

Briefing for Parliamentarians: Pharmacy First service

March 2024

Summary:

- The Pharmacy First service enables patients and the public to visit pharmacies, as a first port of call, for help with a range of common minor illnesses. Over 98% of all English pharmacies currently offer the service.
- The community pharmacy sector has ambitions for the service beyond what is currently offered – Pharmacy First shows once again the potential and willingness of community pharmacy to support Government and NHS objectives.
- To deliver further services through community pharmacies, these must be commissioned in the context of fair, sustainable funding.
- MPs are encouraged to post about Pharmacy First on social media to inform constituents about the new service, visit a local pharmacy, and arrange a meeting with their Local Pharmaceutical Committee (LPC).

What is the Pharmacy First service:

Pharmacy First enables community pharmacists to provide advice and supply prescription-only medicines, including antibiotics and antivirals where clinically appropriate, to treat seven common health conditions without the need to visit a GP. The seven conditions, and patients who can be treated, are:

- Sinusitis (12 years and over)
- Sore throat (5 years and over)
- Earache (1 to 17 years)
- Infected insect bite (1 year and over)
- Impetigo (1 year and over)
- Shingles (18 years and over)
- Uncomplicated urinary tract infections (women aged 16–64)

What are the benefits of the Pharmacy First service?

For patients

By thinking 'Pharmacy First', patients and the public will find it easier and quicker to get the help they need and bypass the 8am rush to book an appointment with their GP. This is something that patients have welcomed. According to a 2023 YouGov Poll, 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.



Four in five people in England can reach a community pharmacy within a 20-minute walk and there are twice as many pharmacies in the most deprived communities, making access to care quicker and more convenient.

For pharmacy owners

Pharmacy owners have been calling for this service for many years. In July 2023, 86% told us they wanted to provide the service. In 2022, it was estimated that 65 million informal healthcare consultations were taking place in England's community pharmacies every year, with no specific funding attached to them. This service goes some way to injecting some much-needed funding into the community pharmacy sector, particularly after a real terms cut of 30% since 2015.

For the wider NHS

Pharmacy First aims to help free up 10 million GP appointments a year by next winter. This will give GPs time and space to see patients with more complex conditions.

Will Pharmacy First have an impact on antimicrobial resistance?

NHS England has led the work to ensure that the clinical pathways for the Pharmacy First service and the associated Patient Group Directions (PGDs) – the legal framework that allows a pharmacist to supply certain prescription-only medicines – will allow community pharmacists to supply antimicrobials, only where clinically appropriate, without increasing the risks of antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

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 services** in England, suggests that pharmacists are more cautious about supplying antibiotics than other healthcare professionals.

Pharmacists understand the issues and have already been contributing to anti-microbial resistance efforts for several years through their Pharmacy Quality Scheme.

Ambitions for the future:

Community pharmacy has ambitions for the service, beyond what is currently offered. This could include extension to treatment of other conditions – such as chest infections – as well as building on other services and diagnostics.

The [Vision for Community Pharmacy](#) developed by Nuffield Trust and The King's Fund and commissioned by Community Pharmacy England, provides further policy insight on how we could build on and develop the community pharmacy service to support the nation's health and wellbeing.



The report makes several suggestions including:

- Expanding other clinical services in pharmacies such as delivering more NHS vaccinations or supporting women's health.
- Building on the Blood Pressure Checks Service to offer treatment and management of hypertension.
- Looking at the management of long-term conditions like asthma and diabetes.
- Pharmacists referring directly for diagnostics, e.g. blood tests and to secondary care where appropriate, rather than sending patients back to their GP.
- Pharmacists undertaking targeted health checks and screening for at-risk groups.

To read a summary of the Vision report, scan the QR code:



Other new pharmacy services

From December 2023, thousands of women have been able to get their contraceptive pill from their local pharmacy.

Pharmacists are also increasing the number of life-saving blood pressure checks given to at-risk patients over the next year, with a Government ambition to deliver 2.5 million a year by spring 2025. It is estimated this could prevent more than 1,350 heart attacks and strokes in the first year.

Pressures on the sector:

- In order to deliver further services in community pharmacies, they must be commissioned in the context of fair, sustainable funding.
- The unsustainable financial situation, because of a decline in core NHS funding by 30%, inflationary pressures and inability to pass on rising costs, has resulted in intolerable pressures for community pharmacies and an increase in pharmacy closures.
- This situation is unsustainable and requires urgent attention in the form of an immediate review of the Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework (CPCF), to ensure that it delivers the funding pharmacies need to serve their patients.
- Pharmacy funding requires an urgent uplift if it is to continue to support the network of pharmacies, and the future CPCF must include an uplift mechanism to prevent funding from falling short due to rising costs and inflationary pressures.