

Evaluating the capacity and capability of Community Pharmacy to deliver Covid-19 vaccinations

A research report based on a nationwide survey of community pharmacists conducted 5-8 March 2021



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Context

The community pharmacy sector has shown great interest in supporting the UK Covid-19 vaccines delivery plan. This has been particularly so in England, where pharmacies have taken part in the annual flu vaccination programme since 2015/16 and have demonstrable capability and capacity.

The 2020/21 flu vaccination programme finished on March 31, by which time community pharmacy contractors in England had reported administering over 2.6 million jabs.¹ Once final figures are collated, the number will be higher. The majority of these – nearly 1 million – were administered in September 2020, the first month of the 2020/21 programme.

Three vaccines for Covid-19 have been authorised for use in the UK. The first to become available, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, must be stored at -70C until it is thawed ahead of use. Once thawed, it can be stored between 2-8C for up to 5 days, and prior to administration, it needs to be reconstituted. The vaccine is delivered in an outer pack which contains 975 doses. This means that its distribution and use must be carefully controlled to maintain efficacy and minimise wastage.

Pharmacies initially had two ways of engaging with the programme:

- **Option 1:** Work with the general practices in their Primary Care Network (PCN) to support the PCN vaccination site and any outreach into care homes, etc, necessary from that site. This could involve pharmacy contractors providing staff, under a private sub-contracting arrangement
- **Option 2:** Provide a Covid-19 vaccination service as an Enhanced Service where the NHS wants to commission that service, either because it has no existing provision in an area or because additional provision is needed. Such a service could be provided at a pharmacy, but a suitable off-site location may also be used.

Vaccine storage, combined with the requirement to be able to operate from 8am to 8pm, seven days a week, vaccinating a minimum of 1,000 people per week, may have discouraged many pharmacy contractors from expressing an early interest in December 2020. Nevertheless, NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE&I) selected around 200 community pharmacy sites to go live in January and February 2021. The first six sites – four independents and two multiples – went live on January 14.

By February 16, when NHSE&I issued a call for new applications from pharmacy contractors to become Covid-19 vaccination sites, the landscape had changed. The Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine was available, and could be stored in a fridge between 2-8C. Additionally, expressions of interest were sought from contractors who could provide up to 400 vaccines per week.

Because of the need to vaccinate as many people in as short a time as possible, NHSE&I is currently focusing on using mass vaccination sites, hospital hubs and designated primary care sites (including some community pharmacy sites), rather than a wider primary care model.

Pharmacies in Northern Ireland are also involved in delivering Covid vaccinations. Northern Ireland health minister Robin Swann announced at the end of March that almost 350 community pharmacies would be taking part - around two-thirds of the country's roughly 530 pharmacies.

The availability of vaccines with standard storage requirements means that it should, in the future, be possible for the NHS to use a 'business as usual' primary care vaccination programme, similar to the flu programme, for administration of the Covid-19 vaccine.

The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee (PSNC) is keen to see pharmacies play a greater role in the vaccination programme. Discussions between PSNC, NHSE&I and the Department of Health and Social Care about an Advanced Service have commenced in preparation for a time when this may become possible and desirable.

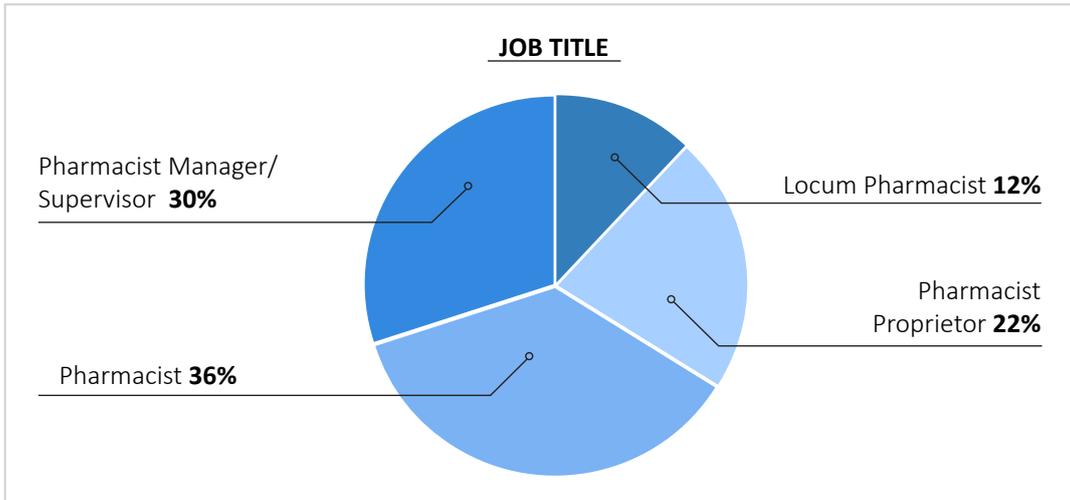
It should be noted that while flu vaccinations have been available through pharmacies in England and Wales for some years, provision through pharmacies in Scotland² and Northern Ireland³ only took place for the first time in 2020/21.

References:

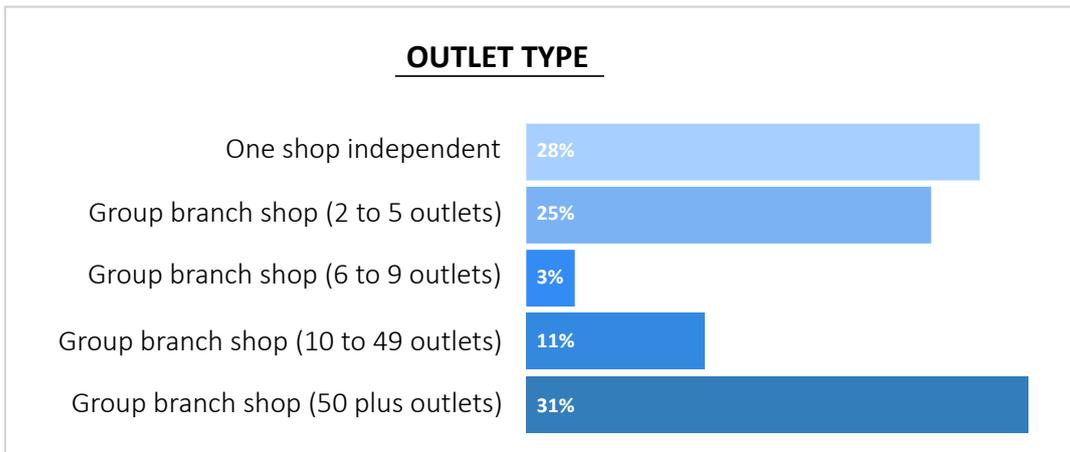
1. Flu vaccination data for 2020/21: PSNC (psnc.org.uk)
2. Primary and Community Care Directorate (cps.scot)
3. Health Minister welcomes extension to community pharmacy seasonal flu vaccination services | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)

The Survey Sample

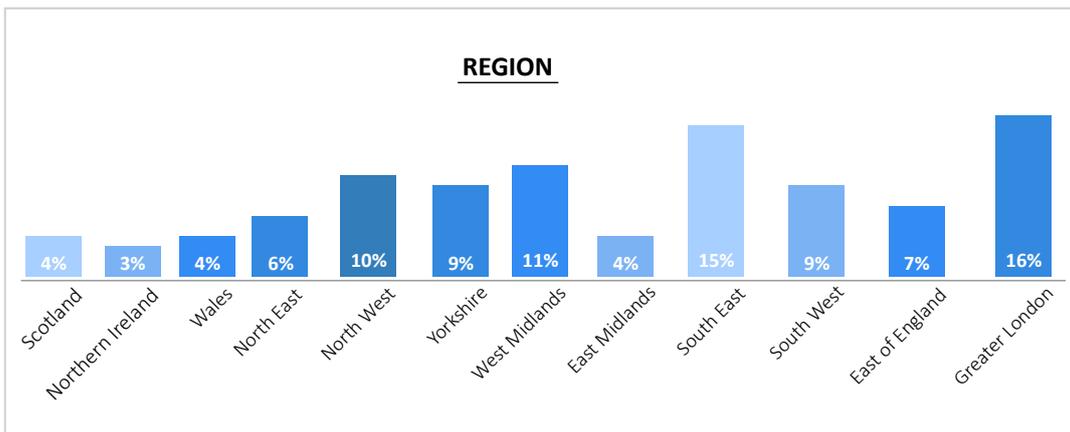
- Between March 5-8, 2021, CIG Research surveyed 232 pharmacists in the UK about their views on providing a Covid-19 vaccination service through pharmacy
- The sample included 36% with the job title 'pharmacist', 30% supervisors/managers, 12% locums and 22% pharmacist proprietors



- 28% worked in single outlet independent pharmacies
- 40% worked in small chains (2-49 outlets)
- 31% worked in multiples (50 plus outlets)



- 54% of respondents were men and 43% were women (3% did not respond to this question). Their mean age was 45.9 years
- 54% of respondents gave their ethnicity as White Caucasian, while 46% were BAME
- The sample showed a broad geographic spread



Key Points

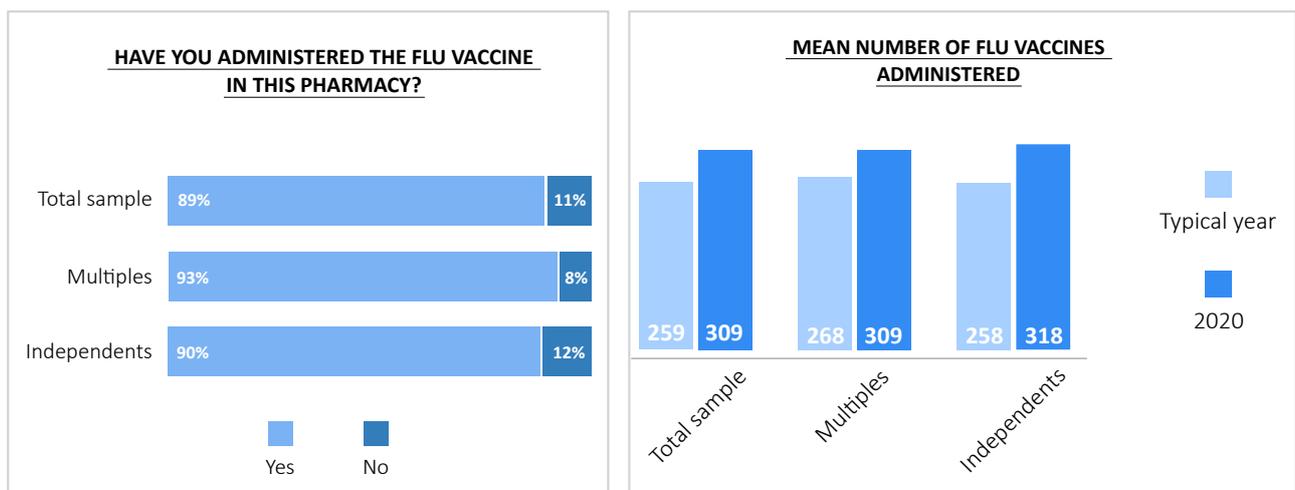
- 92.5% of pharmacists in England said they had administered flu vaccines as part of the national flu vaccination programme in England
- Pharmacists in England estimated that prior to 2020/21, they delivered an average of 275 flu vaccinations per pharmacy in a typical year
- In 2020/21, people between the ages of 50-64 years were added to the national flu programme for the first time. In 2020/21 pharmacists in England estimated they had delivered 324 flu vaccinations per pharmacy
- 95% of flu vaccinations delivered by pharmacists in England were administered in a pharmacy
- 48.5% of pharmacists in England said the annual flu vaccination service did not have much impact, or no impact at all, on the usual business of the pharmacy
- Only 2.5% of pharmacies in England are engaged in the provision of Covid vaccinations, but 37% plan to do so as soon as possible and a further 41% are considering it
- If appropriate funding and support were available, 58% of pharmacists in England said they would definitely be able to deliver an annual Covid vaccination service
- Pharmacists in England estimate the maximum number of Covid vaccinations they could give in a week would be 310
- The pharmacy would be the preferred location for 85.5% of respondents, and 66.5% would employ extra staff to mitigate the impact of a Covid vaccination service on the usual business of the pharmacy
- 71% of pharmacists in England say there would be a great deal of interest from customers for a Covid vaccination service delivered by the pharmacy, and 28.5% say there would be quite a lot of interest

Experience with flu vaccination

Of the total sample (n=232), 89% of pharmacists offer flu vaccinations from their pharmacy, and in a typical year, they estimate they give an average of 260 vaccinations.

In 2020/21, in a move to reduce potential pressures on the NHS during the coronavirus pandemic, people aged 50-64 were offered a free NHS flu vaccination (they will also be included in the 2021/22 programme). This led to an increase in the estimate of the number of vaccinations delivered per pharmacy to 310.

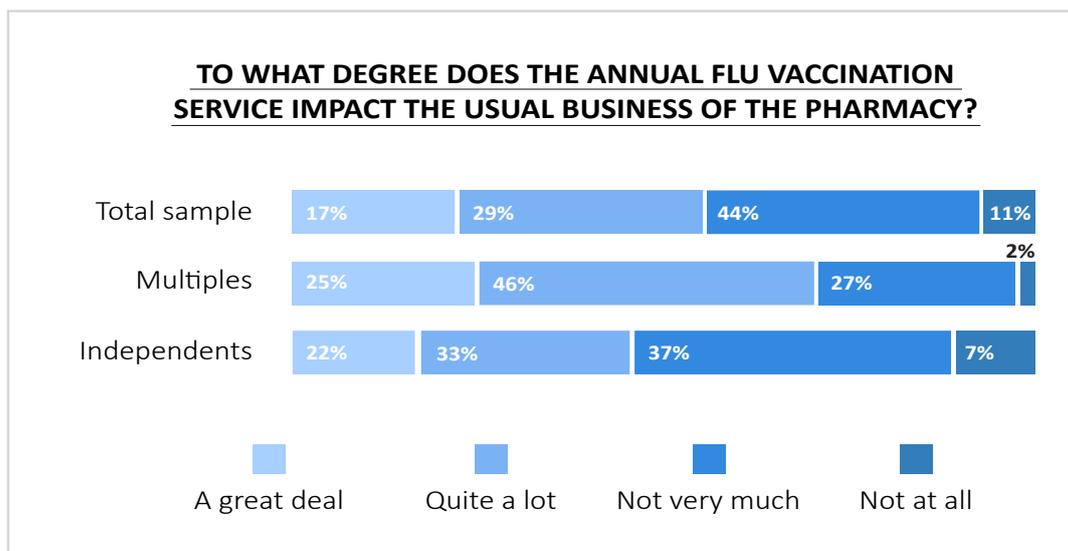
In terms of throughput, there is little difference between multiple and independent pharmacies. Independents gave slightly more jobs than multiples in 2020/21.



In terms of location, 95% of all flu vaccinations took place in a pharmacy, with just 2% in care homes and 1% in patients' own homes.

The majority of pharmacists (42%) say the annual flu vaccination service does not have very much impact on the usual business of the pharmacy, while 6.5% say it has no impact at all. However, a third (34%) say it has quite a lot of impact and 18% say it has a great deal of impact.

Among pharmacists working for multiples, 46% say the vaccination service has quite a lot of impact on the usual business of the pharmacy, and 25% say it has a great deal of impact. For pharmacists working in independents, the figures are much lower, at 29% and 17% respectively.



Flu vaccination – England only

Pharmacies in Scotland and Northern Ireland only started providing flu vaccinations in 2020/21 and the service was not universal or available throughout the September-March period.

Focussing on flu vaccination in England only, where the service is now well established, gives a slightly different picture, but one which arguably is more representative.

92.5% of pharmacists in England (n=169) said they had administered flu vaccines as part of the national flu vaccination programme.

Prior to 2020/21, they delivered an average of 275 flu vaccinations per pharmacy in a typical year.

In 2020/21, pharmacists in England estimated they had delivered 324 flu vaccinations per pharmacy.

48.5% said providing an annual flu vaccination service had not very much or no impact at all on the usual business of the pharmacy, while 33.5% said it had quite a lot of impact and 17.5% a great deal.

Interest in administering Covid-19 vaccines

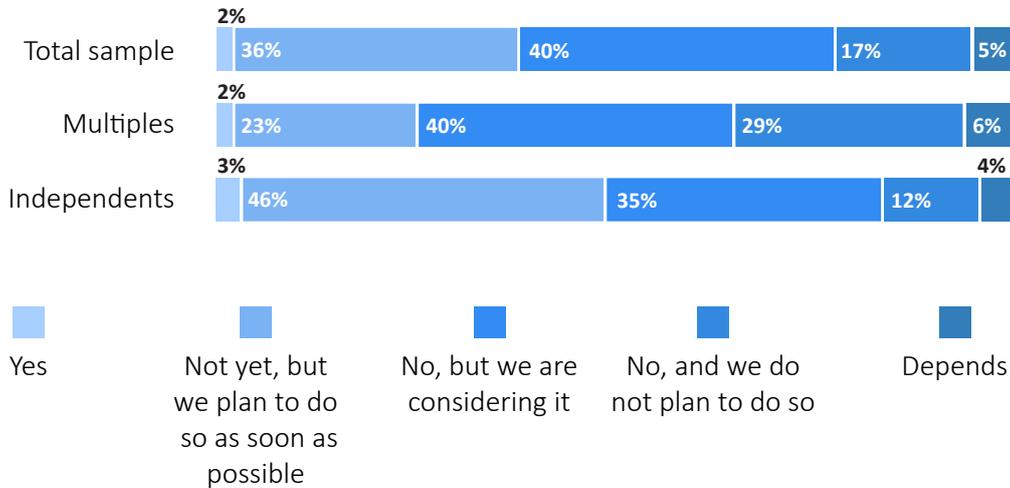
Only 2% of the total sample (n=3) were part of the Covid vaccination programme when the survey was conducted in March 2021. However, 37% were planning to get involved as soon as possible and 41% were considering it. Only 15% did not plan to do so.

5% of the sample said it depended – reasons given were:

- *Payment and requirements*
- *I work for a multiple and don't control this*
- *Funding would need to improve as the other services become compromised otherwise. Facilities and space are considerations*
- *I vaccinate elsewhere. Would be happy to do so at my village location, but would be unlikely to reach 400 a week with social distancing*
- *Will be determined by head office*
- *We would like to offer it. However, the red tape and bureaucracy with the service has prevented us*
- *Don't have the capacity at present to meet necessary requirements. However, may be interested in an annual programme*

Independents were keener than those in multiples to provide the service, with 49% either currently offering Covid vaccinations or planning to do so as soon as possible.

DO YOU OFFER A COVID-19 VACCINATION SERVICE (N=232)

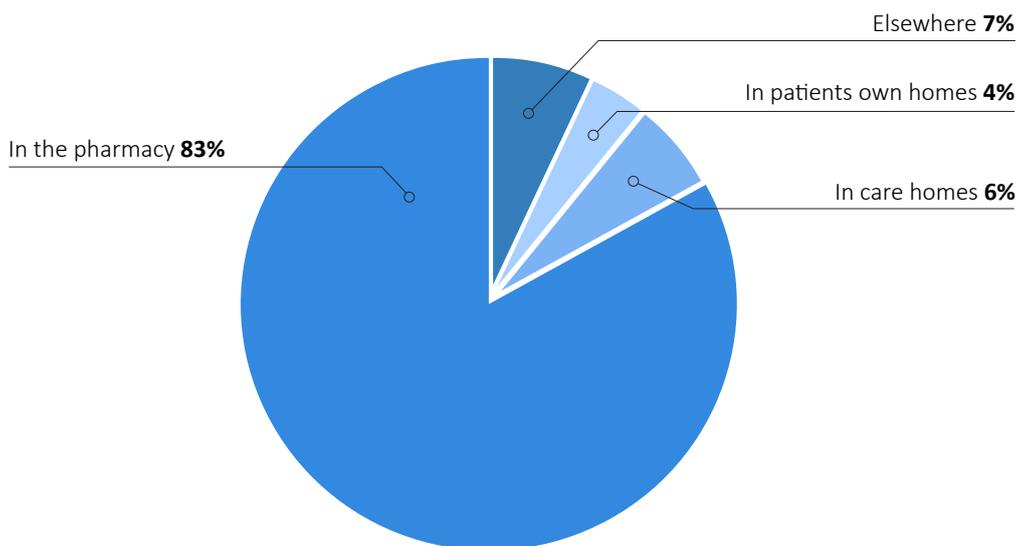


Among those who would be prepared to provide Covid vaccinations or are currently considering doing so (83% of all pharmacists), the estimated maximum number of vaccinations that could be delivered from their pharmacy in a week was said to be 287. The figure is higher among independents (352) than multiples (182) and highest in Greater London (398).

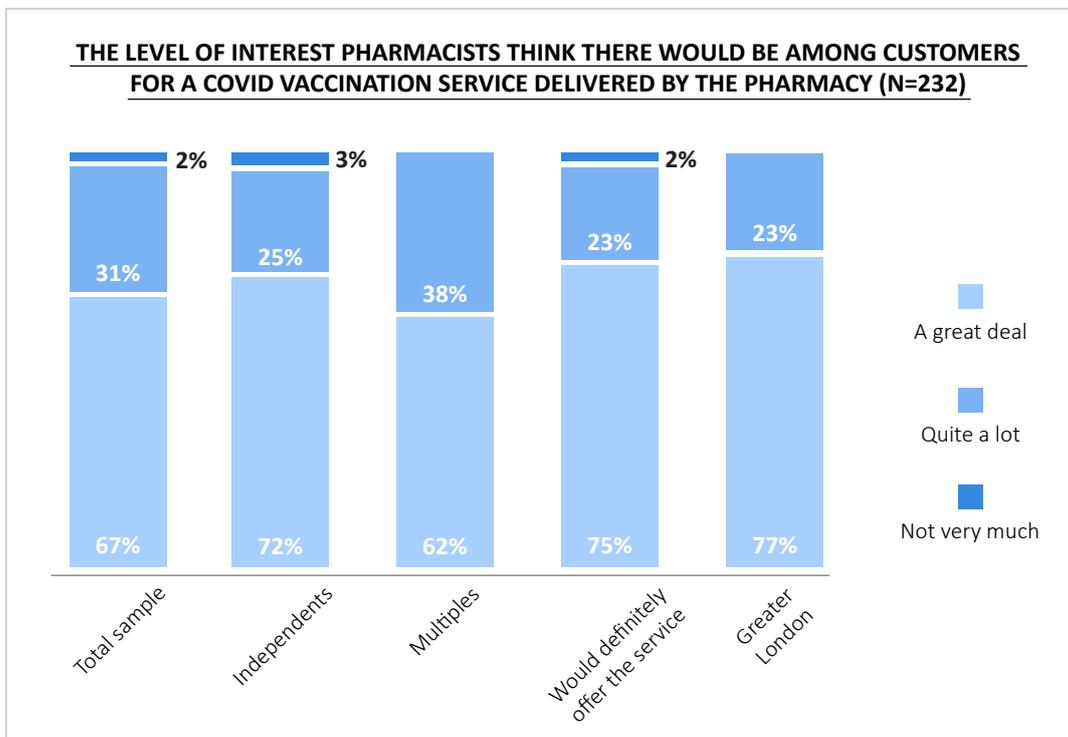
Taking pharmacies in England only, respondents estimated their maximum capacity for delivering Covid vaccinations from their pharmacy in a week would be 310.

Among those who would be prepared to provide Covid vaccinations or are currently considering doing so (n=192), 83% envisage offering vaccinations in the pharmacy, with care homes, patients' own homes and elsewhere making up the remaining 17% of service provision locations.

IN WHAT LOCATIONS DO/WOULD YOU ADMINISTER COVID-19 VACCINES? (n=192)



Two thirds of pharmacists (67.5%) believe there would be a great deal of interest among their customers for a Covid vaccination service delivered by the pharmacy (this rises to 70% for pharmacists in England), while 31% say there would be quite a lot of interest. Less than 2% say there would not be much interest.



Independents (72%), those who would definitely offer the service (75%), and pharmacists in Greater London (77%) are the three groups who think there would be the most interest from customers.

Of the total survey sample, only a fifth of pharmacists (19%) did not think that a Covid vaccination service would impact on their business significantly.

To mitigate the impact of a vaccination service, the majority (63%) would employ extra staff, 22% would share the work with other pharmacies, while 33% would extend opening hours and 7% would take other measures, such as:

- *Fit into the normal day using extra pharmacist time*
- *Use additional pharmacist/technician support*
- *Absorb it into the working day*
- *Use relief/ locum cover*
- *Close during the day to deliver the service without heavily impacting on normal business*
- *Change workflows and extend timelines for other services, eg. prescription turnaround times*
- *Open on Sat/Sun for appointments*
- *Use a different venue*

Delivering a Covid vaccination service

Pharmacists, on average, say that a fee of £17.67 (excluding ingredients costs) would be appropriate for administering each vaccination. Independents, on average, say a fee of £18.09 would be appropriate, while multiples put the figure at £15.22.

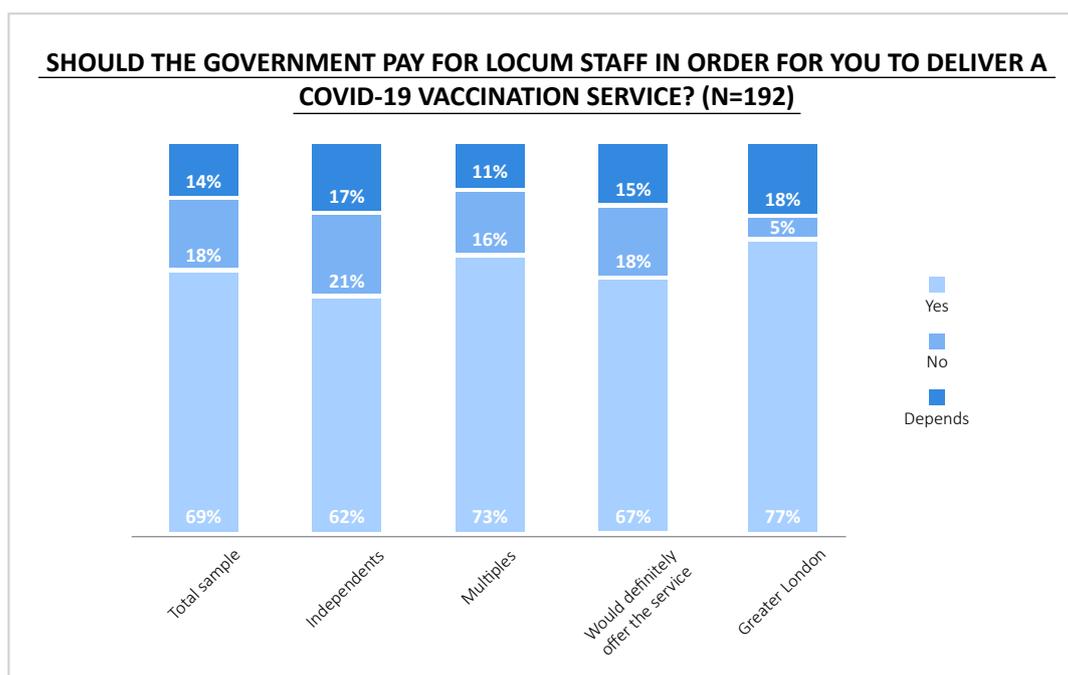
If the pharmacy was not available or suitable for delivering a Covid vaccination service and hiring an alternative venue was necessary, appropriate payment for daily premises hire was put at £177. This rose to £212 for pharmacies in Greater London.

For managing patient appointments, three quarters of the total sample (76%) would prefer to use a booking system run by the pharmacy, although half (49.5%) would be happy to use a centralised booking system for their area, and 36.5% would be happy with a 'walk-in' system.

Only one in five pharmacists (21%) favour a GP referral service, and this drops to 12% among those based in multiples. Those in multiples were also less comfortable using a centralised booking system – an option chosen by only 34%, compared to 52% of independents.

	Total sample	Independents	Multiples	Would definitely offer the service	Greater London
Walk-in	36.5%	39%	36.5%	43%	55%
Centralised booking system for your area	49.5%	52%	34%	44%	59%
Booking system run by the pharmacy	76%	74%	83%	78%	86%
GP referral	21%	23%	12%	18%	27%

There was a mixed response to the question of whether the government should pay for locum staff in order for the pharmacy to deliver a Covid vaccination service.



Given that 63% of all pharmacists would expect to employ additional staff in order to offer a Covid vaccination service, it isn't surprising that 69% of those who would consider offering the service would expect the government to pay for locum staff: 18% disagree and 14% say it would depend, mainly on the level of demand and on the fee/payment for the vaccine provision.

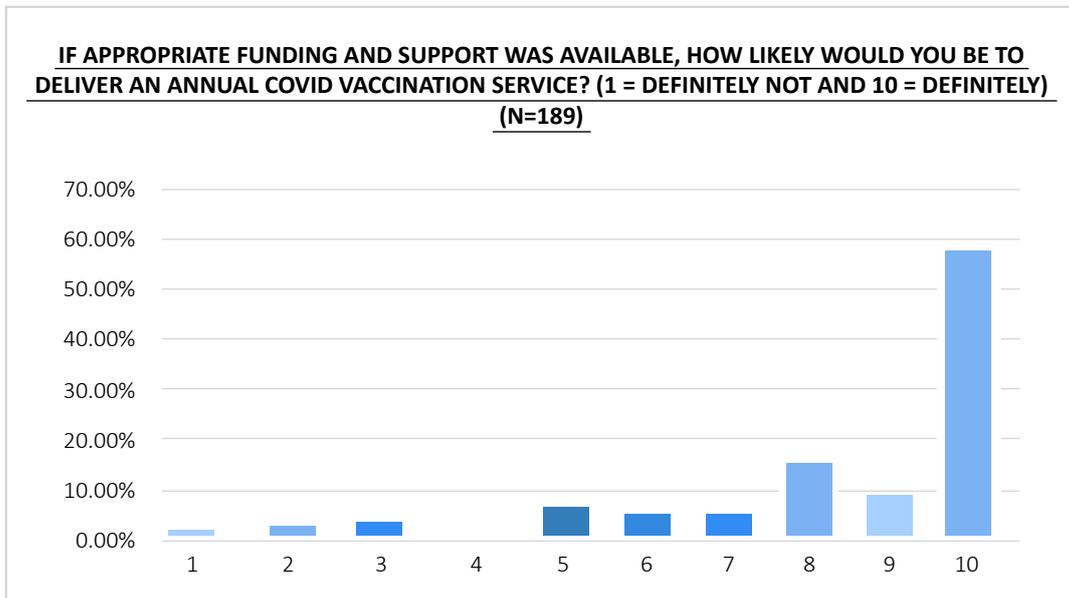
Of the total sample, 67.5% say the government should pay for locum staff, with a substantially higher percentage of multiples (73%) saying so than independents (62%).

Of the 15% of the total sample who said 'it depends', the reasons given included:

- *The regular business has to run side by side and a locum is needed to cover those hours*
- *The level of vaccine delivery authorised*
- *If the fee for the service were adequate, it would cover locum costs*
- *Depends on the numbers we are expecting to administer vaccines to*
- *As long as the remuneration per job is sufficient, it is for each pharmacy to assess staff needs*
- *Whether the service was open to all or restricted to gaps in provision or hubs. The latter would require locum funding*
- *Local demand for vaccinations. It's a commercial decision to offer vaccines, so it's up to us to organise staff*
- *The vaccine fee*
- *If all appointments are filled then payment per job can cover the costs. But if I have to take on locums and there are not enough appointments on the day then I would expect payment to cover my costs*

Attitudes towards a Covid vaccination service

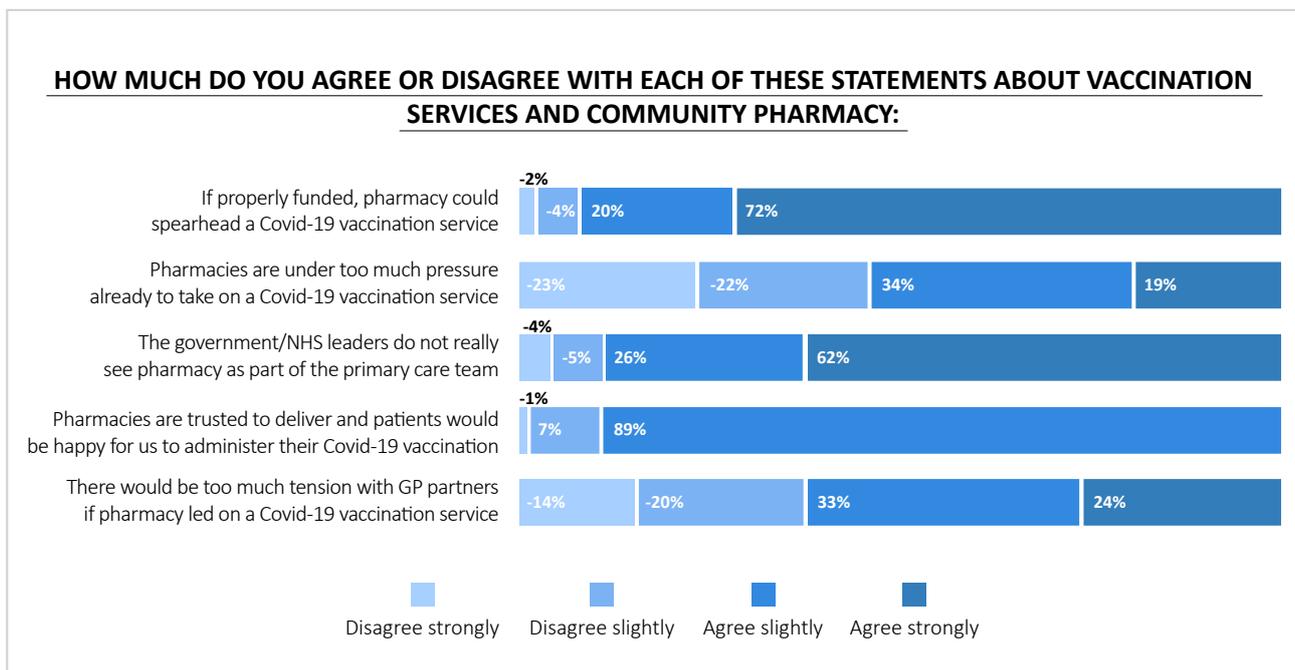
On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 represents those who would definitely deliver a Covid vaccination service, and 1 represents those who would definitely not, 58% of respondents would definitely deliver a service. Independents were marginally keener than multiples to do so.



Pharmacists in England (n=169) were asked how much support they had received from GPs, their Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and their PCN to help them get involved in delivering Covid vaccination services.

None scored highly. The PCN was seen as being most helpful, but just one in five pharmacists (18% said it provided a great deal or quite a lot of help. 48.5% said it was no help at all. The CCG was next, with 13.5% considering it very or quite helpful and 54% saying it was of no help at all, GPs were considered least helpful – just 9.5% of respondents said GPs provided quite a lot or a great deal of support while 71% said they had been of no help at all.

Pharmacists' views on a Covid vaccination service



Respondents (n=183) were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

If properly funded, pharmacy could spearhead a Covid vaccination service

72% of the total sample agreed strongly and 20% slightly. Multiples (n=56) were less supportive – 64% agreed strongly, while 25% agreed slightly. Among independents (n=125), 74.5% agreed strongly, while 19% agreed slightly.

Pharmacies are under too much pressure already to take on a Covid-19 vaccination service

Views were split on this statement. 34% agreed slightly and 19% agreed strongly. However, 22% disagreed slightly and 23% disagreed strongly.

Views differed markedly between multiples and independents. Among multiples, 39% agreed strongly and 30% agreed slightly with the statement, with only 30% disagreeing strongly or slightly. Among independents, only 8% agreed strongly with the statement, with 35% agreeing slightly. 28% disagreed strongly and 26.5% disagreed slightly.

The government/NHS leaders do not really see pharmacy as part of the primary care team

There was general support for this statement, with 62% of respondents strongly agreeing and 26% agreeing slightly. Only 4% strongly disagreed.

Pharmacies are trusted to deliver, and patients would be happy for us to administer, their Covid vaccination

89% of respondents agreed strongly with this statement, and 7% agreed slightly.

There would be too much tension with GP partners if pharmacy led on a Covid vaccination service

Most respondents agreed that this would likely be the case – 33% agreeing slightly and 24% strongly. Only 14% disagreed strongly, with 20% disagreeing slightly.

The statements below are a representative selection of responses to the question:

Please tell us in your own words why you think a pharmacy-based Covid-19 vaccination service would, or would not, be advantageous in your pharmacy

Such a service would help to establish pharmacy as the primary place for a community vaccination scheme. It would help to make up the shortfall in funding of a proper, sustainable pharmacy contract

It's more about the speed, convenience and advantages for the patient

Easily accessible, extended hours, patient trust

The service would support and complement existing services, and would ensure that it is available locally so patients will not have to travel far. It could help mop up the hard-to-reach population as well

As Covid vaccination is set to be an annual event, we need a system in place to make sure it is repeatable every year and 'business as usual'

It's a follow-on from flu vaccination. A lot of customers are asking when we are doing them. It is definitely an Essential Service

Advantageous as we deal primarily with care homes

The service would be available with extended hours and at weekends

Regular patients all say they prefer to have their flu jab here: many have asked if they could get their Covid jab and pneumonia jab here – and we're open Saturday

Apart from the financial advantages, it also gives more options for the people who can't travel far and want vaccination locally

Although it would be a lot of work for us, I believe the public would welcome it hugely. Therefore a properly funded programme may work well

The additional service would enhance our professional status. There would also be a financial benefit

We have accessibility and availability of trained staff. While GPs mostly closed their doors during the pandemic, pharmacists remained open throughout, and this has positioned them as a trusted healthcare provider

It would take the pressure off the GPs and hospitals so they can focus on treating patients

It would enhance the public's perception of pharmacies as being part of the NHS

Just like the flu vaccine, it would be convenient for patients and help reduce the workload for GPs

It is something patients want and feel comfortable with. It increases our range of services and would bring care closer to home for patients

Definitely advantageous - quite a lot of our patients would prefer in store vaccination

I do not think it would be advantageous if we had to keep delivering our usual services while doing Covid vaccines as we would not have the capacity. We do not have the option of reducing service availability like GPs do

Patients prefer to come to pharmacies as we are usually located near their homes. They are able to arrange their vaccination when collecting prescriptions

Patients shop in store and use the pharmacy regularly so it would be very convenient for them – near to their home (often within walking distance). They have been asking for this service

Our pharmacy serves a large deprived area with lots of social housing. A high percentage of the population are black and ethnic minority. A local service on their doorstep would be very advantageous

We have had countless requests for us to offer it. There is no current offer in the village as the PCN site is a few miles away and hubs further. People like a walk-in option. We were overwhelmed this year with flu requests and did 1,000. If we had had the stock, we could have doubled this

The same reasons for commissioning the annual flu service: accessibility and convenience for the service user and to increase uptake

Pharmacies have remained open throughout the pandemic and provided an excellent service when GPs closed their doors to patients. Patients like going to their local pharmacies for prescriptions and flu vaccinations. Covid-19 vaccinations would be an added service

We would need to employ extra staff. Without that, we are going to be under pressure

It would reach black and minority ethnic groups that are difficult to contact. Many customers would prefer to come to the pharmacy as it is located so close to home

If it could run alongside flu vaccination, it could work – provided we were given adequate funding and had proper access to patients' medical records

We do not have space, and the volume of patients would interrupt normal day-to-day running so remuneration would have to be sufficient to cover locum costs

Professional satisfaction, local awareness of what pharmacy can do, additional revenue

Makes sense if we are already providing the flu jab

Please refer to the PDA's "thousand little ships" policy... if all of us were to contribute even a little, it would make the difference

It is what patients have been asking for. A number of patients would greatly benefit with not having to travel. They are familiar with our set up and do not understand the bureaucracy that has sprung up in the delivery of Covid vaccines. Pharmacy is quite capable of handling time limited vaccines

Local to where clients live

Convenient for customers, both in terms of location and time

The take-up of flu vaccines has been highly positive and well received by the local community. The majority have expressed huge interest in the Covid vaccine also being available locally

My pharmacy services a fairly aged population and they all come to me for their flu jab and have all enquired about the Covid jab. Apart from the fees, it is good for my patients

More uptake of the vaccines as pharmacies are more accessible than GPs. Also, we have the ability to work more hours and have a flexible approach to offering bookings

Overlooked expertise which should not be abused by passing the burden of continued care elsewhere when the heat of the current situation has dissipated

Many local patients have stressed that they would rather have, and are more likely to get, the vaccine if it was administered by our pharmacy. We have a multilingual staff and great rapport with patients, which means the trust level is higher. Also, the additional income would be a lifeline to the business



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