

What we heard about pharmacy

April 2024 – March 2025



April 2025

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Summary

Oxfordshire is publishing a refreshed Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment in 2025. This is part of a coordinated approach to a wider needs assessment across Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB). These statutory documents, with tight focus, remit and guidelines, support commissioning decisions based on patient need, and are the responsibility of Health and Wellbeing Boards to develop. They set out how the provision of pharmaceutical services can meet the needs of the population. As part of this process, Oxfordshire County Council ran a public survey between January to March 2025 to hear from people about pharmacy services in the county, hearing from 454 people in all (<https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/oxon-pna-2025>).

This Healthwatch Oxfordshire report gives a very **brief summary** of some of the feedback themes from over 100 members of the public about pharmacy services in the county. Between April 2024 and March 2025, we received comments on pharmacy services by phone, email, face to face outreach, and via our research, Enter and View visits, online feedback centre and via paper 'Have your say' forms.

We have compiled what we heard to bring insight into the Oxfordshire Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment. Whilst the comments reflect people's views and sentiments, it is important to note that this is not part of focused research on pharmacy at this time, and as a result may reflect some of the wide spectrum of experiences, including both 'good' and 'bad', that have led people to want to share their views with us. They do however highlight some of the challenges and positives of people's experiences when accessing and using pharmacy in the county. Our previous, in-depth research reports on pharmacy (Getting Your Prescriptions, 2022; Using Pharmacies in Oxfordshire, 2021) can be seen on our reports page <https://healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/reports> – and much of the findings from these reports are still reflected in what we hear today.

Additional information includes:

- Healthwatch Oxfordshire held a **webinar** (May 2024) open to the public to hear **about 'Pharmacy First'**. The recording can be seen here: <https://healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/news-and-events/patient-webinars/> Speakers included the Chief Executive of Community Pharmacy Thames Valley, and Head of Primary Care at BOB ICB, with questions and feedback from members of the public who attended.
- **Enter and View** visits to Boots Pharmacy in Oxford (February 2025) and Day Lewis Pharmacy, Didcot (March 2024). To see the reports here: <https://healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/report/enter-and-view-report-on-the-boots-pharmacy-cornmarket-street-oxford-february-2025/>

Thanks to all who took time to share their views.

What have we heard?

People value the support and care from their local pharmacy

People told us they value the support of their local pharmacy, and the range of information, and expertise provided by staff. Positive communication with friendly staff teams was appreciated.

"I'm very fortunate that they deliver it to me at home. They're very helpful on the phone if I need to speak to them, and of course if I go in there again, they're very good, so I can recommend them as well. With very best wishes and many thanks for all your hard work."(resident Kidlington)

"The staff are always friendly and extremely helpful, [name] in particular helped me with a medication issue and went above and beyond to sort it!" (feedback centre)

"Extremely quick and efficient service accompanied by quietly and discreetly spoken instructions. Good confidence building for me!"
(feedback centre)

"Always ready to give advice both medically and with administration." (feedback centre)

"Excellent service - assessed, diagnosed and appropriately dealt with." (feedback centre)

"Advice needed for skin rash. Asked pharmacist as I'd heard they could just advise on skin, ears and eyes. She was so kind, prescribed cream and gave exact instructions. Thank you soooo much."
(feedback centre)

"Helpful and friendly staff, quick service." (feedback centre)

"Always made sure I am looked after as I am in an electric wheelchair and always put my drugs in the back of my wheelchair. If I need a drug urgently and the Health Centre have not added it in then they always get in touch and order it for me." (feedback centre)

"Pleasant, friendly, efficient service. Always ready to help and advise." (feedback centre)

Communication, information and contacting the pharmacy.

People also valued clear communication, helping them to manage their medication, and stay in touch with prescriptions. However, others expressed frustration with long waiting time on phones, and being unable to reach pharmacies for information they needed.

"Fast, reliable. They rang me to explain when one prescription was unavailable - have rung more than once to let me know a prescription was ready - and are happy to deliver as well."
(feedback centre)

"Good service. I am sent a text when my prescription is ready to collect." (feedback centre)

"It is next to impossible to get though on the phone so multiple trips (by taxi) into town to see if prescriptions are in/ready etc, involving time/cost/standing in long queues often to be disappointed is unavoidable." (feedback centre)

"Have to go and queue cos never answer phone or text to inform you if any meds are ready to pick up." (feedback centre)

"Never answer the phone. Unacceptable. This is a pharmacy, people are losing access to their essential medication." (feedback centre)

"Phone rings engaged for long periods." (feedback centre)

Our recent research to hear from women about health care services included feedback for pharmacists to use more discretion when women and girls need emergency contraception of medications of a sensitive nature. (report to be published in 2025)

Pressure on services and staff

We heard comments which highlighted some of the current pressures pharmacies and their staff are under – with impact on patients, including long queues, waiting times and on the overall experience of service and support.

"The pharmacy queue is outrageous, but the staff were lovely, apologised for the wait and got my son's prescription done rather quickly, I would definitely visit again. [Two members of staff] did a great job." (feedback centre)

"The staff are good but cannot keep up with demand since the other pharmacy in the town closed. Very long queues for medication and lots of empty shelves. It looks run-down and shabby. Not sure about

cleanliness. We need another pharmacy close by." (feedback centre)

"There are long delays in obtaining repeat prescriptions -normally between 6-10 days. You go and queue for a minimum of 30 minutes to see if your medicine is ready and its normally a NO. You can't ring to ask as they never answer the phone. With an OOS item you have to keep going back as they never text or communicate with you so I have to spend time going to the pharmacy and queuing to be told no its still not in stock." (feedback centre review)

"The shop is small and cramped with poor stock levels, and regularly has a queue of customers. I waited for over an hour today and an old lady in front of me had to do the same." (feedback centre)

"Pharmacist loudly announcing details of my medication in front of the massive queue with no consideration for my patient confidentiality; long queues with very slow service; lack of stock of common prescription medication; erratic opening hours; poorly stocked with overpriced over the counter products. Really poor over the last year. Didn't used to be so bad." (feedback centre)

"Massive queues, script takes a week to be processed and the pharmacy closes for lunch. It's unbelievably frustrating to have to go there for anything." (feedback centre)

"Had to queue for half an hour. Shelves of pharmacy are bare as they have no time to order stock. Looks untidy with stock not on shelves as they don't have time to unpack it. Doesn't give you confidence, however, pharmacists are kind, and trying really hard to deliver." (feedback centre)

Seasonal impact was also noted, for example, with vaccination appointments.

"I arrived at x Pharmacy five minutes before my appointment for my latest Covid-19 vaccination. There was already a long queue. I was

not seen for two hours and forty-five minutes. Many others in the queue outside were vulnerable or elderly with many distressed."
(feedback centre)

Managing demand: concerns with service provision and keeping up with population growth

Other comments about pressures, note concerns with impact of housing expansion and population growth, and ability for services to keep up with demands.

"The pharmacies, before the change how patients request their repeat prescriptions, were all very busy – many attempts to contact them by phone and longish queues when you visit them. Wantage and Grove size has increased due to big housing estates being built." (resident South Oxfordshire)

"I have been trying to get medications for myself and my 92 year-old partner from the pharmacy, and have been appalled. They promised they would be ready over a week ago, and all week I have been trying to get them. They say it's because there are no staff. I feel so sorry for the staff on the counters – but they never stay so they have to bring people in from other branches. It's an absolute shambles. I'm concerned about the planning of pharmacies in Wallingford with all the new building that is going on". (resident South Oxfordshire)

Closures of pharmacies and changes to opening hours

We heard about unpredictable opening hours and closures of some pharmacies, often due to staff shortages.

"It was shut again on a Saturday – because they didn't have a pharmacist to open up. It's the fourth time I've tried to use their shop and it's been shut due to lack of pharmacist and I don't use it often as I use my local pharmacy." (feedback centre)

"Closes at lunchtime but website says it's open – this has been true for years despite complaints to correct website." (feedback centre)

Delayed or incorrect prescriptions and medicines shortages.

We also receive feedback on services where people have experienced medication delays, incorrect prescriptions, and sometimes medicines shortages. This may lead to patients having to travel across county to source or having to return repeatedly to see if medications are available.

"They are never on time, always losing my repeat prescription, or keep telling it's not ready or always missing something. Always late on my repeat prescription by 2-3 weeks. Today is the last time I go there and wouldn't advise anyone going there." (feedback centre)

"Prescriptions go missing. You can waste half an hour or more just to find out they can't help you." (feedback centre)

"The staff are really lovely face to face and get everything sorted out if you attend – but if you are relying on them for regular deliveries of correct medication please be very careful. Medication is rarely without errors in some form. They do dosset boxes weeks in advance so if you have changes made it can be weeks before things get corrected again." (feedback centre)

"If your prescription is ready – there is usually something missing." (signposting call)

"They quite often do not have the medication you need and have to wait days for it to arrive. This has resulted on numerous occasions of going elsewhere out of the town". (feedback centre)

"They never have any of my daughter's prescriptions in stock and I have to go to other pharmacies to check stock". (feedback centre)

"You have to keep going back as they never text or communicate with you so I have to spend time going to the pharmacy and queuing to be told no its still not in stock." (signposting call)

"Rarely, if ever, have prescriptions ready after 48 hrs as they should. Often need a week to get prescriptions ready. Even when contacted and say they'll have prescriptions ready - when I go in they haven't done them. Sometimes they can't find the prescription they have done. Phone rings engaged for long periods." (feedback centre)

We also hear regularly from the public about medications that may no longer be provided. For example, we are contacted about lack of shared care agreement with GPs on ADHD medications – an issue impacting some patients, and which we have raised with the commissioner BOB ICB, and at Oxfordshire Health Overview Scrutiny Committee.

"I am Diabetic and used to get a weekly injection and the chemist cannot get them so have not had for months now." (signposting call)

"Blood insulin trips no longer available on prescription." (signposting call)

Access to pharmacies

We also heard some specific comments highlighting some of the potential barriers people may face when accessing pharmacy services, both in available opening times, physical accessibility, and availability of language and communication support.

Opening times

Speaking to men during our outreach in 2024, we heard about various barriers men can face in seeking help and care. Some of this related to long work hours and being unable to take time off during the working day to seek help.

"Local pharmacies close early and have long wait times." (Men's health report March 2025)

Physical access and public transport

We heard feedback about physical access to pharmacy, including cost of travel, and limits to public transport in some areas of rapid growth. We also heard from people living in more rural areas.

"I needed to use taxis for the first couple of weeks, to get to the GP and pharmacy. I can afford this, but the cost could be difficult for less fortunate people." (Discharge from Hospital report Nov 2024)

"The X34 and X35 bus route which serves the very fast growing population of Chilton, Harwell Campus and Harwell Village, has been re-routed to serve the Great Western estate in Didcot (in a deal between the Builders and the Council) and this now means there is no longer the direct bus route for these villages passing Woodlands Surgery and Pharmacy, the Health Centre, the Library etc. The same thing applies also to the X32 which used to go past these facilities and then on direct to the JR Hospital, from these villages." (Didcot resident)

"I am disabled and not well at present. Visiting the pharmacy in person is currently not an option for me." (person living in a village)

Digital and online Access.

"I live in a village and there are issues with broadband via landline and Ofcom describe the network coverage as limited. The NHS app sends one time codes to check identity. Patients are not allowed to email repeat prescription requests or make a written repeat prescription request in writing. I may come to some harm if I cannot get my repeat medication from my G.P. Not everyone is computer literate and the Online form does not work on older devices." (person living in a village in South Oxfordshire)

Access for asylum seekers and refugees

We heard from local group Asylum Welcome about some of the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees:

Individuals under No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) conditions are unable to afford their medication.

"I have No Recourse to Public Funds, so I have to pay for my medication. Sometimes, I don't collect my medications because I can't afford it. How can people like me pay for their medication? We can't afford £9."

Asylum seekers who live on less than £9 a week are entitled to free prescriptions but struggle to pay for other essentials.

"I always need multivitamins. The majority of my ASPEN card money goes to multivitamins."

Asylum seekers are not required to pay for prescriptions, but a number indicated they had been incorrectly charged.

"I have stomach problems because the food in the hotel is not good. I went to the pharmacist. They gave me medicine; it was very expensive. I showed him my papers [HC2 certificate] and he said, 'You have to pay for this.'"

Access to interpreting services

People have commented on the lack of interpreting services (BSL and language) offered in community pharmacies, commenting that they are unclear as to their rights to free interpreting and do not know how to access.

"It is very hard to book an appointment when you cannot speak English and people just do not understand you." (feedback during outreach)

A new interpreting and translation service (Dals) was commissioned by BOB ICB on the 1st April 2025, and will provide 24/7 access for all NHS patients using primary care services, including pharmacy. All local pharmacies have had training on this offer, and how to access for patients they serve.

Our past reports on pharmacy

Healthwatch Oxfordshire has published previous reports on pharmacy services. A **report published in July 2022**, "*Getting your prescriptions*" can be viewed here: <https://healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/our-work/research-reports/>

The results outlined in the report, and comments from respondents illustrate good practice and care, but also highlight some of the challenges faced at the current time. There are significant pressures on pharmacies, and these inevitably have an impact on service and experience of patients.

The report **built on a previous report by Healthwatch Oxfordshire** "*Using pharmacies in Oxfordshire*" based on the views of 370 people (May 2021). This report can be seen here: <https://healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/report/using-pharmacies-in-oxfordshire-in-2020-may-2021/> It included recommendations for improved communication with the public around functions and role of community pharmacies and need for services to gain better feedback users of pharmacies. The last *Oxfordshire Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment*, was published in March 2022 by Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board, and adopted recommendations found in this, noting action for commissioners to:

(vii) *Address issues highlighted with repeat prescriptions including delays, medication errors, and reliability of the service*

Useful links:

Oxfordshire insight data <https://data.oxfordshire.gov.uk/>

[Oxfordshire Data Hub – JSNA – Bitesizes and Health Needs Assessments](#)

Healthwatch England – Pharmacy, what people want. Report April 2024.

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/report/2024-04-30/pharmacy-what-people-want>

Healthwatch England – Pharmacy Closures in England. September 2024.

<https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/report/2024-09-26/pharmacy-closures-england>

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