

## Pharmacy First Sore Throat Pilot Service

The Pharmacy First Sore Throat Pilot Service was delivered across Northern Ireland to provide **faster, more accessible care** for people aged **five years and over** experiencing sore throat symptoms. Through participating community pharmacies, patients could receive a **clinical assessment, self-care advice, rapid testing for Strep A where appropriate, and treatment including antibiotics when clinically indicated**, without the need for a GP appointment.

### Project Overview

The pilot aimed to:

- Improve **timely access to care**
- Demonstrate the **potential to reduce pressure on GP and Out of Hours (OOH) services**
- Support **safe and appropriate antibiotic prescribing**

Participating pharmacists used the **evidence-based FeverPAIN clinical assessment**, alongside **Rapid Antigen Detection Tests (RADT)** where indicated, to guide treatment decisions.

Between **1 November 2023 and 31 March 2024**, the service delivered **6,768 consultations** across **43 community pharmacies**.

Patient experience was exceptionally positive:

- **93%** of respondents reported being *very satisfied* with the service
- **97%** said they would be *likely to use the service again*

Importantly, **62% of service users stated they would otherwise have contacted their GP** if the pharmacy service had not been available, highlighting the service's strong **potential to relieve pressure on wider primary care services**.

### Key Outcomes

#### Improved access to care

Thousands of patients received **timely clinical support** directly through their local community pharmacy.

#### Potential reduction in GP and OOH pressure

- **62%** of users reported GP as their likely alternative
- Additional users indicated they would have contacted OOH or another NHS service  
This demonstrates a clear **displacement of demand from traditional care settings**, supported by user behaviour and stakeholder feedback.

### Safer antibiotic prescribing

- Antibiotics were supplied in **25% of consultations**
- This is **substantially lower than published GP prescribing rates in comparable settings**, supporting national antimicrobial stewardship objectives.

### High patient satisfaction

Over **9 in 10 service users** rated the service very positively, with strong willingness to use and recommend the service again.

### Strong professional support

The service received **wide support from pharmacists, GPs and OOH providers**, with the majority recommending wider rollout. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of:

- Continued public awareness activity
- Clear referral pathways
- Ongoing monitoring to ensure value and sustainability

### Partners Involved

The pilot was delivered in partnership with:

- **Medicines Optimisation Innovation Centre (MOIC)** – evaluation lead
- **Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG)** – programme oversight
- **43 community pharmacies** across all five Local Commissioning Group areas
- **General Practice and Out of Hours providers**, who referred patients where appropriate and contributed feedback to the evaluation

### Pilot Duration

The Pharmacy First Sore Throat Pilot Service operated for **five months**, from **1 November 2023 to 31 March 2024**.