

# GPP NI 2030:

## A strategy for General Practice Pharmacy in Northern Ireland

**February 2024**



Department of  
**Health**

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## Foreword

In the evolving landscape of the integrated health and social care system in Northern Ireland, the widespread introduction of pharmacists into general practice teams, realising the vision outlined in “Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together”, has been a resounding success.



Every GP practice in Northern Ireland now has a pharmacist as an integral part of their clinical team, working alongside GPs and other healthcare professionals to improve the safety and quality of prescribing and improve patient outcomes.

General practice pharmacists provide excellent value for money for the Health and Social Care (HSC) system through supporting the delivery of prescribing efficiencies, as well as other vital improvements in the safety, efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of prescribing within GP practices. Pharmacists also release much needed capacity within the general practice team so that GPs can focus more of their time on the care and management of patients with complex medical needs.

Building on this success, this vision outlines our strategic direction for the future development of the general practice pharmacy workforce, implementing a recommendation in the Pharmacy Workforce Review 2020.

Across six themes and two key enablers, this plan sets out how general practice pharmacists, as clinical leads for medicines within the general practice team, can fully contribute to optimising the health outcomes of our population through enhanced workforce capacity and capability.

It outlines plans for new career development opportunities for pharmacists, including through the introduction of new advanced pharmacist practitioner roles, and for optimising skill mix through the introduction of pharmacy technician roles aligned with future service development priorities.

General practice pharmacists have always been at the forefront of innovation and transformation in how primary care services are delivered and this plan outlines how they will continue to adapt their services in response to improvements in the availability and use of data and technology to best meet the health needs of our population.

The recommendations contained in this report are ambitious and outline a positive vision for the future contribution of general practice pharmacists to HSC transformation, and I would like to thank everyone who contributed to its development. The Department is committed to working with service commissioners, providers and the general practice pharmacist workforce to progress implementation of these recommendations in the coming months and years.



Professor Cathy Harrison  
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

## Executive Summary

1. This strategy describes how the knowledge and skills of general practice pharmacists can be best utilised to deliver improvements in patient and population health outcomes. It outlines recommendations for actions to be progressed over the next six years by the Department of Health, working in partnership with commissioners and service providers to realise the ambition outlined in this strategy by 2030.
2. Six strategic themes are outlined which build upon the solid foundations provided by our highly trained and motivated general practice pharmacist workforce, which is now widely recognised as an integral part of the general practice multidisciplinary team.



*Figure 1: Vision for  
General Practice Pharmacy in 2030*

3. By 2030 general practice pharmacists will be more firmly established as the clinical leads for medicines in the general practice team, leading the delivery of high quality, safe, effective, cost-effective and sustainable prescribing and use of medicines.
4. Foremost, this vision is about how general practice pharmacists can best contribute to improvements in the health outcomes of the population of Northern Ireland. Our population rightly expect to benefit from the consistent delivery of high-quality patient centred pharmaceutical care in all settings, delivered holistically with a focus on the person rather than their condition. This can be achieved by general practice pharmacists using their skills to deliver direct patient care and by empowering patients to make evidence-based decisions about their medicines and wider health and wellbeing.
5. This vision is also about realising the full potential of a diversified general practice pharmacy workforce working in professionally fulfilling roles within robust career development pathways. This means establishing pharmacy teams consisting of pharmacists at different stages of their career pathway, including entry level and advanced practice, and pharmacy technicians.
6. General practice pharmacists have been at the forefront of innovation and transformation in how primary care services are delivered and will continue to adapt their services to best meet the needs of individual patients as technology advances. Improvements in the availability and use of prescribing and population health data will help to drive continued improvements in pharmacy service planning and delivery and support clinical decision making.
7. This vision and the actions outlined below represent the next stage in the development of the general practice pharmacy workforce in Northern Ireland for the rest of this decade. The Department of Health will work with service commissioners and providers, to evaluate the impact of the actions outlined in this strategy to inform future policy development beyond 2030.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

*Recommendation 1: Define the core general practice pharmacist role and develop arrangements that support the consistent delivery of high-quality services in all practices.*

*Recommendation 2: Develop a career pathway for general practice pharmacists with an initial focus on new clinically advanced general practice pharmacist roles that improve patient outcomes and contribute to health system improvements.*

*Recommendation 3: Develop a culture of pharmacist professional development that allows protected time and access to high quality education and training from undergraduate to consultant level practice.*

*Recommendation 4: Implement a pathfinder study that will inform the phased introduction of the pharmacy technician role in general practice.*

*Recommendation 5: Develop innovative approaches to data interrogation that will enable targeted pharmacy support to optimise individual and population health outcomes.*

*Recommendation 6: Develop clinical outcome measures that demonstrate the impact of general practice pharmacy services on individual and population health outcomes.*

## Introduction and strategic context

8. “Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together” outlined how general practice pharmacists would work as an integral part of the GP surgery team using their skills and experience to improve patient outcomes, improve the safety of prescribing through medication reviews and reconciliation, reduce the level of medication errors and reduce waste through management of prescribing systems. “Delivering Together” also highlighted the potential for pharmacists working in general practice to use their clinical skills to help to alleviate some of the pressures faced by general practice through the management of long-term conditions **[1]**.
9. General practice pharmacists are key to delivery of the primary care component of the Regional Medicines Optimisation Model outlined in the Medicines Optimisation Quality Framework (MOQF), which supports the better health and wellbeing of the population of Northern Ireland through delivering improvements in the safe and effective use of medicines, and have demonstrated clear benefits in terms of safety, quality and efficiency benefits for practices and patients **[2]**.
10. In recognition of the considerable benefits that could result from developing a general practice pharmacy workforce in Northern Ireland, an initial five-year commitment was announced in December 2015 that saw additional investment to provide for pharmacists to work alongside GPs. With full implementation achieved by 2020, almost 400 pharmacists now deliver a highly valued service as key members of every general practice team in Northern Ireland **[3]**.
11. Evaluation of the general practice pharmacist service has demonstrated the benefits of the pharmacist’s role in promoting medicines optimisation through undertaking medication review, medicines reconciliation, prescribing system management, achieving a more consistent approach to prescribing, formulary implementation, reducing prescribing expenditure and releasing GP capacity **[4]**.



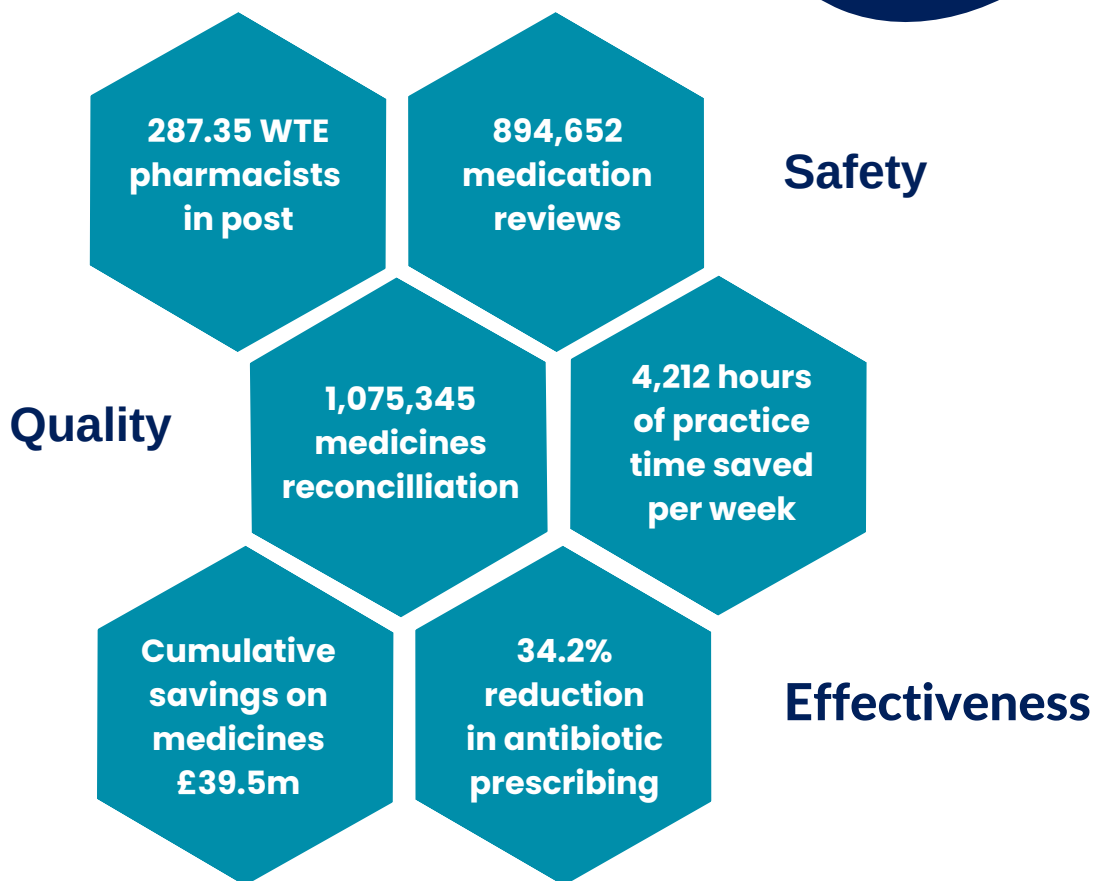


Figure 2: Benefits from the initial rollout of the general practice pharmacist service [4]

12. Initial objectives set for general practice pharmacists focussed on service delivery. However the general practice pharmacist's clinical role has developed beyond these objectives with the result that many pharmacists now work as autonomous clinicians and lead in the management of long-term conditions. As a result of the successful implementation of the initial five-year investment plan, the general practice pharmacist service is now established as a core service within general practice.
  
13. The Department of Health's Pharmacy Workforce Review, published in 2020, considered the role of pharmacy across all HSC settings in response to a range of wider strategic drivers impacting on pharmacy practice. It contained an analysis of the current pharmacy workforce in Northern Ireland and made recommendations to inform the development of the whole pharmacy workforce over the next ten years [5].

14. Included within the review are recommendations specific to general practice:
- *A career pathway should be developed for general practice pharmacists. Moreover, strategic direction needs to be given as to how this sector will develop and how this will affect further recruitment.*
  - *A model for core general practice pharmacy services should be delivered consistently across GP Federations with scope to allow for variation in specialist/additional services according to local need.*
  - *A path-finder study should be undertaken to explore the role of pharmacy technicians in supporting the work of general practice pharmacists.*
15. Against a backdrop of increasing demand for primary care services and resulting workload pressures and the need to rebuild HSC services following the COVID-19 pandemic, different ways of working have been implemented over recent years to ensure that optimal use is made of the skills and knowledge within the general practice pharmacy team [6,7]. However, the existing general practice pharmacist workforce faces significant challenges in continuing to consistently deliver key medicines optimisation roles and the clinical patient centred role which is so highly valued by patients and other healthcare professionals against a background of numerous competing pressures. Action is needed to stabilise and equip the general practice pharmacist workforce to meet these challenges. The current difficult financial situation facing HSC services means that additional investment will be required, subject to identification of funding streams, and decisions around prioritisation including approval of business cases.
16. The following six themes outline how Northern Ireland's general practice pharmacists will use their knowledge and skills to realise tangible improvements in individual and population health outcomes:

*Theme 1: Experts in medicines*

*Theme 2: Delivering person centred holistic care*

*Theme 3: Optimising outcomes from medicines*

*Theme 4: Leading medicines governance in general practice*

*Theme 5: Improving access to care*

*Theme 6: Leading innovation in medicines optimisation*

## **A Vision for General Practice Pharmacy in 2030**

### ***Theme 1: Experts in medicines***

17. The key role of pharmacists, as distinct from other healthcare professionals, is their expertise in medicines. By 2030, this expertise will result in general practice pharmacists being universally recognised as a core member of the multidisciplinary team, contributing not just to individual patient management but also to overall care planning and service improvement for the population.
18. While medicines will always be initiated by a spectrum of healthcare professionals, general practice pharmacists will consistently be the clinical lead for safe and effective prescribing. They are, and will continue to be, the first point of contact for medicine related queries and referrals. General practice pharmacists will lead the provision of expert medicines advice and information to patients and other professionals.
19. General practice pharmacists will consult directly with patients to review and prescribe medicines for patients with both acute and long-term conditions. They will be independent prescribers with advanced clinical assessment and decision-making skills and will focus their attention on optimising patient centred outcomes by prescribing, monitoring, reviewing, adjusting, and stopping medicines.
20. General practice pharmacists will have a focus on those individuals at highest risk of preventable harm associated with medicines use such as frail and elderly patients, those using high risk medicines or complex therapies, and those who are transitioning between care settings.

## ***Theme 2: Delivering person centred holistic care***

21. While pharmacists are experts in medicines, the core role of pharmacists as generalists is to provide care holistically, with a focus on the person, rather than focusing solely on their condition or their medicines. General practice pharmacists will apply their skills to maximise impact on patient care by helping patients to make informed decisions about their medicines through a shared decision-making approach.
22. General practice pharmacists will support prevention of ill health through provision of lifestyle advice and alternatives to prescribing medicines, such as social prescribing or referral to services offered by third party providers. This will also contribute to reducing the environmental impact of medicines use, in keeping with the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare's principles of sustainable clinical practice [8].

## ***Theme 3: Optimising outcomes from medicines***

23. Where medicines are indicated, general practice pharmacists will continue to optimise health outcomes from medicines use. This will include timely provision of standardised and evidence-based medication reviews. This aspect of the role will evolve to include reviewing more complex medication regimes using a shared decision-making approach in cases requiring more personalised approaches.
24. The general practice pharmacist will lead on deprescribing to ensure that medicines are only prescribed and used where there is benefit, so maximising health outcomes and minimising the environmental impact of excess medicines use and waste.
25. General practice pharmacists already have a lead role in supporting a culture of safe, effective, and cost-effective medicines use within general practice. They will continue to work collaboratively with the practice multidisciplinary team to promote safe, clinically effective, and cost-effective prescribing, informed by HSC guidance such as the Northern Ireland Formulary [9].

#### ***Theme 4: Leading medicines governance in general practice***

26. General practice pharmacists will continue to lead the development and implementation of robust medicines governance processes within the overall practice system of clinical governance to ensure safe and effective prescribing in practices and safer transitions for patients between care settings.
27. General practice pharmacists will undertake quality improvement activities. They will disseminate the outcomes, share best practice and work with colleagues to streamline clinical processes and improve medicines safety.
28. General practice pharmacists will continue to assess emerging evidence and undertake clinical prescribing audits to ensure medicines use is safe and effective for their patients. They will continue to support regional and national medication safety initiatives and strategy [10].

#### ***Theme 5: Improving access to care***

29. General practice pharmacists have a key role in reducing health inequalities and improving wellbeing for patients through improving access to care. They will continue to work as part of the general practice team to offer services in a way that improves access to care in line with improvements in technology.
30. General practice pharmacists will proactively identify vulnerable people who particularly need support, such as those with lower health literacy, language barriers or other disabilities whether visible or hidden, in line with guidance and statutory obligations and will work with colleagues to help them access that support.

32. General practice pharmacists will work more closely with pharmacy and clinical teams in other settings to plan and deliver improved access to integrated healthcare services based on the needs of local populations. The new HSC Integrated Care System will provide an important vehicle for greater collaboration. [11].

### ***Theme 6: Leading innovation in medicines optimisation***

32. General practice pharmacists will develop the research base on medicines optimisation and pharmacy practice. They will expand their research capabilities through postgraduate training pathways and collaborate with research teams in the identification, data collection and dissemination of research to maximise its impact and optimise patient outcomes.
33. General practice pharmacists will lead on quality improvement initiatives relating to medicines, working to implement changes in conjunction with the practice team. They will champion examples of innovation and best practice in the use of medicines within general practice through regional and national professional networks.
34. General practice pharmacists have contributed to the safe and effective implementation of innovative digital enablers of transformation in primary care, such as the rollout of prescribing decision support packages, and will continue to embrace and support innovation that positively impacts on patient health and outcomes, including the rollout of electronic transmission of prescriptions.
35. General practice pharmacists are ideally placed to be the clinical leads for pharmacogenomics within general practice. Leading the operational delivery of advances in this area will be an increasingly important part of their role, including making therapeutic decisions based on pharmacogenomic testing and helping patients and other professionals to understand and interpret pharmacogenomic data [12,13].

## **Enabling the Vision**

*This vision is supported by two enablers. Firstly, workforce development and reform to build on the successes and achievements of our current general practice pharmacist workforce. Secondly, improvements in the use and availability of data to support pharmacy service planning and delivery.*

### **Enabler 1: Developing our workforce**

36. Optimising the capacity and capability of the general practice pharmacy workforce is critical to realising their full potential to contribute to improved patient and population health outcomes. The current workforce has become an integral part of general practice and it is essential that the pharmacist's skills are fully utilised to obtain the maximum benefit for patient care.
37. Defining the core general practice pharmacist role will provide greater clarity to other healthcare professionals and the wider public on what services and benefits can be expected to be provided by all general practice pharmacists.
38. Retention of the existing general practice pharmacist workforce is essential to continued service delivery and this should be supported by ensuring that remuneration remains attractive and comparable to similar roles in other sectors.
39. Consistent delivery of high-quality medicines optimisation services will also require adequate resilience to be incorporated into staffing models that ensures continuity of general practice pharmacist service provision in the event of staff absence.
40. The need to develop a career pathway for general practice pharmacists should be progressed without further delay to support retention of the current general practice pharmacist workforce within the sector.

41. An expanded career structure for general practice pharmacists will be established by developing services that offer the opportunity for general practice pharmacists to progress through defined career pathway stages from entry level to advanced practice roles. These roles will be aligned to nationally recognised professional training and competency frameworks encompassing professional practice, collaborative working, leadership and management, education and research skills **[14]**.
42. Introduction of new advanced practice roles will provide the opportunity for general practice pharmacists to provide advanced medicines optimisation services to areas identified as local and regional priorities. These advanced practice roles will include a focus on delivery of complex medication reviews in patients taking multiple medicines, resolving problems with high-risk medicines, and independent provision of specialist clinics in areas of identified service need **[15]**.
43. The work culture for the general practice pharmacy team will be one of protected professional development including shared multidisciplinary learning opportunities. This culture should embrace developing others, provision of mentorship and establishing peer support networks that help with continued learning and development.
44. All general practice pharmacists will have access to high quality training and protected time to develop their proficiency as clinicians. Independent prescribing with advanced clinical assessment skills training will allow pharmacists to practice as autonomous practitioners in new advanced practice roles.
45. Provision of education and training to others will continue to be a key part of the general practice pharmacist role and this will increase in importance as planned reforms of the initial education and training of pharmacists are implemented **[16]**. This will include facilitating experiential learning for student pharmacists, provision of supervision for less experienced pharmacists and acting in designated prescribing practitioner roles for trainee independent prescribers.



Legislative barriers will also be addressed to enable foundation year training to be delivered in general practice.

46. General practice pharmacists will continue to provide education opportunities on medicines optimisation and therapeutic issues to other healthcare professionals in the practice team, in their capacity as clinical lead for medicines optimisation within the practice multidisciplinary team.
47. The health needs of the population are best served by fully utilising the skill sets of pharmacy professionals working at all levels of practice. This can be progressed by establishing expanded pharmacy teams in general practice, comprised of pharmacists at different stages of the career pathway working alongside pharmacy technicians.
48. Pharmacy technicians can lead the operational aspects of medicines management processes within practices to support safe and efficient prescribing systems. As their role becomes more established, pharmacy technicians will seek to develop some patient facing roles to help support people to understand and use their medicines safely and effectively. Pharmacy technicians in general practice will also be supported to develop their clinical and consultation skills, aligned with continued developments seen nationally in their role **[17,18]**.
49. Pharmacy technicians will become a registered and regulated healthcare profession with the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland in the coming years, enhancing their contribution to healthcare provision and outcomes in all healthcare settings. They will work within defined and agreed parameters for practice and will be supported by robust training and governance frameworks as set out by nationally recognised professional bodies such as the Association of Pharmacy Technicians UK (APT UK) and Primary Care Pharmacy Association (PCPA) **[19]**.

## **Enabler 2: Using data to deliver high quality services.**

50. Improvements in the availability and use of HSC data will support general practice pharmacists to make treatment decisions and deliver personalised care that optimises patient outcomes. Prescribing data will continue to be utilised by general practice pharmacists to monitor trends and to promote cost-effective prescribing within practices. In addition, data from practice clinical systems and from hospital admission and discharges will increasingly be utilised to identify patients requiring targeted intervention and support.
51. General practice pharmacists will be supported by improvements in electronic decision support tools that contribute to shared decision making with patients by representing data in ways that can help them participate and alleviate barriers arising from low health literacy. These tools will increasingly use data in more intelligent ways to achieve personalised decisions about medicines. This will include the use of artificial intelligence (AI) which has potential in predicting outcomes, targeting intervention and treatment decision support [20].
52. To measure the impact of general practice pharmacists on population health, clinical outcomes data and prescribing data will be employed to plan, evaluate and improve services.
53. Establishing systems to gather and utilise feedback data from users of general practice pharmacy services will also drive continuous improvement in the quality of service and further contribute to demonstrating the impact of general practice pharmacy services on the health and wellbeing of the population.

## Realising the Vision

54. Realising this vision will require collaborative working and new innovative approaches to the planning and delivery of general practice pharmacy services. The Department of Health will work closely with service commissioners and providers to establish new governance arrangements that will be responsible for overseeing the consistent delivery of high-quality general practice pharmacy services and to progress implementation of the recommendations identified here as necessary to realise the vision by 2030.
55. Realising the full potential of the general practice pharmacy workforce will require additional investment to stabilise and develop service capacity and capability. At present full implementation of the recommendations set out in this vision is subject to confirmation of funding being available and will require prioritisation, workforce mapping and planning to ensure realistic implementation. It is not possible to fund full implementation of this vision from within the Department's existing resources and so delivery is dependent on securing the additional resources required.
56. This vision and the recommendations outlined below represent the next stage in the development of the general practice pharmacy workforce in Northern Ireland. It is recognised however that pharmacy practice is continually evolving to meet the care needs of our population and will continue to do so during the period in which this vision will be implemented. The Department of Health will work with service commissioners and providers, to evaluate the impact of the recommendations outlined in this strategy to inform future policy development beyond 2030.

| Recommendations |  |
|-----------------|--|
| 1.              | Define the core general practice pharmacist role and develop arrangements that support the consistent delivery of high-quality services in all practices.  |
| 2.              | Develop a career pathway for general practice pharmacists with an initial focus on new clinically advanced general practice pharmacist roles that improve patient outcomes and contribute to health system improvements. |
| 3.              | Develop a culture of pharmacist professional development that allows protected time and access to high quality education and training, from undergraduate to consultant level practice.                                  |
| 4.              | Implement a pathfinder study that will inform the phased introduction of the pharmacy technician role in general practice.   |
| 5.              | Develop innovative approaches to data interrogation that will enable targeted pharmacy support to optimise individual and population health outcomes.  |
| 6.              | Develop clinical outcome measures that demonstrate the impact of general practice pharmacy services on individual and population health outcomes.  |

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