Findings from the development and implementation of a survey of registrant and informant experiences of Fitness to Practise at the GDC

Final Report

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Executive Summary

Background

The GDC has in the past routinely collected feedback from registrants and informants who have been involved in the Fitness to Practise (FtP) process. However, historical data collection elicited low response rates, and so data of limited utility. In 2023, the GDC commissioned a research project to develop a new questionnaire to improve the quality of data.

Specific objectives for the new survey were to:

- Refine and develop the feedback collected, with improved content validity and acceptability.
- Consider relationships within data which may inform understanding of satisfaction and provide cues to improve processes.
- Identify metrics which may allow longitudinal quality monitoring.
- Provide recommendations for a live process of feedback collection and monitoring.

Methods

A survey was developed from that previously used by the GDC, and the requirements reviewed through scoping conversations with stakeholders within the GDC, including the Regulation, Legal and Governance and Strategy Directorates.

The final version included questions about the stage and duration of respondents' cases, their satisfaction with process and outcome of the FtP case, perceived areas for improvement, and demographics.

A link to the survey, hosted on the Jisc online surveys platform, was sent to registrants and informants in four waves. Samples were all registrants and informants whose cases had reached a decision in a qualifying period:

- Wave 1: Cases from 1st April 2022 to 30th September 2023. Survey open 16th November to 4th December 2023.
- Wave 2: Cases from 1st October 2023 to 31st January 2024. Survey open 11th April to 27th May 2024.
- Wave 3: Cases from 1st February to 30th May 2024. Survey open 12th September to 31st October 2024
- Wave 4: Cases from 1st June to 30th September 2024. Survey open 4th December 2024 to 31st January 2025

The main data collected was the same through all distributions, although fewer free text items, and additional scale items addressing their attitudes towards the process, were included from wave 3.

Results

Simple response rates calculated against the entire sample varied from 10% to 24% of registrants, and 13% to 30% of informants. Adding a reminder from wave 2 increased the response rate for both groups. However, while email analytics are not conclusive, the response rate calculated against the apparent number of email recipients who opened the survey was much higher. This suggests that survey content was acceptable to most who started it, with response rates being limited by visibility of the email, or interest in clicking-through. This is reinforced by there being few missing data among responses.

Most respondents were dissatisfied with the process, and the outcome of their case, although a higher proportion of registrants than informants were satisfied with the outcome. More registrants than informants also felt communication was clear.

The area of the process most indicated as open to improvement was the length of time of the investigation, followed by overall support received. However, a number of aspects of communication were identified as in need of improvement by over 30% of respondents in registrant and informant samples.

Few respondents, in either group, felt the process was trustworthy or fair, or that their case was treated appropriately or proportionately. However more registrants than informants felt that their case was treated appropriately and proportionately. One quarter of informants felt their case had been taken seriously by the GDC.

Results suggest that for both informants and registrants, satisfaction with the FtP process is associated with their satisfaction with the outcome of the case. Elements associated with satisfaction which may need improvement included, for all respondents, the tone and respect of communications, for informants the speed of response to queries, and for registrants the overall length of time of the investigation.

Conclusion

The revised questionnaire has achieved a higher response rate than the previous process for gaining feedback. The main challenge for increasing response rates further may be to induce recipients of the email to open the questionnaire itself.

A number of variables – time taken, overall satisfaction with the process, and identified needs for improvement – may provide useful indicators of quality over time. However, the GDC should consider how all data are to be used, to ensure all are useful. This is particularly true of free text data, which requires resources for routine analysis.

Contents

1 Background

The GDC has in the past routinely collected feedback from registrants and informants who have been involved in the Fitness to Practise process. This was collected through an online survey, a link to which was contained in the email which informed them of the case decision.

However, over a number of years this survey had achieved a very small number of responses. Reasons for this are unknown, but could arise from a simple lack of engagement with the GDC following completion of a case, with both groups preferring to move on, or from a more specific lack of engagement with, or resistance to, the survey itself. There had not been consideration of the acceptability to registrants and informants of the survey, nor detailed consideration of the validity of the data, nor how data may be used.

Consequently, despite the potential value of gaining feedback from registrants and informants to support ongoing quality assurance and improvement, this raised questions about the value of such data collection.

In 2023, the GDC commissioned a research project, led by the University of Manchester, to develop a new questionnaire to improve the quality of the data and to provide independence in data collection and analysis.

1.1 Objectives

The feedback surveys were part of a commissioned research project with four overall objectives:

1. To provide baseline and follow-up measures to evaluate and inform ongoing activity to improve the outcomes and impact of the FtP process at the GDC.
2. To understand registrant, informant and witness experiences of the FtP process, including how these differ across participant groups and characteristics.
3. To understand the experiences of support for registrants, informants and witnesses during the FtP process, including how these differ across participant groups and characteristics.
4. To understand how the GDC can improve its processes and support in order to better meet the needs and improve the experiences of registrants, informants and witnesses involved in FtP, including addressing equality, diversity and inclusion.

Specific objectives for the survey were to:

- Refine and develop the feedback survey to improve content validity and acceptability.
- Consider relationships within data which may inform understanding of satisfaction and provide cues to improve processes.
- Identify metrics which may allow longitudinal quality monitoring.
- Provide recommendations for a live process of feedback collection and monitoring.

2 Methods

2.1 Development of questionnaire

This report presents data collected at four waves in 2023-24. Surveys were distributed to different samples of registrants and informants at each of these points, reflecting different periods within which cases had been completed. Registrant and informant versions had minor differences to reflect different relationships to the process, but key measures were the same. The surveys went through a number of iterations before initial distribution, and one significant revision after the second wave. Final versions are included in Appendix A.

2.1.1 Initial version

The initial questionnaire was developed from that previously used by the GDC. Potential revisions and additions were identified through scoping conversations with stakeholders within the GDC, including the

Regulation, Legal and Governance and Strategy Directorates. Initial redrafting focused on developing a concise online implementation covering the same areas as the original version, with consideration of the user experience and presentation of questions.

Issues discussed with the GDC during this phase included the desired balance between general feedback and specific concerns which could be linked to particular cases, and the distribution and timing of the questionnaire in relation to when cases were completed. The provision of free text items was felt to be necessary, but the risk of unconstructive 'venting' was identified, as were considerations about the scaling of the survey to a live setting.

The version distributed to respondents eliminated any explicit link to individual cases, to focus feedback on the general process, and so allow aggregation of responses into quality assurance indicators. It was reviewed by five dental professionals, resulting in minor revisions to wording.

Respondents were routed through the survey depending on their response to an initial question identifying them as a registrant or informant, but the main question areas were the same: stage of process, experience of communication, satisfaction with process and with outcome, time taken for process, areas of potential improvement, and demographics. Free text items asked respondents to "provide any suggestions of things that could be improved in relation to [defined areas of potential improvement]. Please indicate if emails, letter, phone calls could be improved" and to "tell us about anything the GDC did well".

In addition to the main questionnaire, all respondents were given the opportunity to feed back on the survey. This was mostly positive, but some comments led to revision to the survey. Findings relating to these questions are not included in this report, but excerpts from interim summary reports are included in Appendix B.

The decision was made within the GDC before the first survey was distributed, and that a separate survey would be developed for the Dental Professional Hearings Service (see Appendix C), and so the Fitness to Practise survey would not include any questions related to respondents' experience of hearings.

2.1.2 Revised version

The third and fourth waves used a slightly modified version of the survey, which added additional quantitative measures, and removed some demographic items (marital status, and gender of partner/spouse) which had very low response rates, and which some free text comments had questioned. Their removal was primarily to reduce length, to reflect proportionality in the collection of personal data, and to see if a simpler set of demographic items increased engagement or completion.

Free text responses within the first two waves referred to perceptions of fairness and trust (see results section on free text responses). To allow respondents to express their perceptions of the process in a simpler and more easily analysable way, new items were added to the revised version of the questionnaire used in waves 3 and 4:

- I trusted the process to reach the correct outcome.
- I felt the process was fair and unbiased.
- I felt the case was treated appropriately by the GDC.
- I felt the case was treated proportionately by the GDC.
- I felt my concern was taken seriously by the GDC. (Informants only).

These items had five-point response scales, from 'Disagree completely' to 'Agree completely'. At the same time, free text questions were reduced to one item, encompassing positive and negative aspects: "Please provide any details of potential improvements related to the above points, or list any aspects which you think worked well. Please make any comments constructive and things that the GDC can respond to". Additional text was added to discourage respondents from providing details of their cases, or raising further allegations.

2.2 Questionnaire distribution

Surveys were hosted on the Jisc online surveys platform (https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk). Links were distributed by the GDC in emails to those who had been in involved in a Fitness to Practise case that had reached a decision in a qualifying period. For cases that had reached the Case Examiner stage this included cases that had been closed and cases referred to a hearing.

The first period extended back to April 2022 to maximise responses at the initial implementation of the survey. Subsequent waves were limited to four-month periods:

- Wave 1: Cases from 1st April 2022 to 30th September 2023. Survey open 16th November to 4th December 2023.
- Wave 2: Cases from 1st October 2023 to 31st January 2024. Survey open 11th April to 27th May 2024.
- Wave 3: Cases from 1st February to 30th May 2024. Survey open 12th September to 31st October 2024.
- Wave 4: Cases from 1st June to 30th September 2024. Survey open 4th December 2024 to 31st January 2025

The JISC platform was upgraded between waves 1 and 2. This meant there were cosmetic differences between the versions completed at these points, but questions were unchanged.

2.3 Data analysis

Numerical data were analysed statistically. To compare distributions of categorical variables, chi-square analysis was carried out. This determines whether a difference in distributions is greater than would be expected by chance, that probability indicated by a 'p-value'. By convention, a p-value of less than 0.05 – meaning there is a 5% chance that an observed difference occurs by chance – is taken to mean that a difference is 'real', referred to as being 'statistically significant'. Fisher's exact test is similar to chi-square, but is used when a distribution includes very low numbers (usually less than 5 in any one cell).

To consider what may influence satisfaction, multiple regression was carried out. This analysis identifies the extent to which a variable of interest (in this case satisfaction with process) varies between values of a set of 'predictor' variables. As carried out, only variables which added explanatory power to the regression model (known as its 'fit') are reported.[1]

To aid clarity, statistics are reported in footnotes rather than in the main text.

Free text responses were analysed using quantitative content analysis. This involves each statement being labelled with a 'code' which reflects what was said, and frequencies of codes summarised. Where responses clearly included more than one statement, these were separated and coded separately, although where a comment contained elements of more than one code, a judgment was made as to which dominated (e.g. many comments about the length of cases also referred to aspects of communication, but were coded just once). All questions were collated and coded together, purely on the basis of what was written, and not influenced by the wording of the question, except where responses were brief or ambiguous. Responses which did not contain substantive content (e.g. 'NA' or 'see above') were treated as blank and deleted.

[1] Analysis was carried out in R (https://r-project.org). Variable selection used the drop1() test to identify those whose removal did not reduce the overall fit of the models.

3 Results

The results are presented in four parts. The first describes data reflecting the acceptability of the survey as indicated by response rates and missing data. The second considers sample demographics across all waves, and participants' routes to engagement with the FtP process. The third section presents analysis to provide an overall picture of the data and patterns within it, and the final section considers how data may provide longitudinal quality indicators. While two different versions of the survey were used, the majority of the content was the same, and so data from the different waves are pooled, where appropriate.

3.1 Acceptability of survey

Response rates indicate a general acceptability of the survey, in terms of process, and content. An extremely low response rate, indicating low engagement, can mean that recipients do not see value in the survey, or trust its use. Low response rates may also be more prone to biases in data, for example where particular – often extreme – viewpoints may be over-represented. Here, where data may be used to inform decisions to change, or not to change, processes, it is important that due consideration is given to such bias, where possible.

Response rates for online surveys are generally not high (a 2022 meta-analysis found a median of 39%, but with a distinct skew to lower rates.[1] In the researchers' experience a simple response rate of 19% to 30% across different populations has been achievable). A lower response rate is not inherently problematic, as a distribution of data which includes a range of responses suggests a systematic bias is not present. Other biases, such as over-representation of certain demographics, can only be identified where population demographics are known.

3.1.1 Response rates

Table 1 summarises response rates for each wave, for registrants and informants. Waves are separated here to reflect the different versions of the survey, time periods, and time of year. This includes an overall simple response rate – the number of completions related to the total sample contacted, but thanks to analytics available from the email platform used by the GDC, it also provides more detailed figures which indicate whether non-completion may be due to the survey per se, or if respondents are deterred earlier. Email analytics are not conclusive, for example because clickthrough figures may register other links within emails, while some email clients may not register emails being opened or links being clicked. However, the 'Completion rate from clickthrough' does suggest that the simple response rate is likely to be a bare minimum, and that there are likely to be other deterrents to completion.

With this caveat, it is notable that the completion rate of those who started the survey is very high, albeit lower for informants, suggesting most of those who started the survey completed it, and were not deterred by its length or content (the completion time varies by wave, but the median is less than 10 minutes, and upper quartile 15 minutes, for all. In all waves there are outliers, where it appears respondents returned to complete the survey in more than one visit).

[1] Wu M-J, Zhao K, Fils-Aime F. Response rates of online surveys in published research: A meta-analysis, Computers in Human Behavior Reports, 2022;7:100206,

Table 1. Response rates in each survey wave

Registrants

Wave	Total recipients	Total respondents	Simple response rate	Emails opened*	Clickthrough*	Completion rate from clickthrough*	Median (quartiles) time to complete
1	1419	145	10%	857	187	78%	8.8 (5.0-15.1)
2	266	55	21%	341	88	63%	5.8 (4.1-14.8)
3	340	80	24%	457	96	83%	5.5 (3.8-9.2)
4	284	61	21%	363	82	74%	6.5 (4.6-13.2)

Informants

Wave	Total recipients	Total respondents	Simple response rate	Emails opened*	Clickthrough*	Completion rate by clickthrough*	Median (quartiles) time to complete
1	1298	163	13%	833	264	62%	8.5 (5.3-13.7)
2	302	90	30%	374	134	67%	7.0 (3.9-13.9)
3	360	99	28%	478	152	65%	5.5 (3.8-10.0)
4	293	63	22%	351	101	62%	6.5 (3.7-10.1)

* Figures include data from email analytics, which may not accurately register all opened emails or clicks on the survey link.

The increased simple response rates from wave 2 are largely due to the inclusion of reminder emails sent shortly before the survey was closed, which nearly doubled the number of responses. However, it is also possible the shorter time period for inclusion in the later waves, and greater recency, was a factor. The changes to the questionnaire in wave 3 may be associated with the increase in registrant completions in wave 3, but this was not maintained into wave 4, and there was no apparent effect on informant completion. In each wave, the majority of respondents completed the survey within 48 hours of the email being sent (a similar spike was observed following reminder emails). The timing of wave 4, over Christmas and New Year may have limited responses, although a reminder was sent in mid-January.

3.1.2 Missing data

Missing data, where respondents omit responses to individual questions, may indicate problems with the acceptability of items (including perhaps trust in the survey) or their clarity or relevance. For each wave, and for both registrant and informant samples, the rate of missing data was very low for all items (excluding optional free text items, and demographic items considered below). Most items had no missing values, with the highest rate being just 2% missing. This indicates high acceptability, and is indicative of content validity and relevance.

3.2 Sample demographics

Table 2 summarises the demographics of registrants and informants combining all waves, comprising 341 registrants and 415 informants. Demographics of the population to whom the survey was sent are not available, and so any differential response rates cannot be calculated. Rates of missing data across these variables range from 9% to 47%, indicating that any conclusions about the representation of demographic groups must be drawn with caution.

Some categories have low frequencies. In isolation, these data cannot be used to identify individuals, but there is a risk that if population figures are low, and available, an individual having completed the questionnaire could be inferred. For this reason, specific low frequencies below 5 are suppressed.

Table 2. Demographics of registrants and informants

	Registrants	Informants		Registrants	Informants
Total	341	415			
Sex			**Religion**		
Male	145 (43%)	234 (56%)	No religion	80 (23%)	137 (33%)
Female	159 (47%)	139 (33%)	Christian	114 (33%)	155 (37%)
Prefer not to say/Missing*	37 (11%)	42 (10%)	Buddhist	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)
			Hindu	23 (6%)	7 (2%)
			Jewish	4 (1%)	<5 (<1%)
			Muslim	32 (9%)	11 (3%)
			Sikh	9 (3%)	<5 (<1%)
			Any other religion	0	5 (1%)
			Prefer not to say/Missing*	77 (23%)	93 (22%)
Age group			**Sexual orientation**		
16-24	<5 (<1%)	5 (1%)	Straight	275 (81%)	307 (74%)
25-34	44 (13%)	22 (5%)	Gay/Lesbian	5 (1%)	10 (2%)
35-44	93 (27%)	60 (14%)	Bisexual	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)
45-54	79 (23%)	100 (24%)	Other	0 (0%)	<5 (<1%)
55-64	60 (18%)	90 (22%)	Prefer not to say/Missing*	58 (17%)	90 (22%)
65 or over	29 (9%)	91 (22%)	**Gender identity**		
Prefer not to say/Missing*	32 (9%)	47 (11%)	Same as sex registered at birth	301 (88%)	360 (87%)
			Different to sex registered at birth	0	<5 (<1%)
			Prefer not to say/Missing*	40 (12%)	53 (13%)
Ethnic group			**Marital status****		
White	173 (51%)	287 (69%)	Never married	30 (15%)	38 (15%)
Mixed/Multiple	6 (2%)	9 (2%)	Married/civil partnership	125 (62%)	100 (40%)
Asian/Asian British	70 (21%)	24 (6%)	Separated (married/ civil	<5 (<2%)	5 (2%)
Black/Black British	9 (3%)	7 (2%)	partnership)	12 (6%)	30 (11%)
Other ethnic group	16 (5%)	6 (1%)	Divorced/Dissolved civil partnership	<5 (<2%)	10 (4%)
Prefer not to say/Missing*	67 (20%)	82 (20%)	Widowed/Surviving civil partnership	26 (13%)	70 (28%)
			Prefer not to say/Missing*		
Disability			**Married or civil partnership****		
Disabled	21 (6%)	97 (23%)	Opposite sex	127 (64%)	129 (51%)
Not disabled	286 (84%)	259 (62%)	Same sex	8 (4%)	6 (2%)
Prefer not to say/Missing*	34 (10%)	59 (14%)	Prefer not to say/Missing*	65 (32%)	118 (47%)

* Explicit responses of 'prefer not to say' are grouped with missing data to indicate overall acceptability.
** Only included in first version used in wave 1 and wave 2. Percentages are based on total responses of those waves only.

3.2.1 Progress of cases

Table 3 summarises the stage to which respondents' cases had progressed. Most reported reaching the case examiner stage, although more informants than registrants did not know, or could not remember, which stage they reached. This could indicate less familiarity with the process, or the stage being less meaningful to informants. Most registrants (226; 66%) indicated they had been represented in their case. Similar proportions of both groups who had reached the case examiner stage had proceeded to hearing: 45 (23%) registrant respondents, and 48 (23%) informants.

Table 3. Stage of process

	Registrants	Informants
Initial assessment*	-	53 (13%)
Casework	106 (31%)	57 (14%)
Case examiner	193 (57%)	205 (50%)
Don't know/can't remember	24 (7%)	85 (21%)
Prefer not to say/Missing	18 (5%)	15 (4%)

*Initial assessment was not included on the registrant survey, as registrants are not informed if a concern does not meet the threshold for casework to be undertaken.

3.2.2 Informants' relationship with registrant and route of referral

Informants were asked about their relationship with the registrant about whom they had raised a concern, with four options: patient, dentist colleague or DCP colleague. An 'other' response allowed free text to be added, and most of these responses could be recoded into existing or new categories. Table 4 summarises these responses. Most informants were patients, or relatives of patients (74%, n=308). Twenty (5%) indicated they were dentist colleagues, and 12 (3%) DCP colleagues. 'Other professional relationships' included educational and regulatory roles, and 'other personal relationships' included neighbours and other contacts outside of work.

Table 4. Informants' relationship with registrant (descending order of frequency)

Relationship	Frequency (% of total)
Patient	308 (74%)
Other professional relationship	21 (5%)
Relative of patient	20 (5%)
Dentist colleague	20 (5%)
DCP colleague	12 (3%)
Employer	12 (3%)
Other personal relationship	10 (2%)
Member of public	4 (1%)
Other	5 (1%)
Self-referral	2 (<1%)

Table 5 summarises the routes which participants reported using to raise concerns; whether just with the GDC or through other routes. In the first version of the survey this question only allowed a single selection, with a free text box, but this was changed to multiple selection for the second version. Where free text responses indicated multiple routes, these have been recoded to reflect this, but some routes may still be under-represented. Nonetheless, it is clear that the most frequent route was through the GDC, with the second most frequent a direct approach to the registrant. Of those who selected 'other', some indicated they had approached the Care Quality Commission (CQC), or taken legal action, reporting to the police, or through a solicitor. Two indicated contacting political representatives.

Table 5. Routes through which informants raised a concern

Route	Frequency (% of all informants)
GDC	189 (46%)
Registrant	98 (24%)
Employer	61 (15%)
Dental Complaints Service	38 (9%)
NHS	49 (12%)
Other	46 (11%)

3.2.3 Time to complete

The length of time cases had taken was similar for both groups (table 6). Figure 1 plots reported length of time, grouped by the stage cases had reached. This indicates that a larger proportion of registrants than informants reported waiting over 18 months for case examiner cases to complete, but that where cases closed at the casework stage, more were completed in less than 12 months, with most completed within 6 months.

Table 6. Length of time cases had taken (all responses)

Length of time	Registrants	Informants
1 month or less	18 (5%)	26 (6%)
2-6 months	105 (31%)	123 (30%)
6-12 months	67 (20%)	94 (23%)
2-18 months	43 (13%)	78 (19%)
More than 18 months	108 (32%)	92 (22%)

Figure 1. Length of time for different stages to complete, for registrants and informants

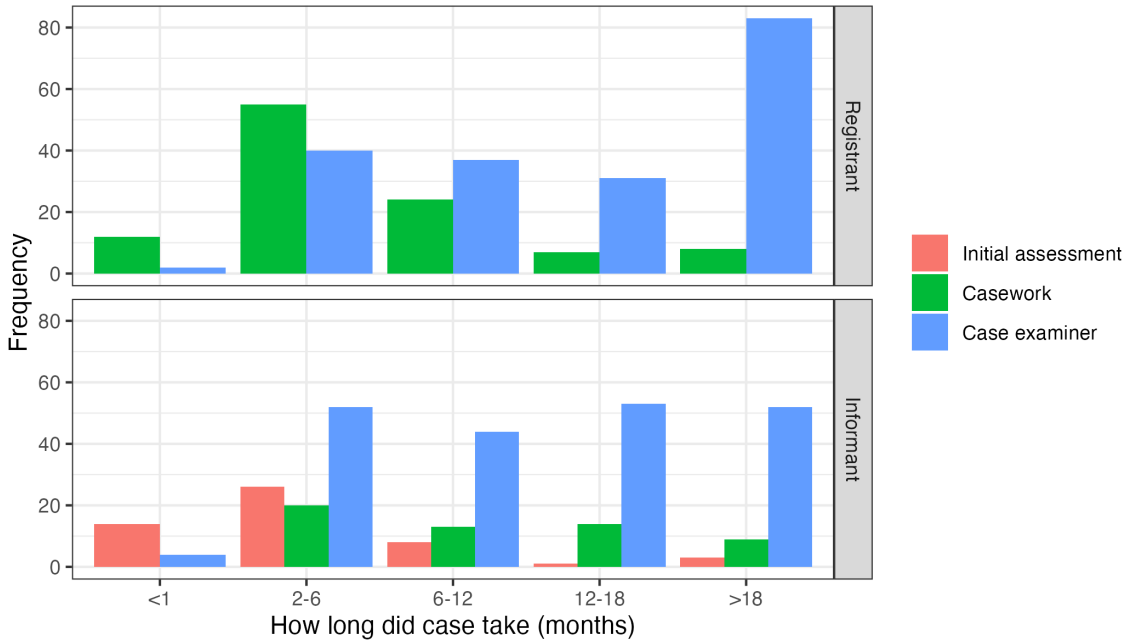


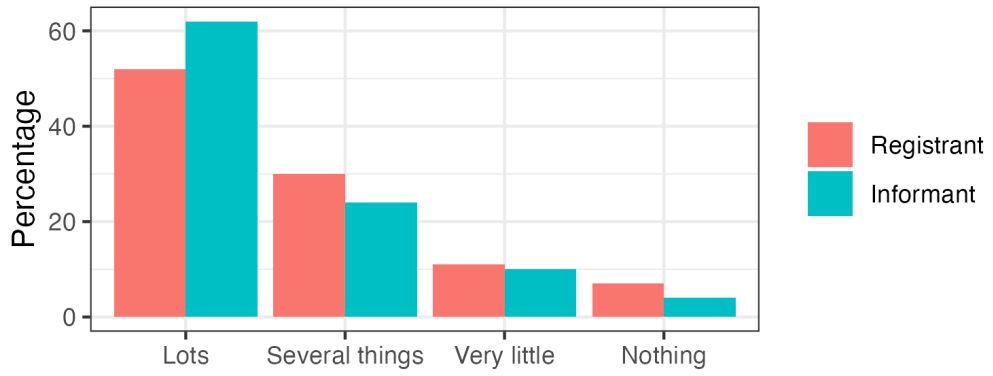
Figure includes only those who indicated which stage their case had reached – excludes 'Don't know' and 'Prefer not to say'.

3.3 Satisfaction with the process

3.3.1 Overall satisfaction

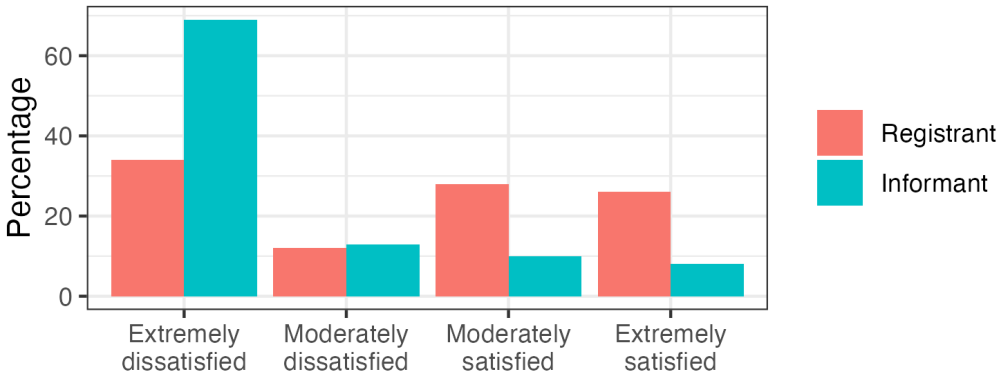
Respondents were asked 'Overall, how did you feel about the process?' and asked to indicate how much could have been improved. Distributions for registrants and informants are illustrated in figure 2. Opinions were similarly distributed for the two groups, with most feeling lots could have been improved, and relatively few thinking little or nothing could be improved.

Figure 2. Responses indicating how much respondents would like to change about the Fitness to Practise process



However, satisfaction with the outcome of cases varied, with more informants than registrants expressing dissatisfaction (figure 3).

Figure 3. Respondents' overall satisfaction with the outcome of their case



3.3.2 Channels of communication and satisfaction with communication

A number of questions asked about elements of communication from the GDC. Registrants and informants were asked different questions, reflecting the different initiation of contact – informants contacting the GDC, and registrants being informed that a concern was raised.

Most registrants had been informed about a concern by email (79%, n=267), with 15% (n=50) being contacted by letter, and 4% (n=13) by phone. Informants had raised concerns through a number of routes, but half had used the GDC website (49%, n=202), followed by email (33%, n=137), letter (9%, n=38) and phone (6%, n=25).

Most registrants felt initial communication was clear (58%, n=197, moderately or very clear, 40%, n=136, moderately unclear or not at all clear), but informant views of clarity were more negative (47%, n=194, moderately or very clear, 51%, n=211, moderately unclear or not at all clear).

While most informants found it very or somewhat easy to raise a concern (60%, n=250), 40% found it somewhat or very difficult (n=165). Most informants were dissatisfied with the initial response from the GDC (61%, n=152 moderately or very dissatisfied), but there were significant associations between satisfaction and both perceived clarity and ease of communication.[1]

3.4 Identified areas of improvement

Participants who had indicated dissatisfaction were asked which aspects could be improved. Table 7 summarises the frequencies of responses from each group. Based on frequency of selection, priorities appear to be similar, with the length of time of the investigation being the most important for registrants and informants. The largest differences were with regard to the overall support received, and the tone of communication (selected by more registrants) and information about case outcomes (selected by more informants).

[1] Fisher's exact test was significant p<0.0001 for both.

Table 7. Frequencies of registrants and informants indicating improvements could be made in different areas.

	Registrant (n=341)	Informant (n=415)
The overall length of time of the investigation	256 (75%)	230 (55%)
The overall support I received from the GDC through the process	239 (70%)	222 (53%)
How often I received updates from the GDC about my case	167 (49%)	230 (55%)
The tone and respect of communications	149 (44%)	121 (29%)
The speed of response to queries	141 (41%)	188 (45%)
The detail of updates I received	123 (36%)	168 (40%)
The clarity of communication from the GDC	115 (34%)	154 (37%)
The information provided about the case outcome	109 (32%)	213 (51%)
How useful information from the GDC was	103 (30%)	130 (31%)

3.5 Perceptions of the process

New items were added from wave 3, to consider trust in the process, and perceptions of its fairness and proportionality. Informants were also asked if they felt their concern had been taken seriously. All these measures demonstrate a skew towards disagreement, with a modal response at the lower end of the scale, but some indicated a split in opinions. Due to this, further analysis dichotomised responses into 'high' (scores of 4 or 5) or 'low' (scores or 1, 2 or 3; while the scale midpoint is neutral, it is coded cautiously).

A minority of respondents were positive about each of these items (as presented in table 8). There were differences in the proportions of registrants and informants scoring more positively on perceptions of trust and fairness, but these were not statistically significant (i.e. the difference is not greater than would be expected by chance). More registrants than informants felt that their case was treated appropriately and proportionately by the GDC. Informants were also asked whether they felt that their concern was taken seriously, and while still a minority, a greater proportion agreed with this statement than with the 'appropriately' and 'proportionately' items.

Table 8. Summary statistics for trust, fairness and proportionality items.

Item	Number (%) of registrants scoring high on each measure	Number (%) of informants scoring high on each measure	Difference between groups
I trusted the process to reach the correct outcome.	32 (23%)	46 (29%)	Non-significant
I felt the process was fair and unbiased.	41 (29%)	31 (19%)	Non-significant
I felt the case was treated appropriately by the GDC.	48 (34%)	29 (18%)	Significant (Chi-square = 9.39, df = 1, p = 0.0022)
I felt the case was treated proportionately by the GDC.	47 (34%)	31 (19%)	Significant (Chi-square = 7.27, df = 1, p = 0.0070)
I felt my concern was taken seriously by the GDC. (Informants only).	NA	43 (27%)	NA

Responses given on a five-point scale where 1=Completely disagree and 5=Completely agree

3.6 Influences on satisfaction with the process

The main objective of the survey is to assess satisfaction with the FtP process. In order to understand what may influence that satisfaction, and so identify areas which may be targeted for improvement, multiple regression analysis was carried out to see which variables were associated with satisfaction with the process.

Variables considered were:

- Respondent demographics.
- Aspects of the process identified as in need of improvement (those presented in table 7).
- The reported length of the case.

- Satisfaction with the outcome.
- Perceptions of the process (as presented in table 8).

As perceptions of the process were only added at wave 3, variables were added to the analysis in blocks, and significant effects (i.e. those indicating a relationship greater than chance) noted for data from all waves, and for the final two which included perception of process. Missing and 'prefer not to answer' responses were excluded from this analysis.

Table 9 summarises the significant relationships identified in each analysis. The 'coefficients' column indicates the difference in 'satisfaction with process' scores with changes in the predictor variables. For example, as satisfaction with outcome here is treated as a continuous variable, the co-efficient of 0.450 for informants across all waves indicates that for each increase of 1 point in 'satisfaction with outcome', 'satisfaction with process' increased by 0.45 scale points. Other variables are categorical, and coefficients indicate the different in satisfaction between groups. So, the coefficient of -0.282 for 'The overall support I received from the GDC through the process' indicates that the satisfaction with the process of those who thought overall support could be improved was 0.282 scale points lower (on the 1-5 scale) than those who did not indicate it needed to be improved.

Table 9. Variables with a significant association with respondents' satisfaction with the FtP process

Informants			
All waves (excludes perceptions of process)	Coefficient	Wave 3 & 4 only (includes perceptions of process)	Coefficient
Satisfaction with the outcome of the case.	0.450*	I felt the case was treated appropriately by the GDC.	0.790*
The overall support I received from the GDC through the process.	-0.282**	The speed of response to queries.	-0.300**
The speed of response to queries.	-0.271**	The tone and respect of communications.	-0.304**
The tone and respect of communications.	-0.164**	Satisfaction with the outcome of the case.	0.191*
Registrants			
All waves (excludes perceptions of process)	Coefficient	Wave 3 & 4 only (includes perceptions of process)	Coefficient
The overall support I received from the GDC through the process.	-0.446**	I felt the process was fair and unbiased.	0.644*
The overall length of time of the investigation.	-0.369**	I felt the case was treated proportionately by the GDC.	0.387*
The tone and respect of communications.	-0.278**	The tone and respect of communications.	-0.319**
Satisfaction with the outcome of the case.	0.270*	The overall length of time of the investigation.	-0.299**
The information provided about the case outcome.	-0.188**	Satisfaction with the outcome of the case.	0.178*

* Represents change in satisfaction with process with a change of 1 point of the variable.
** Represents difference in satisfaction with process between those who felt item needed improving, compared to those who didn't.

These results suggest that for both informants and registrants, satisfaction with the outcome of the case is a significant predictor of their satisfaction with the process. Elements identified as needing improvement which are associated with satisfaction are, for all respondents, the tone and respect of communications, for informants the speed of response to queries, and for registrants the overall length of time of the investigation.

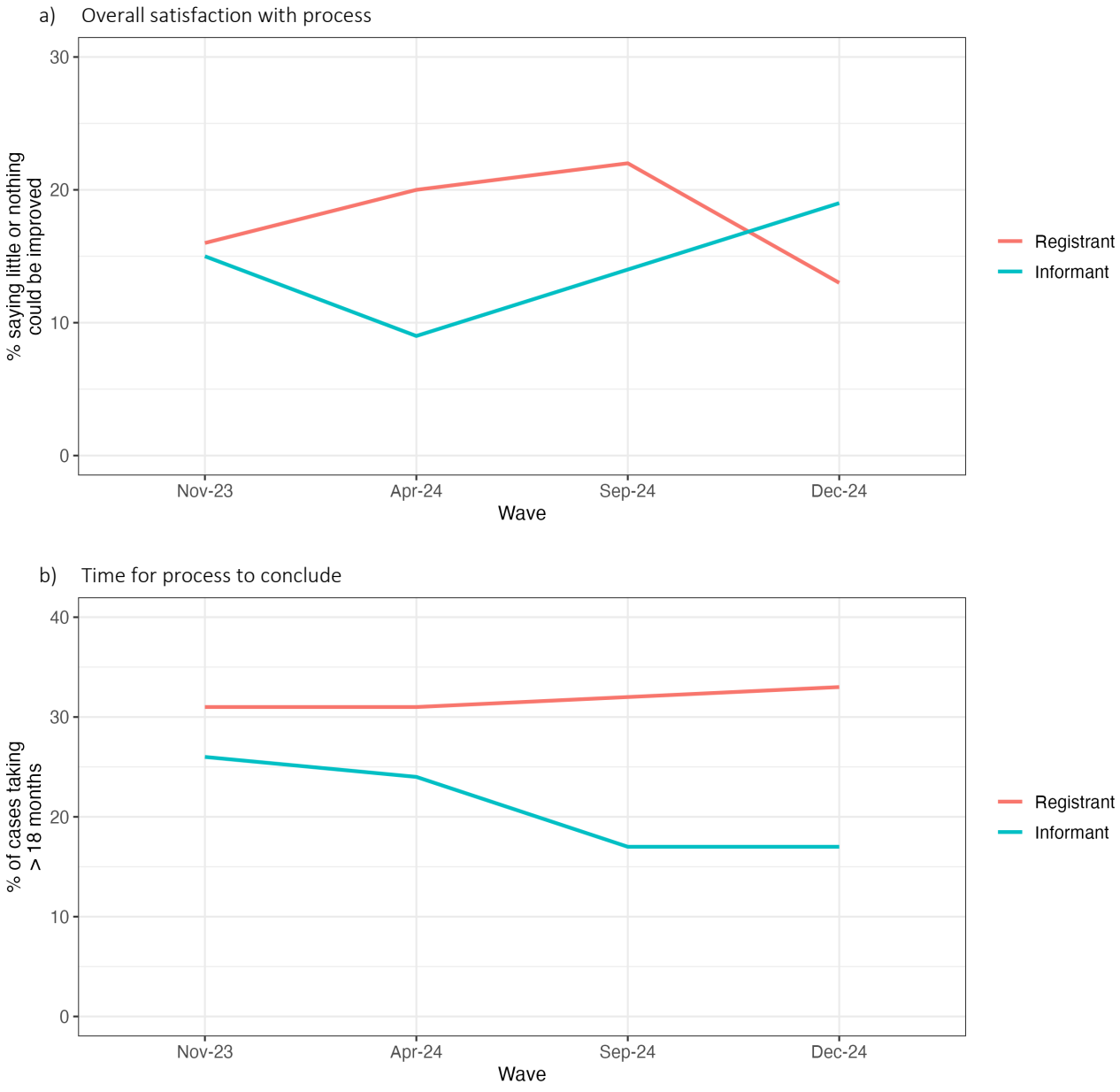
Some potential improvements which appeared to be associated with satisfaction – overall support, and the information provided about the case outcome – were not significant with the addition of items reflecting perceptions of the fairness, appropriateness and proportionality of the process. This suggests that these perceptions are more important than some practical frustrations.

3.7 Potential quality indicators

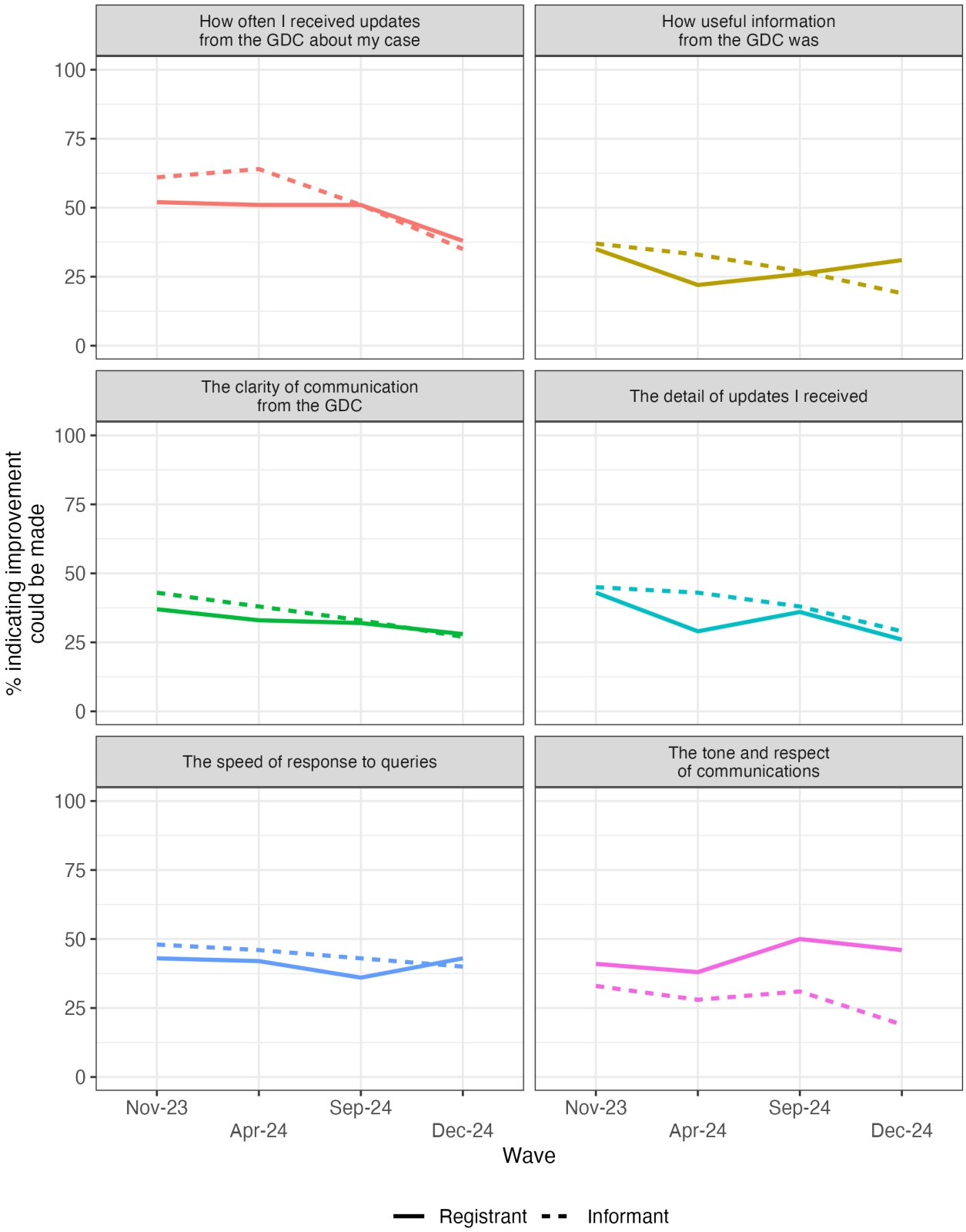
The summary above provides insight into the overall experience of the process. Some of these data may also provide quality indicators which can be monitored over time to identify trends, and responses to changes in process.

Figure 4 illustrates what one such dashboard representation may look like for overall satisfaction with the process, time to complete a case, and indices of need for improvement in different areas. In practice, a different timeline (for example collating annual data) may be more appropriate for monitoring trends, as this would be less vulnerable to outliers. Other variables may be suitable for such representation, and further development of visualisation design and implementation may allow changes in risk to be clearly flagged.

Figure 4. Changes in potential quality measures over time



c) Proportion of respondents identifying need for improvement in communication



3.8 Free text data

The first version of the survey included two main free text questions asking for areas of improvement, and positive experiences, and also included four free text items concerning the questionnaire itself. However, many respondents used these items to also express feelings about their experience of the process, and did not target responses to the relevant questions. To limit the volume of free text, and eliminate this confusion, the second version of the questionnaire included just one free text item. For analysis, responses to all free

text questions were collated together, regardless of the wording of the question. Content analysis was undertaken on these responses, with initial codes (or labels) applied to each statement, and then simplified to a standard set. Table 10 summarises the frequencies of codes with 15 or more responses, with example quotes provided. Quotes which were ambiguous or unclear (51 in total) were coded as 'other' and are omitted here.

Table 10. Frequency of codes in content analysis of free text items

Code	Code description	Example quote	Number of statements
Generic negative	Comments about negative experiences or attitudes, giving little detail.	"Everything needs to be improved" (Informant) "I cannot think of one aspect of this process that I could say was well handled" (Registrant)	159
Communication	References to the frequency or content of communication from the GDC	"I received minimal communication and no updates other than when a decision was made." (Informant) "An email regarding FTP during the work day whilst I am at work I felt was completely inappropriate." (Registrant)	155
Generic positive	Comments about positive experiences, giving little detail.	"They were very professional, polite and supportive." (Informant) "Based on my experience I think the GDC did all that they could." (Registrant)	139
Length of case	Comments focusing on the length of the process	"Greatly disappointed at length of time this case seems to be taking. It has been ongoing for over 15 months since I first reported this." (Informant) It is a stressful process overall and the time it took takes a toll so length of time between stages and clarity of the communications need to be improved." (Registrant)	103
Fairness/bias	Comments on perceived fairness of the process.	"I don't think GDC has a fair process to support the patients. The system is geared towards protecting the incompetent dentists." (Informant) "I find the GDC's investigation process very one-sided and lacking in proper evidence review. Communication is poor, and the treatment feels punitive rather than fair." (Registrant)	100
Case-specific	Details of specific cases, rather than perceptions of the process. Some included personal details, or reiteration of allegations against individuals.	Quotes omitted as some details may be identifiable	79
Proportionality	Comments on the perceived proportionality of cases.	"The punishment for the dentist was too soft for the damage done and should have been more severe." (Informant) "GDC should only get involved in specific cases to protect public interest and the profession. This should be clearly set so no cases other than those affecting the above be dragged into lengthy, stressful and expensive process." (Registrant)	68
Tone or attitude	References to the tone of communication from the GDC, or the attitude inferred by recipients	"Whole process was pointless . I dealt with offhand, disinterested staff. The outcome was a joke as a result I have no respect for the GDC." (Informant) "I was made to feel like a criminal when I had not even seen the patient during the time alleged. The GDC treats you as guilty from the offset rather than innocent until charged." (Registrant)	41
Survey: detail	Statements requesting the opportunity to provide more detail in the survey.	"Redesign this survey to make it more inclusive for the respondent instead of the tick box response exercise this this survey clearly is." (Informant) "I had anticipated a more in-depth exploration of the questionable FTP processes employed by the GDC." (Registrant)	37
Survey: impact	Statements indicating survey engagement may be	"I think more people would be inclined to take the survey if they believe their case may be reviewed." (Informant)	24

Code	Code description	Example quote	Number of statements
	higher if there were clear consequences from providing feedback.	"If they truly believed it would make a difference to the way the GDC operate in the future." (Registrant)	
Accessibility	References to the accessibility of systems or information, both in relation to technology and EDI concerns.	"The time limit to access information was restricting. Twice the link expired before I could access information." (Informant) "Should be a portal with all documents on relating to the case. Shouldn't just be downloadable once." (Registrant)	22
Taking seriously	Statements from informants about the perception their complaints were not treated seriously.	"I had a good case for malpractice, sent loads of emails and facts, none were considered, a total waste of my time, GDC aren't interested in my case." (Informant)	19
Support	References to support received from the GDC by respondents.	"I didn't feel supported during the investigation, and at one stage I was firmly told not to email again as I would be updated with the result." (Informant) "There was zero personalised support at the most stressful time in my entire career (links to websites were given, but they were of no use - I needed to speak to someone)" (Registrant)	18
Survey: demographics	Statements questioning inclusion of demographic items.	"Not sure what my sex, sexual orientation and religion has to do with this survey" (Informant) "Seems rather superficial with more questions on gender and religion than the actual subject its interested in." (Registrant)	15

As Table 10 shows, many comments were generic (both positive and negative), and not directly informative of areas for improvement. There were some key concerns – including the time taken, the clarity and frequency of communication, and perceptions of proportionality and bias. Some of these were already present in the survey (e.g. length of case) or were added in waves 3 and 4 as scale items (e.g. perception of bias).

Only a minority of responses provided clear actions, or potential actions, which the GDC could take. However, the comments indicating a desire to see impact from such feedback, and to have communication or evidence that it is being acted on, do provide an opportunity for action.

4 Discussion

4.1 What the data tell us

Across all the data, it seems there are overall similarities between the views of registrants and informants, with most being dissatisfied with the process. Analysis indicates that satisfaction with the process is associated in part with satisfaction with the outcome, which is not open to modification. However, there are aspects of the process which may be shaped, and so have potential to improve satisfaction regardless of case outcome.

While several aspects of the process were identified by participants as requiring improvement, those which had a statistical relationship with satisfaction may be prioritised as being more influential: the tone of communications, the speed of response to informants' queries, and the overall time taken. Higher level perceptions of appropriateness and proportionality may be addressed by explicit communication about decisions to proceed or escalate, and transparency in processes.

A majority of respondents felt the process could be improved. This may be a result of a sampling bias, with those who are less content being more likely to complete a survey about their experience. However, this cannot be assumed, and even if such views are the expression of a smaller proportion of the population, the raw numbers show widespread dissatisfaction: 176 registrants and over 250 informants in these samples felt lots could be improved.

Demographics, to the extent which they can be examined with these data, are not significant predictors of satisfaction. This is reassuring in terms of equitable experience, and means that data may not need to be weighted to reflect any variation across time. However, with very low numbers of responses from some minority groups, this may require further and ongoing attention.

4.2 How the data may be used

There is evidence that the questionnaire is suitable for gathering feedback on the FtP process, including the identification of areas of improvement. Some items may constitute useful indicators for tracking over time – the reported time for completion, overall satisfaction, and frequency with which particular communication elements were indicated as needing improvement, all have the potential to show change over time. However, the GDC may wish to consider if additional items should be introduced which may be indicative of particular challenges, or sensitive to planned changes.

Free text responses provide some opportunity for respondents to give constructive feedback, and may be helpful in indicating areas of potential improvement. They also allow respondents to express dissatisfaction, and expand on responses to other items, which may improve their engagement through providing more perceived control over their responses.

However, there is a risk of collecting large volumes of data that has little value for improving processes if potential solutions are not identified. The reduction in free text questions, and the imposition of a character limit in version 2 of the survey, did make a difference to the volume of data received, but it must be considered whether it is proportionate, or ethical, to collect such data if it may not be used. Analysis of free text is time-consuming, and there remain risks in respondents providing personal details or raising additional concerns which cannot then be addressed through the survey. If these items remain, communication around the survey, as well as the survey itself, must make clear that it is not possible to respond to individual concerns or complaints raised in this way, and signpost respondents to appropriate channels through which they may contact the GDC directly.

4.3 Caution in interpretation

The response rates are not high, although not unusual for online surveys (for which 20-25% is often a 'good' response rate). The effective response rate from those who received and opened the survey seems to be far higher based on email analytics, but as not all email clients/browsers register an email being opened, and some registered clicks may not have been on the survey link, this must be treated with caution. Lack of population demographics means there is a risk of some groups being under-represented.

5 Conclusion

This questionnaire has achieved a higher response rate than the previous process for gaining feedback. While this may be in part due to the questionnaire structure and items, which appears to be acceptable to respondents, it will also be in part due to the process by which it is disseminated, and the framing of the request to complete it. It can be inferred from response data, that this is the main challenge for increasing response rates further – to induce recipients of the email to open the questionnaire itself.

Some survey items have an association with reported satisfaction, and may provide potential levers for the GDC to improve satisfaction. Some, including overall satisfaction, have the potential to provide meaningful indicators of how perceptions vary over time, and future data collection will allow any trends to be reviewed over a longer period. Other items may not be of as much value to the GDC, and where they are not used, consideration should be given to dropping items to produce a more concise survey.

Finally, there was desire expressed in some free text comments that feedback should be seen to be effective, and as something which would be acted upon by the GDC. To this end, communication around the survey has potential benefit for future engagement. For example, a 'you said, we did' framing could illustrate any response to feedback.

6 Appendices

Appendix A: Versions of survey

Version used at Waves 1 and 2

Feedback on the process for raising and investigating concerns about dental professionals
Help the GDC improve its process for dealing with concerns

With something as sensitive as the way the General Dental Council (GDC) deals with concerns raised about dentists and dental care professionals, it is important to hear from those who have been through the process to make sure everything went as well as it could, and see how things can be improved. The process of looking at concerns which are raised is part of the GDC's responsibility to ensure Fitness to Practise.

This survey asks you some questions about your experience, whether you are a dental professional about whom a concern has been raised, or someone who has raised a concern. It has 9 pages and should take around 5-10 minutes to complete.

This is about your experience of the process - we will not ask about any details of your case, and any additional information you raise will not be identifiable.

We appreciate that the experience can be challenging, but your feedback here may help to improve the experience of others in the future. Your responses are completely anonymous. If you would like to contact the GDC, please use the contacts on this page: https://contactus.gdc-uk.org/

Please note, this version of the survey is a pilot being developed as part of a project conducted by Newcastle University and the University of Manchester. Anonymous data may be shared with the GDC.

Newcastle University is the data controller for this survey. While the questionnaire does not ask for any personally identifiable information, it does contain free text questions. Please see our Privacy Policy.

How did you come to be involved in the investigation of a concern?
The next page contains questions specific to your role in the case. Please select which best describes you. If you have been involved in more than one case, please consider the most recent completed case, or case which has been referred to a Hearing, even if the Hearing is still in progress.

Are you
- A registrant about whom a concern was raised
- Someone who has raised a concern

[registrant path]
The stage your case reached
Your case may have reached any of a number of different stages. It will help the GDC to consider your feedback on the process to know what stage your case reached. You can find out more about these stages here.

Stage 1: Initial Assessment
The concern is assessed to decide whether any harm has been caused to a patient, or public confidence in the profession may have been undermined. This stage decides whether the concern should be considered by the GDC, or by another body. This decision is usually made within 1 week.

Stage 2: Casework
If a concern is taken forward by the GDC, information will be collected from records and from the registrant to see if it needs to be considered in more depth. No decision is made at this stage about whether an allegation is true. The aim is to complete this stage within four months from the date a concern is received.

Stage 3: Case examiner
If a case requires further consideration, case examiners will look into it further, alongside any further comments from the registrant, and the person who raised the concern. A decision will be made at this point whether any further action

is necessary, if conditions are placed on the registrant's practice, or if the concern should proceed to a hearing. Cases which proceed to this stage should have a decision within 6 months of the concern being raised.

Stage 4: Hearings
If the case examiner stage decides there should be a hearing, the case is passed on to the independent Dental Professionals Hearings Service. Hearings are conducted in public by an independent committee which hears evidence from all parties and makes a decision on any action to be taken.

The GDC Hearings service is a separate part of the GDC, independent of the fitness to practise process. A separate survey is being developed to evaluate that aspect of the process, and if you have been through the hearings service you will hear from us again. However, please do complete the rest of the survey reflecting your experience in the earlier stages.

What stage did your case reach? (Registrants are not informed of an initial assessment which does not proceed to Casework).

- Casework
- Case examiner
- Can't remember/Don't know
- Prefer not to say

Following the case examiner stage, did the case proceed to a hearing?

- No, it did not proceed to a hearing
- Yes, it did proceed to a hearing

Experience as a registrant

How were you first informed that a case was being opened?

- Email
- Letter
- Phone call
- Other

What other form did that first contact take?

How clear was the first communication from the GDC about the details of the case and what would happen?

- Not all clear
- Moderately unclear
- Moderately clear
- Very clear
- Can't remember

It would be helpful for us to know whether you were represented during your case.

- I was represented
- I was not represented
- Prefer not to say

Your experience of the process

How did you feel about the outcome of the process - the decision made following a case investigation. This could be any action taken, the decision to proceed to a hearing, or the decision not to continue with a case.

- Extremely dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

Overall, how did you feel about the process, and how things were run? Try and put to one side how you feel about the outcome and consider what was done well or could have been done better.

- I felt lots could have been improved
- I felt several things could have been improved
- I felt very little could have been improved
- I felt nothing could have been improved

How long did the process take from the first contact with the GDC to being informed of the final outcome? (If you don't know exact dates, please select the most likely answer).

- One month or less
- 2 to 6 months
- 6 to 12 months
- 12 to 18 months
- More than 18 months

The next page asks in more detail about things that could have been improved.

Improvements

Which of the following do you think could be improved?

- How often I received updates from the GDC about my case
- The detail of updates I received
- The speed of response to queries
- The information provided about the case outcome
- The overall length of time of the investigation
- The tone and respect of communications
- The clarity of communication from the GDC
- The overall support I received from the GDC through the process
- How useful information from the GDC was

Please provide any suggestions of things that could be improved in relation to what you have ticked above. Please indicate if emails, letter, phone calls could be improved.

- [free text]

Positives

Please tell us about anything the GDC did well.

- [free text]

[Informant path]

The stage your case reached

Your case may have reached any of a number of different stages. It will help the GDC to consider your feedback on the process to know what stage your case reached. You can find out more about these stages here.

Stage 1: Initial Assessment
The concern is assessed to decide whether any harm has been caused to a patient, or public confidence in the profession may have been undermined. This stage decides whether the concern should be considered by the GDC, or by another body. This decision is usually made within 1 week.

Stage 2: Casework
If a concern is taken forward by the GDC, information will be collected from records and from the registrant to see if it needs to be considered in more depth. No decision is made at this stage about whether an allegation is true. The aim is to complete this stage within four months from the date a concern is received.

Stage 3: Case examiner
If a case requires further consideration, case examiners will look into it further, alongside any further comments from the registrant, and the person who raised the concern. A decision will be made at this point whether any further action is necessary, if conditions are placed on the registrant's practice, or if the concern should proceed to a hearing. Cases which proceed to this stage should have a decision within 6 months of the concern being raised.

Stage 4: Hearings
If the case examiner stage decides there should be a hearing, the case is passed on to the independent Dental Professionals Hearings Service. Hearings are conducted in public by an independent committee which hears evidence from all parties and makes a decision on any action to be taken.

The GDC Hearings service is a separate part of the GDC, independent of the fitness to practise process. A separate survey is being developed to evaluate that aspect of the process, and if you have been through the hearings service you will hear from us again. However, please do complete the rest of the survey reflecting your experience in the earlier stages.

What stage did your case reach?

- Initial assessment
- Casework
- Case examiner
- Can't remember/Don’t know
- Prefer not to say

Following the case examiner stage, did the case proceed to a hearing?

- No, it did not proceed to a hearing
- Yes, it did proceed to a hearing

How you raised your concern

What was your relationship to the dental professional about whom you raised a concern?

- Patient
- Colleague (as a dentist)
- Colleague (as a DCP☐
- Employer
- Other
- If you selected Other, please specify:

How did you raise your concern?

- By telephone
- By letter
- Through the GDC website
- By email
- Other
- Please give more detail

How easy was it to raise a concern this way?

- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult

How satisfied were you with the initial response from the GDC?

- Extremely dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

How clear was the initial communication from the GDC about the details of the case and what would happen?

- Not all clear
- Moderately unclear
- Moderately clear
- Very clear
- Can't remember

Had you raised a concern about the dental professional through any other route?

- No, only with the GDC
- Yes, with the registrant directly
- Yes, with the registrant's employer
- Yes, with the Dental Complaints Service ☐DCS☐about a private provider
- Yes, with the NHS about an NHS provider
- Other
- If you selected Other, please specify:

Your experience of the process

How did you feel about the outcome of the process - the decision made following initial assessment or case investigation. This could be any action taken, the decision to proceed to a hearing, or the decision not to continue with a case.

- Extremely dissatisfied

Moderately dissatisfied
Moderately satisfied
Extremely satisfied

Overall, how did you feel about the process, and how things were run? Try and put to one side how you feel about the outcome and consider what was done well or could have been done better.

I felt lots could have been improved
I felt several things could have been improved
I felt very little could have been improved
I felt nothing could have been improved

How long did the process take from the first contact with the GDC to being informed of the final outcome? (If you don't know exact dates, please select the most likely answer).

One month or less
2 to 6 months
6 to 12 months
12 to 18 months
More than 18 months

The next page asks in more detail about things that could have been improved.

Improvements

Which of the following do you think could be improved?

How often I received updates from the GDC about my case
The detail of updates I received
The speed of response to queries
The information provided about the case outcome
The overall length of time of the investigation
The tone and respect of communications
The clarity of communication from the GDC
The overall support I received from the GDC through the process
How useful information from the GDC was

Please provide any suggestions of things that could be improved in relation to what you have ticked above. Please indicate if emails, letter, phone calls could be improved.

[free text]

Positives

Please tell us about anything the GDC did well.

[free text]

[registrant and informant paths merge here]

About you

This survey is anonymous. It is important to us that we have an idea of who is completing the survey, and these questions will allow us to consider whether we are getting a representative range of responses.

These questions ask about your protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. This will help us understand more about who has taken part in this survey and how people's experiences differ.

You can select 'prefer not to say' for any of these questions. Some responses ask for further information ('Please specify'), but this is optional. When we report the survey findings, we will ensure that no one is identifiable from the answers they have given.

What is your sex?

Female
Male
Prefer not to say

Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

Yes
No (please specify - optional)

Prefer not to say
Please give more information if you would like to.

What is your age group
16-24
25-34
35-44
45-54
55-64
65 or over
Prefer not to say

Do you consider yourself to have a disability? The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial long-term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities.
Yes
No
Prefer not to say

What is your legal marital or registered civil partnership status?
Never married and never registered in a civil partnership
Married
In a registered civil partnership
Separated, but still legally married
Separated, but still legally in a civil partnership
Divorced
Formerly in a civil partnership which is now legally dissolved
Widowed
Surviving partner from a registered civil partnership
Prefer not to say

Who is, or was, your legal marriage or registered civil partnership to?
Someone of the opposite sex
Someone of the same sex
Prefer not to say

What is your religion?
No religion
Christian (all denominations)
Buddhist
Hindu
Jewish
Muslim
Sikh
Any other religion (please specify - optional)
Prefer not to say
Please specify (optional):

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?
Straight/Heterosexual
Gay/Lesbian
Bisexual
Other sexual orientation (please specify - optional)
Prefer not to say
Please specify (optional):

What is your ethnic group?
White
English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British Irish
Gypsy or Irish Traveller
Roma
Any other White background (please specify - optional)

Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups
- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed or Multiple background (please specify - optional)

Asian/Asian British
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background (please specify - optional)

Black/African/Caribbean/Black British
- Caribbean
- African background (please specify - optional)
- Any other Black, Black British, African or Caribbean background (please specify - optional)

Other ethnic group
- Arab
- Any other ethnic group (please specify - optional)

Prefer not to say

Improving this survey

We want to make sure this survey is effective in letting the GDC know how well the fitness to practise process works. The questions below are about this survey. Please indicate if anything is not clear, not appropriate, or if anything was not asked which you feel the GDC would benefit from knowing.

The survey was easy to understand
- Yes
- No
- Please say any more about why that was, and what could be improved.
  - [free text]

The survey allowed me to say what I wanted to about the process of raising a concern and the different stages of investigation.
- Yes
- No

Please say any more about why that was, and what could be improved.
- [free text]

The design of the survey was easy to use
- Yes
- No

Please say any more about why that was, and what could be improved.
- [free text]

What, if anything, would you change about this survey?
- [free text]

What might encourage more people to give feedback about their experience of the GDC fitness to practise process?
- [free text]

Version used at Waves 3 and 4

Feedback on the process for raising and investigating concerns about dental professionals

Help the GDC improve its process for dealing with concerns

The General Dental Council (GDC) deals with concerns about dentists' and dental care professionals' Fitness to Practise.

This is a sensitive process, and it is important to make sure everything went as well as it could, and see how things can be improved. As someone who has been involved in the process, we are asking you to complete this survey. It asks you some questions about your experience, whether you are a dental professional about whom a concern has been raised, or someone who has raised a concern. It has 7 pages and should take around 5-10 minutes to complete.

We know that the process can be challenging, but your feedback may help improve it for others. This is about your experience of the process. Your responses will be combined with others to identify areas for improvement. Please do not include any information that could identify you or another individual. We will not ask for details of your case, and will not be able to respond to comments about individuals.

If you would like to contact the GDC, please use the contacts on this page. Please note, this version of the survey is a pilot being developed as part of a project conducted by Newcastle University and the University of Manchester. Newcastle University is the data controller for this survey. While the questionnaire does not ask for any personally identifiable information, it does contain free text questions. Newcastle University will remove any personally identifiable information before sharing with the GDC. Please see our Privacy Policy.

How did you come to be involved in the investigation of a concern?

The next page contains questions specific to your role in the case. Please select which best describes you. If you have been involved in more than one case, please consider the most recent completed case, or case which has been referred to a Hearing, even if the Hearing is still in progress.

Are you
A registrant about whom a concern was raised
Someone who has raised a concern

[registrant path]

The stage your case reached

Your case may have reached any of a number of different stages. It will help the GDC to consider your feedback on the process to know what stage your case reached. You can find out more about these stages here.

Stage 1: Initial Assessment
The concern is assessed to decide whether any harm has been caused to a patient, or public confidence in the profession may have been undermined. This stage decides whether the concern should be considered by the GDC, or by another body. This decision is usually made within 1 week.

Stage 2: Casework
If a concern is taken forward by the GDC, information will be collected from records and from the registrant to see if it needs to be considered in more depth. No decision is made at this stage about whether an allegation is true. The aim is to complete this stage within four months from the date a concern is received.

Stage 3: Case examiner
If a case requires further consideration, case examiners will look into it further, alongside any further comments from the registrant, and the person who raised the concern. A decision will be made at this point whether any further action is necessary, if conditions are placed on the registrant's practice, or if the concern should proceed to a hearing. Cases which proceed to this stage should have a decision within 6 months of the concern being raised.

Stage 4: Hearings

If the case examiner stage decides there should be a hearing, the case is passed on to the independent Dental Professionals Hearings Service. Hearings are conducted in public by an independent committee which hears evidence from all parties and makes a decision on any action to be taken.

The GDC Hearings service is a separate part of the GDC, independent of the fitness to practise process. A separate survey is being developed to evaluate that aspect of the process, and if you have been through the hearings service you will hear from us again. However, please do complete the rest of the survey reflecting your experience in the earlier stages.

What stage did your case reach? (Registrants are not informed of an initial assessment which does not proceed to Casework).

- Casework
- Case examiner
- Can't remember/Don't know
- Prefer not to say

Following the case examiner stage, did the case proceed to a hearing?

- No, it did not proceed to a hearing
- Yes, it did proceed to a hearing

Experience as a registrant

How were you first informed that a case was being opened?

- Email
- Letter
- Phone call
- Other

What other form did that first contact take?

How clear was the first communication from the GDC about the details of the case and what would happen?

- Not all clear
- Moderately unclear
- Moderately clear
- Very clear
- Can't remember

It would be helpful for us to know whether you were represented during your case.

- I was represented
- I was not represented
- Prefer not to say

Your experience of the process

How did you feel about the outcome of the process- the decision made following a case investigation. This could be any action taken, the decision to proceed to a hearing, or the decision not to continue with a case.

- Extremely dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

Overall, how did you feel about the process, and how things were run? Try and put to one side how you feel about the outcome and consider what was done well or could have been done better.

- I felt lots could have been improved
- I felt several things could have been improved
- I felt very little could have been improved
- I felt nothing could have been improved

How long did the process take from the first contact with the GDC to being informed of the final outcome? (If you don't know exact dates, please select the most likely answer).

- One month or less
- 2 to 6 months
- 6 to 12 months

12 to 18 months
More than 18 months

The questions below ask about how you feel about the process. Please select how much you agree with each statement.

I trusted the process to reach the correct outcome.
Disagree completely
Disagree somewhat
Neither disagree or agree
Agree somewhat
Agree completely

I felt the process was fair and unbiased.
Disagree completely
Disagree somewhat
Neither disagree or agree
Agree somewhat
Agree completely

I felt the case was treated appropriately by the GDC.
Disagree completely
Disagree somewhat
Neither disagree or agree
Agree somewhat
Agree completely

I felt the case was treated proportionately by the GDC.
Disagree completely
Disagree somewhat
Neither disagree or agree
Agree somewhat
Agree completely

Possible improvements to the process

Which of the following do you think could be improved?
How often I received updates from the GDC about my case
The detail of updates I received
The speed of response to queries
The information provided about the case outcome
The overall length of time of the investigation
The tone and respect of communications
The clarity of communication from the GDC
The overall support I received from the GDC through the process
How useful information from the GDC was
Other

Please provide any details of potential improvements related to the above points, or list any aspects which you think worked well. Please make any comments constructive and things that the GDC can respond to. Please do not give any details of your individual case, or make further allegations. Your responses will be stored anonymously, and it is not possible to respond to any comments which you make here. (100 words maximum)

[free text]

[informant path]

The stage your case reached

Your case may have reached any of a number of different stages. It will help the GDC to consider your feedback on the process to know what stage your case reached. You can find out more about these stages here.

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The concern is assessed to decide whether any harm has been caused to a patient, or public confidence in the profession may have been undermined. This stage decides whether the concern should be considered by the GDC, or by another body. This decision is usually made within 1 week.

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Stage 3: Case examiner
If a case requires further consideration, case examiners will look into it further, alongside any further comments from the registrant, and the person who raised the concern. A decision will be made at this point whether any further action is necessary, if conditions are placed on the registrant's practice, or if the concern should proceed to a hearing. Cases which proceed to this stage should have a decision within 6 months of the concern being raised.

Stage 4: Hearings
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The GDC Hearings service is a separate part of the GDC, independent of the fitness to practise process. A separate survey is being developed to evaluate that aspect of the process, and if you have been through the hearings service you will hear from us again. However, please do complete the rest of the survey reflecting your experience in the earlier stages.

What stage did your case reach?
- Initial assessment
- Casework
- Case examiner
- Can't remember/Don’t know
- Prefer not to say

Following the case examiner stage, did the case proceed to a hearing?
- No, it did not proceed to a hearing
- Yes, it did proceed to a hearing

How you raised your concern

What was your relationship to the dental professional about whom you raised a concern?
- Patient
- Colleague (as a dentist)
- Colleague (as a DCP)
- Employer
- Other
- If you selected Other, please specify:

How did you raise your concern?
- By telephone
- By letter
- Through the GDC website
- By email
- Other
- Please give more detail

How easy was it to raise a concern this way?
- Very easy
- Somewhat easy
- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult

How satisfied were you with the initial response from the GDC?

- Extremely dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

How clear was the initial communication from the GDC about the details of the case and what would happen?

- Not at all clear
- Moderately unclear
- Moderately clear
- Very clear
- Can't remember

Had you raised a concern about the dental professional through any other route?

- No, only with the GDC
- Yes, with the registrant directly
- Yes, with the registrant's employer
- Yes, with the Dental Complaints Service ☐DCS☐ about a private provider
- Yes, with the NHS about an NHS provider
- Other
- If you selected Other, please specify:

Your experience of the process

How did you feel about the outcome of the process- the decision made following initial assessment or case investigation. This could be any action taken, the decision to proceed to a hearing, or the decision not to continue with a case.

- Extremely dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

Overall, how did you feel about the process, and how things were run? Try and put to one side how you feel about the outcome and consider what was done well or could have been done better.

- I felt lots could have been improved
- I felt several things could have been improved
- I felt very little could have been improved
- I felt nothing could have been improved

How long did the process take from the first contact with the GDC to being informed of the final outcome? (If you don't know exact dates, please select the most likely answer).

- One month or less
- 2 to 6 months
- 6 to 12 months
- 12 to 18 months
- More than 18 months

The questions below ask about how you feel about the process. Please select how much you agree with each statement.

I trusted the process to reach the correct outcome.

- Disagree completely
- Disagree somewhat
- Neither disagree or agree
- Agree somewhat
- Agree completely

I felt the process was fair and unbiased.

- Disagree completely
- Disagree somewhat
- Neither disagree or agree
- Agree somewhat

Agree completely

I felt the case was treated appropriately by the GDC.
- Disagree completely
- Disagree somewhat
- Neither disagree or agree
- Agree somewhat
- Agree completely

I felt the case was treated proportionately by the GDC.
- Disagree completely
- Disagree somewhat
- Neither disagree or agree
- Agree somewhat
- Agree completely

I felt my concern was taken seriously by the GDC.
- Disagree completely
- Disagree somewhat
- Neither disagree or agree
- Agree somewhat
- Agree completely

Possible improvements to the process

Which of the following do you think could be improved?
- How often I received updates from the GDC about my case
- The detail of updates I received
- The speed of response to queries
- The information provided about the case outcome
- The overall length of time of the investigation
- The tone and respect of communications
- The clarity of communication from the GDC
- The overall support I received from the GDC through the process
- How useful information from the GDC was
- Other

Please provide any details of potential improvements related to the above points, or list any aspects which you think worked well. Please make any comments constructive and things that the GDC can respond to. Please do not give any details of your individual case, or make further allegations. Your responses will be stored anonymously, and it is not possible to respond to any comments which you make here. (100 words maximum)

[free text]

[registrant and informant paths merge here]

About you

This survey is anonymous, and we do not know anything about who has responded, or not. It is important though that we have an idea of who is completing the survey, and whether we are getting a representative range of responses (it is hard to act on information from just one group). The questions on this page ask about your protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, and will help us understand more about who has taken part in this survey and how people's experiences differ. You can select 'prefer not to say' for any of these questions. Some responses ask for further information ('Please specify'), but this is also optional. When we report the survey findings, we will ensure that no one is identifiable from the answers they have given.

What is your sex?
- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say

Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?
- Yes
- No (please specify- optional)

Prefer not to say

What is your age group

16-24
25-34
35-44
45-54
55-64
65 or over
Prefer not to say

Do you consider yourself to have a disability? The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial long-term effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

Yes
No
Prefer not to say

What is your religion?

No religion
Christian (all denominations)
Buddhist
Hindu
Jewish
Muslim
Sikh
Any other religion (please specify- optional)
Prefer not to say
Please specify (optional):

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

Straight/Heterosexual
Gay/Lesbian
Bisexual
Other sexual orientation (please specify- optional)
Prefer not to say
Please specify (optional):

What is your ethnic group?

White

English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British Irish
Gypsy or Irish Traveller
Roma
Any other White background (please specify- optional)

Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups

White and Black Caribbean
White and Black African
White and Asian
Any other Mixed or Multiple background (please specify- optional)

Asian/Asian British

Indian
Pakistani
Bangladeshi
Chinese
Any other Asian background (please specify- optional)

Black/African/Caribbean/Black British

Caribbean
African background (please specify- optional)
Any other Black, Black British, African or Caribbean background (please specify- optional)

Other ethnic group

Arab

Any other ethnic group (please specify- optional)

Prefer not to say

Please provide additional detail about your ethnic group if you would like to.

Appendix B: Respondent feedback on survey

Interim reports summarised the responses to feedback questions about the survey itself. Text from those interim reports is reproduced below, along with a description of changes made for the third wave. Overall, responses indicated clarity and usability, and potential usefulness. The need for demographic data was questioned in some free text responses.

Feedback on survey: Wave 1

Participants were also asked about their views of the survey. Most found it easy to understand (99% of registrants, 93% of informants) and easy to use (98% and 93% respectively). Views were more mixed in response to 'The survey allowed me to say what I wanted to about the process of raising a concern and the different stages of investigation' – but similar for the two groups (77% of registrants and 72% of informants feeling it did not allow expression).

Respondents were invited to provide explanations for their responses in free text items, but many responses related to the FtP process, rather than the questionnaire. However, there were responses referring to the clarity of questions (although not specified), and questioning the need to ask all demographic questions.

Most common were comments indicating they would have liked more opportunity to elaborate – some implying more free text was desirable. Some of these comments suggested the respondent had not identified the free text boxes provided as an opportunity to say what they wanted to. The free text box referring to 'things that could be improved' in relation to a multiple-choice question may not have been clear, or felt too limiting. Some responses suggested more specific items for each stage of the process would have been helpful.

Feedback on survey: Wave 2

Participants were also asked about their views of the survey. Most found it easy to understand (98% of registrants, 94% of informants) and easy to use (98% and 97% respectively). Views were more mixed in response to 'The survey allowed me to say what I wanted to about the process of raising a concern and the different stages of investigation' (89% of registrants and 75% of informants feeling it did not allow expression).

Respondents were invited to provide explanations for their responses in free text items. As in the first sweep, many responses related to the FtP process, rather than the questionnaire, but there were comments about whether data would be used, urging action is taken on feedback (and often a lack of trust that it would be). Demographic items were again questioned.

Proposed changes for subsequent waves: Wave 2

Two tranches of data have been collected with the initial version of the questionnaire. With this information, it is proposed that revisions are made to the questionnaire before a final pilot sweep. Proposed revisions are:

- Removal of the survey feedback questions.
- Addition of scale items relating to trust in process, perceived bias of process and other attitudes identified in review of free text comments.
- Addition of text clarifying how data will be used by GDC.
- Removal of low-response demographic items on marital status.
- Revision of text around free text items to encourage constructive comments, and clarification of how details – particularly relating to individual cases or registrants – will be treated.

Key indicators to look at in the final dataset will be use of additional items, content and tone of free text, and missing data on demographic items.

Appendix C: Summary of responses to hearings survey

Following input from the GDC, it was agreed that a separate survey for witnesses and registrants who had been through the Dental Professionals Hearings Service would be appropriate. Organisationally, the Hearings Service is distinct from Fitness to Practise, and attending a hearing is a substantially different experience.

Method

The questionnaire comprised four main sections, with many questions common to both versions, although some questions and details were tailored to the different populations.

Questions addressed:

- Type of hearing
- Use of Hearings Service website
- Communication from Hearings Service
- Witness support
- Experience and support during hearing (in person and/or online)
- Accessibility and adjustments
- Demographics

Items used a mixture of yes/no questions, and responses to statements on a five-point scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

Links to the surveys were sent in two waves, in September 2024 (reminder October 2024) and November 2024 (reminder sent January 2025).

Results

Note: Low frequencies limit potential analysis of the data, and so the details below are limited to descriptions of distributions. Any further interpretation would be misleading.

Response rates

Due to the limited number of cases which reach hearings, the populations to which the surveys were distributed were small. Table 1 summarises data on opened emails and clickthrough on the survey links across the two waves. The completion rate of those who opened the survey is acceptable and for registrants similar to that of the FtP survey, but the clickthrough rate itself is low, and so the effective response rate is very low. Completion time is brief, reflecting the short length of both surveys.

Table 11. Response rates to each survey sweep

	Total recipients	Total respondents	Simple response rate	Emails opened*	Clickthrough*	Completion rate from clickthrough*	Median (quartiles) time to complete
Registrants	61	8	13%	73**	13	62%	5.2 (3.8-6.6)
Witnesses	111	13	12%	114**	28	46%	4.1 (2.9-4.7)

* Completion rate from clickthrough

** Suggests some recipients opened both initial and reminder emails.

While demographic data were collected, the low numbers mean that there is a risk of identification of individuals where there are single-digit responses to many categories. These data are therefore not reported here.

Type of hearing

All but one hearing reported by registrants was a Professional Conduct Committee (PCC). The other was a Professional Performance Committee (PPC). Those attending a PCC were all represented, the one attending a PPC was not.

Five registrants and two witnesses attended in-person hearings, while two registrants and seven witnesses attended online proceedings. For one registrant (the PPC case) and four witnesses, attendance was not required.

All registrants felt their hearing was listed in a timely manner (all agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement).

Use of Hearings Service website

Three registrants and two witnesses said they had used the website, while two in each group were not sure. The remainder (three and nine respectively) had not. Of these, one registrant and three witnesses indicated they already had the required information, but the others indicated they had not known about the website.

Among those who had used the website, there were mixed views on the questions relating to experience of the website:

- On the website, the role of the Dental Professionals Hearing Service was clearly explained.
- On the website, it was clearly explained what would happen during the hearing.
- I was able to find the information I needed on the website.
- The information on the website was available in the format I needed.

Communication

Registrants and witnesses completed some different items, summarised below.

Both groups:

- My queries were responded to in a timely manner.

Registrants only:

- The Hearings Service staff communicated clearly during telephone conversations.
- The Hearings Service staff communicated clearly in letters or emails.
- The Hearings Service staff communicated clearly in the outcome/determination letter.

Witnesses only:

- The Hearings Service staff communicated clearly with me. (witness)
- The information I was given about what would happen at the hearing was easy to understand.

For all but one of these items, distributions of responses showed views across the five-point scale. The exception was the registrant-only item regarding clear communication of outcome to which all responses were on the lower half of the scale.

Witness support

There was an even split of responses between those who had been made aware of the Dental Professionals Hearings Service Participant Support Officer, those who hadn't, and those who could not remember.

Most witnesses (n=9) had received telephone support prior to the hearing, but just one had received face-to-face support, and another had visited the hearing room before the hearing. (Two selected 'Other', but added text indicating they had received no support).

Overall, there was an even distribution of witnesses who felt the service provided was excellent, average or unacceptable.

Experiences of in-person and online hearings

Due to only two witnesses having attended in person hearings, and two registrants having attended online hearings, it is not possible to meaningfully comment even on the distributions of those responses. For the better-represented group in each type of hearing, views tended to be positive, or occupied a range of the scale crossing the midpoint. Table 3 summarises the analogous items for each type of hearing.

Table 12. Questions relating to online or in-person experience of hearings

In-person	Online
I was able to find the venue easily.	I was able to join the hearing easily without any technical problems.
I was welcomed by the Hearings Service staff.	I was welcomed by the Hearings Service staff.
I was able to ask questions about the process while at the venue.	I was able to ask questions about the process.
It was explained to me who was in the hearing room.	It was explained to me who was in the hearing.
I was able to engage in the hearing in the way I wanted to (directly or through a representative).	I was able to engage in the hearing in the way I wanted to (directly or through a representative).
I was kept informed about what was happening on the day of the hearing.	I was kept informed about what was happening on the day of the hearing.
I was kept informed of developments and waiting times.	
The facilities at the venue met my needs.	
The Hearings Service staff provided me with the information I needed.	
The Hearings Service staff provided me with the support I needed.	

Accessibility and adjustments

There was an even mix of both registrants and witnesses who indicated ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘can’t remember’ to questions asking whether they had been provided with accessibility information and given the opportunity to inform DPHS about any necessary adjustments.

Only one witness indicate they had asked for adjustments, and that these had been provided.

Implications and conclusion

Responses to the hearings survey were too few to draw any meaningful conclusions regarding the data. The use of the full range of the scale suggests some construct and content validity, which may mean data would be useful from a larger sample.

The completion rate of both registrants and witnesses who clicked on the link appears acceptable, but the numbers clicking through appears low. This may suggest that the framing of the survey was not appealing, or simply that recipients did not find it salient. However, as not all email clients may register opening or clickthrough, this cannot be guaranteed.