

Guidance for hosting a pharmacy visit with your local MP

This briefing provides guidance to help LPCs and contractors organise successful visits to community pharmacies for local MPs.

Introduction

Community pharmacies have been working flat out over the past year to cope with the demand and pressures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the recent conclusion of the CPCF year 3 negotiations, now is a good moment to engage with policy makers about what support the sector needs going forward. In addition to this, an MP visit represents a good opportunity to show off pharmacy at its best including the range of new services pharmacies can now offer and have been offering throughout the pandemic. As lockdown restrictions have lifted, MPs may be keen to visit a pharmacy in person, however you could also offer a virtual briefing if they would prefer. Either of these are excellent ways to showcase pharmacy to MPs – all of whom should have an interest in hearing how local services have been supporting their constituents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why organise a pharmacy visit?

Community pharmacy has built a profile among local and national politicians in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic: many MPs have publicly praised the role of community pharmacies in maintaining patient access to medicines and healthcare advice, supplying lateral flow testing kits, and in administering COVID-19 vaccinations. However, we must continue to build upon these relationships with MPs to ensure they fully understand the value of pharmacy and the sector's potential to do more, with the right support in place.

Ultimately, we need the support of MPs to help campaign for an expanded role for pharmacy and further investment into the sector, and pharmacy visits are an excellent way of engaging with local politicians to help build this support. A visit will be a valuable opportunity for MPs to learn about the current workings of the sector from the 'grassroots', including any local issues you are experiencing. It will also be a chance to be reminded of the value of pharmacy and to once again show their support for the sector.

All MPs will represent constituents who value and use pharmacies regularly, so MPs will generally be happy for the opportunity to show their support locally.

Covid-19

Pharmacies have been crucial to the pandemic effort across the country, and you should explain this to your MP. Set against a backdrop of many primary care access points becoming harder to reach during lockdowns, community pharmacies worked extended hours to ensure local communities could continue to access the medicines and the healthcare support services they needed. Many pharmacies also contributed to the vaccination effort with more and more people opting to be vaccinated in a community setting.

Pharmacies were more than happy to step up and provide these services but inevitably this has impacted considerably on the financial and operational health of the sector. A recent [report](#) by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Pharmacy found that almost half of those pharmacy owners surveyed suggested it was likely their pharmacy would be forced to close. 95% of pharmacy professionals surveyed felt their place of work was under financial pressure.

New pharmacy services

It is important to show pharmacies getting on with the job of supporting their communities with the plethora of services they now deliver. By educating and informing MPs about the value that community pharmacies can deliver, both to local communities and the healthcare system, we can win their support to increase future funding to pharmacies and secure their long-term future as community health hubs.

To support the NHS long term plan ambitions for disease prevention, every pharmacy is already a healthy living pharmacy offering a range of preventative interventions to increase general health and wellbeing. Pharmacies envisage an expansion in this role. You can talk about the new services agreed recently in the year 3 CPCF negotiations.

Smoking cessation

In January 2022, a Smoking Cessation Service will be rolled out as an advanced service. This service enables NHS trusts to refer patients discharged from hospital to a community pharmacy of their choice to continue their smoking cessation care pathway, including providing medication and behavioural support as required, in line with the NHS Long Term Plan care model for tobacco addiction.

Hypertension case-finding

In October 2021, the Hypertension Case-Finding Service will be rolled out as an advanced service to support the NHS Long Term Plan ambitions for prevention of cardiovascular disease. This service will have 2 stages. The first is identifying people at risk of hypertension and offering them blood pressure monitoring (clinic check). The second stage, where clinically indicated, is offering ambulatory blood pressure monitoring (ABPM). The blood pressure test results will then be shared with the patient's GP to then inform a potential diagnosis of hypertension.

New Medicine Service

The NMS, which supports patients who have been newly prescribed a medicine to get the maximum benefit from it, has been extended with a range of new patient and carer cohorts now eligible for the service. This will benefit people prescribed a new medicine for hypercholesterolaemia; osteoporosis; gout; heart failure; glaucoma; Parkinson's disease; epilepsy and urinary incontinence or retention.

The service can also now be offered to support parents / guardians / carers of children and adults newly prescribed eligible medicines who could benefit from the service, but where the patient is not able to provide informed consent.

CPCF and funding messages

As well as the new Advanced Services and the positive impact they will have, you can talk about all the work you are doing to implement them. Try not to get into too much detail on specific policy points, and MPs will not respond well to complaining, but you can get across the point that pharmacies needed an uplift in funding to mitigate against increasing operating costs, in part due to Covid, but these calls were flatly rejected by the Government. Talk about how this affects morale in the sector as well as your own personal predilections for the long-term future of the sector.

A key message to get across to your MP is: if pharmacies are to continue to provide this level of exceptional support to the communities they serve, the Government must fund them fairly. Underfunding the sector could have disastrous consequences for the local community, resulting in:

- Pharmacy closures
- Increased pressure on remaining pharmacy services
- Increased pressure on GP and other primary care services

Organising a visit: A step by step guide

Identify your MPs

It is important to first identify the right MPs to engage with, and find out which parties they belong to, and whether any of them serve as a Minister or front bench spokesperson. If you are engaging with MPs you do not know, it is a good idea to do some background research. There will be some record of what they have championed or spoken about in Parliament on Hansard, or you can get an idea of their key interests from the internet, or their websites and social media accounts. Look for links to community pharmacy or healthcare, as this will give you an idea of their position. If you already have a relationship with an MP, then you will know this and should be able to pick up some of your previous conversations with them – eg they may have been interested in a particular local service or might be keen to see pharmacies doing more to support a particular health agenda.

If you need any help or guidance on this, please get in touch- george.foote@psnc.org.uk. You will most likely deal with MPs' constituency assistant, make a note of their contact details as they could be very useful in the future. The following website has a search function which will allow you to easily find your MP: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps>

Choose the pharmacy for the visit

Make sure you invite MPs to visit a pharmacy within their constituency. LPCs can check their local MPs against PSNC's list, which maps all MPs in England to their LPC areas. Contractors can additionally use Parliament's postcode checker to confirm your local MP – this will be helpful if your pharmacy is in a different constituency boundary to where you live.

The pharmacy you choose needs to demonstrate community pharmacy's best assets. Whether this is because of its accessibility or because of the quality and range of services provided, choose a local pharmacy that shows the best of community pharmacy. In the current environment, there may also be other considerations such as space in the pharmacy to allow for social distancing.

Make the right approach

For those with existing relationships with MPs, you may already have their contact details, but generally MPs are best reached via their [parliamentary email addresses](#). Visits should be billed as an opportunity for MPs to see first-hand the work their local pharmacy teams do, as well as to better understand the challenges they face. Many MPs will be keen to show their constituents that they are supporting local health services, often through their website or on social media, so it would be useful to emphasise the chance to take photos, collaborate on a local press release, and show support for a highly valued team of health professionals in the local community. A template email invitation is included as [Appendix 1](#).

As well as showcasing community pharmacy, a visit will provide an opportunity to discuss pharmacy policy and the challenges facing the sector. Be aware that the visit may be short, due to diary pressures, meaning you will need to be clear about what you want them to understand and how you would like them to support you. Be ready for the question: "How do you want me to help?". MPs can table questions in Parliament, write privately to Ministers, or make contact with local commissioners and others responsible for planning and delivering local care, and PSNC can help with these follow-up actions.

Publicise the visit

A pharmacy visit is an ideal opportunity to generate local press coverage and cement awareness of pharmacy's central role within the community. You can:

- Contact your local newspapers in advance of the visit and make them aware of the time and date of the visit – they may want to send a photographer.
- Take photos of the visit for you to use on social media, for a press release, and to share with the MP and their team.
- Social media is important to a lot of MPs, so be sure to share photos of the visit on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and any other available channels. Encourage the MP and their office to share photos as well.
- Prepare a press release in advance to release the day after the visit. The release should be eye catching without being sensational. Use it to fly the flag for the work of community pharmacists and give an overview of the purpose of the visit and detail the individuals present. A template press release is included as **Appendix 2**.
- Make sure you include a quote from the pharmacy owner, the MP and any other relevant attendees (e.g. commissioner representative). You can approach all of these people in advance of the visit about adding a quote to the release, or you can ask the MP for a quote on the day itself – just make sure they have final sign off.
- Remember to keep an eye out for any coverage, including on the MP's communications channels!

Follow up

After the event, thank all 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, or to put them in touch with PSNC on specific points that arose during the visit.

Report back to local pharmacy contractors

LPCs should make sure you tell your contractors about the visit and any outcomes; it may inspire them to get involved in lobbying MPs in the future. You can also let PSNC know by emailing us at: george.foote@psnc.org.uk

The visit: tone, content and key messages

The purpose of a pharmacy visit is to create a positive impression of community pharmacy, demonstrating pharmacy's value and particularly the work the sector has done throughout 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 **pharmacies are extremely valuable in communities and have been working under huge pressure throughout COVID-19: if they are to continue to provide the high level of support to the communities they serve, they must be fully supported to do so.**

Be sure to highlight plenty of local examples where pharmacy staff have gone above and beyond to support patients and constituents during the pandemic. You can also demonstrate the value of pharmacy 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 help tackle the backlog of care.

Pharmacies have been a vital resource for patients throughout the pandemic

- Community pharmacies are a critical part of the NHS and they have much more to offer to benefit patients, local communities and local healthcare systems.
- Pharmacies have risen to the unprecedented health challenge presented by COVID-19; they made adaptations to ensure they could remain open and continue to provide vital medicines and services. Patients have relied on this support and the NHS has benefited from it.
- As well as dispensing prescription items in a COVID-secure way, pharmacies have delivered healthcare advice at a rate of more than 58 million consultations per year – they have been a buffer for the NHS, helping their local communities and reducing pressure on other NHS healthcare providers.

The majority of pharmacies are providing access to COVID-19 testing, and many are additionally supporting the COVID-19 vaccination programme

- 89% of pharmacies in England offer Lateral Flow Device testing kits as part of the COVID-19 testing programme. This means that most people should be able to access testing kits from one of their local pharmacies, improving access to rapid COVID-19 testing for people across England, helping them to return to work and education. The service is optional to provide, so the high uptake is testament to the commitment of pharmacy teams, who want to do as much as they can to support pandemic recovery.
- To date, around 700 pharmacy-led vaccination sites have administered more than five million COVID-19 vaccines, but there could be a greater role for community pharmacy in this important programme. Booster vaccinations are a growing challenge in which pharmacies could assist.

There are many more ways in which pharmacies are supporting people to stay healthy

While MPs will be keen to hear about access to testing and provision of COVID-19 vaccinations, the day-to-day support offered by pharmacy teams is equally as important to highlight. As pharmacies remained open throughout the entire pandemic, they have been a vital resource for patients by maintaining access to essential medicines and providing face-to-face healthcare advice. Key points to evidence this include:

- Pharmacies' role in the 2020/21 flu season - pharmacies administered over 2.6 million NHS flu vaccinations. This is over 1 million more people than last season, which is particularly impressive during a pandemic.
- Discharge Medicines Service launch – people discharged from hospital with new medicines may now be referred to a community pharmacy for extra support and guidance. The service aims to support those returning home after a hospital stay and is just another way in which pharmacies will be helping patients going forwards.

Community pharmacies contribute huge value

In May 2021, PSNC conducted a pharmacy advice audit that found the following:

- It is estimated that 1.1 million informal consultations are taking place in community pharmacies in England every week- that's **58 million consultations every year**.
- 8.6% of people seeking advice from a pharmacy said they had been unable to access another part of the healthcare system: that is 96,000 people per week, or **five million per year**. A further 9% and 2.4% of consultations were the product of informal referrals from General Practice and NHS 111.
- Every week pharmacies provide advice to over 730,000 people seeking advice for symptoms – nearly **38 million people per year**.
- Every week pharmacies provide advice to over 263,000 people seeking advice about an existing medical condition – **13.6 million people per year**.
- Almost half of patients reported that if attending their local pharmacy had not been a viable option, they would have visited their GP. This means that pharmacies giving advice saves more than 2 million GP appointments every month, or **24 million every year**.

Pharmacies are also facing financial challenges which, if unresolved, risks local communities losing out on the vital support they offer

While you will want to be highlighting to your MPs all of the positive contributions made by local community pharmacies, it is still important to highlight some of the challenges facing the sector. As key influencers, MPs will want to try and help if they understand the problem. They need to understand the value of pharmacy and the risks to their communities should this support be taken away.

- NHS community pharmacies want to be able to continue to offer the informal face-to-face healthcare advice and clinical services that so many people want from them: but they cannot afford to subsidise the NHS.

- COVID-19 has put a combination of sustained pressures, both operational and financial, on pharmacies. A huge amount of work has been required in dealing with the pandemic.
- The current funding arrangements are putting financial pressures on many pharmacies.

Health and Care Bill

Proposed legislation will create make Integrated Care Systems legal entities with considerable influence locally. The more integrated primary care is, the better. However, there is currently a question mark over the exact representation of primary care professions within the new structures. It is crucial that representatives from pharmacy are included here and are appropriately remunerated for their role.

Actions for MPs

MPs will often ask if they can do anything to help and you can suggest the following:

Submit Parliamentary Questions

MPs may offer to ask parliamentary questions to show their support for pharmacy. MPs can ask oral parliamentary questions in the House of Commons chamber. These will usually be at departmental questions or Prime Minister's Questions. Written parliamentary questions can also be submitted by MPs to Government departments. These always receive an answer from the Minister and are a useful way to elicit information. MPs offices should be proficient at organising this but please do get in touch if you require any help.

Letters and questions to Ministers

If MPs show an interest in the challenges facing the sector, ask if they are prepared to write letters or put questions to Ministers/officials calling for additional support. Again, MPs office should be able to organize this but please do get in touch if you require any help.

Join the pharmacy group in Parliament

MPs can also support the work of the All-Party Pharmacy Group (APPG) in Parliament, so please do encourage them to join. The group is actively sponsored and supported by PSNC jointly with the other pharmacy bodies. The group hosts events and coordinates parliamentary activities to promote pharmacy. If an MP would like to join as a member, or simply find out more about upcoming events, they can email: contact@pharmacyappg.co.uk

Appendix 1: Template letter to invite MPs to a visit

Dear [name of MP],

I am writing on behalf of [Local Pharmaceutical Committee], which represents all [optional: number of] community pharmacies across [area], including those in [constituency]. We wanted to reach out personally and invite you to visit a local pharmacy to find out more about the work they have been doing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community pharmacies have been working tirelessly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure patients and the public have been able to maintain access to critical medicines and healthcare services. Pharmacies have been open throughout the pandemic and have been a lifeline for patients, particularly as other parts of primary care were forced to limit access to the public in the early months. Now, as we look towards recovery from coronavirus, pharmacies are playing an increasingly important role in COVID-19 vaccinations and booster jabs, as well as the dispensing of NHS prescriptions and provision of healthcare advice. All of this is supporting patients' health, while aiding the recovery of local high streets, communities and wider NHS services.

We would like to invite you to find out more about your local pharmacies and how they have helped your constituents during the pandemic by arranging a visit so you can see this first-hand.

If you would like to take up this offer, we can be in touch to arrange a convenient time, otherwise, please do get in contact if we can help your work in any other way.

Kind regards,

[xxx]

Appendix 2: Template press release to promote a pharmacy visit

LOCAL MP VISITS LOCAL PHARMACY AND THANKS TEAM FOR EFFORTS

[Name of MP] has visited [xxx pharmacy] to hear about the work the pharmacy team are doing to help residents in [constituency].

[Name of MP] heard about the vital support the pharmacy has been providing for the local community, including by providing face to face healthcare advice and distributing COVID-19 lateral flow tests alongside the regular dispensing of prescription medicines.

[Pharmacist] comments: "Community pharmacy teams have been the first port of call for many local people on healthcare matters throughout the pandemic. Our regular patients and the wider community have relied on us for their essential prescription medicines, but also for healthcare advice about symptoms or long-term conditions, as well as other services."

xxx MP commented: "I have learnt today about how community pharmacies are playing their part in important efforts to support pandemic recovery, through helping people when they are feeling unwell or need healthcare advice, to providing COVID-19 testing kits. I am keen to ensure we make best use of community pharmacies which already offer a range of services but can do so much more to contribute to important health agendas to support patients and the NHS."

[xxx of the xxx Local Pharmaceutical Committee] said: "As many patients will know, our local community pharmacies across [constituency] are doing far more than just dispensing medicines. They are offering a whole range of services and are keen to offer so much more. We are pleased that [xxx MP] understands this and supports a greater role for community pharmacies."