



Experiences of Community Pharmacies in West Essex

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Healthwatch Essex

Healthwatch Essex is an independent charity which gathers and represents views about health and social care services in Essex. Our aim is to influence decision makers so that services are fit for purpose, effective and accessible, ultimately improving service user experience. We also provide an information service to help people access, understand, and navigate the health and social care system.

1.2 Background

Healthwatch Essex were approached by Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System to undertake a series of projects focussing on the lived experiences of people in the area in relation to their health, care and wellbeing. This project was focussed upon gathering peoples lived experience of accessing community pharmacies in west Essex.

1.3 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Essex would like to thank the public who engaged with us and our network of stakeholders and partners who supported in sharing the project.

1.4 Terminology

PNA - Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment, conducted by Essex County Council

1.5 Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings and observations carried out on specific dates and times, representing the views of those who contributed anonymously during the projects time frame. This report summarises themes from the responses collected and puts forward recommendations based on the experiences shared with Healthwatch Essex during this time.

2.0 Purpose

The aim of this project is to explore people's experiences of accessing community pharmacies in west Essex in order to inform the Hertfordshire & West Essex Integrated Care System.

2.1 Engagement methods



Survey.

A survey was created and distributed via our network of stakeholders and partners, as well as on our social media platforms and a dedicated page on our own website.



Interviews.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of resident's experiences with community pharmacies we conducted a number of one-to-one interviews with participants.



Case Studies.

To further understand the experience of using community pharmacies, we gathered details of lived experience from members of the public which are presented here as case studies

3.0 Key Findings

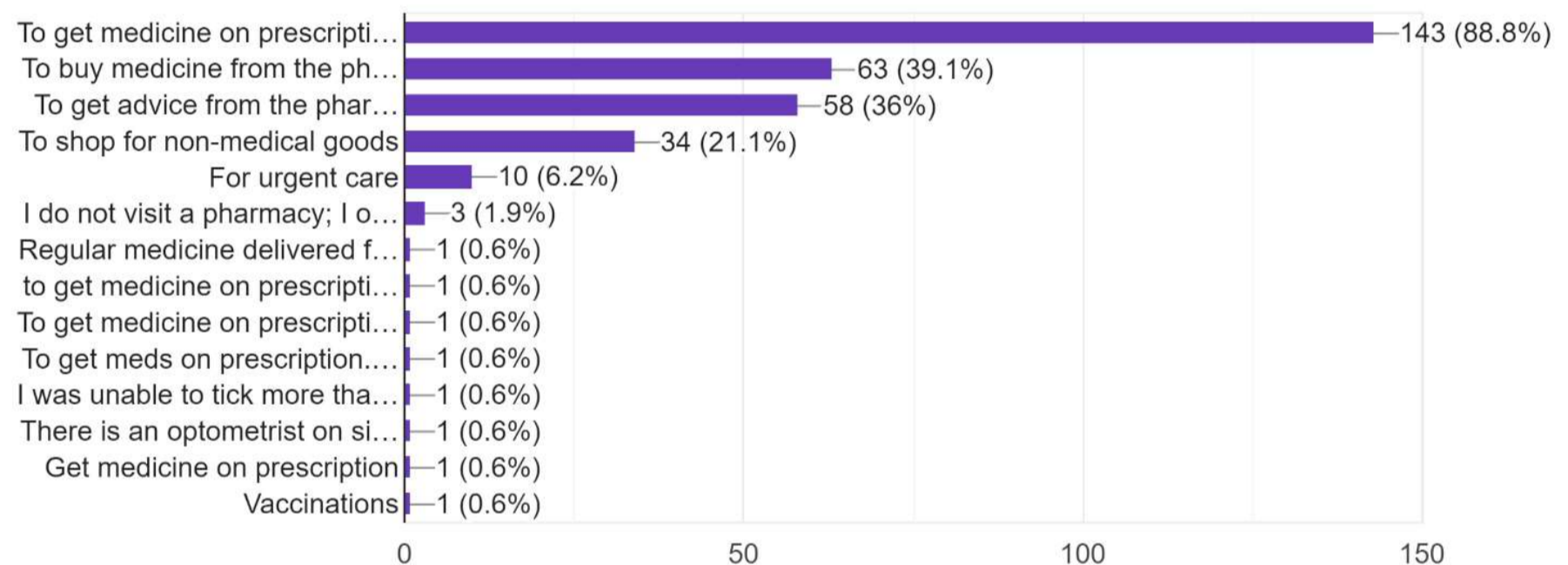
3.1 The Survey

In order to better understand residents lived experience/feedback regarding community pharmacies, we circulated a survey which garnered the following data.

Our first question asked why residents visited the pharmacy, and as part of that we asked them to tick all the answers that applied. 161 responded and the majority - nearly 89% - attended the pharmacy to collect medication on prescription.

1. Why do you usually visit a pharmacy? Please tick all that apply.

161 responses



Responses can be quantified as follows:

To get medicine on prescription-143

To buy medicine from the pharmacy-63

To get advice from the pharmacy-58

To shop for non-medical goods-34

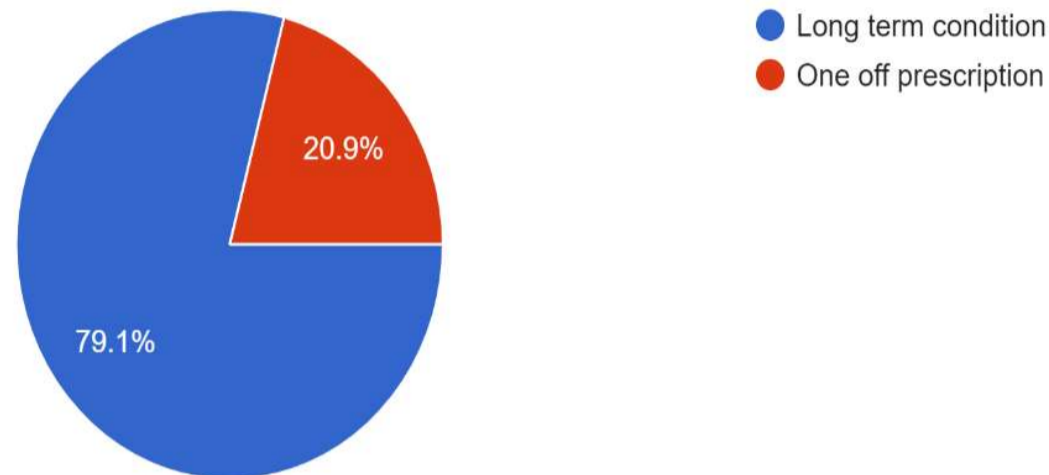
For urgent care-10

I do not visit a pharmacy; I order medication online and have it delivered-3

The second question asked if respondents were collecting long term or one-off medication, and over 79% of respondents used the pharmacy to collect medication for a long-term condition.

1a If you answered 'to get medicine on prescription' is this medication for a long-term condition or a one-off prescription?

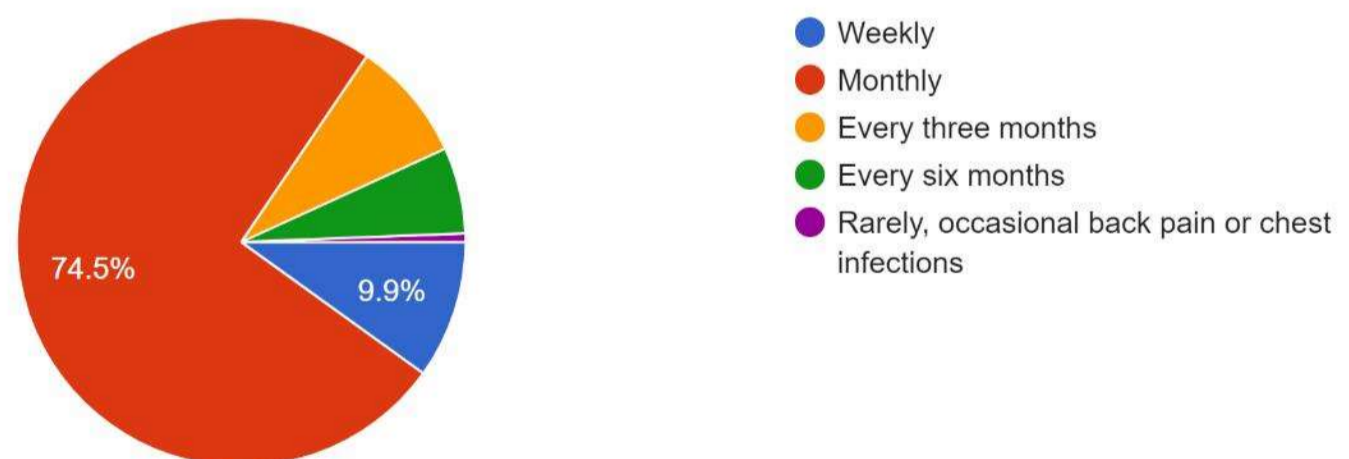
158 responses



We then went on to explore the frequency with which our respondents used their pharmacy. Over 74% of respondent's used the pharmacy on a monthly basis, just under 10% used the pharmacy weekly, 9% every three months and 6% every six months.

2. How often do you use a pharmacy?

161 responses



In addition, just under 60% used the same pharmacy and 39% used different pharmacies but visited the same one most often.

3. Do you use the same pharmacy or different pharmacies?

162 responses



We then asked respondents for feedback of what works well and what doesn't work well at the community pharmacy they use.

The overwhelming theme of the feedback received was in recognising helpful and friendly staff. Many respondents observed that pharmacy staff were under pressure and very busy, but they still delivered a service that met the customer's needs. Below is a selection of the positive feedback received.

'Helpful, knowledgeable staff.'

'The pharmacy I use most is quite good with some technology. They do send me a text when my prescriptions have been dispensed and are ready for collection. The staff are lovely, and the pharmacists will answer any questions you might have.'

'The pharmacy staff are all qualified and knowledgeable. They are very helpful with one-to-one private consultations. They are often able to diagnose a problem without having to make an appointment to see the GP.'

'My local pharmacy is in our village and is run by an excellent family with the father as the qualified pharmacist. I get a tremendous amount of help from the pharmacist whenever I need it and I have complete trust in my very efficient pharmacist. Apart from prescriptions and medical needs the shop sells many useful articles that are needed by all those in need medical or personal equipment. It is a place of constant requirements and minor medical advice. We couldn't manage without it.'

'Sometimes helpful if they have time. They use text messaging when medications are ready to pick up.'

'Always helpful and professional. Very helpful staff.'

'An excellent source of advice, my prescription is usually ready for me.'

‘The vaccination service has been very good.’

‘I use Boots in Stansted, and although always short staffed, the staff are always friendly and helpful, despite working under great continual pressure. I collect both my monthly prescription and use the store for other items like cold remedies etc.’

‘Getting Flu vaccinations at the pharmacy has worked well.’

‘Convenience, promptness of getting medication and wonderful staff members.’

‘Normally staff are friendly and helpful. Service in the whole is good.’

‘Tesco pharmacy is usually ok.’

‘Staff try to be pleasant. Staff appear to be quite well informed.’

‘Staff are helpful, and until recently were knowledgeable enough to give prompt advice as they knew us. There has been a change of staff recently, so it’s a bit of a learning curve. They are convenient for my husband as he can get there from work (on foot) and collect his medication. If fully staffed the hours are extra to the 9 to 5/5.30.’

‘Accessibility and helpful, friendly staff.’

‘During Covid I had an eye infection and the pharmacy suggested I went to the doctor. I had to be referred to the hospital. I wouldn’t have got it sorted without their advice.’

‘I always get a message when my repeat is ready to pick up. Good service, helpful staff.’

‘It’s good being told when my prescription is ready; no long wait to be served; helpful, knowledgeable staff.’

‘Direct communication between surgery and pharmacy is helpful.’

‘Good service and helpful staff, and also good location.’

‘Fantastic service, efficient, friendly, great staff from Stansted pharmacy.’

‘Great service, efficient and helpful.’

‘Friendly, helpful staff. Accessible and friendly pharmacists. A reasonable range of products to buy. To get advice on healthcare problems that crop up in my family.’

‘Good friendly service usually.’

‘The process works between the GP and pharmacy.’

‘Having a pharmacy next to the GP surgery is ideal, and in easy walking distance so that I can get there whilst working or when unwell. The staff are really helpful.’

‘Fantastic staff who treat you as a human being rather than a number plus very good and quick service.’

‘Helpful staff who always get the prescription correct.’

‘Good service, small queues, helpful and knowledgeable staff.’

‘Helpful staff working under pressure.’

‘The customer service has improved recently at Boots, but it couldn’t have got any worse, plus they text when prescriptions are ready to collect.’

‘Good friendly service.’

‘Very efficient and friendly service for repeat prescriptions.’

‘Friendly, hardworking staff.’

‘Great service at all times and staff are helpful and friendly.’

‘The Boots pharmacy gives good service, once you are being served.’

‘Friendly and professional staff - although overworked and very busy.’

‘It’s my most local pharmacy. It’s very helpful.’

‘The Stansted pharmacy has easy access for my wheelchair, they are friendly and always willing to offer advice.’

‘I use Boots in Stansted. The staff are always very helpful, although overstretched. I order my repeat prescription online with Boots, which works well for me.’

‘Helpful polite staff, short queues, easy access, easy parking.’

‘Fast to dispense.’

‘It is well stocked, and the staff are very friendly and knowledgeable. I have often gone in there for advice.’

‘Good staff but overworked.’

‘Knowledgeable staff, good selection of non-medical goods.’

‘They give good advice.’

‘Staff are polite.’

‘Professional, extremely helpful, knowledgeable, they go beyond expectation.’

‘Staff are usually helpful but often appear under pressure.’

‘The pharmacy is a short distance from where I live, so is easily accessible. They are very organised, and my prescription items are always ready. The staff are warm and friendly. In addition to regular prescriptions, I have been able to book appointments for COVID and Flu jabs which makes it very convenient.’

‘On occasion I have needed to ask the pharmacist’ advice on treating ailments e.g., an eye problem, an allergic reaction and they have been both reassuring and competent.’

‘Very helpful, friendly and knowledgeable.’

‘My prescriptions are dispensed and ready for collection.’

‘Very helpful pharmacists.’

We then asked for feedback regarding what doesn't work well at their community pharmacy. Slow service, frustrations with the ordering system, being unable to talk to staff over the phone and some medications not being available were common statements. Below is a selection of the positive feedback received.

'Slow service or goods not available.'

'It can take a time to find my prescription.'

'I would prefer it if the pharmacy could automatically request my regular prescriptions for me from the GP instead of me having to do it each month. A more automated system and communications with the GP would be helpful.'

'It's just a hopeless service.'

'On occasion there is no private space to consult the pharmacist as the small consulting room is being used for medicine storage and boxes of pre-delivered products.'

'I have to get someone to go for me as I cannot wait in long queues for a long time (I cannot stand for long).'

'There is sometimes confusion about managed prescriptions ready for collection; my partner has been turned away several times then I phone, and it is ready.'

'It's very busy, staff are under a lot of pressure and can be very abrupt.'

'I have not been so pleased with the prescription service for the following reasons: -

1. Two pharmacies said they were unable to provide my prescribed medication (saline eye ointment). I thought all pharmacies were meant to source all prescribed medication. Also there was no way of finding a pharmacy that was able to provide the medication without visiting or ringing around.

2. The pharmacy I now get my medication from has their own ordering system, as well as using the NHS app - their own system has a delay of several weeks before processing the prescriptions.

3. I normally order through the NHS app - I was surprised to find recently that the pharmacy has requested my medication on my behalf, without me requesting this. I don't think this is appropriate.'

'It is always busy, and people have to queue. You can easily be queuing outside for 15 minutes and another 15 minutes inside the store. This is not great if you feel unwell or are elderly. It also has a step so mums with pushchairs or elderly with walking difficulties have trouble accessing. The shop is too small, and you can't shop and queue with ease. They often don't have what you need and take too long to dispense. I hate being in the shop too well because you don't know what viruses/infections people have while queuing!'

'The last time I tried to collect a prescription, it took me four visits. The pharmacy was closed during published opening hours, then the surgery had forgotten to send the order, then the surgery sent it to the wrong pharmacy, then I finally found it.'

‘The previous time it took six visits to get what I needed. Between random closures and orders being stuck or sent to the wrong place, it was a very frustrating experience.’

There is always a queue. Often the queue is out of the shop as the shop is so small. The shop is always cluttered with deliveries. The counter is cluttered, and the screens make it impossible to have a confidential conversation. Staff try to be pleasant but can be rude when they are under pressure, which they frequently are. There is no predictability in collecting monthly prescriptions, sometimes prescriptions are ready in three days, one time this year it was 17 days and the pharmacists had to issue emergency supplies. There is no nearby parking for my disabled partner, so he is often not able to get his own prescriptions. We had to return one prescription when a container bottle of 30 tablets had had the seal opened and two taken out to meet the 28-tablet prescription. During this procedure the tablets were tainted with a strong spice flavour and made my partner feel sick (and he is a chef).’

‘The pharmacy obviously shop around and obtain the cheapest brand of medication so very often the size, shape and colour of the tablets change from one month to another. I am able to manage this by being really careful when I load my partners pill docket. How someone with poor eyesight, English as a second language or disability would cope, I dread to imagine.’

‘Prescribed medication is often not available, so you are only given part prescription then upon returning for the rest along with the docket I was given to claim it, I was told I’d already collected it! Awful service and presumably fraudulent.’

‘Our family put in prescriptions every month. They contacted my daughter recently and told her that they were unable to get her regular medication and that she would have to come and collect the prescription and source the items elsewhere. Luckily, she sourced it elsewhere, but the chemist suggested she changed chemists.’

‘Closed at lunch time - why?’

‘The current dispensing pharmacy in Stansted is very busy, small, long queues and often a long wait for prescriptions. Not great when with a child or in a small, enclosed space with people with respiratory illness. Parking is difficult. I have waited over 25 mins for a simple prescription (inhalers) that was called through by the surgery five hours previous.’

‘Always a long queue, limited parking which isn’t conveniently close being 37 weeks pregnant, unable to call them ahead due to how busy they are. Sometimes I feel rushed by staff due to how busy they are in the store.’

‘The staff work in cramped conditions and service is very slow - things always seem disorganised which typically means there is a long queue and unacceptable queuing times - normally 20 minutes is a good outcome.’

‘One of the assistants is VERY quietly spoken. I am slightly hard of hearing and can never hear a word she says.’

‘When you are immuno-suppressed, standing in a queue in a small shop is not great. Then they hardly have whatever you need in stock, so you have to go again on another day to collect it

and stand in the queue. If you wait for a text asking you to come and collect your meds it can take days which is useless if you need antibiotics or pain relief urgently.’

‘In December 2022 my prescription was sent to Boots Pharmacy from my GP. I waited about three hours before going to collect. It was very busy. When I got to the front of the queue, I was told it had not yet been downloaded from the computer. It would take at least 15 minutes to make up. Feeling unwell and coughing badly I left it for later. Later I felt worse and did not want to go out in the cold. I picked it up the next morning after queuing for about 30 minutes as the till was down. As I do not pay for my prescriptions and did not need to go through the till then I was again a little annoyed.’

‘I was told informed they were dealing with 500 prescriptions and were overrun. I posted my experience on Facebook and there were many instances of people having to wait for an hour or longer.’

‘I changed from Boots to Copes Pharmacy for my monthly prescriptions because of issues with not getting the prescriptions correct or not having the correct amount of medicine in stock. These are ongoing problems.’

‘When I try and contact Boots Pharmacy by phone it is never answered.’

‘They’re usually very busy and it takes a while to be served. It sometimes takes days to dispense repeat prescriptions and they don’t always have stock.’

‘They are always busy and rushed off their feet! Most of the times not being able to provide me with the correct medicine, as they have run out.’

3.2 The Interviews

We followed on from the survey by carrying out a number of one-to-one interviews with members of the public. Some examples are detailed below.

Diana*

Diana uses Yogi Pharmacy in Takeley.

She is very happy with the service; ‘they are absolutely wonderful’. They are busy but they go above and beyond. She orders her monthly medication through the NHS app. They will always try to get her medication that doesn’t cause any side effects - she has had breast cancer in the past so this is an ongoing concern. They are her first port of call for advice regarding minor ailments.

Laura*

Laura talked about the current pharmacy service in Stansted Mountfitchet: ‘We don’t understand the response that we get when we find reports that say things like, well, you could always use the one at the airport, or you could travel to Bishops Stortford, etcetera

etcetera. Clearly, the people who are making those decisions have never actually visited the site for the current pharmacy.

My particular concerns are that it is a very, very small shop. That it has stepped access. There's no disabled parking. My partner is disabled and I'm his carer and he's on about twelve medications every day, so he has a big pharmacy requirement. Although he can access the building, it's not easy and if he can't park outside, and his arthritis is particularly bad, then it's not something he can do and he likes to be independent. So, there's no encouragement there for him to do things like that while I'm at work. So, it's a very small shop, and you go in there and there is a single queue for the counter, and ninety percent of people are queuing for prescriptions. That's all they're doing. So, it doesn't function as a chemist shop, and the staff clearly can't cope with running the pharmacy and running the shop. The shelves are constantly empty. The shop is dirty.

When they receive their supplies, there's nowhere for them to store them and they're left on the shop floor in boxes. Often those boxes are open or they're in the sort of crates that products get delivered in, and they're literally just sort of piled up around the counter area. I mean I've taken photos inside the shop because I've been shocked by it. You don't see the pharmacist because they're hidden behind, they're so busy. I have on one occasion spoken to the pharmacist when we had to go in and make a complaint about a dispensing item, and they did come out, and we squeezed our way into a tiny little office at the side for consultations which is about three feet by four feet. I mean it was an absolute joke. They were great, they were absolutely great, but it wasn't easy to speak to the pharmacist and I never feel that I can ask to speak to the pharmacist because I'm in a queue of five or six people. All waiting for their prescriptions and I just feel you know; we're being encouraged to use our pharmacist to discuss minor ailments and I just don't feel we can because they never appear to be not under so much pressure.

The turnaround in terms of getting prescriptions ready is really variable, sometimes it's two days, I think the longest I've ever had to wait was seventeen days, when they were struggling to get particular drugs, luckily, I'd ordered early, but it can be very variable, very variable. I think it's just not big enough and suitable enough for the ever-increasing population of the town, and you know there is now an alternative that could be used with disabled parking, no step access at all, and you know, it would take the burden off and enable both premises to function as pharmacy and a chemist. You know the town is split geographically, and I think there's one side of the town that would use Boots and the other because it suits them, and the other half would use the premise next to the doctors because it would suit them. So, I don't think there's an issue about only one being able to you know, be viable at all. So, I mean they're my main concerns. It's just not fit for purpose.'

Belinda*

'Well, I think that, personally, having been a person that picks up prescriptions for myself and my two sons, for forever kind of thing, and also other people from time to time, there is no set pattern. It really is dependent on what that particular pharmacy does, so one is really different to another. If I go to my closest one, say, which is round the corner, they're quite efficient, they text you when your prescription's come in. But what they don't do is offer a service like Pharmacies For You, where they actually request your medication. They don't do that. But they are good at letting you know that it's in. And then if I go to the other

one, which is in Morrisons, just down the road, they don't ever text you when it's in. You have to just keep going in and asking them, but they do reorder on repeat prescriptions, and they're really nice people as well. So, they're lovely people and they will do anything if you phone them up or you talk to them, but it's a hit-and-miss as to you just have to go in and say, 'Have you got this or have you got that?' kind of thing. So, they vary so much, that's what I think. There's no standard process, is there?

The other thing that I found really difficult was a couple of years ago when my mum died, I had bags of medication that I needed to get rid of, right? And I knew I couldn't put them in bin or anything. It was really strong medication; it was just loads and loads of it. And I went into so many pharmacies and said, 'Would you take this medication and destroy it, or whatever?' And they said, 'No, we don't take it in.' It took me ages to find one that said that they would take it in. So, it should be standard, shouldn't it?'

Rob*

'Until fairly recently I've only had very ad hoc connections with pharmacies and things and for straightforward items just ad hoc basis, it's been absolutely no problem at all. Recently because of an eye condition I've had to have some repeat prescription for items that are not so common, and I've had some more difficulties with that, but I suppose on the plus side, it tested out the system a little bit, which is positive.'

Rob had been prescribed some solution for an eye problem by a consultant at hospital, but the pharmacist wasn't able to source it, so Rob had to contact the consultant to issue another prescription:

'They were very good straight away, said okay, we'll send you a prescription. Again, not on the system and a written prescription, which was put in the post. This was during the recent postal strikes. So, it took three weeks to get it. Now, I'd already run out of the prescription so what I had to do is drive over to Queens just before Christmas, physically pick up a prescription and bring it back and give it into the pharmacy back here again. If it had been an electronically joined up system that the consultant could access, then that would have been much better. Also, there's some confusion between the pharmacy's own system and the NHS app system. And some things you can only do online and somethings you can only do in the NHS system and from what I can see, the pharmacy owned system isn't necessarily looked at very much. So, I put in a prescription with the pharmacies own system that wasn't looked at, I did it with the NHS system and then about four, five weeks later, they turned up on the pharmacy system. I think this is true, you know, not just with prescription side of things, but across the NHS. You know, you've got the GP system, you've got the pharmacy system, you've got the NHS app. Why is there not one system that all areas of the NHS can access?'

3.2 Case studies

In addition to these interviews, we also gathered a number of case studies for additional insight into the lived experiences of the people of the area.

Dawn

‘I suffer from severe osteoporosis and fibromyalgia. I have many different drugs every month to combat nerve pain, depression, gastro issues, vitamins for low levels in blood tests etc. I have to order my prescriptions every month and collect them from the pharmacy. I could really do with them being delivered but haven't asked about that yet. I am regularly in the chemist or various chemists getting my and my son's regular prescriptions. It would be so much better if it was all automated and send out directly to each patient and then if a review was required, the doctor contacts the patient to make an appointment not just stopping the medicine normally prescribed. Another major issue that I have with Pharmacies/GP's is that they won't allow you to order your prescription earlier than the following month when due but every pill package only contains 28 days' worth of tablets so regularly you need to order earlier and earlier. This is a major issue because GPs don't want to give you the next prescription early and they are forcing patients like me to go short on tablets. What do they think you are going to do with the prescription if it's ordered a bit early. Why can't tablets be in boxes of 31 to coincide with the longest months of the year???? Does anyone know the answer to this?’

Dave

‘I have long-term high blood pressure and my wife suffers with COPD. We are both getting on in years and a trusted local Community Pharmacy is an essential part of our life.’

Amir

‘I collect a prescription for my 91-year-old mum. Sadly, the GP practice is not so efficient in being timely with the prescription, so the pharmacist has to make contact with them directly on my mum's behalf in order she gets her medication in a timely manner.’

Brian

‘I'm a relatively healthy 72-year bloke, sadly widowed a few years ago so live on my own in a village. Completely reliant on having to drive - hence it seems crazy that the nearest fully dispensing chemist is not the one in the same building as my doctor's surgery. This means I either have to drive back a few days later, or if more urgent I have to drive elsewhere. No way am I a 20-minute walk from a chemist, and worse, my doctor's surgery is more than 20 mins walk from a fully licensed pharmacy.’

Annabel

‘My husband has medical needs which are long term and have restricted his modes of transport. I do not yet have these concerns. We live in a thriving community of nearly 10,000 people (which pretty much matches the patient list of the Stansted Surgery), and our community pharmacy needs to be able to meet those needs. If Stansted surgery and Elsenham surgery join together the needs of patients of both practices must be

met. NHS England don't think there is an issue. I am sincerely hoping you can change their mind.'

Steve

'I have multiple sclerosis (diagnosed July 1978). I am 70 years old and live alone. I still drive my car but use my battery buggy for local trips. I worry how I will cope with accessing Boots in the future and wish the pharmacy adjoining the surgery was able to dispense medication as the access is on the level.'

Susan

'My husband and I are in our mid-sixties, and at the moment we are completely fit and well. But looking into the future, and therefore thinking of the less able people in the village, the only licensed pharmacy is up a steep hill, a small car park is still a distance away, the entrance into it has steps so wheelchair access could present a problem, and difficulty for anyone with mobility issues. Considering the growing population of the village it makes sense to have a second licensed pharmacy-next to the surgery, easy access and large car park.'

Bob

'I am semi-disabled, am no longer allowed to drive (due to medical conditions) and rely entirely on my wife either taking me to the chemist or collecting my prescriptions for me. I collect 18 separate prescription medicines every 28 days.'

The final questions in the survey asked for demographic information regarding the respondents:

There were a relatively even number of responses from the older age groups. Of the 162 respondents:

48 were aged 65-74

46 were aged 55-64

20 were aged 35-44

20 were aged 75+

19 were aged 45-54

5 were aged 25-34

3 were aged 18-24

And one person preferred not to give their age.

Overwhelmingly, responses were from females; 120 identified as female, 40 males and two preferred not to say.

143 respondents stated that their gender was not different to the sex they were assigned at birth. Twelve respondents stated their sex was different and two preferred not to answer.

142 people stated their ethnic background was White: British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh, ten were White: any other white background, three were White; Irish, one was Asian/Asian British; Indian and six people preferred not to say.

81 respondents stated that they were not carers or considered themselves to have a disability or a long-term condition.

63 considered that they did have a long-term condition.

21 considered they had a disability.

18 considered they were a carer.

One preferred not to say.

3.4 Stansted Mountfitchet

A particularly significant number of respondents to the survey came from residents of Stansted Mountfitchet. They have numerous issues and concerns regarding the community pharmacy provision in their village.

They are extremely frustrated that there is only one NHS dispensing pharmacy in the village which is located at the top of a steep hill with limited parking, no disabled access, long queues (often outside the store), waiting times for prescriptions to be filled, no adequate space for private one to one consultation with a pharmacist if required etc.

The growth of the village over the last 10 years and future housing plans are also a major concern for the residents, they feel that the current provision struggles to meet their needs and can only assume that it will get worse over time as the need increases.

The pharmacy next to the GP surgery is not an NHS dispensing pharmacy so must send prescriptions to their branch in London and then wait for the medication to be sent

back before it can be given to the patient. The Boots pharmacy is the only pharmacy able to dispense same day medication.

I have conducted interviews with numerous residents and members of the parish council.

Below is a summary of their concerns and feedback:

‘Stansted badly needs another dispensing pharmacy. It's a ridiculous waste of resources that the one by the surgery can't dispense, so patients have to walk up the hill, or drive and park again, to get their prescriptions.’

‘The local pharmacy (Boots) is not suitable. Its position in the village is not good.’

‘Boots is too small to deal with the demand of the village, having a second pharmacy supporting the surgery in Stansted would be better.’

‘There are often long queues going outside of the Boots pharmacy meaning you have to queue in the cold/rain. I would use the pharmacy more but it's so busy I feel bad asking for help on non-urgent health matters.’

‘I have to visit a pharmacy out of area as the one dispensing pharmacy in our village is useless; they don't answer the phone, are rude, keep you waiting, and you can't wait in the pharmacy. Stansted needs another pharmacy.’

‘We have stopped using our local Boots in Stansted as we have found them to be inefficient, at times unfriendly and unhelpful. It seems unable to deal with the demands placed on it by the growing population in Stansted.’

‘The pharmacy is closed at weekends and can't dispense on the same day as they have to send it off. We need another pharmacy in Stansted as Boots can't cope with the volume. There is always a long wait at Boots.’

‘Copes cannot dispense a prescription on the same day as prescribed and so this does not work for me when I need a prescription on 'the day'. I then have to go to Boots Pharmacy in Stansted which means going out twice when I feel ill. Boots Pharmacy is overloaded with work.’

‘On the occasions that I have had a prescription given due to illness, I have not been able to walk to Boots as it is too far from my home to access when unwell. Sadly, Copes has not been given a dispensing license, so cannot give an immediate prescription. This situation needs to be changed as it adversely affects the health of those people who are not close to Boots. When I have been obliged to use Boots, the wait is very long for prescriptions as they are being asked to complete more than they can handle.’

‘Staff are taking time to serve customers as they are very busy. We need to have another pharmacy for prescriptions - why not the chemist next door to surgery?’

‘I have an issue with not being able to receive medicine from a prescription the same day from the pharmacy next to the surgery as it doesn’t have a license to prescribe itself but has to send the prescription to another pharmacy in London. If I want the medicine urgently, I have to walk up the hill to Boots and join the queue. Even then it often means I have to return later as they are extremely busy and just can’t cope with the number of prescriptions. The staff can be rude and unhelpful there as they are so stressed.’

‘If the weather’s good, or I fancy an uphill walk I will walk to the pharmacy - otherwise I have to drive and try and park on the main road - my husband uses the pharmacy next to the doctor’s surgery which is more convenient, but they are not a ‘dispensing in store’ pharmacy - only ordered medications. They are much easier for us to access.’

‘Boots in Stansted are understaffed, have variable opening times and are often overrun or out of stock. They are too small and have inadequate parking provision.’

‘Copes not being able to dispense immediately is a problem, as apparently you think one dispensing pharmacy in the village is sufficient, or that we should drive to the airport and somehow get airside to use a pharmacy there.’

‘Boots is not as close geographically so harder to get to if ill. It doesn’t always have medication so there is no other option. It often has large queues and is very small so holds limited stock.’

‘Boots is too small, the parking is difficult, it is too often closed due to staff shortage, there is a delay on issuing prescriptions, and they are understaffed.’

‘Boots has no convenient car park, only very limited street parking. The service is slow resulting in queues and staff often abrupt. It is at the top of Chapel Hill which is impossible to walk up from the shops, station or car park for most people, especially for the elderly, people with pushchairs and prams and those with health conditions. I am in my late 70's and have grandchildren. The biggest drawback of Stansted Pharmacy is not being able to dispense medicines as it can take time to get prescriptions delivered to them from their supplier and not opening on Saturdays as a result delays the time when customers can collect.’

‘The pharmacy (Copes) is adjacent to the town central carpark and for physically challenged people this is a very great help as the other town pharmacy is a considerable walk away up a very steep hill. The staff are helpful but as medicines have to be sent from their London based branch, delivery can be delayed and therefore a fully licenced pharmacy would be much more convenient.’

‘I have no complaints, the only point I would raise is that the shop is not easily accessible for people with disabilities. The doorstep is quite high and there is no ramp. The shop is also geographically a distance from the village health centre, up a very

steep hill, making it difficult for people who live at the bottom end of the village to get to the chemist.'

'There are different staff every time I visit. No disabled access. The premises are too small, with bad working conditions.'

'The Boots chemist has no wheelchair access. I'm left sitting in all weathers just waiting for someone to notice me from outside.'

'Boots in Stansted is always busy, has long waits and is not very efficient, staff can be abrupt and unhelpful, it's also a distance from the doctor's surgery. It's really annoying as there is a lovely chemist right next door to the doctors but hasn't a licence for prescriptions, Boots seem to have the monopoly!'

'Stansted's only pharmacy is always really busy with a long queue. Staff seem overburdened with their jobs, so service is slow. The step into the shop is very awkward and when my son was in a wheelchair he couldn't get in without great difficulty.'

'Boots Chemist in Stansted Mountfitchet is approximately 0.5 miles away from the GP Surgery, up a steep hill, which makes it difficult to walk to when you're unwell. I try to avoid using the car, because the pharmacy is competing with Tesco Express and other businesses for very limited parking space. Opening hours used to be restricted for a long time due to staff shortages and I went in vain on at least one occasion, although that appears to have been rectified. There are frequent queues, including people waiting outside the pharmacy. Inside the pharmacy it looks dated, tired, and is quite small. Service can be very slow.'

'My local pharmacy is Boots / Stansted. I have often had to queue many times, and would rather a pharmacy closer to the surgery, where I would have just visited and collected the prescription.'

'Long waits and poor parking are the norm. Boots is not in close proximity to the doctor's surgery meaning you need to drive between the surgery and the pharmacy and repark which is a pain as parking is scarce.'

'I use Copes pharmacy beneath Stansted surgery as they never have queues, and the staff are polite and helpful unlike Boots which is always busy, and staff overstretched.'

'This is the only pharmacy in the village with a dispensing licence; despite there being another unlicensed pharmacy adjacent to our surgery. This pharmacy is clearly under a high degree of pressure due to the high demand being placed on it for prescription provision. It is I feel, an unsustainable situation. They don't do dosset boxes or deliver to customers. I tend to place orders online or attend Boots in other locations, if I need a better choice of non-prescription products.'

‘Boots pharmacy is inadequate for the size of the village. A second pharmacy at the other end of the village is badly needed.’

‘With only one pharmacy in walking distance that can fill a prescription it means they are constantly too busy and takes ages. Typically, it means we need to then drive to other locations to get faster service.’

‘Very helpful staff: they have a welcoming environment, easy for all to access, close to the GP practice. The only drawback is that they don’t have a dispensing licence so one had to wait 24 hours or longer for a prescription to be fulfilled. Boots is the alternative; a steep, uphill walk - great if you’re infirm or feeling unwell - small, unwelcoming premises: transient staff battling to stem the tide of irate customers who have to wait queuing for unacceptable times.’

‘Copes Pharmacy is unable to dispense medicine, meaning a delay when I get a new prescription. This was a huge problem when I was offered painkillers after a recent injury as I had to get up the hill to Boots. This caused me considerable pain that could have been avoided by Copes having a dispensing license.’

‘Boots Pharmacy in Stansted is abysmal, it’s hit and miss, they can’t locate prescriptions, huge queues in a tiny shop, so we have to queue outside in all weathers.’

‘They are hard to get hold of on the phone and hard to visit in person as I live in a rural area. There are huge queues for the pharmacy (e.g., in Boots) and long waits for dispensed medications (again, e.g., Boots).’

‘Having a pharmacy at the top of a hill when the doctor’s surgery at the bottom is not helpful. The hill is difficult when one is feeling healthy but if needing a prescription after a surgery visit then usually not feeling good.’

‘I have lived in Stansted for 25 years and have seen it grow enormously. Unfortunately, Boots is unable to keep up with the demand of such a large population, so a second chemist with a dispensing license is vital. The airport is not a viable option, as anybody with local knowledge would know.’

‘The fact that Boots is the only licensed pharmacy in Stansted Mountfitchet Village. The people who make the licensing decisions need to listen to the people who live in the village and need to use the pharmacy services.’

Many residents of Stansted Mountfitchet also offered one to one interviews. Below is a summary of these.

Ray:

Ray has a long history of campaigning for a second licensed pharmacy in Stansted. He explained that the village is rapidly expanding, and the current Boots store is unable to cope; it is an unsuitable building, with no disabled access, a very small private room, lack of staff, poor parking nearby, and is at the top of a very steep hill.

The other pharmacy in the village is next door to the GP surgery but is not a dispensing pharmacy, so Boots is the only option or travelling outside of the village.

Ray is unhappy with the recent PNA and the survey that went with it, stating that people found it difficult to complete.

He has had lots of involvement with the local MP and parish council to garner support for the pharmacy next to the GP surgery to be given the ability to dispense prescriptions directly.

John:

The Boots pharmacy in the village has no parking, no step free access, and is always very busy with long queues.

The growing population is a real concern as the infrastructure is not in place to support it.

He feels very strongly about the situation.

He found the PNA survey to be very long and complicated.

Joerg:

The Boots pharmacy is up a steep hill, has low staff numbers, the building looks tired, and it doesn't meet the needs of the community. Parking issues affect many residents and there is no disabled access.

Joerg feels that the staff can give a good service but are very slow due to the level of demand they have to cope with.

The other pharmacy can offer more services, is bigger, has better parking and is next door to the GP surgery. It would make sense for them to be able to provide prescriptions directly, rather than having to send them to their London store to be processed and then back to Stansted Mountfitchet, which is the current arrangement.

He also feels that the general prescription system is very long winded.

Ashley:

It is frustrating having to use Boots as it is always packed. The queues have not improved but the staff have recently-they are good.

He states that you have to wait 48 hours to collect from the pharmacy next to the GP due to them not being able to dispense straight away.

He has monthly medication which he orders on the NHS app. He has been using for this for six months with no issues.

Chris:

Had an incident at Boots where she was given the wrong strength of medication so will not use them anymore. She instead travels to use a pharmacy in Bishops Stortford, who she reports give a 'super service'. They request her medication then text her when it is ready to collect.

Michael:

Uses Pharmacy 4 You as they deliver medication direct to your home. Boots is at the top of a steep hill and always has a large queue so isn't practical for a lot of people.

Rachel:

Suffers from undiagnosed mobility issues and is currently in a lot of pain. She is unable to walk up the hill to the Boots store. She uses the pharmacy next to the GP surgery for repeat prescriptions and is happy with the service. She feels that due to Boots being so busy, their relationship with the residents of the town is suffering. She cannot understand why residents would be expected to travel to the airport to use the pharmacy there. The cost of parking is very expensive, and the store is airside so after security, therefore you can't access it without a plane ticket.

As the response from Stansted Mountfitchet was so significant, we approached the parish council for their viewpoint.

Interview with members of the parish council:

'Well, this parish council has supported the community to lobby for a second licensed pharmacy. Primarily because we've got a brand-new state-of-the-art GP surgery in the south of the village. Actually, it's a town, but people like it to be called a village. So, in the south, and an unlicensed pharmacy sits next door to it. The license for the person who runs that is in London. So, you can get your prescriptions made up, but you wait 48 hours. So, if you want an antibiotic today, you can't get it from there. The village is divided in two by a steep hill. We do have a very small pharmacy on the top access road at the top of the hill run by birds. There is no disabled access into that pharmacy. And there are double yellow lines along the majority of the road. You can park outside, but then you've got two steps up onto the pavement and then you've got to ask for assistance to get in up over the step to the pharmacy. They are very often short-staffed. They very often work limited hours, and the village is growing. We've got a new development for 350 houses proposed as we speak. We are approximately 10,000, population.

We have a railway station, again, in the south of the village, not far from the farm from the GP surgery. And that station serves Elsenham, Henham, Manuden, various locations to the north of the village, as well as we are so close to Bishop Stopford. People come here to get on the train before it stops in Bishop Stopford. They will want to use a pharmacy as well. Some of them, in fact over, I think it was over 2,000, wasn't it? Use the GP surgery as well. Because there's a new development on the edge of Bishop Stopford, which really, you know, we're now the meat in the sandwich between Newport and Bishop Stopford. So currently our GP surgery is also supporting the Elsenham surgery. Elsenham do have the ability to dispense for people who attend the surgery who live in Elsenham. But quite a number of Elsenham patients also use our surgery, so it's split. So basically, the demand on services is growing and growing. In

Covid Boots didn't deliver, they can't do deliveries or won't do deliveries or whatever, but they didn't do any deliveries. And in the current situation where you can't see a doctor, you know, you go to a pharmacist or you're recommended, certainly at the moment, to go to a pharmacist. Well, they're so busy up there that they can't cope basically. And that's no criticism of them, that's just how it is. If we had a second dispensing pharmacy then, you know, as the village is growing, it would help. And I can prove, and I've sent when they did the PNA to say that there will be enough work for everybody to make a living. We don't want to lose one, we want two. But people are very, very reluctant to do anything about this situation and I can't understand why. Our MP is supportive. Our county councillor is supportive. Our district councillors from here are supportive. As for district council, I haven't got a clue to be absolutely honest, and I don't mind you repeating that word for word. Not a Scooby Doo. They didn't know that the PNA was going to start, we told them.

When the PNA came out, it was over the Christmas period, so we asked for an extension to that because no one was going to fill it in over Christmas. So, we did get an extension on that. But Dipti Patel, who is the lead or was the lead in Essex, continually explains to us, although she doesn't need to, that they are not the deciding body on the registration for a second pharmacy. We understand that, but the way in which the PNA was constructed and the questions that were asked, there was no way they were going to change their minds. Already made up. Is that they haven't considered any of the representations that we've made. I think Dipti has taken it as a personal issue, that we are creating these waves. Well, I'm sorry, but we have to represent what our community wants.'

Healthwatch Essex visit to Stansted Mountfitchet:

On Friday 27th January 2023 I visited Stansted Mountfitchet and was shown around the town and the current pharmacy services by some of the local residents who have been campaigning for a second licenced pharmacy for some time now. I was shown the GP surgery, both pharmacies and the geographical nature of the town.

I was first shown the pharmacy directly next to the GP surgery. This is a large unit with easy access for disabled customers, ample parking next to the building, various consulting rooms and various other services. They also provide blister/dosett packs of medication for customers and free delivery (Boots no longer provides blister/dosett packs). One member of staff explained that the delivery service wasn't just about dropping off medication to a customer but the importance of face-to-face contact and checking their general wellbeing.

I also took the opportunity to walk up the hill to the Boots pharmacy at the top of the town. The hill is long and steep. I can fully understand that anyone with mobility issues, a wheelchair user, respiratory conditions, young children etc would find walking up that hill a difficult or an impossible task depending on their situation. At the top of

the hill is the Boots store, the road is very busy and the on-street parking at the front of the store is first come first served so a space is not always available. There are also three kerbs to get up from the road to the pavement. The store itself has a substantial step at the front door so makes it inaccessible for wheelchair users. I could see the button outside the front door for anyone unable to access the store to push and I understand a member of staff will attend to them. It is not however an acceptable option for a disabled person to have to wait outside in possible poor weather conditions for assistance.

I then had a short tour of the town and surrounding area. The town is spread out over a varied terrain and geographical area with various housing developments over the recent years and planning permission being sought for more. Many residents already feel that the current service that Boots provide is unable to cope and they have concerns that this will only deteriorate in the future as demand increases.

Any suggestion that residents can use the pharmacy at Stansted airport is not a viable one as the pharmacy is situated airside which means that it is beyond security and cannot be accessed without a boarding pass.

Having visited the area and listening to the feedback from many residents, it is clear that the community here feel a great deal of frustration that the current situation causes and that this is reinforced by the logistical factors of the pharmacy provision.

Recommendations

Healthwatch Essex recognises some of the difficulties that the ICB will have regarding pharmacies as they do not have any control over NHS England contracts or how private companies manage their businesses. However, there are a number of actions that we recommend which could assist with developing a positive relationship between pharmacies and their customers and develop the pharmacist's role in primary care.

- Promoting the use of the NHS app to order repeat prescriptions.
- Promoting the services that pharmacists can offer outside of medication and prescriptions.
- Offering training sessions to pharmacy staff to develop customer service skills and recognising that certain customers may need extra assistance, e.g., those with dementia, neurodiversity, deaf/blind, disabled etc.
- Supporting communities to ensure future services meet the needs of the expanding population.
- Increasing awareness and accessibility of pharmacy services to difficult to reach residents-the travelling community, older people, carers, neurodiverse etc.

'The entire system - from frontline staff to policymakers to NHS leaders - must show more imagination of what pharmacy can do. Pharmacies provide a vast network of healthcare

professionals across local communities, connecting with hard-to-reach communities and vulnerable groups. Pharmacies act as a safety net, addressing health inequalities, driving improvements in early disease detection, promoting self-care, alleviating pressures in primary and urgent care, and leading public health initiatives. We cannot put too high a value on this.’ (All-Party Pharmacy Group “The Future of Pharmacy Manifesto” report - 23 January 2023)

4.0 Conclusion

Our engagement with the residents of west Essex focussed on the request of feedback and lived experience regarding their use of community pharmacies and garnered in excess of 160 responses. Most respondents used the pharmacy once a month to collect medication for long term conditions. Whilst a number of individuals are generally satisfied with the service provided by their community pharmacy, many took the opportunity to express their concerns and dissatisfaction around a number of issues. The issues raised mainly centred around the waiting time for prescriptions to be filled, unable to contact pharmacies by telephone and feeling that staff were too busy to ask for advice.

Residents want to feel able to ask their local pharmacists for advice when required. It is important for them to be able to build a relationship with that provider and have trust and confidence with the service they deliver. There were some difficulties pointed out regarding use of NHS apps to reorder medication and how that links up electronically with the different systems that pharmacies use. Some respondents had concerns that their medication was being requested by the pharmacists from the GP surgery without their knowledge.

The residents of Stansted Mountfitchet are not satisfied with their current community pharmacy provision and have concerns that it will not be able to meet the future needs of their population. The community here is clearly mobilised to address this issue and to represent the needs of its members, which a significant proportion do not feel are being adequately met currently. There is certainly work to be done in communicating with the residents here and achieving the best possible outcome.

