



Mystery shopping NHS Prescription Prepayment Certificates and Medication Disposal in Eastbourne

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healthwatch
East Sussex

Introduction

About Healthwatch East Sussex

Healthwatch East Sussex is your local health and social care champion.

We make sure NHS leaders and local council decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care.

We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

Healthwatch East Sussex is delivered by East Sussex Community Voice CIC.



About this report

This report summarises the findings and recommendations from our mystery shopping of access to Prescription Prepayment Certificates and medication disposal services across pharmacies in Eastbourne Borough.

It provides an overview of how many pharmacies in Eastbourne currently offer Prepayment Prescription Certificates and medication disposal services and any issues they are experiencing in providing these to patients and the public.

Background to our project

Prescription Prepayment Certificates (PPC) are promoted by the NHS as a means of reducing the costs of prescriptions for those regularly receiving multiple forms of medication.

However, feedback received by Healthwatch in early 2026 suggested some people were experiencing challenges related to PPCs, including:

- being unable to access hard-copy PPC forms (FP95) to support in-store digital completion of applications
- finding pharmacies where PPC applications could be made in-person
- finding pharmacies allowing the use of accessible payment methods (i.e. cash) when paying for PPC's

These raised concerns for Healthwatch that lower income and less digitally enabled people may face additional barriers in saving money on their prescriptions due to challenges in applying for PPC.

We identified that NHS websites suggest in-person applications can be made, however, there is no public list of which pharmacies support this.

In part, this may reflect that support for PPC applications is not an NHS contractual requirement for community pharmacies. Subsequently they are not funded to offer this and are encouraged to signpost people to apply via the NHS Business Services Authority website or by telephone.



Storage and disposal of excess/returned medication

Proper disposal of expired or unwanted prescriptions or medication is essential for ensuring safety, protecting the environment, and preventing misuse.

Pharmacies all offer medication disposal services, but feedback we received suggested some may struggle to cater for the level of demand and/or have sufficient secure storage. We heard this may also have been affected by recent changes to the contracting of disposal services.

Our project

We undertook 'mystery shopping' of a limited number of community pharmacies in a defined area to explore the payment methods and support available with PPCs, and the status of medication disposal.



Aims and objectives

Aim: To map the provision of specific services at pharmacies in Eastbourne Borough

Objectives:

1. Identify if PCC application forms (FP95) are available in hard-copy at pharmacies
2. Identify whether PCC applications can be paid for in cash at pharmacies
3. See if secure storage and disposal of excess/returned medication is a challenge for pharmacies

What we did

During June 2026, four Healthwatch volunteers visited 19 pharmacies in Eastbourne Borough. Pharmacies were given advance notice of our forthcoming visits by letter. Each volunteer used a standardised questionnaire to ask pharmacy staff about the services they offer.

We used the responses received to explore three specific aspects for each pharmacy:

- 1. Whether PCC forms (FP95) are available in hard-copy to support in-pharmacy applications**
- 2. Whether PCC applications can be paid for in cash**
- 3. Whether secure storage and disposal of excess/returned medication is a challenge for pharmacies**

Limitations

- Our review is reliant on the information provided by pharmacy staff, and not from third-party means e.g. web searches.
- Of the 19 pharmacies visited, two declined to participate, but all percentages shown are out of the 19 in the study area.
- We recognise our snapshot is only accurate as of June 2026 and subsequent updates or changes may have occurred since.



We visited 19 pharmacies across Eastbourne Borough to mystery shop the services they offer



We asked if pharmacies received unused or waste medication for disposal, and how they stored and disposed of it

Key findings: Prescription Prepayment Certificates

Applying for Prescription Prepayment Certificates in pharmacies

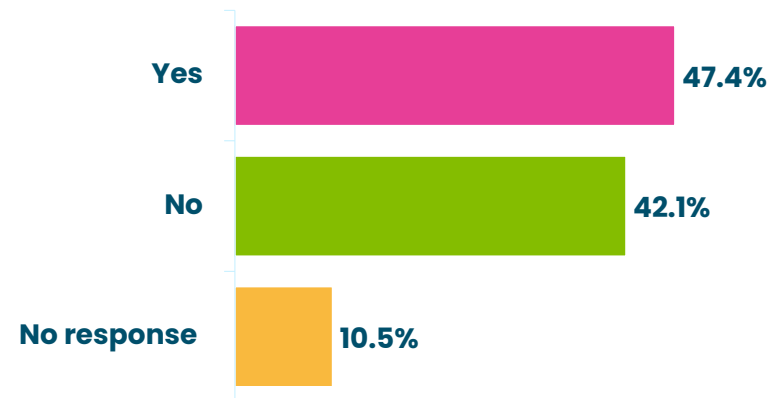
As [Community Pharmacy England](#) clarify, selling of PPCs in-store is unfunded and it is optional for pharmacies to undertake, but they are encouraged to support those requiring assistance in applying.

Nine (47.4%) of the pharmacies we visited told us they currently support people to complete a Prescription Prepayment Certificate (PPC) in-store.

Most indicated clients would be assisted by pharmacy staff to complete the online application, including support for completion in-store and offering directions for self-completion whilst in the pharmacy.

Where pharmacies did not support in-store PPC applications, staff provided advice leaflets, and encouraged people to go online or use the NHS App. One signposted to another pharmacy.

Can people apply for an NHS Prescription Pre-payment Certificate (PPC) in your pharmacy?



Key findings: Prescription Prepayment Certificates

Applying for Prescription Prepayment Certificates in pharmacies

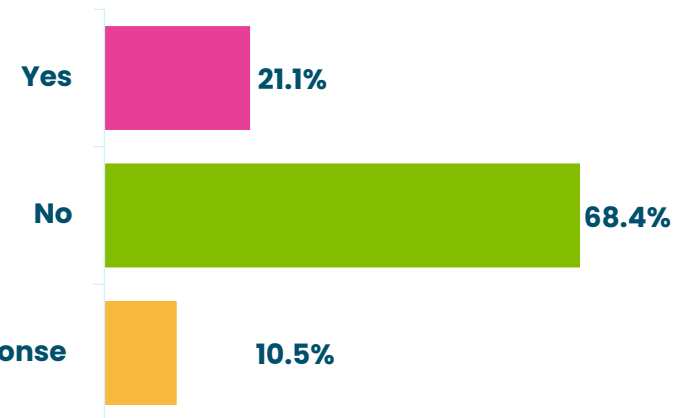
Only four (21.1%) of the pharmacies we visited told us they regularly receive requests to apply for a PPC, and the number of requests could fluctuate.

Of the nine pharmacies in Eastbourne offering clients support with applying for PPCs, only two said they were regularly receiving application requests.

Across all the pharmacies visited, staff in four told us the pharmacist or other staff suggest to patients receiving multiple medications via prescription they may wish to consider applying for a PPC to save money.

Feedback from our mystery shoppers suggested material and information on PPCs was inconsistently displayed, and there may be scope to raise awareness of this scheme through increased promotion in pharmacies and other NHS services.

Do you regularly receive requests to apply for an NHS Prescription Pre-payment Certificate (PPC) in your pharmacy?



Key findings: Prescription Prepayment Certificates

Applying for Prescription Prepayment Certificates in pharmacies

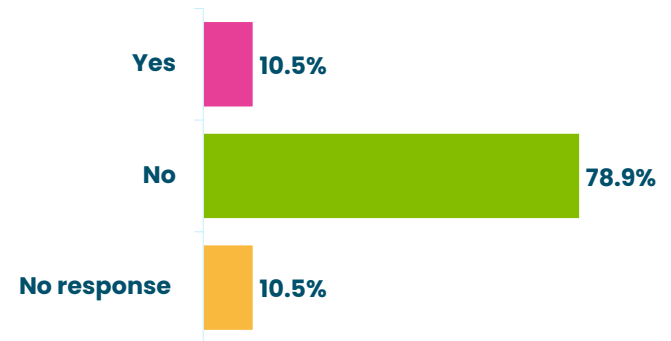
Only two (10.5%) of the pharmacies we visited told us they stock paper copies of the forms (FP95) available to support in-store NHS Prescription Prepayment Certificates (PPC).

Whilst these pharmacies had hard copy forms, we were unable to identify a downloadable or printable equivalent via the NHS website for public/patient use, creating a dependency on pharmacies to have these paper copies available.

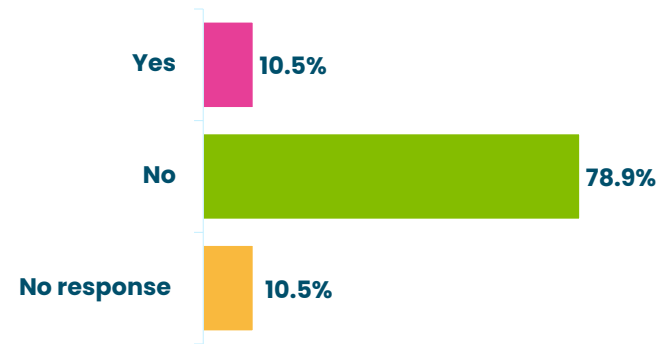
Only two (10.5%) pharmacies told us they accepted cash payments for Prescription Prepayment Certificate (PPC) applications.

Whilst the [NHS website](#) indicates clients can pay for PPCs 'in full at a pharmacy', it is not clear which payment methods this includes or excludes.

Do you stock paper application forms for NHS Prescription Pre-payment Certificate (PPC)?



Can people pay for an NHS Prescription Pre-payment Certificate (PPC) in your pharmacy in cash?



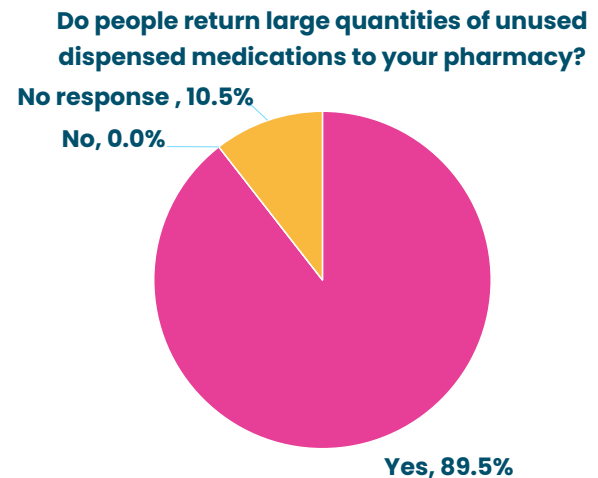
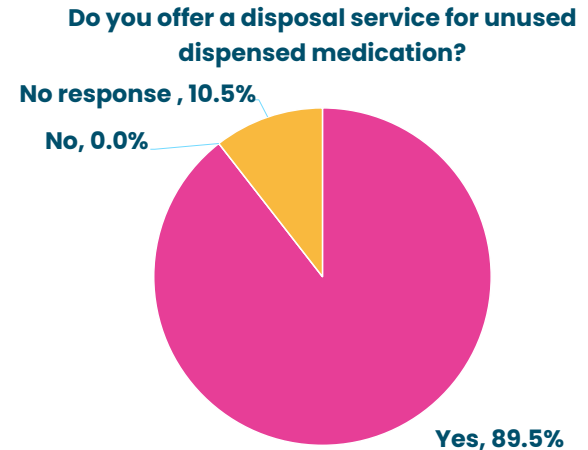
Key findings: Medication disposal services

All the pharmacies we spoke to (17 out of 19 approached) told us they offer a disposal service for unused dispensed and waste medication. *We are aware this is an essential service and reasonably assume non-respondents deliver this service too.*

Staff at all these pharmacies told us they regularly receive large quantities of unused dispensed medication. *"Sometimes a bag-full."*

Reasons for returns most mentioned, included when a family member or loved one has passed away and medication returned from care homes. We didn't hear about members of the public routinely returning unused medication for other reasons.

We also heard observations from pharmacy staff that some people appear to over-order medication and that clinicians may order prescriptions in high quantities, which may contribute to excess and an increased likelihood some will be leftover.



Key findings: Medication disposal services

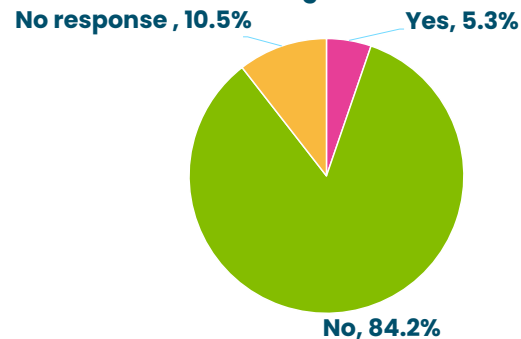
Only one pharmacy (5.3%) we spoke to in Eastbourne told us they had declined the return of dispensed medication.

We heard this was an isolated incident due to a delayed collection with the external disposal provider.

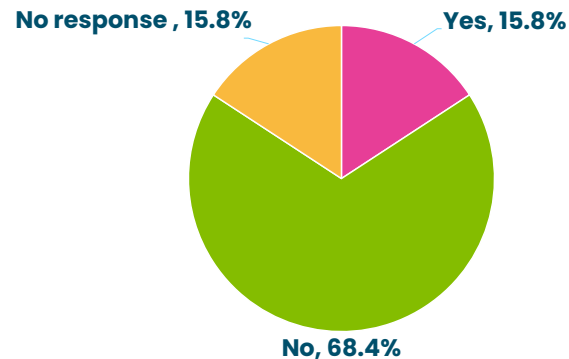
Most pharmacies had adequate storage and frequent collections, but three (15.8%) told us secure storage or disposal of returned medication can pose a challenge if they receive significant quantities in a short timeframe, or collections are delayed.

We heard some pharmacies had recently experienced delays in disposal collections due to changes in the commissioned provider. We also heard how disposal of 'sharps' (e.g. needles, injectors etc.) can be problematic as pharmacies are not commissioned to provide this, leading people to be re-directed to local council waste collection services.

Have you ever declined the return of dispensed medication because your controlled drugs cupboard/disposal storage is full?



Does secure storage or disposal of returned controlled medication ever pose a challenge for your pharmacy?



Conclusion

Given NHS priorities and the move towards digital services, increasing the use of online applications, digital PPCs and cashless payments is a logical direction that may work well for many people. However, there is a risk of digital exclusion for people who cannot access or use these methods. As a result, schemes designed to reduce prescription costs, such as PPCs, may be harder for some people to access.

It is encouraging many pharmacies in Eastbourne already help people apply for PPCs, either in-store or through self-completed applications. However, our mystery shopping found that only 1 in 10 pharmacies had paper forms available or accepted cash payments.

It was also difficult to know which pharmacies offered these options without asking staff directly, as availability depends on individual providers. In addition, NHS information about PPCs is often digital, inconsistent and sometimes unclear, making it harder for people to understand how to apply or where to get support with applying.

As a result, access to non-digital PPC services can vary significantly by location. Some eligible people may be missing out because they are unaware of PPCs, cannot access support, or face barriers to applying. Limited promotion also contributes to this issue, with only 1 in 5 of the pharmacies we visited proactively promoting PPCs to eligible customers.

The situation is more positive for in-pharmacy medication disposal services. Most pharmacies reported having adequate storage space and receiving regular collections, which may reflect a more structured and consistent NHS organised approach to delivering these services.

Recommendations

Pharmacies

1. Increase awareness of NHS Prescription Prepayment Certificates amongst patients receiving multiple medications through in-store promotion, pro-actively sharing promotional materials, and staff awareness/training.
2. Consider how the availability of hard-copy Prescription Prepayment Certificate forms (FP95s) may be increased in pharmacies, or pharmacy staff being clear on how these may be obtained, so they can signpost patients appropriately.

NHS Commissioners (NHS Surrey and Sussex)

3. Explore collaboration with pharmacies and other NHS services to increase awareness of NHS Prescription Prepayment Certificates, their benefits, and how to apply.
4. Explore how the clarity and detail of content related to PPCs on NHS websites can be made clearer, especially what non-digital payment methods are available.
5. Clearly communicate any proposed changes in NHS commissioned or contracted medication disposal services with pharmacies, to minimise risks related to medication storage and disposal.
6. Ensure robust monitoring of locally commissioned medication disposal services, to minimise risks related to medication storage and disposal.

Recommendations

Healthwatch East Sussex

7. Raise awareness of people's experiences of obtaining Prescription Prepayment Certificates, and pharmacies provision of medication storage/disposal with NHS commissioners, Healthwatch England and the Local Pharmaceutical Committee.
8. Continue to monitor feedback from pharmacy service users and share insight with NHS commissioners, Healthwatch England and the Local Pharmaceutical Committee.

For more information

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