

Achieving High Street Health

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Health met on Tuesday 8th March, bringing together representatives of high street healthcare providers to discuss their work and how better to integrate them into patient pathways.

The online roundtable event, chaired by Peter Dowd MP, featured speakers from across dentistry, pharmacy, and optometry.

- Shawn Charlwood; Chair of General Dental Practise at the British Dental Association.
- Asif Aziz OBE; Director of Health Care, Boots UK.
- Professor Leon Davies; Vice President, The College of Optometrists.

Introduction: the current state of play

Providers described the challenges in delivering their services as well as the opportunities for care presented by greater expansion and support of high street primary care professionals.

Speakers began by explaining the current role of high street healthcare in providing a first point of contact for patients that is local, accessible, and trusted.

High street healthcare offers preventative care, plays an existing role in reducing health inequality and contributes to the early diagnosis of many conditions including eye, oral, skin and other cancers.

Providers were agile and adaptable during the pandemic, maintaining essential services, working with government to produce more care in the community and in some cases expanding roles to vaccinate, provide more low risk and low acuity care and meeting local population health needs.

Challenges

However, the group also described the challenges faced in providing these vital services, many longstanding, and all of which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

High street healthcare providers are also small businesses in many instances and maintaining a viable business in a rapidly changing landscape has proved in many cases too much, leading to strain on local services and some leaving the profession altogether.

Speakers described several stressors to their current business models:

- Behaviour changes during the pandemic leading to reduced footfall on the high street and increased use of online services.
- Increasing operational costs against a backdrop of fixed term contracts.
- Workforce vacancies, burnout, and wellbeing.
- Commissioning and structural challenges to the ability to innovate.

Dentistry, pharmacy and optometry representatives each in turn acknowledged that addressing these challenges is the first step to creating a sustainable model for high street healthcare.

In turn, speakers agreed that high street healthcare providers, if properly resourced and integrated into local boards and partnerships, could offer many solutions to the problems facing the health service at present.

Looking ahead: future opportunities

High street healthcare providers have the expertise and reach to expand their roles:

- Firstly, by delivering more high-level condition specific care as practitioners and prescribers; and
- Secondly, through providing greater preventative, public health, and diagnostic care.

Integration of the high street into care systems would allow for commissioning of existing and innovative services to provide an alternative pathway for patients.

High street healthcare providers can provide wider public health messages, support behaviour change, manage long-term conditions, identify and refer for red flag symptoms and provide diagnostics.

This requires integrated data services, adequate resource and workforce collaboration to ensure a supportive care pathway for patients and governance to ensure that diagnostic testing is accurate and meets the quality standards that patients expect.

In conclusion: the role of high street healthcare providers

If these conditions were met, high street healthcare providers could play an important part in place-based care.

They can offer local and accessible services, with or without appointment, on the high street in almost every city, town, and village across the country.

They could work to improve public health, provide preventative advice, diagnose disease early and manage conditions holistically away from hospital settings.

This vision is explored in the Health and Care Bill and Integration White Paper. It looks to address health inequality at a local level.

In the absence of a national framework mandating that high street healthcare providers are involved in place-based decision making, it is vital that national, regional, and local policy makers include these often-overlooked professionals from planning to implementation.

It is equally important that good practice is shared, and lessons learnt, to prevent a patchwork approach to good care, and to enable innovation to take place at pace and scale.