June 2026

CPE Briefing Note: Summary of the Pharmacy Pressures Survey 2026

Community pharmacies across England are under unprecedented financial, operational, and workforce strain. Medicines shortages have become a routine challenge, and all while increasing numbers of patients are relying on pharmacies as access to General Practice remains difficult.

The findings from the Pharmacy Pressures Survey 2026 once again highlight a stark reality: without urgent and sustained financial and policy support from the Government, more pharmacies will be forced to cut back services or, in the most severe cases, shut down entirely. Immediate action is needed to protect community pharmacies before even more serious consequences are felt by patients, the wider public, and the NHS as a whole.

Key Findings

75%	of community pharmacies in England are losing money
14%	of pharmacies are profitable
99%	of pharmacy businesses say medicines purchasing costs are not being fully covered by NHS reimbursement
76%	of pharmacies say patients are being directly impacted by the pressures on their business
100%	of pharmacy businesses report their costs are higher than this time last year *47% say costs are significantly higher*
86%	of pharmacies are spending longer to procure medicines than this time last year, *30% say procurement is taking longer than ever before*

Background

The Community Pharmacy England "Pharmacy Pressures Survey" is a recurring annual survey of pharmacy owners and pharmacy staff in England designed to monitor the operational, financial and workforce pressures facing the sector. Fieldwork for the 2026 survey was conducted between 12th February and 13th April 2026, capturing responses from pharmacy owners representing 2,936 pharmacies therefore providing a comprehensive snapshot of current challenges across the sector. The survey results highlight the scale of the pressures facing community pharmacy and their impact on patients and services.

Summary of the Key Findings

Rising Costs

The survey shows that operating costs for pharmacy owners are still increasing. Nearly all responding pharmacy businesses (99.7%) reported that **their costs are higher than at the same time last year**, with 47.4% of pharmacies having significantly higher costs. **Medicines purchasing costs not being fully covered by NHS reimbursement** was reported by nearly all respondents (98.9%) as were **increases in staffing costs and wages (95.1%)**. Other areas of cost increases reported in pharmacies included utilities (39.1%), Business Rates (38.0%), Transport and Fuel Costs (33.4%), Capital Costs (20.20%).

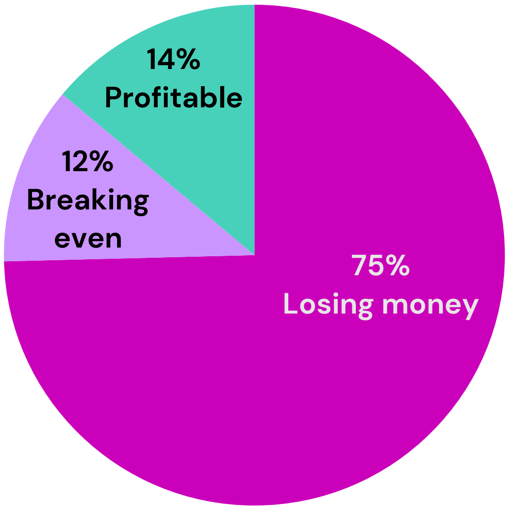
Concerns about future costs, including those associated with increases in National Minimum Wage and changes to business rates, mean that 32.7% of **pharmacies are seeking ways to further reduce their costs, which owners believe will likely impact patients**. In 18% of pharmacies, staff are being made redundant to manage costs.

Costs were also attributed to increased workload, with teams in 27% of pharmacies **spending increased time on sourcing medicines compared to last year**, and 28% spending more time to handle the increasing complexity of patient queries.

Community pharmacies are facing severe financial strain driven by the gap between costs and NHS reimbursement. Rising expenses – including staff wages, rent, business rates, utilities, IT systems, and supply chain costs – are compounding the problem.

Business Sustainability

Three in four community pharmacies are losing money



The majority of pharmacy businesses reported that they are losing money, with just 14% of pharmacies now profitable. 64% of pharmacies are actively losing money. For 6.6% of pharmacies, owners said that their business was unlikely to last another year.

This is playing out in their ability to purchase medicines with the owners of **10.9% of pharmacies reporting that they have been unable to pay their wholesaler bills on time.** Cashflow was a concern raised in the survey, and 9.7% suggested that the business has taken out additional financing to support its daily operations and cash flow.

Pharmacy businesses also indicate that **a quarter of business owners or directors (24.5%) have not taken any salary or income from the business**, and **15% have subsidised the pharmacy with personal savings**.

Many pharmacies report declining personal income, needing to refinance, or cutting back services, with some already closing, raising serious concerns about long-term sustainability.

In open-ended responses, pharmacy owners described how workload and complexity have increased significantly without corresponding funding. Pharmacies are absorbing growing demand from patients unable to access GP services, handling more clinical queries, inappropriate referrals, and administrative tasks, much of which is unpaid.

Staff are under intense pressure due to higher workloads, shortages, and rising expectations, with increasing time spent sourcing medicines amid ongoing supply issues. Combined with growing regulatory requirements and patient misunderstandings around what services are funded, several described how this has created an environment where pharmacy teams are doing more work for less, putting both workforce wellbeing and patient care at risk.

Medicines Procurement and Supply

86% of pharmacies in England are spending more time than last year procuring medicines

Medicines Procurement continues to be a concern with teams in 85.7% of **pharmacies spending longer to secure medicines**, with close to a third (30%) reporting this to be taking more time than ever before.

Where data was provided, there was a wide range in the amount of time being spent in the pharmacies with a range from a few additional hours a week, to some pharmacies recruiting additional full-time staff to help support their procurement activity. **Most pharmacies report spending ~5-8 extra hours per week**, with some significantly higher burdens upwards of 20+ hours per week.

99.73% of pharmacies have **seen an increase in medicines supply chain/wholesaler issues over the past year**.

Impact on Patient Care

Pharmacy owners were asked about the impact on patients due to the pressures on their business. In **76% of pharmacies, businesses owners suggested that patient services are being impacted by the pressures on their businesses**.

88.9% report being unable to source some medicines and supply these to patients, 83.4% of pharmacies suggest that **they are unable to respond to patients' phone calls/emails as promptly as usual** due to the pressures. 27.3% suggested they will have to limit answering calls and emails in 2026.

This means that patients are waiting longer to receive advice from staff in the pharmacy (72.5%) and that it is taking longer to dispense prescriptions (68.7%). When patients were able to access advice, teams in 39.1% of pharmacies were unable to spend as much time supporting/advising patients.

To manage costs, **owners of 29.7% of pharmacies reported they reduced opening hours in 2025, and a further 21.9% plan to reduce them in 2026**.

29.2% of respondents suggested that in 2026 they will have to begin charging for services that were previously offered to patients for free.

Access to Primary Care

98.8% of pharmacies have seen **an increase in requests for healthcare advice for minor conditions**, and 44% have seen an increase in requests for more serious conditions. This was partly attributed to the 98.9% of respondents who had seen an **increase in requests from patients unable to access general practice**, and 93% suggested **an increase in informal referrals from general practice**.

Over a third of respondents (35.8%) suggested they has seen an increase in delays in prescriptions being issued from general practice.

Workforce Pressures

39.9% of the pharmacy business respondents report staff shortages in their pharmacies. 21.8% reported staff sickness due to stress or other issues linked to working in the pharmacy with 13.2% describing difficulties in finding locums to cover.

67.6% reported difficulties in recruiting permanent pharmacists into the pharmacy, rising to 76.3% for support staff.

Pharmacy Outlook

The open responses suggest that community pharmacies are facing a severe and worsening financial crisis driven by chronic underfunding, rising operating costs, and a reimbursement system that often forces them to dispense medicines at a loss.

Respondents consistently highlight that current funding does not reflect real-world pressures such as inflation, staffing, rent, and utilities, leaving pharmacies effectively subsidising NHS services.

The Drug Tariff, concession pricing, and clawback mechanisms are widely seen as unfair, opaque, and outdated, with delays and inaccuracies creating significant cashflow problems.

The respondents expressed a strong call for increased, sustainable, and inflation-linked funding, baseline establishment payments similar to GP contracts, reform or removal of clawback, and guarantees that medicines are reimbursed at or above cost.

Alongside financial pressures, pharmacies are struggling with workforce shortages, burnout, medicine supply instability, and rising workloads without adequate compensation.

Medicine shortages and price volatility have become routine, adding operational strain and affecting patient care, while expanded service expectations (e.g. Pharmacy First) are often seen as unfunded workload increases.

Respondents call for better workforce support, funded training, improved IT and premises investment, and closer integration with the wider NHS. Overall, there is a strong consensus that the current system is unfit for purpose and requires urgent, large-scale reform – without which many pharmacies warn they will be forced to reduce services or close, threatening patient access to care.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey highlights a sector under severe and mounting pressure, with community pharmacies facing rapidly rising operating costs that are not matched by NHS reimbursement.

This financial mismatch is driving significant instability, with many pharmacies loss-making, some unable to meet basic financial obligations, and others relying on personal income sacrifices or external financing to survive.

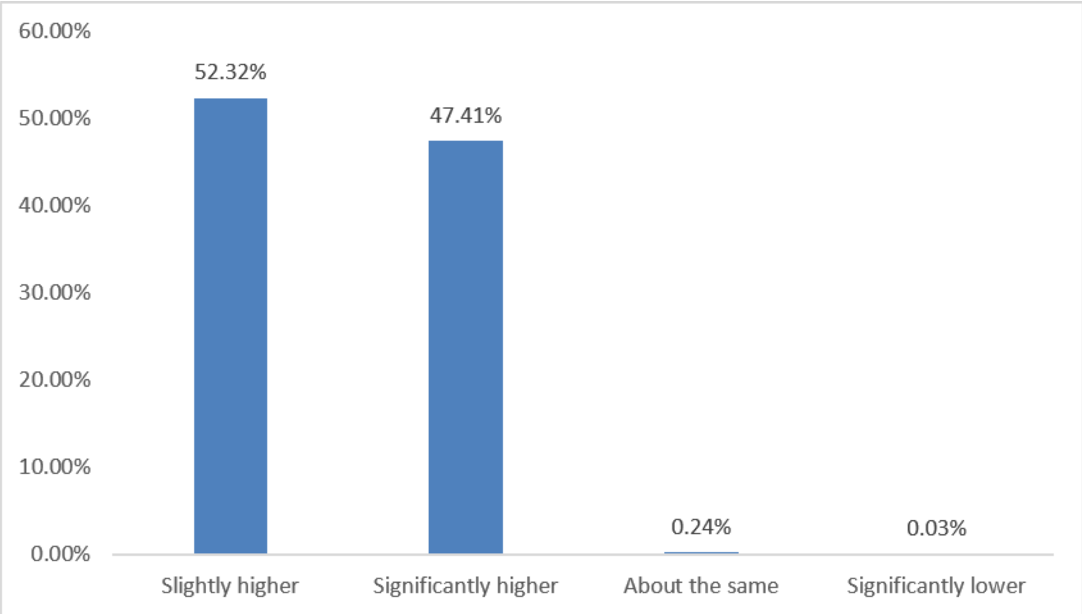
At the same time, workload and complexity are increasing due to medicine supply challenges, workforce shortages, and growing patient demand – particularly as access to general practice is impacted.

These pressures are directly impacting patient care, resulting in delays, reduced service quality, and plans to cut opening hours or introduce charges for previously free services.

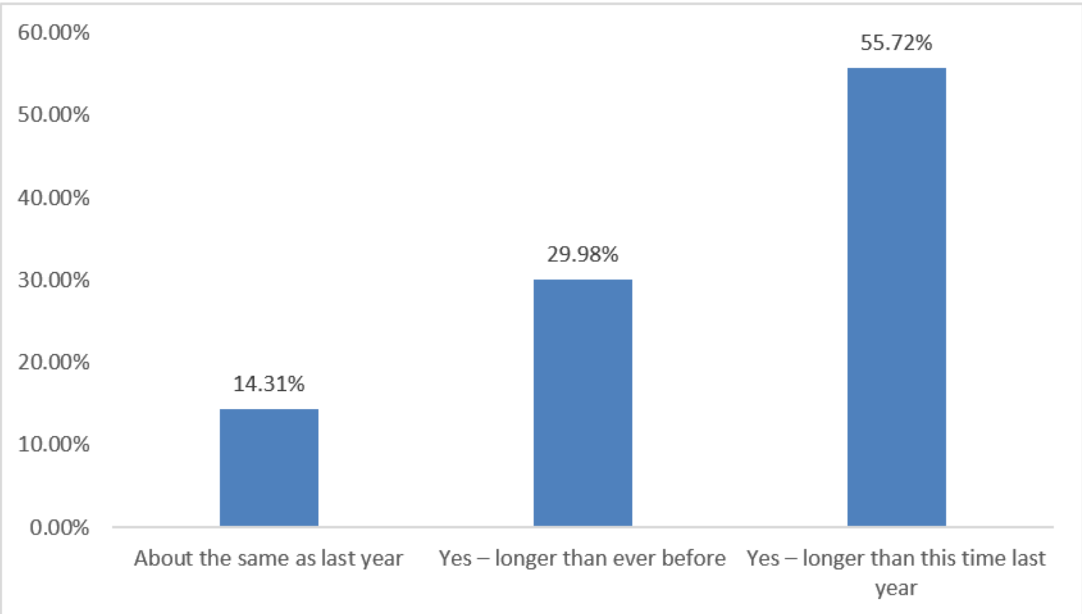
Overall, the findings continue a trend seen in previous surveys and point to a system that is widely viewed as unsustainable, with urgent reform needed to address funding gaps, workforce challenges, and supply chain issues to prevent further deterioration in pharmacy services and patient access to care.

Annex: Breakdown of results

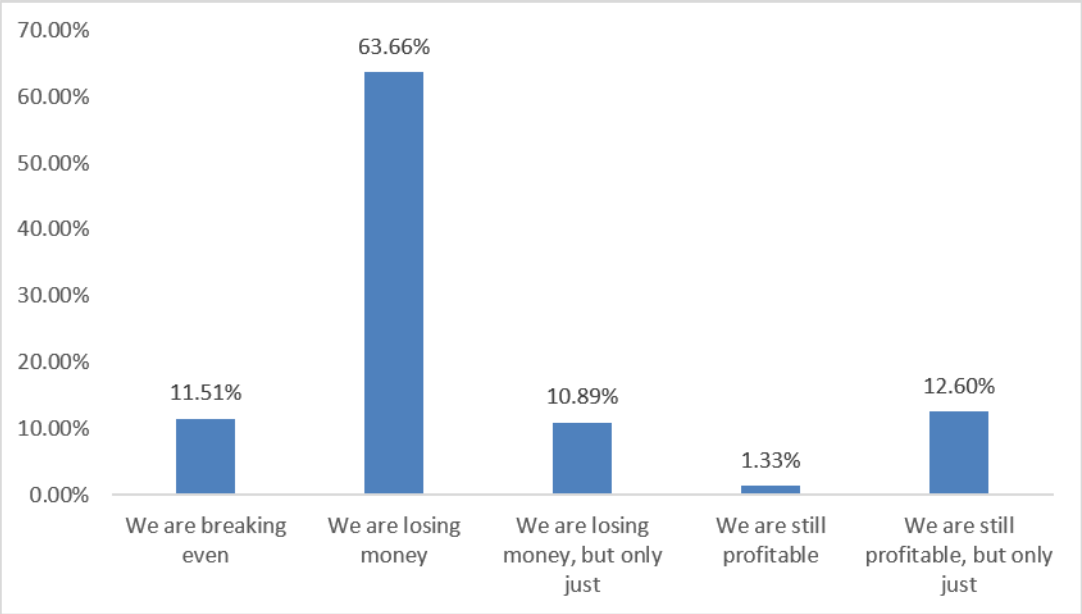
How do the current costs for your pharmacy (or pharmacies) compare with this time (February) last year?



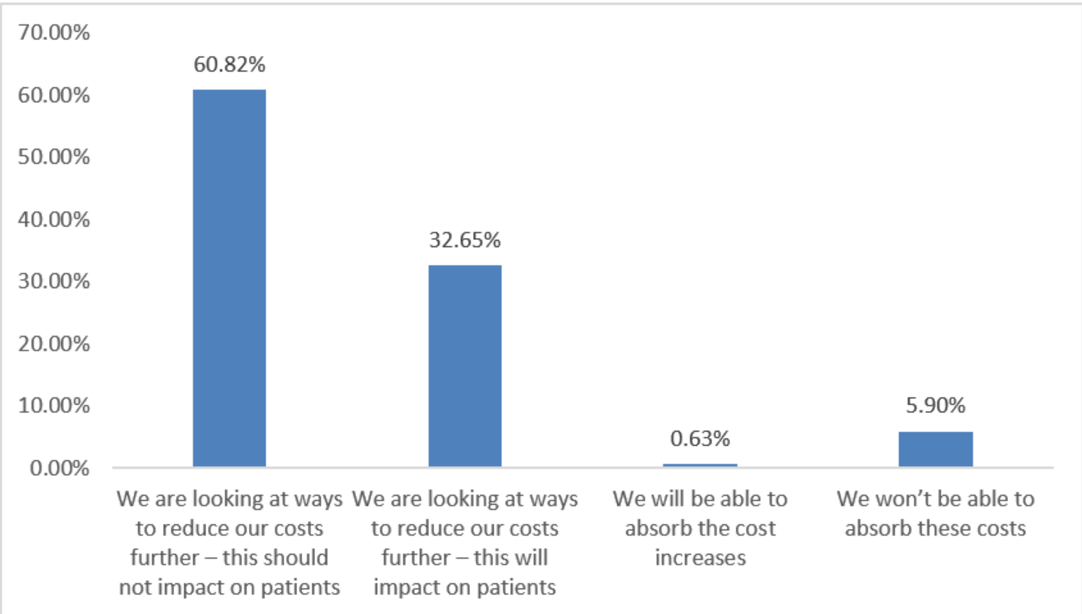
Is your business having to spend longer to procure medicines than this time (February) last year?



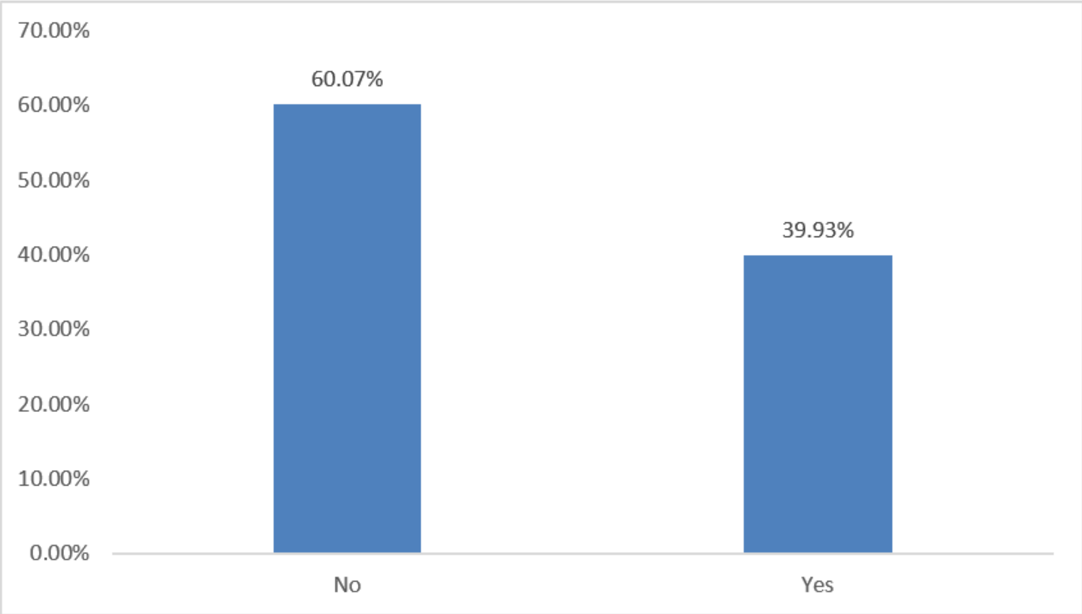
How profitable is your pharmacy business at present?



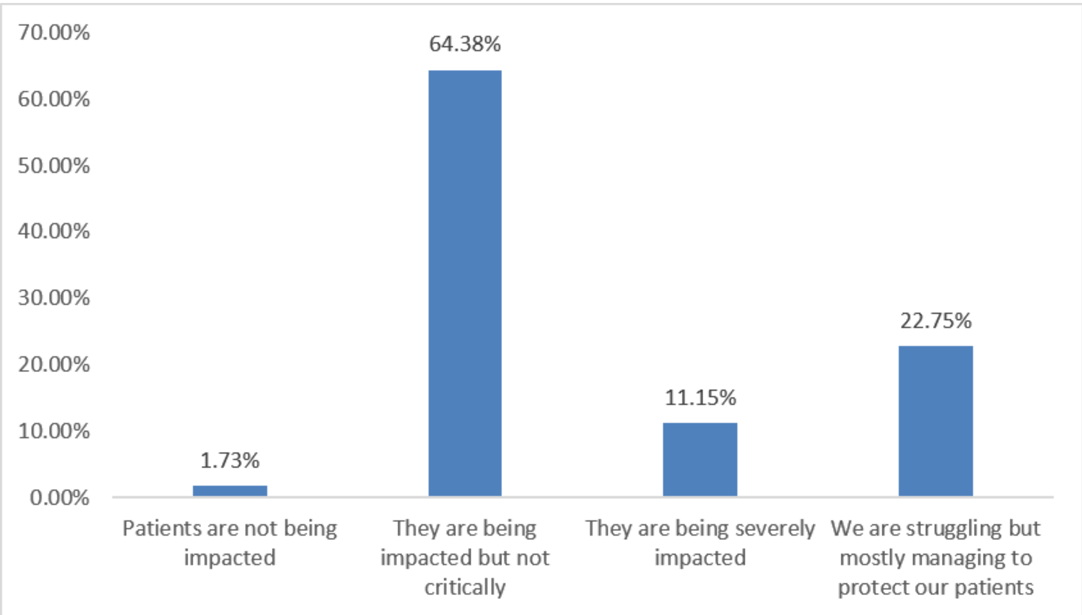
How will your business manage the upcoming increase in National Minimum Wage and changes to business rates, from April 2026?



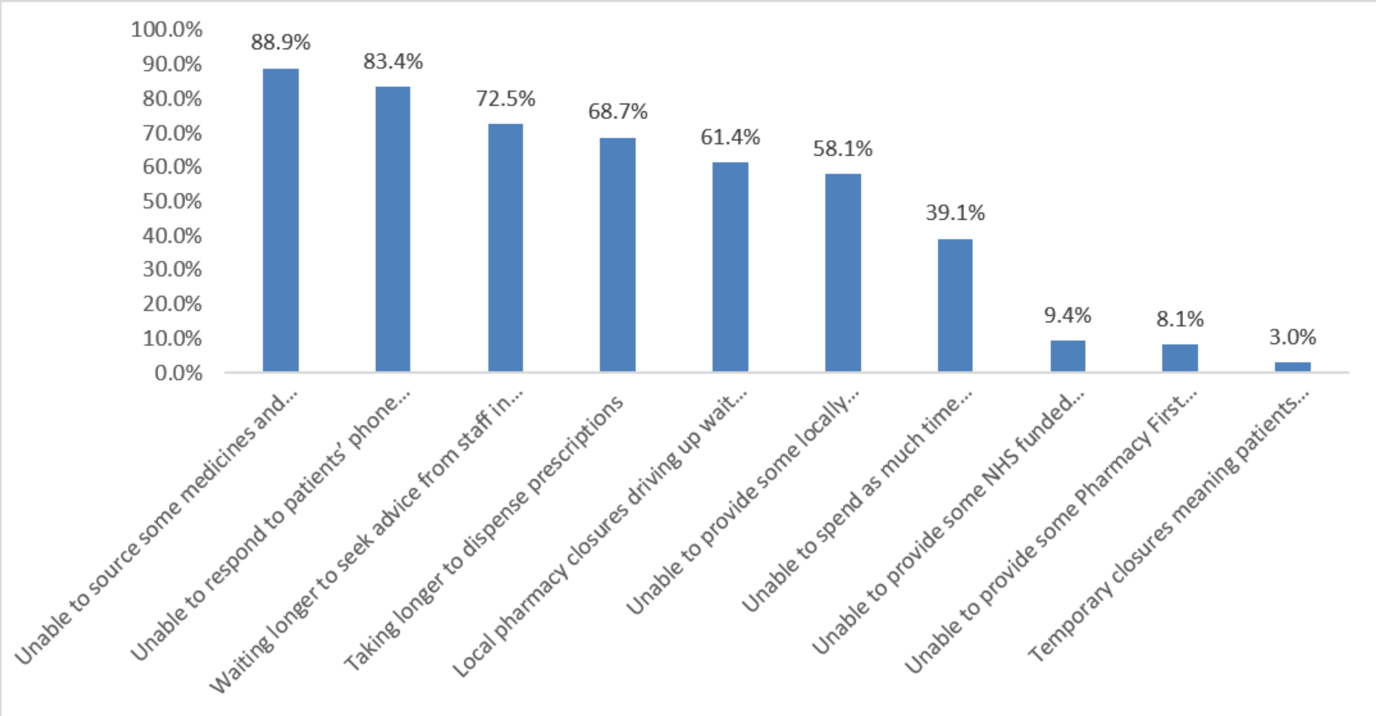
Is your business consistently experiencing staff shortages?



Are patient services being negatively affected by the pressures on your business?



What has the impact on patients been? (please tick all that apply)



If you have any queries or require more information, please contact:

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