age.

We look forward to working closely with the UK Government to be at the forefront of shaping a much needed transformation in contraception and sexual health in this country.

- Alice Pelton, Founder & CEO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the UK Government's Call for Evidence, The Lowdown conducted a survey amongst its users and followers, collecting a total of 2,086 responses. The Lowdown promoted the survey through their Instagram handle @get.the.lowdown from the 18th April until 4th June 2021. This post, and the survey link, were shared widely by social media influencers to people that may not have heard of The Lowdown.

The survey focused on the subject of sexual health and contraception. The goal of the survey was to provide insights into three broad themes; information related to contraception, advice on contraception; and access to contraceptives themselves.

1.1 KEY FINDINGS



Women don't feel listened to by healthcare professionals

When it comes to contraception, hundreds of women told us their side effects are not taken seriously, and that they are frequently told to 'get on with things'. There was a clear message that respondents felt they weren't being listened to by healthcare professionals. 87% reported instances where this was the case, and of this, 72% of the instances were in relation to a reproductive or sexual health condition or treatment.



Half of women have had problems accessing contraception

53% of respondents state that they have experienced problems accessing contraception, despite local authorities being required to offer a broad range of contraception and advice on preventing unplanned pregnancy (Dep of Health, 2013).



The majority of women are willing to pay for contraception in order to receive better service

Although contraception is provided free on the NHS, the lack of suitable access means women feel they have to pay out of their own pockets. Respondents were open to the prospect of accessing contraception privately, with 32% having paid for contraception in the past and 73% saying that they would, or maybe would, pay for contraception if it meant that they would receive a better service.



95% of women are comfortable talking to their friends about contraception

The vast majority of women like to talk to their friends about this topic - but only 70% feel comfortable talking about contraception with a healthcare professional.

2.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As the UK Government correctly points out in their Call to Evidence document, more can (and should) be done in terms of listening to women's voices.

The Lowdown's research has highlighted problems in accessing contraception, as well as instances of women feeling as though they aren't being listened to by healthcare professionals. This, combined with the high proportion of respondents who stated that they would consider paying to access reproductive healthcare privately, leads us to the following policy recommendations:

01

Actively publicise information about contraception and promote the use of websites like such at The Lowdown to connect women and empower them through shared experiences.

02

Invest in and stop making cuts to sexual and reproductive health services so that women can get access to the specialists, care and attention they need.

03

Fund research and raise awareness into the side effects associated with contraception to equip women and healthcare professionals with more robust clinical evidence and resources on these issues.

04

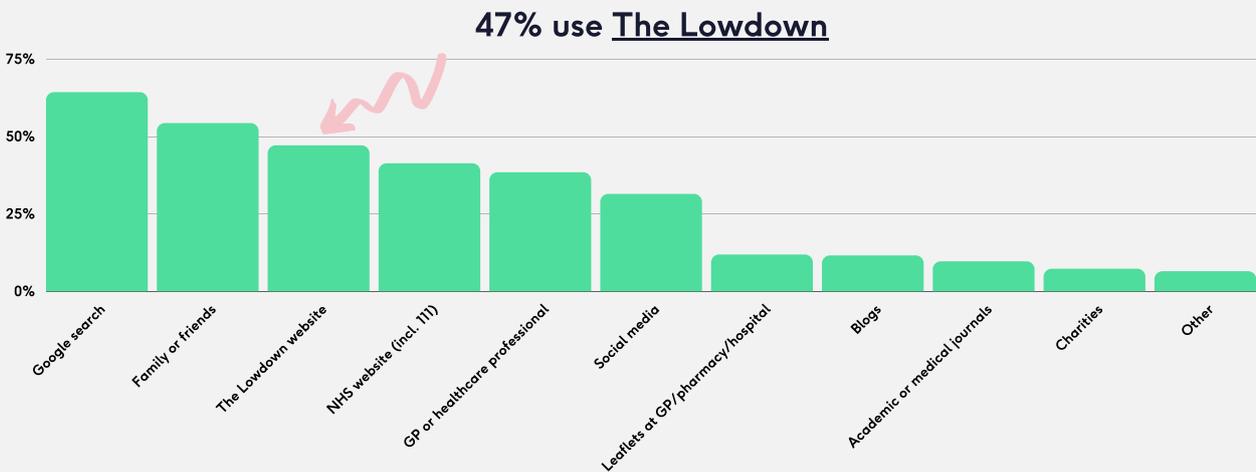
Support and fund the development of better tolerated contraceptives and a wider range of non-hormonal contraceptive methods for men.

3.0 Findings on information provision

In Figure 3.1, we can see which of the listed sources respondents most often used to find information and advice on contraception. 64% use Google search, followed by 54% who consult friends or family, followed by 47% who use The Lowdown website. We can also see from Figure 3.2 that some women feel uncomfortable speaking to doctors or other healthcare professionals about contraception, with 31% saying that they were either uncomfortable or unsure. Figure 3.4 highlights a number of comments that our respondents would like to see change about contraceptive healthcare.

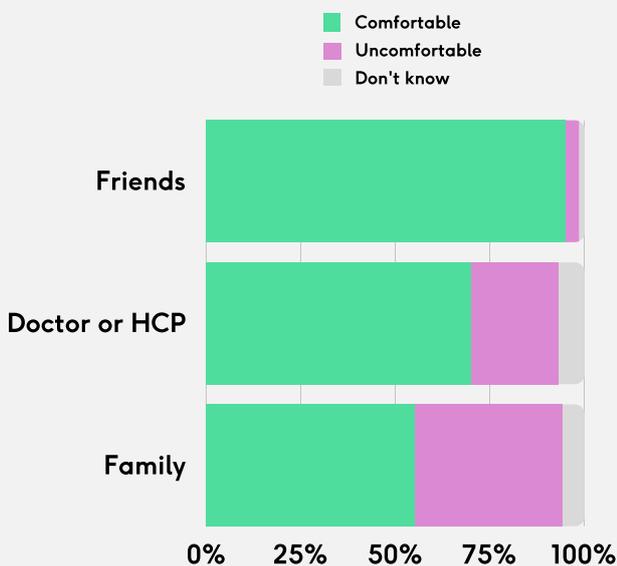
Which of these sources do you use the most for information and advice on contraception?

Figure 3.1



How comfortable do you feel discussing contraception with the following?

Figure 3.2



What do women say about information available at The Lowdown?

Figure 3.3

“There are so many conflicting views and myths out there, The Lowdown website has massively helped this and should be more widely known about”

“The Lowdown has TOTALLY changed my opinions on/understanding of different types of contraception”

“If it wasn’t for the lowdown I wouldn’t know half of what I know about contraception!”

If you could change one thing about contraception healthcare what would it be?

Figure 3.4

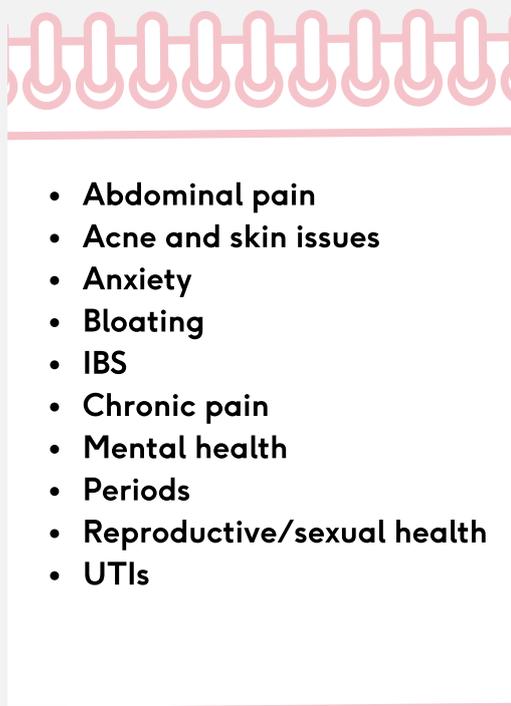


4.0 Findings on advice on contraception

87% of survey respondents reported that there had been instances where they felt as though they weren't listened to by a healthcare professional, with only 13% reporting no instances - this is seen in Figure 4.2.

What were respondents discussing with healthcare professionals in the instances where they felt they weren't listened to?

Figure 4.1



87%



Figure 4.2
Respondents felt as though there were instances where they weren't listened to by a healthcare professional

7/10



Figure 4.3
Respondents had problems with medical advice received on contraception

Figure 4.4 shows that of respondents who felt they weren't listened to, 72% were discussing a reproductive or sexual health related matter. Figure 4.1 shows a breakdown of some of the main topics that respondents were discussing with healthcare professionals when they felt as though they weren't being listened to. Further analysis can be done on the raw survey responses.

72%

Of those who felt they weren't listened to by a healthcare professional were discussing a reproductive or sexual health related condition or treatment

Figure 4.4

5.0 Findings on access to contraception

Survey respondents were asked if they had ever faced problems accessing contraception in the past. Figure 5.1 shows that 53%, 1,104 of respondents, have faced problems in accessing their chosen contraception.

73% of respondents stated that they would, or maybe would, pay for contraception if this would provide a better service. This is shown in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2

73%

Of respondents said that they would, or maybe would, pay for contraception if it meant they received a better service

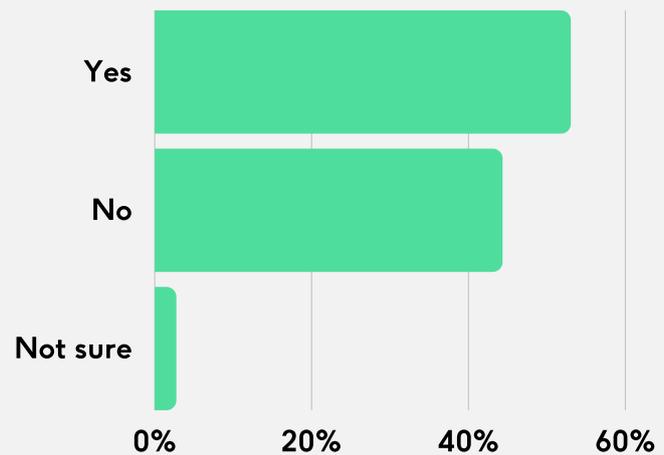
Figure 5.3

32%

Of respondents have paid for contraception in the past

Have you ever had problems accessing or getting hold of contraception?

Figure 5.1



Whilst a large proportion of respondents were open to paying for medical care in order to receive a better service, 32% state that they have already paid for contraception (excluding condoms). This is shown in Figure 5.3.

Of those who did pay for contraception:

- 61% stated that this was due to speed or convenience;
- 14% said it was because they were not eligible for the NHS;
- 9% paid to avoid embarrassment;
- 6% paid to have more choice;
- 11% for other reasons.

Why did you pay for contraception?

Figure 5.4



6.0 CONCLUSION

The Lowdown welcome the positive move from the UK Government to improve the health of women in the UK, and hope the Women's Health Strategy will be the first stepping stone towards gender health equality.

As a matter of urgency, The Lowdown would like to see the Department of Health and Social realise how difficult it is for women to access advice and their contraception of choice, and address the problems caused by relentless cuts in this area.

Limitations to access to contraception and sexual health services, worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic, mean many women are using the internet as their primary source of advice. Women are making their voices heard and the current status quo is not good enough. The promotion of communities of women, connected through shared experience, with access to relatable information and medical expertise will be key to bringing contraception and sexual health into the digital and social age.

Together we can turn the tide on a long history of sidelining women's health to create a healthier, more informed and empowered society.

SOURCES

- Department of Health and Social Care, (2013). 'Commissioning Sexual Health services and interventions: best practice guidance for local authorities'.
- The Lowdown, (2021). 'The Lowdown's Women's Health Survey'.
- The UK Government, (2021). 'Women's Health Strategy: Call for Evidence'.

We thank you for your continued support in our efforts to transform women's health

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