What does Neighbourhood Health mean for Community Pharmacy practice in Northern Ireland – a policy perspective

Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care (HSC) system is under pressure from rising demand and growing complexity of care. In response, the Neighbourhood Model of Health and Wellbeing is a long-term reform programme that aims to bring care closer to home, strengthen prevention, coordinate services and enable earlier access to support before problems escalate.

Launched in March, the Neighbourhood Model marks a major shift towards community-based care. Over time, health, social care and community partners will work together through 17 Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs) aligned with existing GP Federation footprints. These teams bring together professionals and organisations that have traditionally worked separately, creating partnerships focused on improving health and wellbeing within local communities.

Initially, INTs will focus on supporting older people to remain independent, stay well at home and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions. Over time, more services and support will be delivered within community settings, helping people access the right care in the right place at the right time. Transformation will commence this year supported by a mixed funding approach, including HSC resources to run INTs, innovation and industry funding for service redesign and the transfer of 2% of hospital-based expenditure each year into neighbourhood-delivered services over three years.

Delivery will be driven through five Neighbourhood Moves:

1. Anticipatory and Proactive Community Care, expanding community-based frailty, nursing, pharmacy, mental health and social care services to prevent deterioration and avoidable hospital attendance.
2. Transfer Services to INTs, moving suitable services and resources from hospitals into neighbourhoods.
3. Reduce Outpatient Attendance and Follow-ups, increasing use of virtual consultations, patient-initiated follow-up and community-based care.
4. Redesign Clinical Pathways, enabling GPs, multidisciplinary teams and community pharmacists to provide more complex care closer to home.
5. Improve Discharge and Hospital Flow, strengthening community support to help people return home safely and sooner.

Expected outcomes include fewer avoidable hospital admissions and emergency department attendances; improved patient flow through hospitals; greater access to specialist care within communities; increased independence; and better experience for patients, carers and families. Ultimately, the Neighbourhood Model aims to reduce health inequalities, improve population health and create a more sustainable HSC system.

Community Pharmacy at the Heart of Neighbourhood Health and Wellbeing

Neighbourhood-based care is not new to community pharmacy. Pharmacy teams have long provided accessible, trusted and person-centred care across Northern Ireland through medicines supply, clinical services and expert advice that helps people manage their health closer to home.

The Neighbourhood Model aligns closely with the Community Pharmacy Strategic Plan 2030, which envisages a greater clinical role for community pharmacy in supporting population health, managing demand and improving access to care. Our ongoing work on workforce development, digital transformation, service expansion and legislative reform will further strengthen pharmacy's contribution to neighbourhood priorities.

Importantly, community pharmacy has a seat at the table as a core member of every INT. This creates an unprecedented opportunity for local pharmacy teams to work alongside GPs, Trust services, social care, local government and the voluntary sector to shape services around local needs.

Active participation in INTs will strengthen relationships, raise awareness of community pharmacy's contribution, support the development of integrated referral pathways and ensure that pharmacy expertise informs local priorities and solution design.

Opportunities for Local Community Pharmacy Teams

Community pharmacy is already well placed to support the early priorities of neighbourhood working, particularly for older people. Pharmacy First services, vaccination programmes, medicines optimisation in care homes, support with medicines adherence and access to palliative care medicines all help people keep well and independent within their communities. Established community development approaches including the Building the Community Pharmacy Partnership (BCPP) programme will also support neighbourhood working.

New opportunities are emerging. This year, community pharmacies in Antrim, Ballymena, Craigavon and Portadown will begin to participate in a new neighbourhood Obesity Pathway Innovation Programme (OPIP) funded by Innovate UK, testing novel community-based obesity care pathways. A new neighbourhood proactive care pathway for older people and end of life, funded by Macmillan and developed with community pharmacy input, is also planned.

As neighbourhood working matures, community pharmacy teams will play a growing role in redesigned clinical pathways and the transfer of services from hospital to community settings. Developments such as ePharmacy and independent prescribing will enable pharmacies to deliver increasingly complex clinical services and significantly contribute to the prevention, detection and management of long-term conditions.

Prevention is central to the Neighbourhood Model, creating opportunities to build on successful services such as Living Well, smoking cessation and vaccination, while supporting future developments in new areas including weight management, hypertension detection and cardiovascular health.

Looking Ahead

The Neighbourhood Model represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for community pharmacy. By working as equal partners within INTs and continuing to build capability through workforce, digital and service development, including prescribing, pharmacy teams can play a pivotal role in creating a more integrated, preventative and community-focused health service.

The foundations are now in place. The challenge and opportunity is to ensure community pharmacy is fully engaged in shaping and delivering neighbourhood care for the benefit of patients, communities and the wider HSC system.

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