



Pharmacy Comments Received By Healthwatch Cheshire

April 2023 to February 2025

Background

Pharmacies across the UK are facing more and more challenges due to financial pressures, staff shortages, and growing demand for their services. Recent reports show that many pharmacies are having to close temporarily, cut services, or reduce their hours. The National Pharmacy Association (NPA) has warned that, if things do not improve, pharmacies could limit or stop some services in early 2025¹. This would affect people's access to important healthcare services.

In addition, the Pharmacy First initiative² was launched in 2024 which aimed to increase accessibility and provide more services at local pharmacies. While the initiative has been a positive step in many areas, offering easier access to certain treatments and advice, feedback from the public shows that there have been issues around the availability of some services.³ Many patients have found it difficult to access the support they expected due to staff shortages, overcrowded pharmacies, and inconsistent implementation of the initiative.

In Cheshire, pharmacies are struggling to meet the needs of their communities. Many pharmacies have had to cut back on services like free home deliveries, extended hours, and even some prescription medicines. This report looks at feedback from people in Cheshire East and Cheshire West, highlighting their experiences when using local pharmacies. We received 186 pieces of feedback between April 2023 to February 2025 on which this report is based.

We also received some positive feedback highlighting excellent customer service, accessibility of health advice, and efficient prescription management at local pharmacies. Many people appreciated timely medication delivery, personalised care, and assistance with health concerns. Pharmacists showed professionalism and went the extra mile to ensure patients received the right care in a timely manner.

1. <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/report/2024-04-30/pharmacy-what-people-want>
2. <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/advice-and-information/2024-11-15/what-can-pharmacy-first-scheme-do-me>
3. <https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/blog/2024-05-01/three-reasons-why-push-increase-role-pharmacies-being-undermined>

Key Insights

Systemic Issues

- Problems appear interconnected (staff shortages → delays → overcrowding)
- Digital systems (like 'Spine System') showing reliability issues
- Rural areas particularly affected by service reductions
- Coordination between some GPs and some pharmacies needs improvement

Patient Impact

- Health risks from medication delays and shortages
- Increased challenges for vulnerable people
- Increased stress and time costs for patients
- Reduced confidence in pharmacy services

Service Delivery Challenges

- Staffing shortages affecting service quality
- Inconsistent implementation of new initiatives
- Communication breakdowns between healthcare providers
- Physical space and queue management issues

Main Themes and Issues

The feedback from Cheshire East and Cheshire West highlighted several key challenges facing local pharmacies. Medicine shortages and prescription delays were among the most common issues, with many people experiencing long waits or systemic difficulties getting the medications they need. These delays were often linked to poor coordination between pharmacies and GP practices, particularly compounded by the wider national concern of medicine shortages.

Additionally, overcrowded pharmacies and a lack of professional support were frequently mentioned. Many people felt that they were not receiving useful advice from pharmacy staff, which added to their frustration. In some areas, the availability of pharmacies was also limited, particularly in rural locations, where temporary closures or staff shortages were making access to services more difficult.

Medicine Supplies and Availability

Medicine shortages remain a repeated concern across various Cheshire pharmacies, impacting people's health and well-being. Patients reported struggling to access important medications due to stock unavailability, leading to inconvenience, stress, and, in some cases, worsening health conditions. Issues include regular delays in fulfilling prescriptions, being prescribed alternative brands, or being advised to contact other pharmacies or services. Many patients expressed frustration at the repeated need to visit multiple locations or manage without their prescribed medication. The feedback also highlighted the harmful effects of these shortages on specific groups, such as children with ADHD and people with chronic conditions like diabetes or hypertension.

- *"I use [Pharmacy name] in Nantwich for Vitamin B12, but they're often out of stock. The pharmacist suggested I try [another pharmacy name], where I now get it monthly for £120 a year. While I appreciate the suggestion, I'd prefer to get them for free through the pharmacy."*



A man told Healthwatch that due to long NHS waiting lists, he went private for an ADHD diagnosis. He now faces a shortage of his prescribed medication, causing concern about its impact on his mood and health.



- *"I joined a new GP practice in 2021, but the pharmacy attached to the surgery is hard work. Prescriptions often require multiple visits because they either lack stock or have insufficient amounts."*

Telephone call taken by Healthwatch

A woman told Healthwatch that she initially refused an alternative brand of anti-hypertensive medication offered by her pharmacy due to stock shortages of her usual brand. After taking the alternative, she felt unwell, and her blood pressure increased.

Prescription Waiting Time and Communication

Linking to the above theme, prescription delays and poor coordination between GP surgeries and pharmacies are another frequent issue raised by people. Many report long waiting times for prescriptions, repeated visits due to incomplete or unavailable medication, and challenges with pharmacy communication by the GPs. This theme highlights frustrations regarding systemic inefficiencies and their adverse impact on patients' health and well-being. Notably, these issues are worsened by staff shortages, increased pharmacy demand, and digital system inefficiencies, leaving patients feeling unsupported.



Every single month meds aren't ready. My father-in-law ran out and had no medication for 4 days. This makes him deteriorate rapidly—it's happening every time.



- *A couple told Healthwatch that their Surgery [name], will not let them reorder medication sooner than 7 days before they need it, which does not help if you are going away. Their pharmacy [name] in Nantwich, says this is not enough notice to get the prescription ready on time.*
- *"I had to go to this pharmacy 4 times in a week to collect a prescription and received conflicting excuses every time—blaming the doctor, supplier, or patient. My wife has now been waiting 3 weeks for her prescription."*
- *Face-to-face feedback from a local group revealed that the 'Spine System,' which sends prescriptions to a virtual cloud for pharmacists, is not working effectively. Many members feel it fails and would prefer paper prescriptions to ensure reliability.*
- *"I find it very difficult to get my prescriptions as I can no longer drive, and the pharmacy will not deliver."*

Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A man told Healthwatch that he feels like he is 'spending half his life chasing his medication.' He commented that it is often out of stock, not available, or not ready when he goes to collect it. This is especially stressful for older people on multiple regular medications.

A woman told Healthwatch that her tablets had run out a week ago, and she spent all day trying to chase them up. The delays added to her stress, especially since her husband, who she cares for, had been in A&E recently.

However, some people commented positively on the prescription waiting times and appreciated the coordination between their GPs and the pharmacists.

- *"They listen really well and are prompt in getting medication for you. Repeat prescriptions take 2 days from [the] time of request."*
- *"I've had my repeat prescriptions delivered for one year with no problems. They even put the repeats in for me, with no issues at all."*
- *"I don't have any problems in getting medication. The pharmacist is very good and helps me with my ailments."*
- *A person told Healthwatch that their pharmacy was excellent. They explained that if there was a query on the prescription, or the prescription had not reached them, the pharmacy would phone the GP surgery while you waited to sort it out. The person felt that this helped people [who] may be stressed or poorly from having to chase about and try and get through to the surgeries themselves.*

Pharmacy Staffing and Administration

As identified above, the feedback gathered by Healthwatch Cheshire highlighted important challenges faced by many pharmacy users across various locations, particularly related to long waiting times, insufficient staff, and operational inefficiencies. Consequentially, however, many people described their experiences of overcrowding, with queues often extending outside pharmacy premises. The impact of closures in nearby areas has further worsened the issue, increasing pressure on remaining pharmacies.



Not allowed to queue inside even when raining! [The] door [was] not open on Friday, and no phones [were] answered. Pills [are] not ready after 10 days.



- *"My mother made an appointment for her flu jab for 3.30pm on 09/10/23. She walked to the pharmacy which is about 2 miles. On arrival I met up with her and went to the pharmacy. There was a long queue. When we got to the front of the said queue which took 20/25 minutes she was told that she would have to wait at least another 20 minutes because they were busy due to only having one*

pharmacist that day. As the queue was even longer at this point it would have been a longer than 20 [minutes] wait. We left in disgust and went to a different pharmacy where she had her flu jab in less than 10 minutes. Absolutely disgusted with this service."

- "Following problems with an irritated eye I attended [pharmacy name] in Crewe but didn't receive helpful advice so [I] went to [another pharmacy] to speak to a pharmacist who was very helpful but didn't have the eye ointment needed in stock. So, after advice from the pharmacist, I rang [pharmacy name] in Sandbach to ask if they had any of the eye ointment in stock but despite the woman on the phone being very helpful, they didn't have any either. Now going to a fourth pharmacy (driven to 3 and phoned one) and being in increasing pain with my eye and now having tried for a couple of hours to receive treatment, I went to [another pharmacy] in Crewe. The time was around 4.20pm and it was noticed that a shutter was pulled half down but that a family were waiting ahead of me who said they were waiting for the Pharmacist to come back to them so I assumed there was a Pharmacist I could speak to. The Pharmacist peeped out of the half-shuttered door and said he would [not] be seeing anyone until after 5pm as he was trying to get a break and disappeared again. Worried that time was ticking on I didn't feel I could wait until 5pm in case they too were out of stock so drove to a fifth Pharmacy."
- "Not enough staff. The Chemist service has gone downhill, they are busy and short-staffed. You can no longer get a repeat prescription from there you have to see your GP."

Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A man told Healthwatch that he uses [pharmacy name] in Nantwich for repeat prescriptions and finds that the medication he needs is not always in stock and that you can have long waits to be served. He commented that it is a small pharmacy and that he has seen queues backing right out onto and along the street. He commented that it feels as if "the system is broken."

A woman told Healthwatch that she uses [pharmacy name] in Nantwich for repeat prescriptions and finds that they often don't have her medication in stock, and you have to go in several times before you can collect it. She also said that you can wait a long time to be served, and that staff seem busy consulting and advising people and don't seem to have time to get prescriptions ready and serve customers.

However, some people appreciated the staff's excellent management during the busy period.

- *"I have my prescriptions sent electronically to this pharmacy and they will always give me a time to call in for it. They are advertising for staff, but they do a great job and work extremely hard. Being kept informed to collect your prescription after a certain time stops you [from] having to wait around very long."*
- *"I was happy to show him the rash, [the pharmacist] took my concern seriously and spent time with me listening to my symptoms, giving helpful advice and finding antihistamine medication for me off the shelves despite a queue now forming at the counter and me saying "don't worry, you are busy, I will find the tablets myself". The Pharmacist was extremely professional, courteous and helpful and further advised seeing a GP if the rash got worse or spread."*
- *A man told Healthwatch that he has epilepsy as well as sight loss and that [Pharmacy] in Macclesfield is amazing. They have told him that if he feels that he is going to have an epileptic episode whilst in Macclesfield town centre he is welcome to come into the pharmacy and sit quietly in their consultation room where they will keep an eye on him and provide a quiet space until the episode has passed. He commented that it is very reassuring when going into town to know that he has this facility and also said that they are great with his medication and always have it ready on time.*

Customer Service and Staff Professionalism

Many people reported coming across rude, abrupt, or unhelpful staff members who failed to provide proper assistance, ignored customer needs, or showed a lack of respect. Cases of poor customer service ranged from dismissive responses to urgent requests, long delays in processing prescriptions, and a lack of politeness in interactions. In some cases, patients were left without important medication or faced unnecessary worries due to the staff's unhelpful behaviour. There were also reports of staff being unprofessional, such as making inappropriate comments or showing a lack of empathy. Overall, these experiences have led to frustration and a loss of trust in certain pharmacy services, with several individuals deciding to switch pharmacies as a result.



Lady inappropriately making sexual and personal comments to my father-in-law. Complaints were made but no action taken. We are in the process of taking legal action against them. Disgusting and completely unprofessional.



- *"[I] called for emergency contraception. The woman [at the reception] told me they were closing in 15 minutes. I said I could be there in about seven, and she said no, it would be too late, but I should have planned ahead? Even though I was sat in a health clinic waiting for a walk-in slot because I had work at 6 pm."*
- *"Awful experience [at the pharmacy]. The manager is delusional and treats people like dirt."*
- *"Disgusting customer service! Ordered my medication, and a week later I [went] in to collect it, only to be told it's there but in a queue, so it might be two days before [it's] ready. When I enquired why (and only I [was] at the counter), I [was] told, 'because we serve 6000 customers.' Well, I was there, and only I – not 5999 and me. When I asked for the complaints procedure, I was asked why, and I said I think the customer service is terrible. Only to be met with pure*

scorn! The lady actually screwed up her face and said, 'what [are] you on about.' Will be changing my pharmacy."

- "Very, very bad. I had the employees shut the door in my face, wouldn't make eye contact with me, and wouldn't speak to me in a civil or professional manner. This happened [on time and date in] May. The closing time, [which] is stated on a board next to the door, [was] 6:00 pm. The doctor had just prescribed my 2-year-old son Dioralyte. My children were stood with me at the time, and I clearly stated it was for my son. [There was] no care in the world [from] the staff, [who were] just bickering amongst themselves, completely ignoring my existence."
- "The pharmacist has been disrespectful, rude, and dismissive on numerous occasions. I have resorted to [changing] prescriptions and have now decided to travel elsewhere in future."
- "This chemist is a disgrace. It has left an elderly lady with no antibiotics when she is unwell, promising they will be ready, and when we go back, they aren't there. They shouldn't have accepted the prescription! [Pharmacy name] [was] unhelpful as usual."
- "Served [on] 16/11/23 by [name]. Not at all friendly or polite, [they] threw one prescription on [the] counter and left [the] other [where I] could not reach - behind [a] massive barrier around [the] counter. [This is the] second time I have encountered this staff member's poor service."
- "The pharmacist was abrupt and unhelpful when I asked about medication. I decided to change to a different pharmacy. When I rang to inform [pharmacy name], the pharmacist put [me] on hold and cut off the conversation."
- "They never answer the phone, so it is impossible to find out if your prescription is ready. They don't text either. Really unhelpful."

Telephone call taken by Healthwatch

A woman told Healthwatch that a member of staff at the [pharmacy name] in Crewe was very brisk and short with her when she went along to collect her prescriptions. She commented that on one occasion one of her medications was missing and when she asked about this there was no apology and that the staff member was rather snappy with her and not very pleasant or approachable.

Some people, however, had positive interactions and experience with the staff.

- *"The staff are extremely friendly and recognise us. The pharmacist always answers queries over medication, and the prescriptions are ready the following day."*
- *"The staff work very hard, always very, very helpful. Best Pharmacy I have ever come across and I'm 86!"*
- *A student told Healthwatch that the last time she went to [pharmacy name] in Middlewich to collect her prescription, they had run out and she had to go elsewhere to collect it. She also said that the Pharmacy Staff are usually helpful and offer a good service.*
- *"Extremely kind empathetic staff. [They] went out of their way to help me."*
- *"The staff are extremely friendly and recognise us. The pharmacist always answers queries over medication, and the prescriptions are ready the following day."*

Clinical Advice from Pharmacists

This theme highlights instances where patients felt that they did not receive satisfactory or clear advice from pharmacists regarding their medical needs. Many people reported confusion or dissatisfaction due to pharmacists providing insufficient or incorrect guidance about medications and treatments. Issues ranged from the failure to inform patients about the correct way to use new medications, such as the

sublingual nature of tablets, to not addressing patients' specific health concerns, such as eye irritations or pain management. In some cases, patients were given generic or inappropriate suggestions that did not meet their needs, requiring them to seek further assistance elsewhere. Some individuals also encountered pharmacists who were unable to explain why certain medications were unavailable or offered alternatives without properly considering patients' preferences or clinical advice.



My son is on Movicol (for bowel movement), and [pharmacy name] couldn't get hold of it (we've just moved [our] GP to [GP name]). They wanted to put him on [a] cheaper alternative, which I wasn't happy with. I've now managed to get it from [pharmacy name].



- *"Unfortunately, I needed help to come off tramadol and was prescribed Espranor tabs. However, I was not told [on the] first day [that] these were sublingual, and I took them with water – so [the] first dose (2mg) [was] probably not absorbed. [The] next day, [the] pharmacist gave me water to take with a slightly higher dose at [the] chemist – again, this dose [was] probably not absorbed. [On the] next day, [I was] told that [the] tablet had to be taken sublingual as [it is] not absorbed if taken orally. I vomited all day [with] severe pain, [and it was] the same for 4 days running until I gave up."*
- *"Following problems with an irritated eye, I attended [pharmacy name] in Crewe. The pharmacist did come out to listen to my symptoms and was pleasant but just suggested some everyday eye drops for irritated eyes. I mentioned that I [had] tried similar [drops] before and that they were not very helpful and that an antibiotic cream had been useful when I had previously had similar symptoms, but the pharmacist advised [me to use] the eye drops, which I bought. [These] did not help, so [I] went to see another pharmacist at [pharmacy name]."*

Telephone call taken by Healthwatch

A woman who had not been able to see a GP regarding an insect bite was told to see a pharmacist. The first pharmacy she visited, in Broughton, said they could not advise or treat her as she was not a resident of Wales. The second pharmacy prescribed a medication they thought would help (Flucloxacillin) but did not have [it] in stock. The third pharmacy was able to help her.

Some people also expressed the convenience of receiving helpful clinical advice from their pharmacists rather than having to go to their GPs.

- *"I have a better conversation with the pharmacist than the GP. I'll pop into any pharmacy in Chester for advice."*
- *"I recently changed my blood pressure tablets as they were causing swelling in my legs. My GP agreed to the change and prescribed a different medication. A couple of weeks later I received a call from my pharmacy [name] asking how I was getting on with the medication. They talked through some common side effects of the new medication and checked whether I was having any symptoms. I was really impressed – they knew what other medication I had, and they wanted to check there [were] no contraindications between them."*

Limited Pharmacy Availability

Many people reported concerns about the closure of local pharmacies, which could lead to reduced access to essential services, especially for people with limited mobility.

- *"[Pharmacy name] in [street name] is closing in January, which will leave [the] Hoole area without a pharmacy and will put pressure on the few others nearby. I have heard [the one] in Kingsway is already getting swamped. It will also cause issues for those who are less mobile."*
- *"I've heard [pharmacy name] in Hoole is closing down in January [of 2025], but this is my local pharmacy."*

Telephone calls taken by Healthwatch

A woman told Healthwatch on 07.08.23 that she uses [pharmacy name] in [the] shopping centre in Winsford and found the staff good and medications ready on time but commented that she found collecting prescriptions in the afternoon quite frightening as there can be a lot of school children hanging about in groups, which can feel quite intimidating, especially when the afternoons start to draw in and get darker. She said they sometimes seem to follow people, and it makes her anxious about going to the pharmacy.

A woman carer told Healthwatch that they had noticed increased waiting times for medication at [pharmacy name] in Nantwich of up to 3 weeks. She commented that the staff at the pharmacy were very good and helpful but following the closures of other pharmacies in Nantwich, including [pharmacy name], she had noticed that it was putting pressure on other pharmacies making them busier and having to wait longer for prescriptions.

Comments on Pharmacy First and Other Initiatives

The feedback we received about Pharmacy First shows a mix of experiences and opinions. Many comments show that pharmacies are giving helpful advice and support to their communities. They often serve as a convenient and easy-to-reach alternative to visiting a doctor. For example, patients mentioned times when pharmacists offered useful guidance, performed health checks, and pointed them to the right services when needed.

However, the comments also suggest that not everyone knows about Pharmacy First. Some people are familiar with what it offers and find it helpful, but others—like community groups—do not know about its services. In some places, promotional efforts, such as videos or information in the store, are seen as effective ways to raise awareness about the program.

- "I visited [pharmacy name] for advice after being prescribed a chemo cream and it's burning my skin. They advised I should book a GP appointment, which I did, and the doctor at [GP practice name] saw me immediately. I went back to [pharmacy name] to thank them, and they said they had learnt something about chemo cream."
- "I will go down to [pharmacy name] if I'm not sure if I need to go to the GP, and they offer to take my blood pressure whilst I'm there. Good service."
- "I never go to the GP now; I always go to [pharmacy name] first (it's run by local people). I started going during COVID-19 because it was more convenient. I took my son there because I was concerned, he had secondary drowning. They listened to his chest and advised we take him to A&E, where they confirmed my concerns. I've been to [pharmacy name] for regular blood pressure checks and have taken my son there again, and the pharmacist advised that he see a GP. It's too much effort to book a GP appointment. I've even suggested to my nan to go to the pharmacy to get her pulse checked."
- "I attended [pharmacy name] after a doctor's appointment to collect an acute prescription. The doctor sent this electronically. I left it for 1 hour and then went to collect it. My doctor had assured me that it would be there. The pharmacy was extremely busy with a long queue, with two pharmacists on duty and several dispensing assistants. I waited in the queue for approximately 20 minutes. When it was my turn, the pharmacist said that they had not received the prescription. I explained that it was an acute prescription. The pharmacist logged in to the NHS dispensing website and could see my prescription was there but not on the [pharmacy name] system yet. He printed it off, and it was dispensed in about 20 minutes. I did note that there was lots of information displayed promoting Pharmacy First."
- "I recently attended [medical centre name], and on their information screen, they had a video running, acted by children, promoting Pharmacy First. The children were role-playing different scenarios, and the doctor was then explaining more about when to

see a pharmacy and when to see your GP. It was very effective messaging."

Engagement by Healthwatch

Through one of our community partnership engagements, we noted that 'when the subject of Pharmacy First was raised, it became apparent that many people have very little knowledge of what community pharmacies offer, particularly Pharmacy First. This group is very knowledgeable about various issues and frequently signposts and advises residents, so it was surprising that they were unaware of this.'

In conversation with a local pharmacy, they expressed concerns about the lack of promotion of the Pharmacy First scheme by local GPs. Staff believes that this is because Pharmacy First may reduce GP income. However, the pharmacy staff are committed to promoting the scheme themselves. They actively engage with their community to build trust and inform patients about how they can use Pharmacy First and the benefits it provides.

The pharmacy emphasised the importance of ensuring elderly residents continue to receive paper prescriptions. They explained that this helps promote independence, keeps patients informed about their medications, and enables them to discuss any concerns directly with the pharmacy, fostering open communication.

Additionally, the pharmacy highlighted the value of the New Medicine Service. Under this service, when a patient starts a new medication, the pharmacy explains its use and follows up with the patient after seven days to check how they are managing and to provide a review. Finally, the pharmacy expressed interest in further promoting the C-Card scheme. This free and confidential service provides sexual health information, free condoms, advice, and access to local services that support sexual and reproductive health for young people.

Understanding Pharmacy Services: Insights from the Citizens' Focus Panel

The Citizens Focus Panel is designed to enable us to get feedback on particular topics from a set group of Cheshire residents on a regular basis. We intend for this group to reflect the diversity of our population, which is why we would also ask for some basic information about participants, such as age, ethnicity, etc. so that we can make sure the Citizens Focus Panel is as representative as possible. We encourage anyone interested to get involved.

Key Areas Explored

As part of our efforts to understand pharmacy service experiences, we conducted a survey with the Citizens' Focus Panel (CFP), gathering insights on four key areas in line with the report above that includes broader feedback:



Service Experiences



Access



Accessibility



Digital Services

Who did we hear from

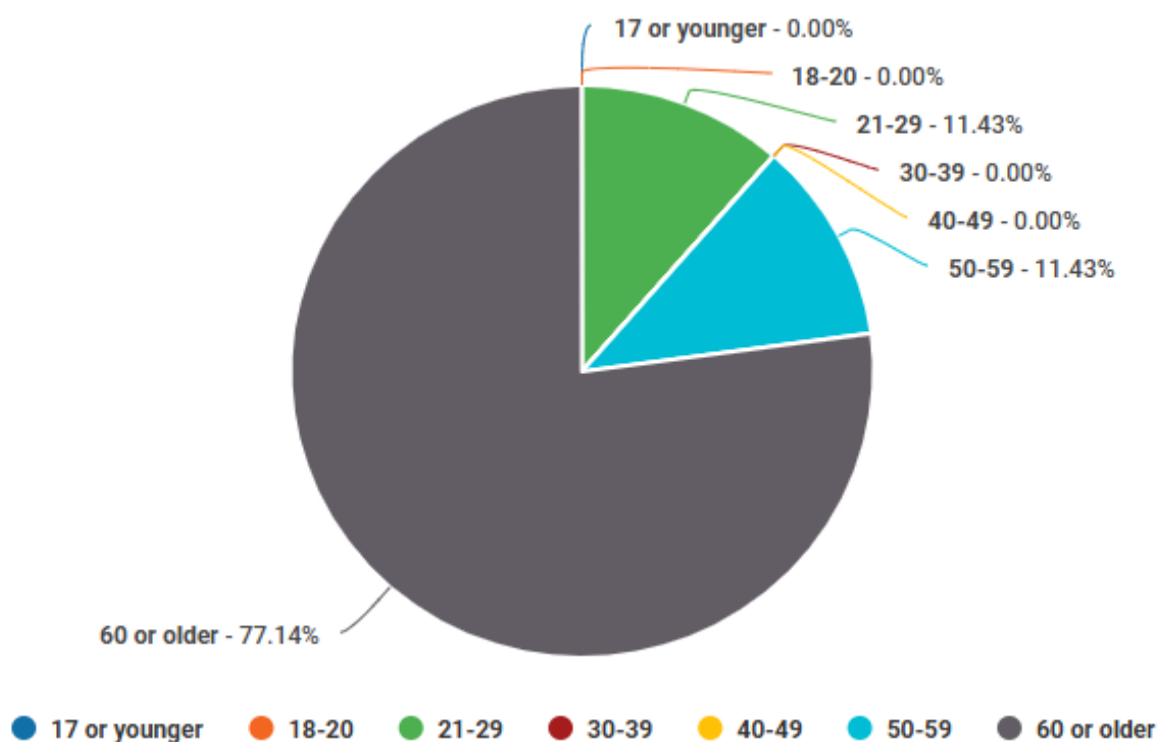
The survey gave respondents the opportunity to complete demographic information should they wish to disclose it. Except for a couple, we have received responses from all respondents on each question.



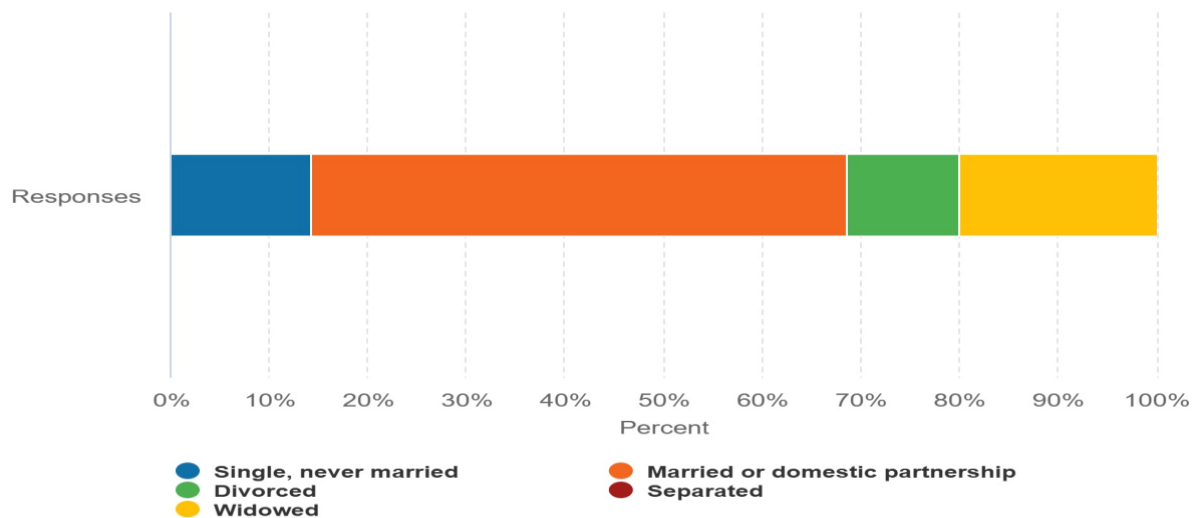
38 online responses

collected via digital survey link.

The majority of respondents were **60 or older (77%)**. More respondents identified as **female (66%)** than male (34%). Most participants were **White British (80%)**.



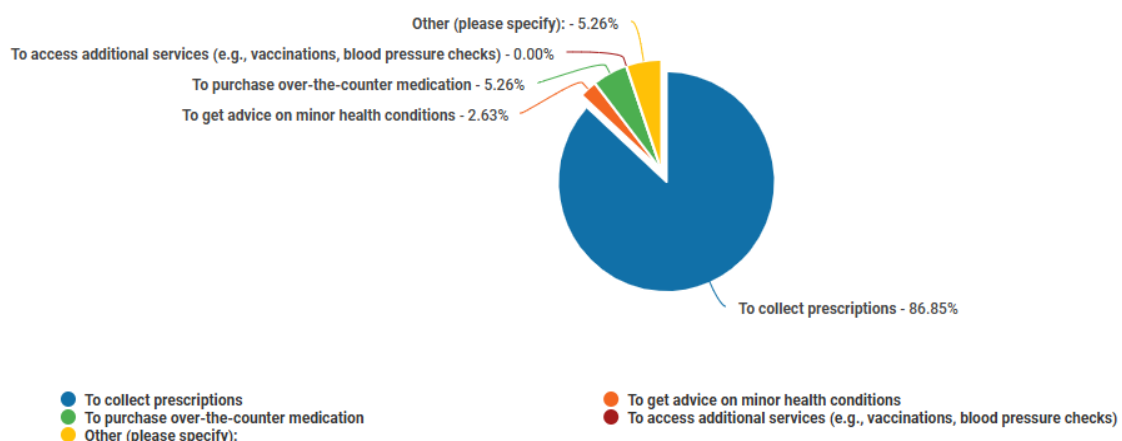
Over half (**54%**) **were married** or in a domestic partnership, while 20% were widowed. The vast **majority identified as heterosexual (88%)**.



Service Experiences

We asked respondents about their frequency of pharmacy visits, their main reasons for attending, and any challenges they faced when using pharmacy services.

What is your primary reason for visiting a pharmacy?



Most people said they **visit a pharmacy every month (68%)**, while some go **every few months (24%)**. Almost everyone **goes to collect prescriptions (87%)**, with only a few **buying medicines (5%)** or asking for advice.

Have you experienced any of the following issues with pharmacy services?

Most people **did not have any issues (53%)** with their pharmacy in the past year.

- "[Pharmacy] is on[e] of the best for advice and customer service."
- "Positive experience on the whole."
- "[Pharmacy] staff are excellent, friendly, professional, knowledgeable and understanding."
- "My nasal spray for sinus is sometimes not available. At times they have substituted."



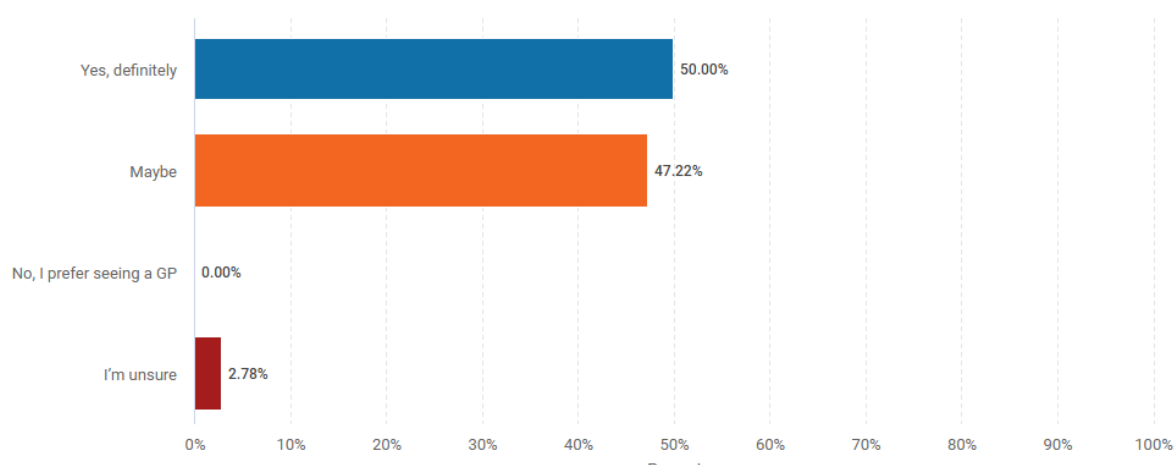
For those who faced issues, the biggest issues were **medicine shortages (29%)**, **prescription delays (24%)**, and **long waiting times (18%)**. Some also had trouble with **opening hours (8%)**, **staff interactions (5%)**, or **getting clear advice (3%)**. We provided an opportunity for people to share other issues under which **one respondent noted that there was "no pharmacist" available**.

- "Prescribed medication not in stock and no stock at the supplier."
- "Prescriptions going to the wrong pharmacy although sent electronically [Going] for repeat medication shortages a few times. Given antibiotics that [are] in shortage in England so [I] had to go back to [my] GP to change antibiotics on prescription = waste of time to start treatment!! Regular long waiting times with not enough staff to serve."

Our local pharmacy opened as a 7-day-a-week, open 'til late pharmacy (10 pm) – but after putting the original local pharmacy out of business it has reduced opening hours to basically 5.5 days a week, closing at 6.30 pm. It's always busy and always crowded. Most pharmacies put in consultation rooms that reduced waiting areas. Often, they only have one person actually serving, and if that person gets tied up finding something everyone just has to wait – even if their medication is sitting there waiting to be handed over. Dealing with people as quickly as possible doesn't seem to be a consideration. You need to order a week ahead to ensure you get your medication. They seem limited on space and are always hunting for things because they don't have enough space to organise properly. A few medications have become hard or impossible to get, and often the pharmacy can offer no advice in those circumstances. You used to get 30 days supply – but this was reduced to 28. Pharmacies seem very restricted by prescriptions e.g. if they have tablets in stock but not capsules they can't issue them without the doctor changing the prescription. You have to order repeat prescriptions on-line with verification via a text. Goodness knows how the elderly cope with this digital exclusion. Collecting my neighbours medication it said it was due for review in 2018 – 7 years ago – but had clearly continued to be issued.

Pharmacy First

Most people were open to using a pharmacy instead of a GP, with 50% saying they would and nearly everyone else saying they might.



People had **mixed views** on using pharmacies instead of GPs. Many saw **pharmacists as knowledgeable and ‘underused experts’**, with some already seeking their advice for minor issues like itchy eyes or colds. Others **welcomed quicker access to advice** and said their choice **would depend on the condition** or the wait time for a GP.

- *"Pharmacists are totally underused. They are experts!!! However, their contracts limit what they can do."*
- *"It depends on the problem, but pharmacies can often be the first to offer advice."*
- *"My wife and I both have chronic conditions, and the pharmacist always considers existing medications and offers clear advice."*
- *"I would welcome having advice quickly."*

Some expressed concerns about **pharmacists being overworked** and questioned if they had **enough staff** for increased responsibilities. A few respondents felt **GPs had a better understanding of medical histories for treatment options** while others noted **issues with privacy and inconsistency across locations**

- *"A GP has your full history and ability to refer and offer more treatment options."*
- *"Not sure they would have the staff available as they already seem overloaded with work in the dispensary."*
- *"Confidentiality, even in arranging to speak to the pharmacist, is very limited."*

Awareness of the Pharmacy First initiative was fairly high, with 69% knowing about it but not using it yet. Only a small number (22%) had actually used it, while a few (8%) had never heard of it before.

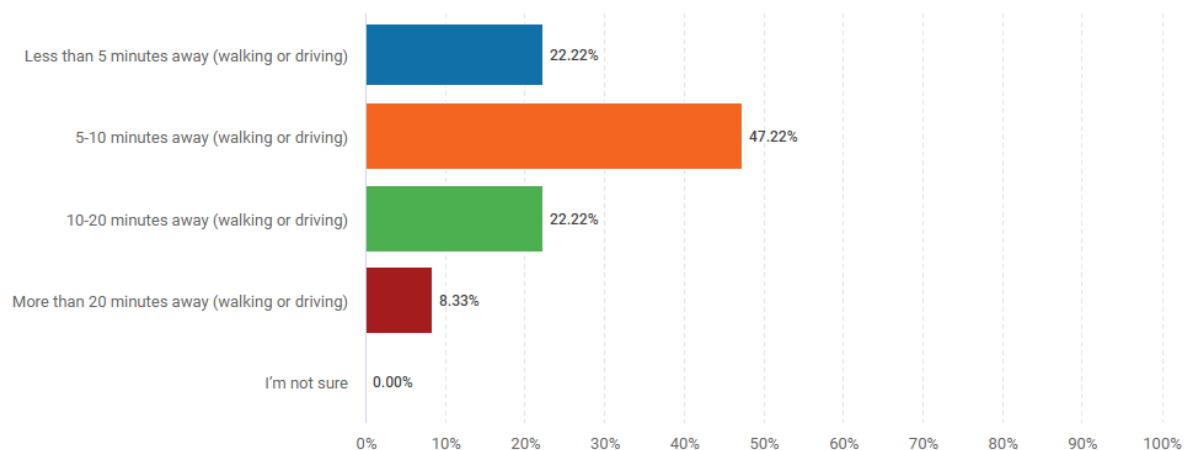
Are you aware of the Pharmacy First initiative?



Accessibility

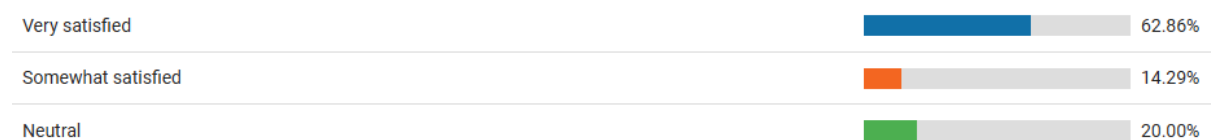
Most respondents reported that their **nearest pharmacy is within a short distance**, with the majority (**about 70%**) being located **5–10 minutes away**. A smaller group said their pharmacy was **less than 5 minutes away** or **10–20 minutes away**, while only a few faced pharmacies that were **more than 20 minutes away**.

How far is your nearest pharmacy?



Regarding the **cost of medications**, most people (**88.57%**) stated that the **cost of living has not affected their ability to afford prescriptions**. For those who do take prescribed medications, **no one** reported avoiding or delaying purchases due to cost.

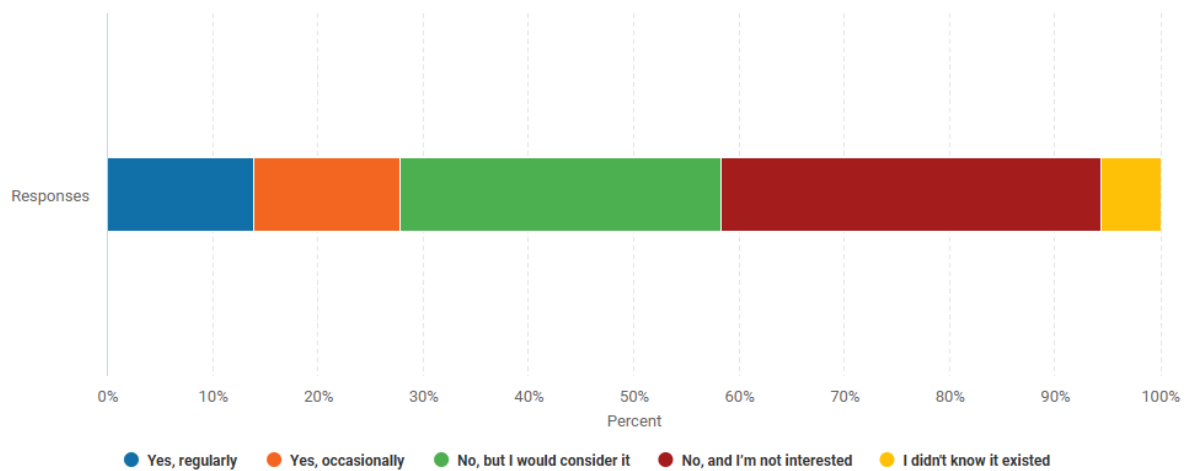
When it comes to **service satisfaction**, most respondents (**62.86%**) were **very satisfied** with the advice and support from their local pharmacy staff, while only a few were **somewhat dissatisfied**.



- *"During holiday periods. Otherwise, the only issue is always having to wait for some time."*
- *"I use an online pharmacy for medication so no issues."*
- *"My local pharmacy is closed from Saturday midday till Monday morning."*
- *"This again is due to lack of pharmacist availability."*

Digital Services

When asked about **online pharmacy services**, a **small group (14%)** reported using them **regularly** or **occasionally**. However, a **larger portion (30.56%)** said they would **consider using** online services in the future. A **significant number (36.11%)** said they were **not interested** in online pharmacies, while a **small minority (5.56%)** were unaware of these services. As mentioned above, many people have reported that using online services is convenient for them.



Feedback

We asked respondents what they would like to see improved in their pharmacy experiences. Most respondents were satisfied with the existing conditions. However, common recommendations included **longer opening hours**, with specific requests for **Sunday morning opening** and **extended hours at lunchtime**.

Some respondents mentioned that pharmacies could benefit from **more staff** to reduce waiting times and improve service.

Some suggested **telemedical consultations** and **more clarity on services offered** to make access easier.

- *"Pharmacy do seem to be hit and miss with very little check on how they deal with the public Random checks would be a start to improve the service."*
- *"Sunday morning opening?"*
- *"More pharmacies, with longer opening hours and more staff."*
- *"Increase in availability of pharmacists."*
- *"Pharmacist to be given more time to practice his expertise."*
- *"More pharmacies, with longer opening hours and more staff."*
- *"Open at lunch."*
- *"Message or telemedical facilities for Zoom consultations"*

Key similarities and differences between the main report and CFP responses.

Similarities

- Both groups reported medicine shortages and prescription delays, though at different frequencies.
- When positive, both highlighted the value of pharmacists' expertise and advice.
- Mixed awareness and use of Pharmacy First was clear across both feedback sources.

Differences

- CFP respondents reported higher overall satisfaction (62.86% very satisfied) than the broader feedback (possibly because of the limited number).

Service Provider Response

Community Pharmacy Cheshire and Wirral (the representative body for all contractors in the area) are thankful for the opportunity to add context and comment to the report.

We note that this report covers a significant period of time of 22 months. During this period, community pharmacy dealt with significant challenges such as medicines shortages, workforce pressures and pharmacy market

changes driven by a contractual framework not resourcing the demands upon the sector appropriately. In that timeframe we have also seen the introduction of the Primary Care Access Recovery Plan (including the Pharmacy First service), the widely publicised collective action by GPs in the discipline adjacent to ours as well as significant central financial policy changes that put pressure on small businesses.

Market Changes: The market changes include the second largest Pharmacy Chain in England (Lloyds Pharmacy) decide it was no longer economically viable to offer pharmacy services and completely exit the market alongside a contraction in the number of other contractors of all sizes. This puts pressure on the remaining pharmacies to not only take the underlying workload but in additional workload settling new patients onto their systems and helping those patients understand any nuances of the setup / processes in the new pharmacy. Any funding our sector receives is based on activity and delivered months in arrears, so it can be difficult to invest ahead of time before business levels have settled.

Contractual situation: In March 2025, the economic review commissioned by the government was published by Frontier economics which showed that only approximately half of the full economic cost of running the pharmacy sector in England was covered by the existing contract. Whilst a new contract for 2024-25 as well as 2025-26 (announced on the last day of March 2025) makes a small step forward in this funding for 2025-26, in reality it has closed what was a ~£2.5 billion gap to ~£2 billion and had a small effect on some of the drug margin issues experienced. The announcement does acknowledge the future issues to address and makes commitments to ensuring that moves towards stabilising the core pharmacy functions continue.

During this period we have seen pharmacies being forced with the impossible situation of either closing or ceasing to offer services they are not commissioned / resourced to offer (such as free or subsidised deliveries, opening hours above those necessary or economically viable and supplying blister packs for those who do not qualify for such support

under the equality act but may have other social care or preferential drivers). Some of the effects of this lack of commissioning clearly comes out in this report.

We note the issues reported with the system around GP prescription ordering rules or difficulty with IT solutions outside of the pharmacies control and we hope that Healthwatch has fed these back to the appropriate bodies to address.

We understand that Healthwatch will have given the feedback gained to individual providers about the specific items of feedback and this is directed appropriately at the pharmacy owners.

It is pleasing to see the appreciation of the many positive factors within our sector alongside these challenges reported and we believe that the majority of customers experience a good service from pharmacies and can resolve any difficulties through individual feedback mechanics such as a feedback or complaints process; although there are several challenges described in this report, given the period of time covered and the 142 pharmacies in the geographies we believe these are the minority of cases experienced which is backed up by data from the GP survey.

Next steps

Healthwatch Cheshire will continue to monitor feedback regarding pharmacy services and encourage anybody with issues accessing local pharmacies to share their experiences with us on our online Feedback Centre:

<https://healthwatchcheshireeast.org.uk/>

<https://healthwatchcwac.org.uk/>

Our findings and reports are shared with Healthwatch England to contribute to a national picture of pharmacy services.

We share all comments and feedback with individual pharmacies locally and also with NHS England, which commissions pharmacy services. We will continue to work together using regular meetings and contact to raise concerns and provide feedback.

In addition, Healthwatch Cheshire will track the impact of the *Pharmacy First* initiative and provide updates to ensure that community members are informed about the services available to them and how to access them.

Further information

We advise people who need urgent medical advice or assistance to contact NHS 111, which can provide information about nearby services.

If you have any queries regarding this report or would like to talk to us regarding support, please contact:

Email: info@healthwatchcheshire.org.uk

Telephone: 0300 323 0006



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Sension House, Denton Drive
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