



Feedback report

Pharmaceutical services in Suffolk

Published September 2023

healthwatch
Suffolk

About this report

A brief introduction to this report and Healthwatch Suffolk.



About Healthwatch Suffolk

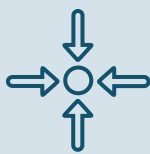
We collect and share lived experience to improve standards of health and social care in Suffolk, regionally and nationally. Our independent role is enshrined in law, supported by trusted data and embedded in local integrated care systems by established relationships with partners. Our service is founded on long-standing values of transparency, accountability and accessibility. We want everybody to feel equally valued, listened to, seen and heard.

For more information about our role, and how we are inclusive, please [visit our website](#).



Our core purpose is to...

Collect and share lived experience to influence better standards of health and social care.



We live and breathe...

Co-production in everything possible. We are inclusive, transparent, accessible, and accountable. We believe passionately that listening and responding to lived experience is vital to create health and care services that meet people's needs.

This report

The Suffolk Health Scrutiny Committee will consider pharmaceutical services in Suffolk at its meeting in October 2023. This briefing has been produced to inform this debate, and to provide a general overview of patient experience regarding:

- Pharmacy services
- Dispensary services within primary care
- The management of medicines and prescriptions

Data source

Healthwatch Suffolk has not completed research about pharmaceutical services in Suffolk. The data available within this report has been exported from the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre (www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/services).

Generally, feedback included in this report was recorded by:

- Healthwatch Suffolk Community Development Officers (CDOs) working in the community as a part of their day-to-day core Healthwatch activity.
- Visitors to the Healthwatch Suffolk website (from searches online, or through links available on service websites).

See our analysis of this data from page six.

We have also included observations from our staff about their engagement in communities (see from page 26) and information about related projects (see overleaf).

Healthwatch Suffolk did not run any specific call for local feedback to inform this report.

For more information

Please contact info@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk, or call freephone 0800 448 8234 to connect with our team.

Related projects

More related work and projects from Healthwatch Suffolk.

I don't like having to discuss my medical history in the pharmacy. Can pharmacists see my patient record?

What's involved in being a pharmacist?

Why is my pharmacy sometimes closed when it should be open?

What part of your day-to-day role is the most challenging?

What is the one thing I can



Focus on co-production

Healthwatch Suffolk has completed work to support the provision of local pharmaceutical services in Suffolk. Please find more details about our projects below.

'There are two sides to the counter' (2022)

We worked with a small co-production group, including representatives of Community Pharmacy Suffolk, to design a poster that could be displayed in local pharmacies.

The aim was to help create a shared understanding between people who use pharmacies and pharmacy staff. It was hoped the poster could help to support better communication with the public and reduce conflict at the pharmacy counter.

The dedicated group worked together to co-produced the posters entitled 'There are two sides to the pharmacy counter'. They have now, with the assistance of Community Pharmacy Suffolk, been distributed for use in pharmacies throughout Suffolk.

For more information, please [click here](#).

Co-producing the questionnaire for the Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment (2021)

In 2021, the Healthwatch Suffolk Co-production Team and ambassadors, helped Public Health

Suffolk to re-shape the PNA questionnaire for users of pharmacy services across Suffolk.

The aim of the questionnaire was to ensure the public voice was included in the PNA review, which would ultimately influence the way that pharmacy services are provided in the future.

Feedback from leaders responsible for the PNA highlighted the benefit of this brief co-production activity.

"I think that this has been improved immeasurably. I think all the changes are really valid, it reads much better from a patient perspective and I think it will provide valuable feed-back that would really help us shape pharmacy services in Suffolk to meet the needs of our communities."

More information about this work can be found on [click here](#).

The results of the PNA questionnaire can be found within the PNA, available from <https://www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/jsna/pharmaceutical-needs-assessment>.



Download the poster

Click to find our poster developed together with Community Pharmacy Suffolk. It aims to develop a shared understanding of how services are working across both sides of the pharmacy counter.



Feedback Centre

Analysis of feedback recorded on the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre (www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/services).



About the Feedback Centre

The Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre is a platform people can use to find, rate and review any health or social care service in Suffolk. You can visit the Feedback Centre on <https://www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/services>, where it is possible to view the feedback people have left about services, including responses from services.

There are more than 20,000 reviews currently listed against hundreds of local services. All feedback is moderated by the Healthwatch Suffolk team to make sure it is not abusive, that it is grounded in a genuine experience of using a service, and that it does not identify any person.

For more information about the Feedback Centre, please contact us.

In brief

In total, 263 reviews were exported from the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre and analysed to identify key themes and sentiment. Overall, the feedback reveals inconsistent experiences of pharmacy services, dispensary services and the management of medicines in primary care.

Some had a positive experience of services, attributing praise to some specific aspects of services, care and support.

They included:

- The positive attitude of staff (63% positive)
- The convenience of digital services (65% positive)
- General, non-specific, comments about services (85% positive)
- The convenience of delivery services (58% positive)
- Perceived usefulness of information and advice from staff (50% positive)

Other themes were mostly negative overall, and they revealed how many people have an inconsistent experience of services and support around their medication.

Some said they were needing to change their own behaviours to account for changes in service delivery (e.g., by visiting multiple pharmacies to maintain their supply of medication), whilst others commented about increasing wait times for services to process medication requests (e.g., up to ten days or more in some cases).

Some of the most negative themes identified included:

- Waiting for, or delays to receiving, medication (70% negative)
- Unavailable medication because of problems with stock (95% negative)
- Issues relating to communication with people and between services (74% negative)
- Issues regarding medication reviews in primary care (68% negative)
- Issues with medication errors, or missing medications (91% negative)

We have included a detailed summary of themes and lived experience below.

Feedback overview

All comments included in this report were recorded between September 2022 and September 2023.

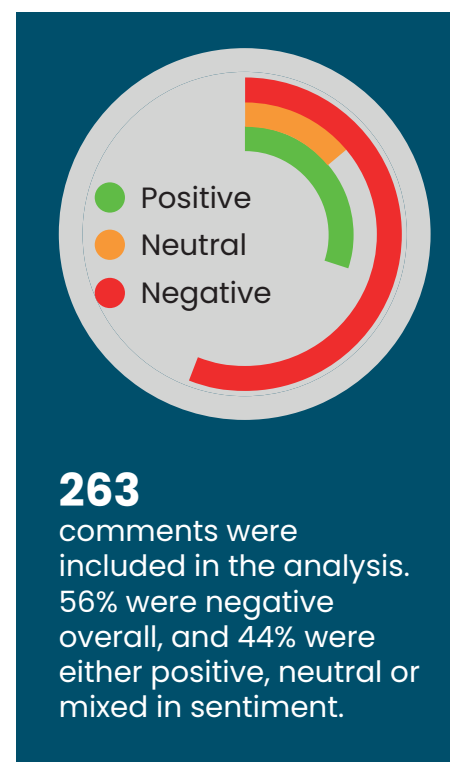
Experiences were not gathered through specific research, or because of a call for feedback by Healthwatch Suffolk. Instead, comments were extracted from the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre, which is a platform the public can use to share lived experience of health or social care services in Suffolk at any time.

Out of 2,415 comments recorded to the Feedback Centre within the period (regarding all services in Suffolk), 263 reviews were relevant to this analysis. Comments were included if they:

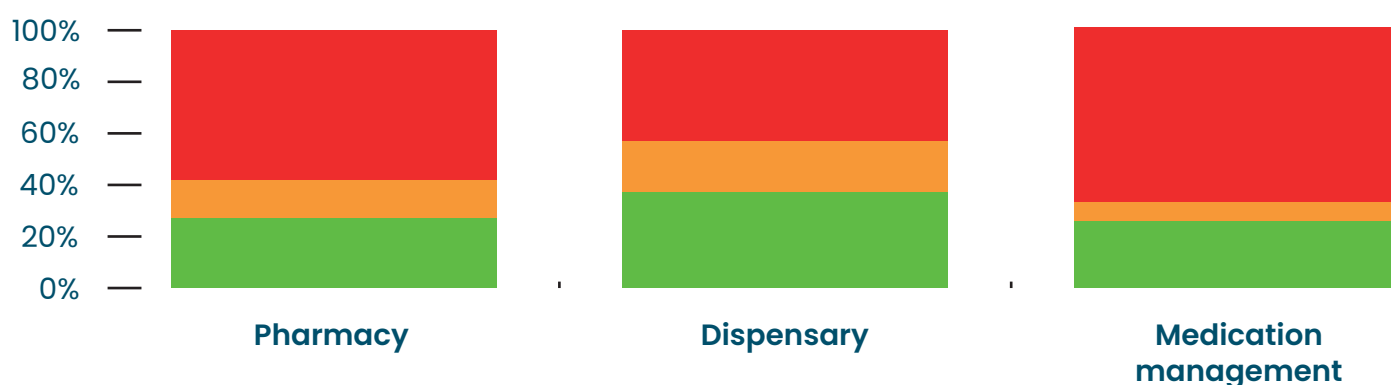
- were listed against a specific pharmacy service.
- were about primary care and included relevant key words such as 'medication', 'dispensary', 'prescription' and other similar terms.

Of the 263 comments included, 30% are positive, 14% are neutral or mixed, and 56% are negative overall. Please see table one below for more information about the sentiment of feedback as it relates to specific service areas considered within this report.

It is noted that the quantities of feedback reported are not sufficient to claim that the opinions expressed are representative of the entire population of people who have accessed pharmacy services. The feedback provided is nonetheless important and is likely to be a fair reflection of many people's experiences in Suffolk.



	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Comments
Pharmacy	27%	15%	58%	98
Dispensary	37%	20%	43%	89
Medication management	26%	7%	68%	74



The Feedback Centre includes an option for people to apply a star rating to services. The table below shows the average star rating (out of five) people attributed to services against the three service areas. It is important to note that comments regarding dispensaries and the management of medication have been taken from feedback that is also inclusive of other aspects of primary care (e.g., access to GP practices).

Service areas	Average rating	Comments
All service areas	3	263
Pharmacy	3	98
Dispensary	4	89
Medication management	2	74

Top ten themes – levels of positive sentiment

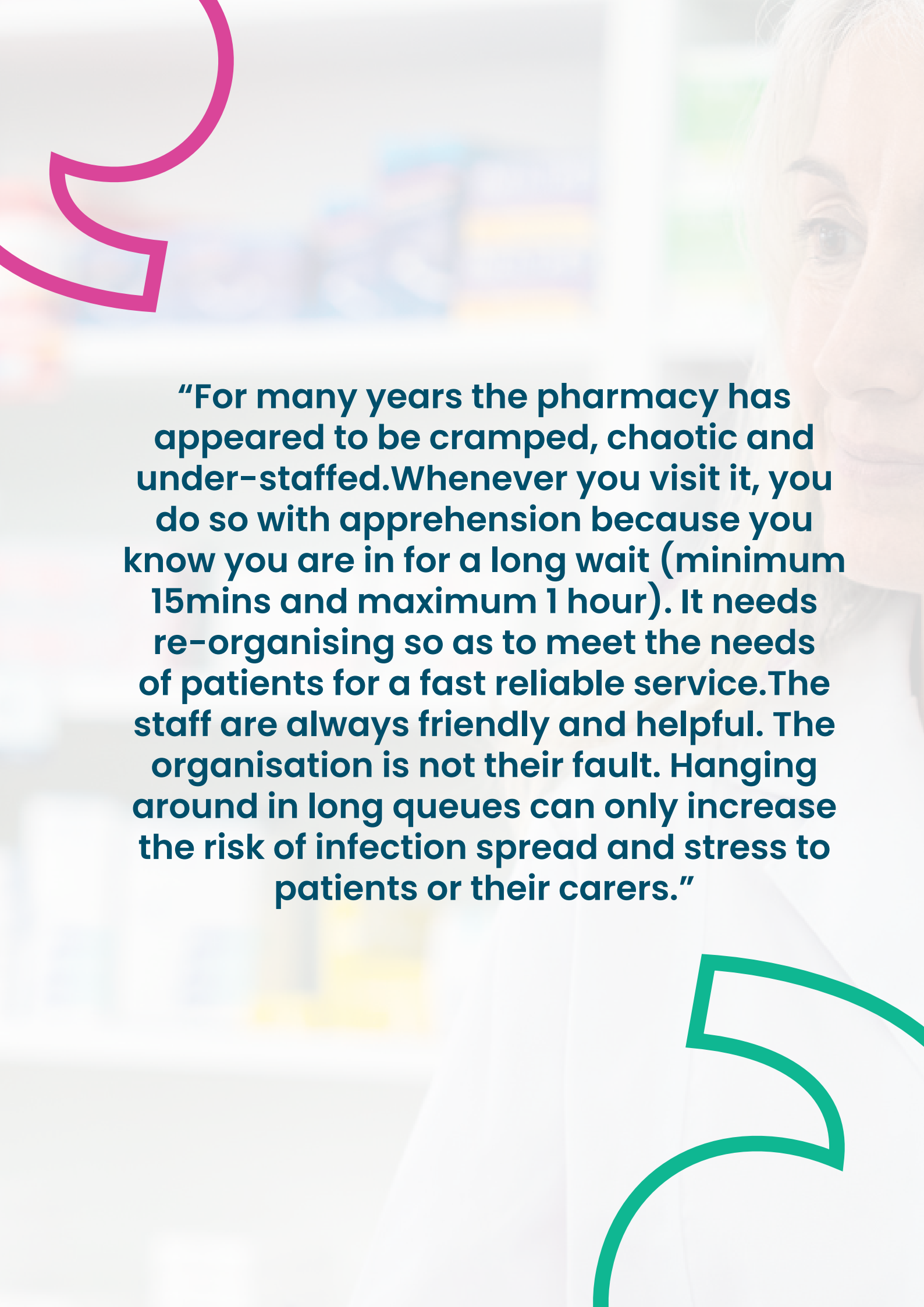
Theme	Positive sentiment	Comments
Waiting or delays	 30%	82
Medication stock	 3%	40
Communication (With patient)	 21%	39
Staff attitude	 63%	38
Patient choice	 25%	32
Medication reviews	 18%	28
Preparedness	 19%	26
Digital services	 65%	23
Errors/Missing medication	0%	22
Service queues	0%	20

Theme summary (All themes)

Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Comments
Waiting or delays	30%	0%	70%	82
Medication stock	3%	3%	95%	40
Communication (with patient)	21%	5%	74%	39
Staff attitude	63%	0%	37%	38
Patient choice	25%	6%	69%	32
Medication reviews	18%	14%	68%	28
Preparedness	19%	0%	81%	26
Digital services	65%	13%	22%	23
Errors/Missing medication	0%	9%	91%	22
Service queues	0%	0%	100%	20
Communication (Phones)	7%	13%	80%	15
Administration/Paperwork	0%	7%	93%	15
Staff capacity	0%	0%	100%	14
Communication (between services)	0%	0%	100%	14
General comments	85%	8%	8%	13
Delivery services	58%	17%	25%	12
Advice and information	50%	8%	42%	12
Convenience of services	45%	0%	55%	11
Blood tests	11%	0%	89%	9

Minor themes

Other minor themes included feedback about service environments (seven comments), the continuity of care and support (five comments) and the extent to which services follow-up with people about medication issues (five comments).



“For many years the pharmacy has appeared to be cramped, chaotic and under-staffed. Whenever you visit it, you do so with apprehension because you know you are in for a long wait (minimum 15mins and maximum 1 hour). It needs re-organising so as to meet the needs of patients for a fast reliable service. The staff are always friendly and helpful. The organisation is not their fault. Hanging around in long queues can only increase the risk of infection spread and stress to patients or their carers.”

Qualitative themes

Several of the most prominent themes in people's feedback are described below in more detail, including examples of lived experience. Some related themes have been combined, and reviews may relate to any of the three services areas.

A breakdown of themes by service area may be available on request to Healthwatch Suffolk.

A note about positive themes

Positivity was mostly associated with five of the main themes. Generally, this included non-specific positive feedback about services, comments about the attitude of staff (including that staff were 'friendly' or 'helpful'), feedback about how digital services were making it easier to access medication (e.g., online ordering and queries), and experiences of having medication delivered. People also commented about receiving helpful advice and/or information from pharmacy or dispensary staff.

Examples of positive feedback are highlighted in our detailed breakdown of themes below.

Waiting or delays

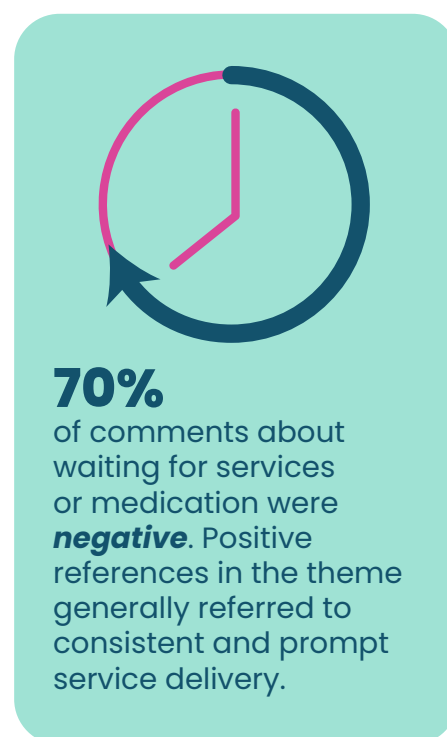
Whilst some people said they had a consistently positive experience of receiving their medication on time, 57 reviews were negative about waiting for, or delays to receiving, medication. People usually attributed such delays to:

- Technical problems with service IT systems.
- Issues with prescriptions (e.g., that they have not been signed by a GP), sometimes compounded by difficulties with obtaining the help of a GP more generally.
- Increasing wait times for medications to be ready (e.g., services requiring increased notice to be able to fulfil prescriptions).
- Delays related to issues with the supply of medications.

Problems such as those outlined above can mean that people have not been able to access their medication when needed, sometimes for more than ten days or weeks in rare cases.

Examples of feedback include:

"I have had issues getting medications on time and have been without pain medication for two weeks. There seems to be an internal issue transferring the prescription across to the pharmacy. I called three times and then visited the surgery to get the issue addressed."





*“... I’ve also had to wait 10 days to get medication after it was prescribed. **I had to come back and forth to the surgery and pharmacy to keep chasing for it.**”*



“It’s a great surgery but the dispensary can be a little slow taking a week to turnaround medications requests for repeat prescriptions. However, it can be 10 days. I now allow a couple of weeks to ensure I have what I need before I run out.”

“Trying to contact via phone to enquire about my medication that has yet to be approved that was ordered a week ago. Been number one in queue for 25 minutes, listening to awful opera music that is very annoying and making the long wait stressful.”

“I have controlled drugs and 4 months in a row my prescription has not been signed so there has been a delay in collecting the medicines and I’ve even run out.”

Delays were not a feature of every person’s experience, and 30% of reviews were positive about the theme of waiting. These comments indicated that services had provided medications on time, and often consistently. Examples of positive feedback included:

“I don’t need to visit much but have no issues getting my medication each month. I put the prescription in one week before I need them and that works well and there’s no delay.”

“I drop off my prescription and then 2 days later pick them up, which is great.”

Overall, there can be variation in people’s tolerance of delays, and local expectations may differ from the timeframes services are working to (which appear to have shifted for some in the period). Experience of delays is subjective, and there are many factors influencing tolerance of them not possible to explore in this report (e.g., the seriousness of a person’s condition). Regardless, people were often forgiving when they needed to wait despite the personal impact, recognising the impact of external influences on services.

“The dispensary is a lot slower now. Staff do their best, but medication isn’t always available, and this does delay things – but this is outside of their control.”

Related to the theme of delays, people also highlighted negative feedback about queues within pharmacy or dispensary environments. In total, 20 reviews made a reference to this.

Examples of feedback included:



20 comments made negative references to queues in pharmacy or GP practices environment. Some people said they had to wait for over an hour for medication to be prepared.

"The physical waiting times to be served are an issue especially in winter when you have to queue outside and there is nowhere to sit."

"The pharmacy is very busy, and I've had to wait an hour to be served just to collect medication. There is very limited seating which is difficult when standing for that long is difficult."

"For many years the pharmacy has appeared to be cramped, chaotic and under-staffed. Whenever you visit it, you do so with apprehension because you know you are in for a long wait, minimum 15mins. max 1 hour. It needs re-organising to meet the needs of patients for a fast reliable service. The staff are always friendly and helpful the organisation is not their fault."

66

"I'm just having a few issues at the moment getting enough of my medication to cover the whole month as I'm currently running out."

99

Medication stock and preparedness

Related to the theme of delays, there were 66 mentions of problems with the availability of medication and the preparedness of pharmacy/dispensary services when people arrived to pick up their prescription. Both issues contributed to delays of varying lengths.

In total, there were 40 references to issues with medication stock and 26 references related to the theme of preparedness.

Ninety-five per cent of feedback about medication stock was negative. For some, issues regarding the supply of medication was a repeating concern, whilst others simply mentioned that they had experience problems with medication supply at times. A few comments made a reference to lengthy delays to receiving medication, whilst others said they had nearly depleted their supply, or that it had been difficult to maintain a consistent supply of their medication.



"They have been unable to get my medication for three weeks and supply at other times has been difficult too and they've had to supply smaller amounts. There have been no other options given I have just had to wait for the supply to be delivered."

"Critically needed hypertension meds not available, so just left out of my bundle! And had one repeat prescription, but when asked for the following one was told doctor hadn't authorised repeat!! In spite of the fact that I had had one already."

The theme of choice (explored in more detail later in this report) also has relevance to these themes because it was clear that people were not always advised of alternative ways they could source medication (e.g., by having their prescription sent to a different pharmacy). This was not always the case though, and others had already adapted to problems with supply by changing their own behaviours.

Examples of both positive and negative feedback relating to the themes of choice and medication stock included:

"I've had occasions when the dispensary hasn't been able to get medication in, but they've always given me a prescription to take somewhere else."

"The dispensary has been unable to get the high energy milk in for my baby. We put the prescription on 3 weeks ago but have arrived to pick it up and it's not ready and they don't have any in stock, they are trying to get in for tomorrow. Its worrying and frustrating that we may run out or will have to reduce the amount given."

"We've actually run out of medication and because my child has so many different medications that we must have at all times. I am now requesting each individual item on separate prescriptions so that when they are unable to get the item in, I can easily take to any pharmacy rather than being tied to a specific one. It's making getting medication much more difficult, but I would rather know that I can get the meds we need by going to multiple pharmacies than run out again. We've had two Libra monitors fail this month but getting replacements has been tricky as we're only allocated 4 each month."

"The surgery works really well the only small issue I've had is getting medication. I've had to take my prescription elsewhere when medication including needles for my insulin haven't been available."

"There are times when medications aren't available at the dispensary, and I had to take the prescription to a different pharmacy. For me that's not much of a problem but for those who don't drive or don't have internet access to be able to call all the different pharmacies to track down the medication you are looking for it would be very difficult. It would be good for those who really can't access information if the surgery tracked the medication down for them."

The theme of 'preparedness' was attributed to any comments referencing, either positively or negatively, the extent to which medication was 'ready' when people arrived to pick them up. It was common for people to suggest they had been notified that their prescription was ready to collect but had realised this was not the case when they arrived at the service.



“The last two months I’ve had to go back to the pharmacy multiple times for my medication to be done. This makes it more difficult as when you don’t drive getting to and from is more problematic.”

Of 26 comments about preparedness, 81% were negative. Examples of feedback (both positive and negative) included:

"Trying to collect repeat prescriptions always slow and often not ready even if I have a text to say it's ready."

"Not sure what part of this process is failing but I used to put script into the surgery, and you picked up meds a few days later, never any issues. Now, I must wait until only 7 days left and on the 7th day, I go to get it and pharmacy said they only had it come in the day before so not made up yet. So, the system is failing somewhere along the line."

"My prescriptions which I order myself are sent electronically to the pharmacy. I have never received a text from them in anything less than 5 days. Went in yesterday after 6 days of waiting and they hadn't even dispensed it. One time recently I went in after 2 weeks and they hadn't even printed it out. I asked why it takes so long and the pharmacist says it is just one of those things. I shall be changing my pharmacy."

"I always get my repeat prescriptions from this pharmacy. I am very pleased with them; they always have it ready on time for me to collect and I find that the staff are always friendly and helpful and very prompt."

"I've received text messages saying that medication is ready to collect but when I arrive the medication is not prepared and ready to take, so I've had to wait while they do it there and then. There have also been issues getting some of the medications I need but this seems to be improving now..."



Some people said it was common for medication not to be ready when they had been alerted to pick up their prescription by services.

Communication (with patients and between services) and phone systems

Issues regarding communication with people, and between services, is a frequent feature of reviews across many types of services. Problems with communication are often a root cause of many of the frustrations people express about their experiences of care and support.

In the context of this briefing, the theme of communication was a mostly negative theme. Out of 53 reviews attributed to it, 81% were negative and just ten comments were positive, neutral, or mixed in sentiment.

People value being kept up to date about their medication. Therefore, positivity tended to be attributed to appreciation of alerts from services to inform people when their prescription was ready to collect. However, experience of those alerts was inconsistent, and a few people highlighted that they either did not receive them every time, or medication was not ready to collect when they had been notified.

Examples of both positive and negative feedback relating to alerts included:

"...My medication is delivered which is helpful. They phone to say when it is coming, and they always arrive on time."

"...The dispensary staff are really great and very helpful, and they are quick to get medication in. I like the text message that is sent to tell you when medication is ready to pick up as it saves coming to the surgery unnecessarily..."

"...The text message system doesn't always work well as you get a text to say your medication is ready for pick up but when you get there it isn't."

"It generally works well but consistency is needed. The text message system notifying you when medication is ready to pick up doesn't always work or get used. So, it's difficult to know whether you can pick up or not."

Common issues that led to negative comments about communication included:

- Delays to receiving communication from services, or not receiving messages at all.
- Lack of promised call-backs on medication enquiries.
- Lack of communication with people, and between services, about medication stock.
- Poor communication between services about changes to medications (e.g., following a hospital stay).

Examples of negative feedback referring to these issues included:

"I've asked for my medication to be changed so the prescription is correct, but this still hasn't been done after asking a number of times, it just becomes a hassle to deal with it. Long term conditions support is lacking Information from the hospital doesn't get on the system quickly enough, so medication changes are not acted upon, I now have to print a copy of letters myself and bring them in because that is the quickest way to get medication changed. They must have the consultant's letter they just haven't managed to get it on the system. We've also had issues where the surgery and hospital were arguing who should be prescribing the medication that was needed meaning that it couldn't be prescribed. Communication is one of the biggest issues at the surgery."



"We have had some issues with 'permissions' to get a prescription for a non-verbal adult, with severe learning disabilities. They said, 'can they not say, 'mum can order my prescription?' This shows the complete lack of any understanding by the service.

What part of 'non-verbal' with 'severe learning disabilities' do they not understand. They do not have or have ever had the capacity to consent. What are they thinking?!"





“The communication between the GP and Pharmacy caused a delay in receiving my medication and I spent three hours going backwards and forwards myself to get my new medication. The GP has full knowledge of my medication, but they do not fully communicate with the Pharmacy.”



“Receptionist wouldn’t arrange call back by Dr. Told to use e-contact which is ineffective, or Pharmacy would call back between 9 & 12 tomorrow (now today) as they are more qualified to deal with medication queries. Surprise no call back. Eventually contacted local independent pharmacy for information.”

“Yesterday I was told by the pharmacist at a local pharmacy that they did not have the antibiotics prescribed and they wouldn’t be delivered until the day after. This was worrying as my husband has an infected wound so I asked if I could try another pharmacy. I was told that it was unlikely that I would get 500mg tablets, as no one could get them, and to ask for 250mg and double up. However, when I took the prescription to the second pharmacy, I was told that the prescription couldn’t be dispensed as it had been claimed by the first pharmacy! The second pharmacist was very helpful and concerned and suggested that my husband get another prescription. This was done after many hours of trying (there isn’t an easy way to access a GP these days). We finally got the antibiotics from our surgery pharmacy at 6pm. Took 7 hours to get this much needed medication. To make matters worse, the first pharmacy told our surgery pharmacy that the prescription had been dispensed. That was untrue. A delivery driver came to our house unexpectedly at 7pm with the antibiotics which were ‘unavailable’ in the afternoon. It looked as if I was trying to get two lots of antibiotics. We sent the medication straight back.”

“My teenage son has been prescribed medication for acne. The GP surgery (who share the same building) prescribed a cream, but the pharmacy can’t order it because it’s out of stock. I have driven back and forth to the pharmacy waiting for the cream, but they failed to tell me it wasn’t available... On a subsequent visit to try again, I had to go back and forth between the GP surgery and the pharmacy to tell one what the other said. It’s been a month now, 8 wasted trips to the pharmacy and still no cream. All that needs to happen is the GP needs to prescribe a different, available, cream and they need to talk to each other! Another wasted trip this morning... I’m now home, with no cream and no idea when or if it will ever be available.”

“It has been a 2 1/2-year battle to get my son any kind of help or support. Doctors in this surgery have outright asked us sarcastically what they can do to help. Today we phoned pharmacy to check on his medication as it was put through by a paediatric doctor to be repeated every two weeks due to a change in frequency. No medication so phoned surgery. Outright told us they glanced over this letter and missed the change on his medication, but it’ll be sorted. Waited hours to be told by pharmacy, nope doctor hasn’t signed off. Then wait half an hour for the surgery to answer. I could go on and on about how this surgery neglects its patients because I don’t just have my son’s story, I have my own and other people I know who attend.”

"I found out recently that I should've been given certain medication following a hospital stay last year. It was only when the issue reoccurred that I was told I should've had it last time..."

"I'm writing this on behalf of my child. They have ADHD and has medication for that, unfortunately there is a lack of the medication. This is the 2nd time, I was advised to speak to the GP to ask for the liquid form of their medication (via the ADHD team) which I did, the GP surgery had received a letter explaining that and I also have a copy of that letter. So, when I went to follow up with the new prescription, I was told that the pharmacy team were declining to issue a new prescription because it wasn't on the notes, and I had to go through the ADHD Team who had already confirmed that it should be sorted by the GP team. We've had many issues with the surgery and prescriptions."

There were 15 specific references to phone systems, of which 12 (80%) were negative. Most negative comments were about long call waits to get through to pharmacy staff, or to local GP practices when attempting to resolve problems with prescriptions (e.g., for a new prescription to be issued, or because of other issues relating to administrative tasks around prescription management).

Examples of feedback about phone systems included:

"The prescription line is busy, and I've left a message, but they haven't come back to me, and I have found it a little slow to get things done."

*"The staff are all lovely people, but unfortunately that's where the praise ends. Mistakes happen almost every month, and I only have 4 items on my prescription. The only way to order medication is to go into the branch, as they *never* answer the phone. They clearly do not have enough staff for the number of patients they deal with."*

"...The only issue is that you can't get through to the dispensary as it goes straight to voicemail. In the end you have to come down to check if the medicine is ready to pick up."

Staff attitude

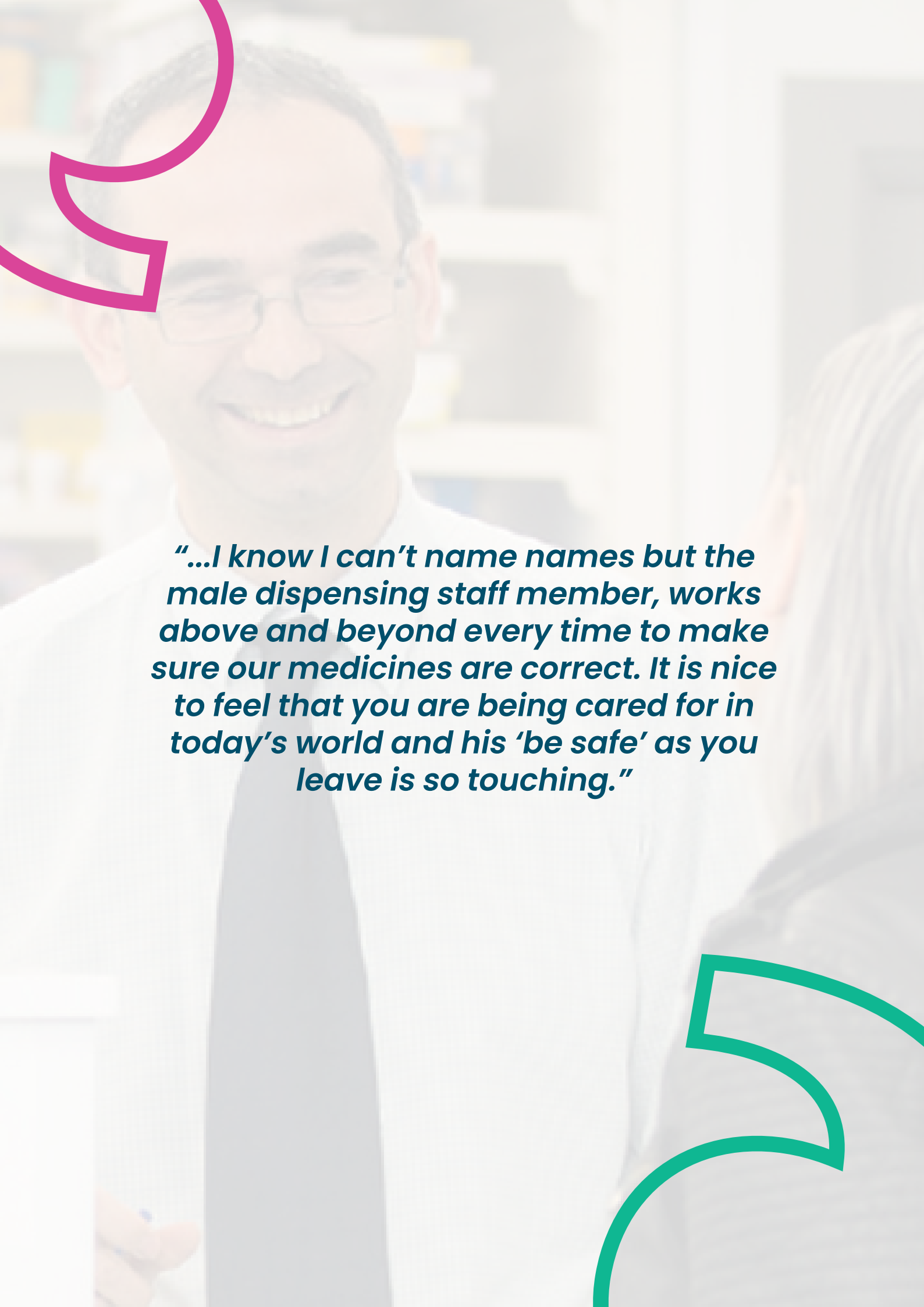
There were 38 comments about the attitude of staff working in services. This included pharmacy staff, and people working in other service areas (e.g., dispensary staff and GP practice receptionists). The theme was generally positive, and people are often appreciative of hard-working staff who they recognise as working under pressure or within chaotic environments. Overall, 63% of the feedback about staff attitude was positive and 37% of the feedback was negative.

Examples of positive feedback about staff attitude included:

"The staff are lovely and do all they can, but they are so busy that waiting times to collect medication can be long and it always seems to take them a long time to just find your tablets."

"...The dispensary staff are really great and very helpful, and they are quick to get medication in..."

"...Staff are friendly and knowledgeable; I trust them, and they give confidence."



"...I know I can't name names but the male dispensing staff member, works above and beyond every time to make sure our medicines are correct. It is nice to feel that you are being cared for in today's world and his 'be safe' as you leave is so touching."

Negative feedback about staff attitude usually related to isolated incidents where people considered the response from staff to have been rude or unprofessional. Examples included:

"I was waiting for my prescription and was third in line and had waited quite a while. I was trying to pick up the antibiotics that I'd been prescribed. After serving the two people in front of me the member of staff just pulled the shutter down and said we're closing for lunch. The surgery staff then had to reissue the prescription so that I could go to a different pharmacy to pick up my medication. I really couldn't believe this type of behaviour when I'd been waiting for so long."

"They were rude to me because I couldn't hear what the staff member was saying who was at the back. She called out something twice and I said, 'sorry is that me, I can't hear you very well.' She didn't come to me at the front to talk to me and the member of staff at the front didn't relay what was said either. Instead, I was made to feel stupid..."

"Pharmacy manager treated me very poorly. She showed scant human compassion or empathy for my situation. I was given poor advice and then they blamed me for following it. She voiced her concerns loudly to a colleague over the phone so all the customers in her shop could overhear. I understand that some medicines are in short supply, and this can cause frustration, however, this is not an excuse for unprofessional behaviour."

Medication reviews and bloods

There were a total of 28 references to medication reviews impacting on people's experiences of access to medication. Of these, 19 were negative in sentiment. Additionally, there were eight negative references to experiences of blood tests linked to medication issues. These comments generally reflected pressures in primary care provision, including that:

- People had been unable to obtain quick access to a GP, or prescribing clinicians, to request a medication review needed for the issue of specific medication.
- Issues with blood tests meant that people had faced delays to the release of medication.
- People had developed health issues through lack of monitoring of medication, or because medication had been changed without an assessment.
- People had not been invited for a review of their medication for lengthy periods of time, even if they had been informed this should take place (e.g., annually). Some feel this should be an automated process.
- People have concerns about the thoroughness of reviews that are not completed in person within primary care.

Examples of feedback related to medication reviews in primary care included:

"I've had problems arranging a blood test and it has taken 3 months in total. Not being able to get the appointment meant that my medication wouldn't be released by the pharmacy, so I then had to go back to the doctor to sort it all out as I have to have my medication. I chased 2 or three times during this period and was told I would be contacted but wasn't..."

"...I've also had difficulties getting a specific medication as when it's needed, I have to have a conversation with a GP but getting one can be difficult."



There were 19 negative references to issues with medication management and reviews.

This included that people had not had any recent review of their medication and were worried about risks or side effects.

"There have been delays getting test results on to the system and because my medication has not been monitored, I now have other health issues. Call backs that have been requested have also not happened. It's taken 5 months to get blood test results."

"...I hadn't had a medication review/blood test for two years, so I've requested this appointment as I was worried about medication side effects."

"Never got to see a regular GP making it very difficult to get the right care with my complex specialised medical conditions. Resulting in being given incorrect information or prescriptions not suited to my needs. No follow ups if blood test is unremarkable leaving a problem to go on and on until I eventually just live with the problem as it's too frustrating trying to get a GP that understands. After 4 + years I finally broke down having to deal with constant mistakes and lack of understanding that I was forced to change GP surgeries. The new Surgery is amazing and has made me realise just how bad the previous practice was."

"Getting bloods done on time is a big issue since moving here. The paperwork isn't issued like it used to be at my previous surgery. Since being moved here, it has been a constant issue. Being on medication that needs a 3-monthly review and monitoring of levels, or it can affect my mental health badly. The paperwork used to be posted to me, some said they can print it off and others say they cannot, so that is confusing."

66

"I submitted my blood pressure readings over seven days following an annual review where my bp was too high."

It took almost two months for me to get a response saying my bp meds to be adjusted when it should have been done straight away."

Why so long leaving me with dangerously high blood pressure."

99

Errors and missing medications

There were 22 references to missing medications, or medication errors. Twenty of those references were negative and two were neutral.

Examples of feedback included:

"I have had issues with my prescriptions with wrong medication and at the wrong strength too. It would help if it was possible to pick up two months supply of tablets rather than just the one."

"I have had problems with my prescriptions being inaccurate or medications not being available even which makes it frustrating when trying to get regular prescriptions."

"Also, since taking over my medication from the hospital, my prescriptions were wrong for about seven months they still get my blood reminders wrong three years on."

"Unable to fulfil prescription, suggested alternative then supplied original medication against new prescription. Then could not fulfil next prescription suggested return later that day; on return did not remember previous conversation – and provided incorrect medication! Finally got correct medicine on third visit that day. Good pharmacist let down by unhelpful, uncaring staff."

"...The Dr explained everything with side effects that the out hrs Dr had prescribed me, despite the fact they misdiagnosed me resulting in putting me on something I shouldn't have been on due to my size/build, (I'm the size of a teenager and not even 6st). The Dr not only explained everything, but also did a thorough check and sent samples to lab and referred me to hospital..."

Patient choice

There were 32 references to issues regarding patient choice in relation to medication and pharmacy services. Of these, 22 (69%) were negative in sentiment.

Common issues people raised in their feedback included:

- Changes made to medication orders against the advice of clinicians (e.g., to swap medications for cheaper alternatives).
- Services not meeting the preferences of patients regarding medication options (e.g., requests for different forms of medication).
- Inconsistent advice from services about sourcing medication amidst supply issues (e.g., informing, or not informing, people about the option to take their prescription to an alternative pharmacy/dispensary).
- Lack of available pharmacy services, which means people are more limited in some localities when supply issues emerge.
- Restrictions on prescribing certain medications without payment (often related to NHS rules and funding restrictions).
- A wish for more digital service options.



“It is better now around the dispensary as they obviously had a hard time after COVID, but **staff always explained where to go to get medications when they didn’t have them and were really proactive at assisting and sorting issues out.”**



Examples of these comments (both positive and negative about patient choice) included:

“I’m on specific medication and my consultant has said that it is best to stay on a specific one due to side effects, but the surgery changes the medication to suit them, and I assume go for the cheapest option which causes me problems.”

“I am taking a particular drug after having breast cancer three years ago. Abroad, it is only available as a monthly tablet. I checked with my oncologist who said it was ok to take this monthly instead of the daily tablet used in UK. I requested on my prescription request that this be changed from daily to monthly tablet. Neither of these requests were processed. No one contacted me to question the request or advise me that they were going to be ignored. When I finally got through today – and that’s a completely different complaint – the receptionist had no explanation other than they had so many requests it was ‘a nightmare’. She did offer get the prescription reissued correctly but I would have to wait until the end of the week.”

“...My husband needs specific medication for each eye but the swap for a cheaper option and do not follow the advice of his consultant which is that he should have separate bottles for each eye rather than just the one.”

“I had a chat with a GP about getting my prescription done on a 3 monthly basis rather than monthly as it’s for a medication I’m on for life and this now happens.”

“For at least 4 years every month, my stoma supplies were not prescribed as requested. Despite many repeated clear instructions from the Stoma Nurse. They even started calling me to confirm, but still reduced the items that were required and requested with no explanation as to why. I could only assume it was a cost saving exercise. They have no idea about stoma products, and don’t understand that every stoma patient is different and have different needs.”

“I’m type 2 diabetic and was issued a libre on prescription, then it was removed. I was told, if I need it, I will have to pay for it. Proved it works for me, proved my weight and number come down while using. Also admitted to hospital after being given wrong antibiotics for pneumonia I was told I had been failed by my doctor... I’ve never felt so alone and not helped. Was told money was the issue, I asked if its right to put a price on life to which I was told there is nothing they can do.”

In the community

Brief observations from Healthwatch Suffolk Community Development Officers.



Observations made by our team engaging in communities

Our team visit services and communities across Suffolk to engage with people about their lived experience of accessing health and social care and support. Many of the comments logged to the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre are recorded by Healthwatch Suffolk Community Development Officers (CDOs) as a part of their engagement visits in primary care settings.

In addition to the feedback highlighted in this report, the team has offered the following observations from their work relating to pharmaceutical services and medication management in primary care.

- In some localities, part-time provision of a pharmacist and a lack of communication between pharmacy services and GPs means people face delays to receiving medication (because pharmacies cannot open without the presence of a qualified pharmacist).
- People express frustration at the time they need to put aside to coordinate the picking up of multiple medications (e.g., because supply issues mean they must source individual items from different pharmacies in their locality).
- Conversations with people leaving feedback often highlight that services are not proactive in advising people of their right to source medications from other services when prescriptions cannot be fulfilled (e.g., because of supply issues).
- People sometimes receive mixed messages when services offer different information about the availability of medication.
- Engagement with one particular care home has highlighted significant issues related to the supply of medication (despite engagement with several different pharmacy services). They can be expecting a large amount of medication to be delivered and only receive a small tray. Staff in the home then must then source items from elsewhere, adding to the workload of care home staff and GP practice staff.
- There are reports that Dossett box availability is limited. Patients from the Stowmarket area have told CDOs that no local pharmacy will provide their medication in this way.
- Contact with dispensaries by telephone is particularly challenging in some areas.

We will be making this report publicly available by publishing it on our website.

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