

Mystery shopping the accessibility of Islington pharmacies



Healthwatch Islington

Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and all sections of the community.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

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Contents

Introduction	3
What we did	4
Our findings	5

Introduction

Healthwatch Islington champions inclusivity in health and care services. Inclusive services provide equal access for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised, for example people with physical or mental disabilities or people belonging to other minority groups.

One way that commissioners ensure equity of access to pharmacy services is to make sure that everyone has a pharmacy close to where they live. However, it is also important to consider whether those pharmacy buildings are equally accessible for all residents. We decided to look at the physical accessibility of pharmacies in Islington. Our volunteers visited 40 pharmacies and assessed them against a series of criteria to evaluate their accessibility.

Over the past two years it has been more of a challenge for local residents to get access to a GP. However, many NHS services are available from pharmacies. This can give people easier access to the support they need whilst relieving pressure on General Practice. Our volunteers also checked how easy it was to see that additional NHS services were available at the pharmacies they visited.

Summary of our findings

- ▶ The size and layouts of pharmacies varied hugely. Some were easily accessible and offered a large range of NHS services, others were limited in size and seemed to provide more basic pharmacy services such as medicine dispensing and advice.
- ▶ It was striking how much accessibility varied across pharmacies – from level access to hearing loop provision. Physical accessibility, particularly for those with a wheelchair or buggy, was limited in a number of cases.
- ▶ Automatic doors can make pharmacies more accessible for residents who are physically disabled or frail, but the majority of pharmacies did not have them.
- ▶ The additional NHS funded services on offer at local pharmacies are not clearly advertised. When looking at the range of NHS services available in local pharmacies, many residents could find a solution to their problem without ever having to contact the GP but this is not clearly advertised in pharmacies, on GP web-sites or more generally.

The detailed findings from these visits are shared in the pages that follow. We will also share them with pharmacies and commissioners in order to inform the Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment. The Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment is a report which provides a comprehensive account of pharmaceutical health needs in Islington, current provisions and where the gaps lie.

We would like to thank our volunteers, Jenni, Jane, Ros and Lynda, for carrying out these visits on behalf of Healthwatch and making this piece of work possible.

What we did

During March and early April 2022 four trained Healthwatch Islington volunteers and one member of staff visited a total of 40 Islington pharmacies. The aim of these visits was to observe the physical space of the pharmacy and comment on the accessibility of the space. None of our volunteers were wheelchair users. One volunteer was deaf and another wore hearing aids.

Before the visits, Healthwatch staff met with the volunteers to agree the criteria we would use to assess the accessibility of the space. In this mystery shopping exercise, volunteers visited each pharmacy as though they were a customer and made assessments on the following:

- ▶ Whether there was level access into the space from the street
- ▶ Whether there was an automatic or a manual door
- ▶ Whether there were internal steps within the space
- ▶ Whether the aisles were wide enough and clear of obstructions so someone could navigate them with a buggy or in a wheelchair.
- ▶ Height of the counters
- ▶ Presence of signage indicating the availability of hearing loops or other reasonable adjustments
- ▶ Whether there were seats inside the pharmacy for those waiting to collect prescriptions
- ▶ Presence of signage promoting other available pharmacy services

During some of the visits, depending on how busy the pharmacy was, the volunteer alerted the staff to their presence and explained why they were visiting. This also gave volunteers a chance to ask questions about the additional services available even if they weren't advertised clearly.

Our Findings

Access to the pharmacy from the street	
Step-free access to the pharmacy from the street	30
Stepped access to the pharmacy from the street	10

30 pharmacies had step free access to the shop from the street. Seven of these had ramps, a couple of which (Clockwork Pharmacy, 161 Caledonian Road and JC Wise Pharmacy, 518 Hornsey Road) were observed as being quite steep.

10 pharmacies had steps. Most of these were very shallow, however three pharmacies had a step at the entrance to the shop that could make access more difficult for wheelchair users. The step at the entrance to WC & K King Pharmacy, 35 Amwell Street was observed to be particularly steep.

Accessible doors	
Manual doors at the entrance	23
Automatic or power-assisted doors at the entrance	11
Manual outer door and automatic inner door	2
Door was propped open	4

Residents who are elderly, disabled or frail can have difficulty opening and closing heavy entrance doors. 23 of the pharmacies we visited had manual doors at the entrance. 11 pharmacies had either power-assisted or automatic doors. Of these, two were non-functioning and had to be opened manually. Two pharmacies had a manual outer door and an automatic inner door. On four occasions the pharmacy door was propped open while the volunteer was there so it was harder to determine what kind of door it was.

Accessibility of the physical space within the pharmacy	
Very easily accessible space with no aisles	2
Clear, accessible aisles	27
Partially accessible aisles	10
Not accessible	1

Two of the pharmacies did not have aisles and were very accessible. 27 pharmacies presented clear aisles with room to manoeuvre a wheelchair or buggy. The ten pharmacies described as partially accessible had aisles that were narrow or blocked in some way. One pharmacy was judged to be inaccessible because there were items sticking off shelves at a low level and it would have been hard to get a wheelchair or buggy down the aisle even if it was free of obstruction.

None of the pharmacies we visited had steps inside the shop.

Height of the counter	
Waist height counter	32
Chest height counter	7
Both waist height and chest height counters	1

Three pharmacies told us that staff came around the counter to speak to customers in wheelchairs.

Seats near the counter

Most pharmacies provided chairs for people waiting for their prescription. During six visits volunteers couldn't clearly observe any seats in the pharmacies. In some cases there were no visible seats, however, in some cases the seats may have been harder to locate and therefore just not observed.

In one pharmacy the seats available were in the GP waiting room in which the pharmacy was based. In another small pharmacy there were chairs but they seemed to be being used by those accessing Covid vaccinations at the pharmacy.

Signage advertising other NHS services available in the pharmacy	
Clear signs advertising other available services	27
No signs advertising other available services	13

Volunteers checked inside the pharmacy to see how other NHS services were promoted, as well as in the windows and on the outside signage.

27 of the pharmacies had clear signs advertising other available NHS services such as flu vaccinations, covid vaccinations, the smoking cessation service, and emergency contraception.

13 pharmacies visited did not have clear signs advertising any additional services other than medicine dispensing. Some of these pharmacies were advertising the availability of other non-NHS services, for example passport photos. A couple of pharmacies didn't advertise other NHS services they offered, but instead recommended that customers downloaded their app.

If services additional to 'dispensing medicine' are not advertised in pharmacies we cannot assume that customers are aware of the range of services available to them outside of their GP practice.

Signage for hearing loops or other reasonable adjustments

35 of the 40 practices had no signage advertising hearing loops and during conversations with staff it transpired that staff at some of these pharmacies didn't know what a hearing loop was. There were hearing loops visible to volunteers at five of the pharmacies. However, we do not know if they were working.

Two of the pharmacies that didn't have hearing loops mentioned that they have one or two deaf customers and they always write things down to communicate with them. No other reasonable adjustments were signposted or noted by our volunteers during the visits.



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