**MP Engagement Guidance for LPCs (August 2020)**

This document provides some guidance for LPCs looking to engage with local MPs in the summer months.

**Introduction**

Community pharmacies have been working flat out in recent months to cope with the unprecedented demand brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. LPCs may have so far engaged with MPs about the sector’s response to the pandemic, but now that Parliament has entered recess for the summer months, MPs will be back in their constituencies and focused on local business. This presents a good time to catch up with MPs you have an existing relationship with to remind them of the value of pharmacy. A large number of MPs were newly elected at the 2019 General Election and given the distractions of COVID-19, many of them may still require a proper introduction to the pharmacy sector. A visit or virtual briefing during the next few months could be a good way to get in touch with your MPs, all of whom should have an interest in hearing how local services have been supporting their constituents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

**How to engage with MPs during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Community pharmacy has built a profile among local and national politicians in recent years, but we must continue to build relationships with MPs to ensure they understand the value of pharmacies in their communities and the potential of the sector. We need to continue to build advocates in Parliament and to gain supporters who can help us to influence HM Government and Ministers.

Typically, we would encourage LPCs to arrange local MP visits to pharmacies during recess, but recently, in the first few months of the pandemic, pharmacy visits had been off the table. However, some MPs are beginning to visit their local pharmacies again (in a socially distanced way and wearing face coverings) and some pharmacies may like to consider offering this. Otherwise, LPCs may prefer to offer a briefing by video conference, such as Zoom, instead.

**If you do plan to host any pharmacy visits with MPs, remember top tips for the visit are to:**

* Choose the pharmacy for the visit carefully. The pharmacy you choose needs to demonstrate community pharmacy’s best assets. It should also, of course, be within the constituency of the MP. In the current environment there may be other considerations such as space in the pharmacy to allow for social distancing.
* Take photographs of the visit for you to use on social media and to share with the MP and their team.
* You will need to share photos with the MP’s team, and you may also want to offer a press release about the visit (template available on the PSNC website), which they can provide a quote for. Also remember that given the current climate, if you plan to share any resources/infographics, it will be preferable to send these across virtually rather than as printed copies.

**For virtual meetings via Zoom, remember:**

* If you are hosting the meeting, make sure the MP’s office receives dial-in details in plenty of time. You may also want to log on early in case of any technical difficulties.
* If the MP has chosen to host the meeting, make sure you have the correct dial-in details in advance.
* Someone from PSNC can be available to join you if you would like. Depending on availability, a member of the executive team or your Regional Representative could join your briefing to offer the national policy perspective.
* Even though they won’t have visited a pharmacy, you could still ask the MP if they will publicly back the sector with a local press release (template available on the PSNC website).

**Following up**

After the visit or briefing, do thank those involved in the visit, particularly the MP and their point of contact with you. There may be an opportunity to provide them with a further briefing in the future, or to put them in touch with PSNC on specific policy points that arose during your discussions.

**Tone, content and key messages for discussion**

The purpose of a pharmacy visit (or briefing) is to create a positive impression of community pharmacy, demonstrating pharmacy’s value, and particularly the work it has done through the pandemic, in terms of supporting both the health of local communities and other local health and care providers.

Community pharmacy’s core message is: community pharmacy is extremely valuable and has been working under huge pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic; please support it. Be sure to highlight plenty of local examples where pharmacy staff have gone above and beyond to support patients and constituents during the pandemic. We also want to highlight how important pharmacies will be in what is expected to be a very difficult winter. There may be a second peak of cases of COVID-19, alongside the risk of flu and other winter ailments. You can also demonstrate this value using the context of congestion in A&E departments and busy GP surgeries, pointing out that it is more important than ever that we use the valuable network of community pharmacies to keep people healthy and out of hospitals.

**Tips for tone and content of the meeting:**

* Take time to prepare.
* Keep the visit broadly positive if you can.
* Base the conversation around clear key messages.
* Stay away from technical terms and too much policy detail, especially for new MPs – many MPs will not be familiar with the sector, particularly those recently elected in 2019.
* Don’t be too party-political.

**Key messages for discussions**

**Changes to pharmacy ways of working**

Many pharmacies have adapted their usual ways of working in order to accommodate the increase in demand:

* Pharmacies have experienced an increased workload throughout the pandemic as demand for prescription medicines grew during the pandemic - a record number of prescription items – 93 million - were dispensed in March 2020.
* Many pharmacies also remained open throughout the bank holidays in Easter and May to ensure patient access to medicines and healthcare advice could be maintained.
* There have also been reports of increases in telephone call handling and patient counselling, as well as anecdotal examples where patients have approached the pharmacy for ailments such as cuts and fractures, as other healthcare locations restricted access to the public.
* Pharmacy teams also implemented the Pandemic Delivery Service, which helped to ensure that those ‘shielding’ at home, with no means of collecting their medicines, were able to access their prescriptions.
* Many former pharmacists and technicians have returned to the frontline since the pandemic and staff are generally working longer hours to cope with increased demand.

**Patient messaging**

Where you can, please encourage your MPs to share some patient messaging with their constituents. MPs will want their local pharmacy staff to stay safe and healthy so that pharmacies can stay open. They may be happy to help share some key messages to their constituents in order protect pharmacy teams so that they can continue to carry out their critical roles during this unprecedented time.

Key messages include:

* Avoid pharmacies if you are showing symptoms of COVID-19: If you have a dry, persistent cough, fever or shortness of breath, please avoid entering your local pharmacies as you would any other healthcare setting.
* Wear a face covering, in line with recent government guidance, when you enter the pharmacy.
* Be patient: All pharmacies are under immense pressure and working around the clock to ensure that you get what you need.
* Respect pharmacy staff: they are providing NHS services and deserve the same respect as any other frontline NHS worker.
* Order medicines as normal: There is no need to stockpile medicines. Ordering extra prescriptions and buying more over the counter medicines than you need will contribute to disruption to the medicines supply chain, which is otherwise robust.

**Key policy asks: What more do pharmacies need?**

Many MPs will want to know what further support pharmacies need from the Government to continue to remain open and serve their local constituents.

You can use the following key messages to discuss this:

**Additional funding:** Community pharmacy needs additional funding to cover the costs of COVID-19 and to maintain current service levels through the winter period. The government gave the sector £370 million in advanced payments to help ease cashflow, but this is not enough. A long-term increase to total pharmacy funding is needed in recognition of the unprecedented challenges that pharmacies are already facing.

**Access to testing**: Testing for community pharmacy staff must be prioritised so that they can continue to work on the frontline and support patients.

**PPE:** We need adequate supplies of quality personal protective equipment (PPE) in all pharmacies. Although additional funding has been granted to help pharmacies install protective barriers, some pharmacies are still reporting difficulties in sourcing masks and aprons. PPE will be particularly important for the flu vaccination effort this winter, which pharmacies will be at the heart of.

**Prescribing patterns:** We need all prescribers to keep their usual prescribing patterns so that potential medicines shortages are not exacerbated - some GP practices have been issuing 56-day prescriptions with serious implications for pharmacy capacity and medicines shortages.

**Removing paper forms**: We need the amendment of service consent models to remove paper forms and the amendment of regulations to remove the need for patients to sign prescription forms during the pandemic.

If you have any queries about the content of this resource, or need any help with follow-up actions, please contact: jessica.ferguson@psnc.org.uk