

# Briefing:

## Community Pharmacies and the Delivery Plan for Recovering Access to Primary Care

### Announcing Pharmacy First

Negotiations between Community Pharmacy England, Government and the NHS around the [Delivery Plan for Recovering Access to Primary Care](#), have now concluded.

The plan pledged £645m to support delivery of community pharmacy services and we are pleased to announce:

- A new national Pharmacy First service, to cover seven common conditions and be introduced from February 2024;
- A new Pharmacy Contraception Service which will allow women to have oral contraceptives initiated and receive repeat supplies in pharmacies; and
- Expansion of the NHS Blood Pressure Check Service through pharmacies.

This is the biggest investment in community pharmacy for well over a decade, and while it is not the panacea to the long-standing underfunding of the sector, it is very welcome recognition of the vital role and capabilities of pharmacies in supporting patient health. This builds on the part played by pharmacies during the pandemic as the public increasingly relied upon them as the most accessible open door in every high street for healthcare and advice.

“ It makes perfect sense to use community pharmacies as a first port of call for healthcare advice, access to contraception and health checks such as blood pressure tests. Local pharmacies are staffed by highly qualified healthcare professionals and empowering them to do more is a logical next step for primary care. These new services will help patients and the public, as well as reducing pressure on GPs and the wider NHS.

**Janet Morrison, Community Pharmacy England Chief Executive**

### Background to Pharmacy First

There has been a recognition for many years that pharmacies, notwithstanding their own [pressures](#), can and want to do more to help the public to manage common health conditions, relieving pressures on other parts of the health service, such as general practice.

Pharmacists are clinically trained health professionals with a special expertise in medicines. From 2026, all newly qualifying pharmacists will be independent prescribers. This means they may prescribe autonomously for any condition within their clinical competence.

Community Pharmacy England has been calling for a national Pharmacy First Service for many years as a way to provide additional choice and support for patients, but also to secure some desperately needed funding for community pharmacies. We submitted a fully costed proposal to the Government in March 2022 and were delighted the service was included in the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care.

**86%** of pharmacy owners told us they want to provide a Pharmacy First service.  
[CPE sector polling, July 2023](#)

**75%** of people agree that they would like to see community pharmacies offering more healthcare services such as treating urinary tract infections or sore throats. [YouGov poll for CPE](#)

**78%** of people say the services provided by community pharmacies are 'very important' to them, their family or community. [YouGov poll for CPE](#)

**65** million informal healthcare consultations are taking place in England's community pharmacies every year with no specific funding attached to them. [Pharmacy Advice Audit 2022, CPE](#)

## About the new Pharmacy First service

The Pharmacy First service will enable patients to visit pharmacies, as a first port of call, for help with a range of common minor illnesses. This service will be limited to seven conditions at first, but our ambition is that this will be expanded as the service matures. In the consultations with a pharmacist, people with symptoms suggestive of the seven conditions will be provided with advice and will be supplied, where clinically necessary, with a prescription-only treatment under a Patient Group Direction (PGD). In the future, we hope that independent prescribers will be able to use their skills to complete episodes of care within the service, without the need for a PGD.

If the pharmacy team cannot help with the condition the patient is presenting with, then the patients will be signposted to the appropriate healthcare access point, such as general practice or A&E.

The service will enable pharmacists to offer advice to patients and supply NHS medicines (including antibiotics), where clinically appropriate, for:

1. Sinusitis
2. Sore throat
3. Earache
4. Infected insect bite
5. Impetigo
6. Shingles
7. Uncomplicated urinary tract infections in women

In addition to this, patients will continue to be able to access emergency prescription medicines or consultations on other minor conditions where they have been referred to the pharmacy by NHS 111, GPs or other settings.

Importantly, the scheme is supported by a major investment in IT/Digital systems to enable access and updating of patient records and wider interoperability of community pharmacy and NHS systems which will be key to supporting patient pathways of care and integrating the sector into primary care systems.

Pharmacy First will launch on 31st January 2024. We expect that there will be an NHS-led patient information campaign to increase awareness of the service. In the future we hope to build on the service, expanding it to include more conditions.

### The Pharmacy Contraception Service

A Pharmacy Contraception Service will allow community pharmacists to initiate supplies of oral contraception for women. This is a step forward, building on the current provision of repeat supplies of contraception, and it will offer a convenient option for women using the contraceptive pill. It marks a significant change for women and there is scope in the future for this service to be extended into other forms of contraception and HRT treatment to create a wider women's health service in the community.

**The NHS estimates that almost half a million women will be able to access the contraceptive pill next year without needing to contact their GP.**



The investment in these services is desperately needed and welcome: pharmacies want to offer these services, and in future, we hope to see pharmacies getting even more support, with more services available and independent prescribing commonplace.

**Janet Morrison, Community  
Pharmacy England Chief Executive**



## Blood Pressure Checks

Government and the NHS have pledged £75m additional funding – from within the Recovery Plan investment to support pharmacy services – to expand the NHS Blood Pressure Check as well as supporting the Pharmacy Contraception service described above.

The Blood Pressure Check service allows people aged 40 years or over to receive blood pressure checks to help identify those at risk of heart attack or stroke. The service will re-launch with a wider range of trained pharmacy staff able to provide it, and we hope even more patients will make use of this NHS service to find undiagnosed cases of hypertension.

There is scope for this service to be built on in future to develop hypertension management and other CVD related pharmacy services.

**The NHS hopes that up to 2.5 million blood pressure checks will be delivered by spring 2025.**

## Challenges and next steps for community pharmacy

We believe that members of the public and patients will support these steps to expand the role of community pharmacies – and we will be supporting the NHS communications campaigns that encourage people to make use of these services.

Many GPs welcomed the prospect of the Pharmacy First service when the Recovery Plan was announced and community pharmacy will be working hard at local and national level to embed these new services within primary care and make them a success. Much work has already taken place to map out the clinical pathways for the services.

Work has also been undertaken to address concerns that enabling pharmacists to supply antibiotics under Patient Group Directions (PGDs) could increase the risks of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Addressing these concerns is partly why the negotiations took so long, as the risks of this service on AMR were fully evaluated, considered and mitigated against. Pharmacists are highly trained healthcare professionals who understand medicines and their potential risks, and the experience of the Scottish and Welsh Pharmacy First schemes, not to mention many local schemes in England, suggests that pharmacists are more cautious about supplying antibiotics than other healthcare professionals.

There are further challenges ahead for community pharmacies who continue to grapple with the impact of 30% real terms funding cuts, spiralling costs, and workforce, medicine supply and other operational pressures. This extra funding for services is very welcome, but it will not

address the underlying core funding deficit in the sector. We continue to see headlines about pharmacy businesses reporting record financial losses, being put up for sale, and continuing their programmes of branch closures.

**79% of pharmacy owners are either neutral or feel they are ill-prepared to face the pressures of the coming winter\***

**80% of independent pharmacies report medicine market instability, workforce costs and unpredictable revenue stream being at maximum pressure – with multiple businesses also reporting high pressure levels across these areas\***

*\*Community Pharmacy England polling, November 2023, not yet published*

In the coming months we need to work with the NHS and Government to address some of these issues – we will need your ongoing support if we are to achieve this.

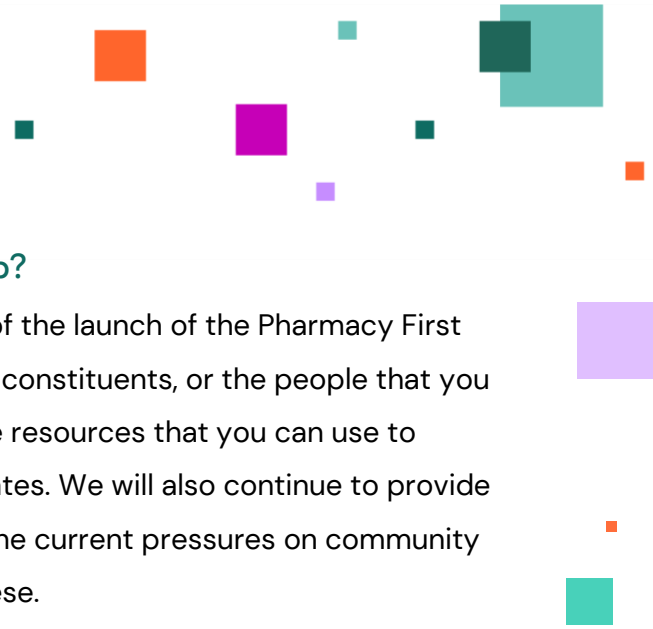


**This announcement is an important step forward for community pharmacies and their patients, but it is not going to solve all of the problems that pharmacies are struggling with. Community pharmacies remain under significant financial and operational pressure with businesses of all sizes reporting record losses.**

**Pharmacy teams will remain very busy throughout this winter but they will be working hard to build these new services into their daily workload when they launch. We hope to work constructively with NHS and the Government to address some of these wider issues over the coming months.**

**Janet Morrison, Community Pharmacy England Chief Executive**

We will also be continuing our work to try to implement the recently published [Vision for Community Pharmacy](#) from Nuffield Trust and The King's Fund. The think tanks set out an ambitious vision for the future in which community pharmacies will offer more across four key policy domains: preventing ill health and supporting wellbeing, providing clinical care for patients, living well with medicines, and being part of an integrated primary care offer for neighbourhoods. We know that if the current challenges can be overcome, community pharmacies are ambitious about this bright future.



## How can MPs and other pharmacy supporters help?

We will be in touch again in January 2024, around the time of the launch of the Pharmacy First service. We would appreciate your help in making sure your constituents, or the people that you represent, are aware of the new services and we will provide resources that you can use to highlight the services, including newsletter and email templates. We will also continue to provide briefings and other materials on the steps needed to ease the current pressures on community pharmacies and would appreciate your support in raising these.

## Reaction to the Pharmacy First Service

### **Chair of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's English Board, Tase Oputu said:**

"This is a really positive step to enhance patient access to care and better manage demand across the health service. The investment is a welcome recognition of the crucial role that pharmacists play in helping the public at the heart of primary care."

### **Dr Claire Fuller, NHS medical director for primary care and the NHS' lead GP in England said:**

"I'm delighted the changes that the NHS is making mean people will have new and convenient ways of accessing treatments for many common conditions. In particular, contraception is essential for many women, and this is a big step forward in making these services easier for women to access."

### **Louise Ansari, Chief Executive of Healthwatch England said:**

"Access to GPs remains the top concern we hear from the public. If delivered and communicated to the public effectively, Pharmacy First has the potential to significantly alleviate pressures on general practice and improve experiences for patients."

### **Rachel Power, Chief Executive of the Patients Association, said:**

"Pharmacies know their communities and the expansion of services pharmacists can offer expands choice for patients. We welcome this and we believe patients will too."