

## London Ambulance Service: survey findings

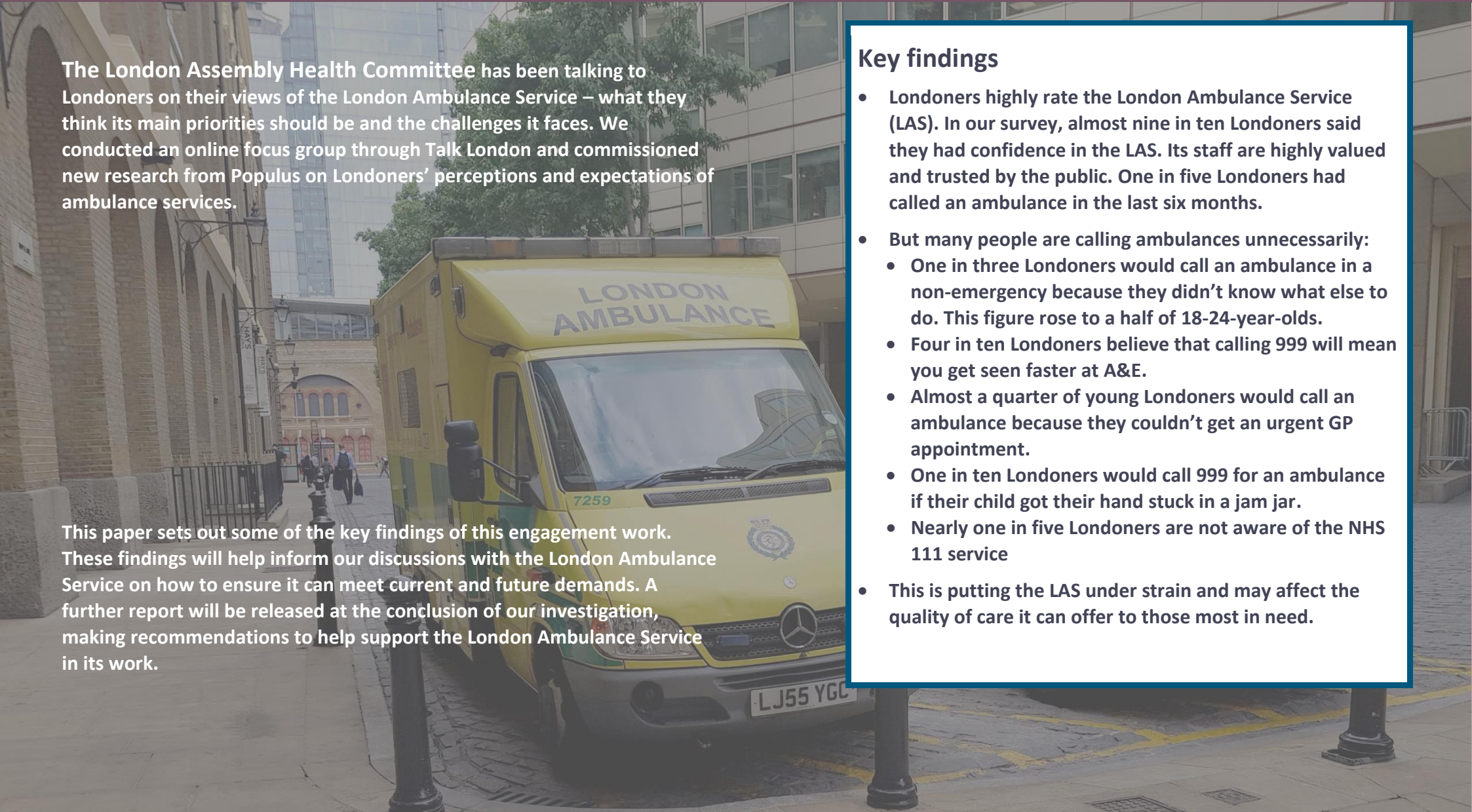
September 2018

The London Assembly Health Committee has been talking to Londoners on their views of the London Ambulance Service – what they think its main priorities should be and the challenges it faces. We conducted an online focus group through Talk London and commissioned new research from Populus on Londoners' perceptions and expectations of ambulance services.

This paper sets out some of the key findings of this engagement work. These findings will help inform our discussions with the London Ambulance Service on how to ensure it can meet current and future demands. A further report will be released at the conclusion of our investigation, making recommendations to help support the London Ambulance Service in its work.

### Key findings

- Londoners highly rate the London Ambulance Service (LAS). In our survey, almost nine in ten Londoners said they had confidence in the LAS. Its staff are highly valued and trusted by the public. One in five Londoners had called an ambulance in the last six months.
- But many people are calling ambulances unnecessarily:
  - One in three Londoners would call an ambulance in a non-emergency because they didn't know what else to do. This figure rose to a half of 18-24-year-olds.
  - Four in ten Londoners believe that calling 999 will mean you get seen faster at A&E.
  - Almost a quarter of young Londoners would call an ambulance because they couldn't get an urgent GP appointment.
  - One in ten Londoners would call 999 for an ambulance if their child got their hand stuck in a jam jar.
  - Nearly one in five Londoners are not aware of the NHS 111 service
- This is putting the LAS under strain and may affect the quality of care it can offer to those most in need.



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### The London Ambulance Service today

The London Ambulance Service (LAS) is the busiest ambulance service in the country. In 2017/18, it handled over 1.9 million emergency calls from across London and attended more than 1.2 million incidents.

The LAS emergency and urgent care service has the following roles:

- Call handling – taking and prioritising 999 calls
- 999 emergency and urgent care response
- Clinical telephone advice – providing advice to members of the public with less serious illnesses and injuries that don't need an immediate ambulance response
- Dispatching and providing paramedics for London's Air Ambulance
- Planning for, and responding to, large-scale events or major incidents in the capital
- Running the NHS 111 service for south-east London

### The London Ambulance Service in numbers

5350 staff – 3380 on the front line

460 emergency call handlers

2 emergency operations call centres

1,100 vehicles

70 ambulance stations across London

620 square mile operating area

The London Ambulance Service is an NHS Trust – the only NHS trust which covers the whole of London. Its 999 services are commissioned by London's 32 clinical commissioning groups, with Brent CCG acting as lead commissioner. The accident and emergency service is split into five operational sectors: north west, north central, north east, south east and south west, aligned with the five STP footprints in London.

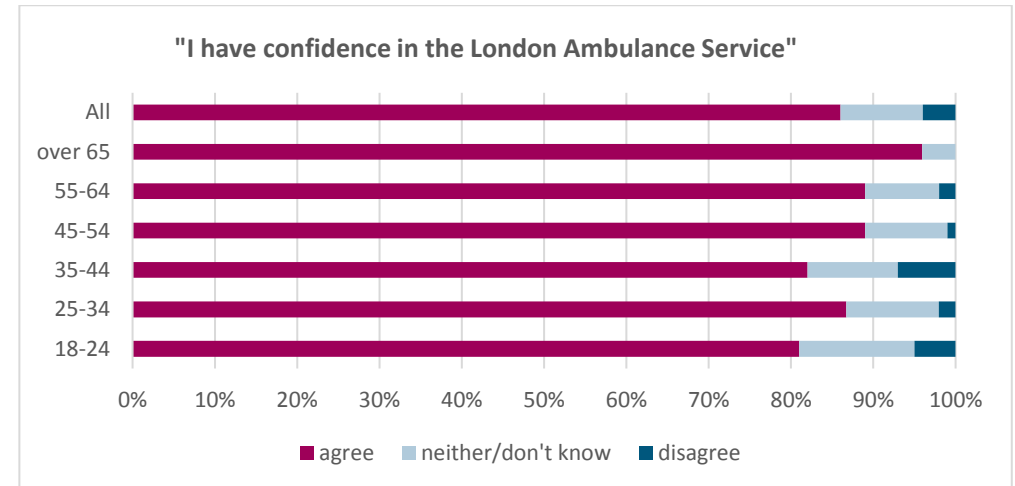
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### How do Londoners think the London Ambulance Service is doing?

Londoners have great confidence in the LAS. Overall, 86 per cent of people say they have confidence in the service. Confidence is highest among the over 65s (94%), and lowest among 18-24-year olds (81%).

There is widespread support for London Ambulance staff, who are generally perceived to be doing an excellent job in often challenging circumstances. Paramedics in particular are recognised as highly trained staff: 91 per cent agree overall, although younger Londoners (83 per cent) were less likely to agree.



"The LAS staff deserve respect for what they do against all obstacles with compassion, good humour and great competence"

"They are already friendly, knowledgeable and provide an excellent service under very trying circumstances"

"The main challenge the Service faces is a very angry and impatient public"

### Londoners highlight difficult and stressful working conditions as a key challenge for the LAS.

Almost two in five Londoners surveyed (38%) think there is too much focus on ambulance response time targets. People aged over 55 are twice as likely to agree (50%) as people aged 18-24 (27%)

"[I want them to be] happy in their jobs so that they don't gain lots of experience and then leave the Service because they're exhausted or frustrated"

"Scrap targets. It puts the driver under pressure"

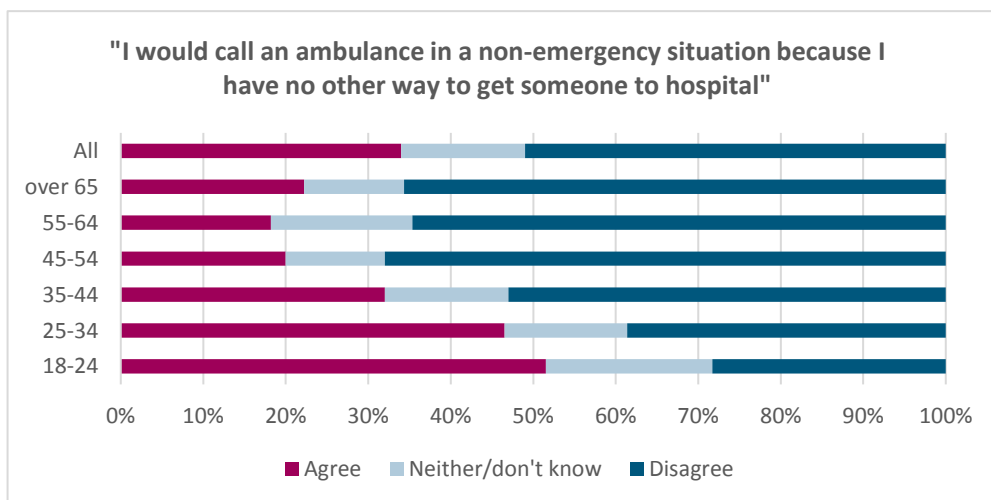
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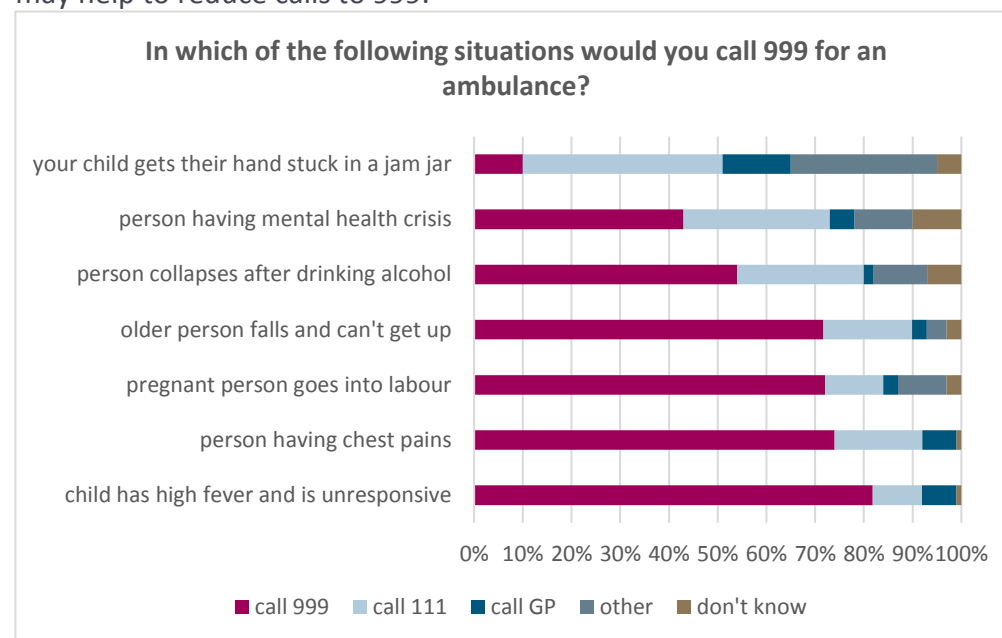
### How do Londoners think the ambulance service should be used?

Londoners have a high degree of confidence in their own knowledge of when to call an ambulance. 56 per cent strongly agree with the statement 'I know when to call an ambulance.' Younger Londoners are the least confident: only 36 per cent of 18-24-year olds strongly agree, compared to 74 per cent of those over 55.

Over 90 per cent of people surveyed said that ambulance services should only be used in emergencies. However, the survey results also suggest that people will 'default' to calling an ambulance if other options are not available, even if they know it is not an emergency.



People have differing views on what type of health issue would require an emergency response from the LAS. Promoting wider conversations around the best ways to deal with urgent, but not necessarily life-threatening issues, may help to reduce calls to 999.



One in ten Londoners would call 999 for an ambulance if their child got their hand stuck in a jam jar

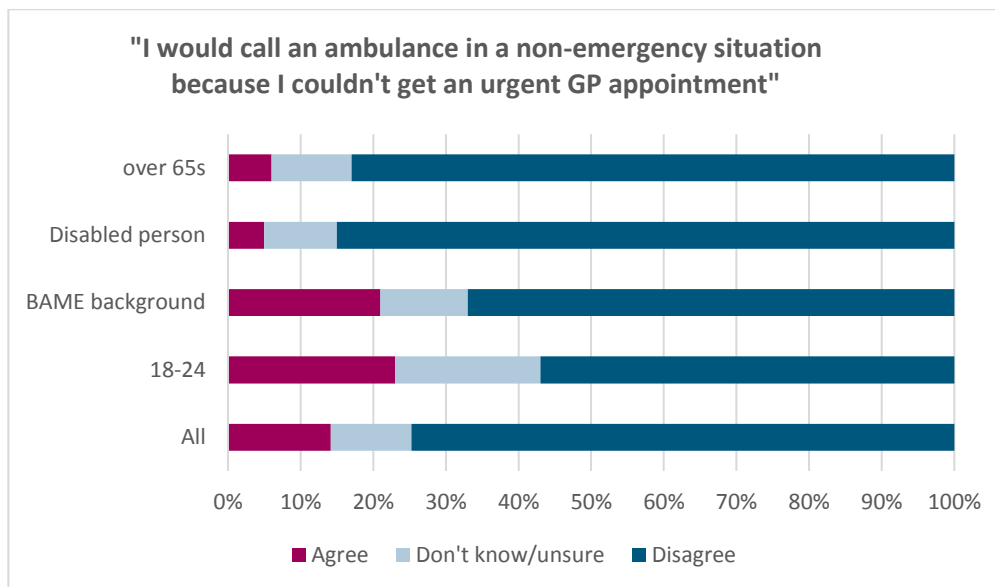
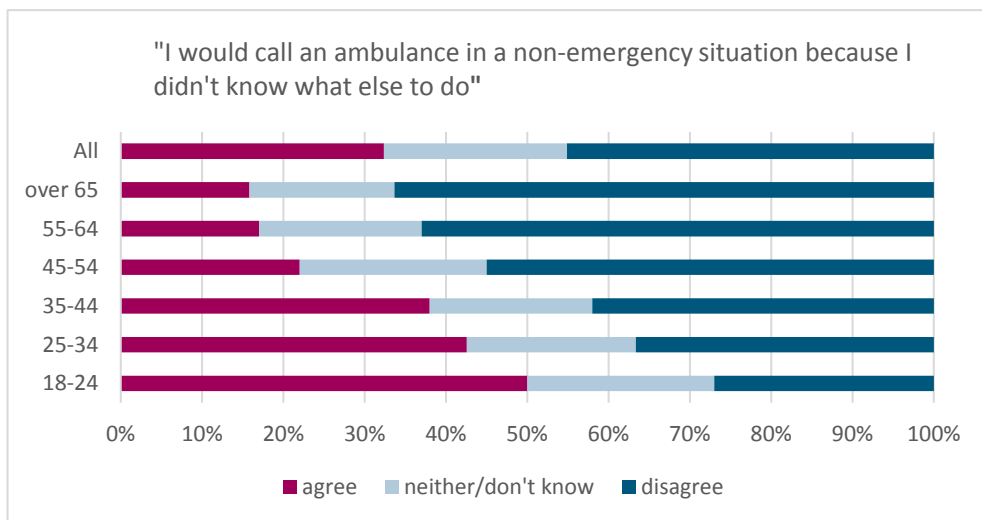
"More work is needed on public education on the appropriate use of ambulance services"

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#### Are Londoners using the ambulance service when they don't need to?

Almost three quarters of Londoners surveyed (72%) believe that people use the ambulance service when they don't need to. Many are strongly critical of what they see as 'abuse' of the 999 system. But in some cases, this may be because people aren't aware of other options. One in three Londoners surveyed say that they would call an ambulance in a non-emergency situation because they didn't know what else to do. Lack of access to other healthcare services, including GP services, also contributes to more people calling 999. This creates additional pressure on the 999 call centre to triage and prioritise cases.



50 per cent of Londoners aged 18-24 would call an ambulance because they didn't know what else to do

"The service does a great job, but their time is often wasted by non-emergency calls. People who abuse the service should be penalised"

"I think the biggest challenge the ambulance service is facing is being used as a stopgap measure or a measure of last resort to address cases of vulnerable people who should be receiving better social care, and people suffering from mental health issues"

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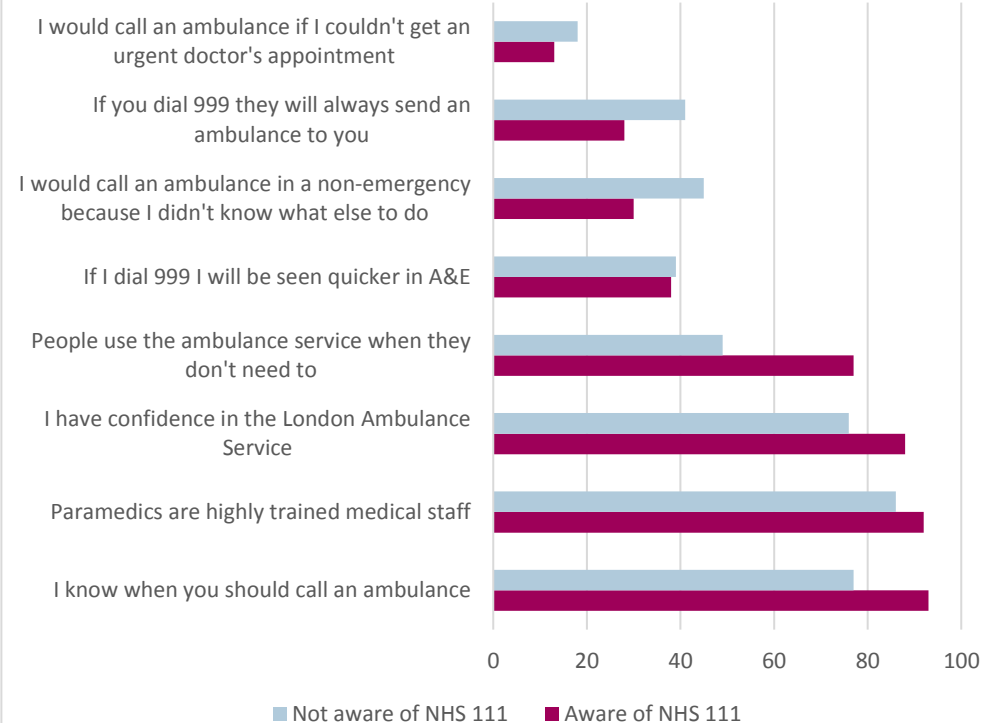
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Four in ten Londoners surveyed believe that calling 999 will mean you get seen faster at A&E. And three in ten believe that if you dial 999 they will always send an ambulance to you. Expectations of what will happen when you call an ambulance vary by age and location, but also vary depending on awareness of the NHS 111 service. Uncertainty around what will happen when an ambulance is called can increase patient anxiety and potential dissatisfaction with the service.

Nearly one in five (17 per cent) of Londoners surveyed were not aware of the NHS 111 service. NHS 111 is the non-emergency helpline number for England. It is intended for urgent, but not life-threatening health issues and is available 24 hours a day. Awareness was lowest among 18-24-year olds. Raising awareness of the NHS 111 service, particularly among younger people, should be a priority for the NHS in London, to potentially relieve some of the pressure on the ambulance service call centres. This is particularly important since the call centres are already stretched: in a report presented to its board in February 2018 the LAS identified an acute lack of staff at its two main bases as a key risk to its ability to function. Listing the risks faced it said: "The trust may be unable to maintain service levels due to insufficient staff in the emergency operations centre (EOC)." While the Service tries to boost recruitment, reducing the volume of calls may help alleviate some of the immediate pressure.

"The one and only time I called an ambulance, I was told it would be faster to take a taxi. This compounded the anxiety and fear I had about my condition"

Perceptions of the ambulance service based on awareness on NHS 111



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### Next steps

**Promoting informed use of the ambulance service needs to be a priority. Well-publicised reports about long waiting times for GP appointments and walk-in centre closures may make it harder to persuade the public to only call an ambulance when appropriate. Care in the community must have enough capacity to meet people's expectations.**

Our snapshot of public views suggests that people are generally supportive of the London Ambulance Service, but that more could be done to make Londoners aware of how it operates and what to expect from it.

The findings suggest that the London Ambulance Service could consider direct its efforts towards better engagement with younger people. There are a number of potential avenues that they could explore, including more proactive outreach with schools and universities and boosting opportunities for younger people to volunteer with the service. They should also consider ways that existing patient participation initiatives, including their Patients Forum, can be made more diverse so that the concerns and expectations of younger Londoners are identified and acted on.

The LAS has recently published a new five-year strategy, setting out its ambitions to improve and transform the services it provides. And the Mayor has recently published his new Health Inequalities Strategy, in which he promises to champion and challenge the NHS and the wider health and care system to work together more effectively.

This is a good opportunity for the LAS and the Mayor to work together to ensure that ambulance services are meeting the needs of all Londoners. As a first step towards a more effective partnership, the Mayor, the NHS and the LAS should look for joint opportunities to promote informed and responsible use of ambulance services and make sure that people are aware of the alternatives to dialing 999 in non-emergency situations.

The London Assembly Health Committee is keen to ensure that London continues to benefit from a world-class ambulance service, which can meet current and future demand. We will be exploring further opportunities for the Mayor and the wider GLA group to support the London Ambulance Service and its staff, and to give Londoners a greater voice in how the Service is run, in our next report.

The full survey data used in this report can be found online at  
[www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk)

To get in touch with us about this investigation, please email  
[healthcommittee@london.gov.uk](mailto:healthcommittee@london.gov.uk)

The Health Committee thanks all those who have taken part in this project

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### About the Health Committee



**The Health Committee** reviews health and wellbeing across London, with a particular focus on public health issues and reviewing the progress of the Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy.

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For further information about the work of the Health Committee, and to see our current investigations, visit [our website](#).

### About the London Assembly

The London Assembly holds the Mayor and Mayoral advisers to account by publicly examining policies and programmes through committee meetings, plenary sessions, site visits and investigations. As well as examining the Mayor's actions and decisions, Assembly Members act as champions for Londoners by investigating issues that are important to the capital.

Assembly investigations are carried out by cross-party committees which cover vital areas like transport, policing, housing and planning, the economy, health and the environment. The Assembly can press for changes to national, Mayoral or local policy.