



Seldom Heard and Health Inequalities Case Study

Homeless Communities in West Sussex

Access to Community Pharmacy

October 2020

Healthwatch West Sussex has been working with community partners that support homeless people in West Sussex to understand their changing health needs.

This is an independent focused case study showing how homeless people struggle to access some basic primary care services, which has worsened due to the pandemic.

Why is this important?

Pharmacies are an essential part of the holistic support available for people who are homeless or rough sleeping. Community Pharmacists can liaise with GPs, help to sort out medications and provide health and wellbeing advice. They can offer a beneficial space with positive interactions for a vulnerable population who are often excluded from elsewhere.

The homeless charities we have spoken to say that a good relationship with pharmacists has a positive impact on the wellbeing of the people they support.

One charity told us how the local pharmacist would phone them if a client seemed particularly agitated or unwell. This meant they were able to check on their wellbeing and get timely support in place.

Others commented that there are pharmacists who make a real difference to their community due to their empathy. It was also observed that these same individuals can have a different experience in different pharmacies and that outcomes were dependant on the approach of individual staff.

Lived experience isn't always good

Pharmacies can be a point of conflict. For this community, even entering a building, a space where they don't *fit*, can put them on edge. They will not always understand why a prescription is delayed, and the pharmacy staff may not understand why this is so important to them, particularly if it's an opiate substitute.





Misunderstandings, frustrations and poor coping mechanisms can appear threatening or aggressive. These powder keg interactions can lead to vulnerable people being banned from pharmacies.



We have been told that behaviour can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy; people excluded from society can become hyper-alert and anxious, and negative interactions become more likely. Exclusion from the places designed to offer support (A&E, GPs, Pharmacies, Dentists etc.) isn't uncommon, and a vicious circle is created.

The UK's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) identified the homeless as a high priority group most at risk from substance use and related harms (ACMD, 2018). Their subsequent [report](#) that looks at how drug-related harms in homeless populations can be reduced, concludes:

Local statutory and non-statutory organisations must maintain an active awareness of the multiple stigma, oppressions and discriminations experienced by their service users. Professional values of respect and non-judgmentalism married with a warm empathic and compassionate approach were perceived as foundational to working with vulnerable people who are homeless and have drug use issues. Furthermore, service providers must endeavour to empower homeless people who experience harms related to drug use. One method of realistically achieving this goal this would be to involve service users in the design and implementation of services.

From our conversations, it isn't clear whether pharmacists and staff receive training for this type of interaction but, given their key placement in supporting this population, it would be beneficial to consider.

Opportunity to improve people's lived experience

Some of the homeless charities in West Sussex provide training in this area, some of which is outsourced, and therefore has costs attached. One such training, focusses on a psychologically informed approach to help foster empathy and understanding of the trauma people bring with them to interactions. Training of this sort would support interactions across a wide cross-section of the general public, as well as interactions with the homeless and rough sleeper community.

We've introduced this opportunity to the Sussex and Surrey Local Pharmaceutical Committee.

