



Pharmacies & Covid: lessons learned

A report by Healthwatch Kent & Healthwatch Medway

May 2021

What is it like being a Community Pharmacist during a pandemic?

That's the question we asked pharmacists last year. Over 100 got in touch to tell us their stories about working during the first lockdown and how it had affected them.

We published everything they told us in a report and made a number of recommendations to ensure lessons were learned, and the system could be better prepared for the months ahead.

As we emerge from another lockdown, we wanted to hear how community pharmacists are feeling now and what progress has been made.

40 community pharmacists from across Kent & Medway got in touch. This report details what they told us.

The Headlines

55%

of pharmacies said staff morale has improved since the first wave of the pandemic, but 32.5% told us it hadn't.

87.5%

told us the response to equipment and PPE requests has improved since the first wave of the pandemic.

80%

told us they do not feel access to primary care has improved for them.

52.5%

could identify areas of the community which they felt are still digitally excluded from accessing services.

35%

said the rollout of the NHS111 first service had impacted their team and 55% told us it hadn't had any effect.

What change do we want to see?

We hope to build some recommendations, in collaboration with service providers, which address the key issues that have been highlighted within our pharmacy reports. These recommendations will focus around workforce wellbeing, communication between pharmacies and GP practices, and NHS 111 referrals to community pharmacies.

Key themes

We've identified clear themes which provide an insight into the issues reported by community pharmacists across Kent & Medway.

Difficult communication with GPs

80% of pharmacies we heard from told us they had not experienced any improvement with access to primary care, since the first wave of the pandemic and in many cases they told us it had deteriorated. Comments included:

- ***"GP services are less accessible, it's difficult to communicate with GPs"***
- ***"There is a huge problem contacting GP surgeries to resolve prescription enquiries"***
- ***"Communicating with GPs via telephone has been a challenge"***
- ***"GP just expects us to do emergency supplies if they haven't done a prescription. They direct telephone medication requests to us, resulting in 100s of phone calls. We are effectively managing their repeat service, free of charge"***
- ***"Our team is under more pressure due to local GP practices. There are delays in prescribing not working to full capacity causing an increase of emergency supplies. We are dealing with a closed-door surgery and the backlash from this."***
- ***"There is virtually no collaborative working between pharmacy and GP surgeries. The worse it has ever been in decades of my experience."***





Increased workload from GPs

A number of pharmacies told us that their workload has increased because GPs are signposting people to pharmacies. Comments included:

- ***“We are providing services for patients that would be better served by GPs”***
- ***“Challenges stemming from GPs still severely restricting face to face appointments, hence lots of enquiries regarding things like rashes and minor ailments. Although we have the knowledge, we are struggling with the workload”***
- ***“GPs are making inappropriate referrals to us. For example patients being told we can look inside their ears, down their throats and sending patients over with UTI’s saying we can treat it”***
- ***“Patients who can't be offered a GP appointment are being signposted to the pharmacy instead. They are coming to us with problems that we can't resolve which is adding to their distress as well as taking our time”***
- ***“Lots of patients coming to us for blood pressure monitoring sent from GP’s”***



Better understanding of the pharmacists' role

Pharmacists told us that patients often aren't aware of what they can offer and the services they provide. Often they believe pharmacists can offer services which aren't available within a community setting. This can, at times, lead to frustrations and 'abusive' behaviour.

- *"Patients don't understand the pressures we face"*
- *"Patients chasing up prescriptions before the due date, patients not waiting for the app to update and show collection is ready."*
- *"Our workload has increased due to peoples' anxieties"*
- *"Peoples' attitudes have become difficult when they don't get the service that they expected"*
- *"Patient attitudes are becoming challenging; they become annoyed and angry when asked to wear face masks or keep social distancing"*
- *"Occasional challenging behaviour from customers not wearing masks, or refusing to leave home and wanting everything delivered"*
- *"There seems to be a lack of understanding by patients, and other healthcare professionals, about non NHS funded services such as emergency supplies, deliveries and pharmacy filling of blister packs."*
- *"I feel that better patient education is required to ensure people don't contact health professionals unnecessarily. Our job is important - mistakes can lead to fatal errors"*

What has changed since our last report?

Morale and wellbeing

In our last report, community pharmacies identified mental health support as one of the top three areas where they felt their staff needed support most, as morale was extremely low.

55% of pharmacies felt morale has improved. However, the need for mental health support has still been raised as a concern by some pharmacies. We can see that whilst overall morale has improved, in many cases individual wellbeing has not.

- *"I'm working under pressure to cover people who are off"*
- *"Stress of the workload"*
- *"My workload is huge"*
- *"Mental Health is an issue"*
- *"We are physically and mentally exhausted"*
- *"We are short staffed. They are all on anti-depressant/anti-anxiety tablets"*
- *"Morale has improved as the end of the pandemic is in sight"*
- *"All our staff have had their vaccine now which has improved our morale"*
- *"Morale has decreased massively due to low staffing levels and increased demand"*
- *"The increase in rude and abusive customers has had an impact on our morale and wellbeing"*
- *"I feel like we are running on empty"*
- *"We feel like we have been forgotten, we do not come under the NHS so even though we have worked so hard during the pandemic we have not had the recognition we feel we deserve, Scotland and Wales pharmacy workers have been given £500 (tax free) each as a thank you for their hard work, what about us!!!! did we not work as hard?"*
- *"It is frustrating being a community pharmacist. We are forgotten with constant funding cuts"*
- *"We are having more and more unpaid work dumped on us"*
- *"Pharmacies have been overlooked seen rather as contractors than NHS workers. We've been open and under a lot of pressure during whole of the pandemic with no recognition from either government or general public. There was no pay improvement despite increased workload (which we took off GP surgeries and emergency services such as 111)"*



PPE for pharmacy staff

In our last report, access to PPE was identified as one of the top three areas where pharmacies felt their staff needed support. 87.5% of pharmacies told us this had now improved since the first lockdown.

- *“We have had a little more support as we are able to order PPE that wasn’t available during the first wave of the pandemic”*
- *“The online portal is easy to access and the equipment is delivered the next day”*
- *“Response to PPE has improved and supplies are coming in no problem but there is no improvement in the support for our well being”*

Working with primary care

In our last report, 78% of the pharmacies we spoke to told us that communication and working with GP surgeries had been difficult and slow. We wanted to find out if this had improved.

80% of pharmacists told us that they hadn’t seen any improvement with access to GPs since their first wave of the pandemic.

Whilst there were 8 pharmacists that told us access to GPs has improved, three of these said it had improved since the first wave of the pandemic but was still not back to pre-pandemic levels.

We heard some positive stories:

- *“We have direct contact with our PCN pharmacist who told us they are happy to help with issues regarding contact with GPs. They are also working on getting us a direct line for calls from pharmacies only”*
- *“A few surgeries now have direct email access which we can send queries to, this has made a massive difference in communication”*

Further comments include:

- *“It stiller seems to be impossible for patients to access GPs”*
- *“We are having a lot of backlash from patients as they are not able to get through on the phone to book GP appointments”*
- *“We struggle to discuss issues with prescriptions with some surgeries. We do not have a direct line and we have to contact them through the main line just like everyone else.”*
- *“It is difficult to speak to primary care because they do not have a direct line for pharmacies”*
- *“If anything, the doctors have got worse. We are constantly having to chase prescriptions and enquire where prescriptions are. Surgeries still have their doors shut and do not pick up the phone to answer queries”*

Digital exclusion

In our previous report, 73% of community pharmacies identified that sections of their communities were in a greater need of support, particularly elderly people. Over 50% of pharmacies felt that parts of the community remain digitally excluded today. Comments included:

- *"I believe the elderly are at a disadvantage as they still need community support"*
- *"For patients who are not online, ordering and access to medical services can be challenging"*
- *"I think older people really struggle with apps etc"*
- *"The GP surgery won't answer their phones so patients without internet cannot put their repeats in via app or email"*
- *"A lot of our customers are elderly so they are unable to use the e-consult system"*
- *"Our village is of an older generation where patients do not have access to smart phones and must call the POD. If there is a queue of multiple people, then they tend to give up. This is the same issue when they call the GP"*
- *"No face-to-face services have resumed yet, and some GPs are still expecting customers to email photographs and this is not an option for many elderly patients"*

Vaccine roll out

The majority of pharmacies told us that the vaccine programme has had a positive impact on community pharmacy teams. Staff told us they feel safer and more confident now that they have been vaccinated.

- *"We are much more positive now that we have been vaccinated"*
- *"We were all able to access vaccines early which made the staff a lot more relaxed during the final lockdown"*
- *"At the beginning there were so many queries about whether or not we would be doing the vaccine which once again increased our workload. Now patients are aware and there has been a positive rollout of the vaccine it has helped significantly"*
- *"We feel safer"*
- *"The vaccine programme has improved the confidence and morale of team"*
- *"We've had an increased in queries and phone calls about the vaccine"*
- *Staff feel more protected"*

Impact of NHS 111 service

Over a third (35%) of pharmacies told us that their workload had been impacted by the roll out of the new NHS 111 First service. Whereas over half (55% told us they had seen no change. Comments included:

- *“We’ve had more referrals, but on some occasions these are unnecessary and could have been signposted in a better manner”*
- *“We do get a few NHS111 requests and they are actioned as soon as possible. It hasn’t impacted our workload a great deal, although we do have to appoint members of staff to routinely check the email for referrals”*
- *“We receive more referrals on Saturdays which has a big impact”*
- *“Referrals have increased but not excessively”*
- *“Workload has increased. It has added to the pressure”*
- *“It has created more work as the 111 staff have not been properly trained. We get bad referrals every week that we should not get.*
- *“We do receive quite a few referrals which as a pharmacy we cannot deal with, as more often than not the patient's need antibiotics which we cannot supply”*
- *“This has generally impacted staff working on a Saturday - it has slightly increased their workload”*

From these insights, it seems pharmacists who feel their workload has been increased due to the rollout of the NHS111 First service, see the effects of this most on Saturdays. Some pharmacists told us they had not seen an impact on their workload, as they are closed on Saturdays.



Other challenges facing pharmacies

Pharmacists shared a number of other issues with us including:

- *“Demand for pharmacy services is high as patients find us more accessible”*
- *“More patients are talking to us about their mental health issues which is stretching our resources”*
- *“Obtaining prescriptions on time for patients is a challenge”*
- *“Increased workload with minimal staffing levels”*
- *“Obtaining certain medications is proving difficult”*
- *“We are seeing increased deliveries and we’re having problems reducing this demand”*
- *“The workload has increased but the number of trained staff has not”*
- *“Pressure with quality care payments for compulsory training, in order for us to meet the QCP criteria”*
- *“Lack of clear communication between healthcare teams causes problems”*
- *“We have concerns around how to deliver services safely and keep both ourselves and customers safe”*
- *“There is increasing demands for new services but no increase in support”*
- *“Demand on home deliveries has also increased ending in patients being disappointed and an increase in complaints. We had already reached full capacity before the pandemic”*
- *“There has been increased demand for emergency supplies caused by delays in getting prescriptions from GP surgeries”*

What do we hope to achieve?

We want to give community pharmacists a voice.

Some of the feedback relates to specific services and in these instances we have taken the feedback to them directly to initiate change.

We hope to inform the development of workforce wellbeing plans and strengthen the support available for staff wellbeing and mental health needs.

We will explore the implementation of direct contact methods between community pharmacies and GP surgeries throughout Kent and Medway.

We are looking to establish a route for community pharmacists to share inappropriate referrals received from GPs and NHS111 services.

We are always looking to drive positive change to health and social care services.

We will keep you posted on our progress.

Thank you

Thanks to all the pharmacies that took the time to contribute feedback to our report. Without your input and insights we wouldn't have been able to build a picture of the issues you, and the wider healthcare system, is facing.

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healthwatch
Kent

Healthwatch Kent
Church Road, Seabrooke House
Ashford TN23 1RD

 info@healthwatchkent.co.uk

 @hwkent

 @HealthwatchKent

 @healthwatch_kent

 0808 801 0102

healthwatch
Medway

Healthwatch Medway
5A New Rd Ave,
Chatham ME4 6BB

 enquiries@healthwatchmedway.com

 @healthwmedway

 @HWMedway

 @HealthwatchMedway

 0800 136 656