

Hampton Pharmacy Closures

The current situation

In October and November 2023, two pharmacies closed in Hampton - **Tangley Park** and **Priory Road**. At the same time, the last remaining pharmacy in Hampton, **Station Approach**, was being renovated. The retail section of Station Approach has been removed and it is now a prescription only service. There is limited indoor waiting space with very limited seating. The remaining pharmacy in Hampton is unreachable by foot for many residents, especially for those with mobility issues.

We received a number of complaints from residents who reported waiting outside over the cold autumn and winter months. Concerns were also raised by key senior stakeholders including Councillors, clinicians and health and social care professionals.

We are still in the process of collecting experiences, engaging with stakeholders and visiting the pharmacies; but we have **shared these initial findings with Boots and formally requested a response**. We will publish further updates in due course.

What did we do?

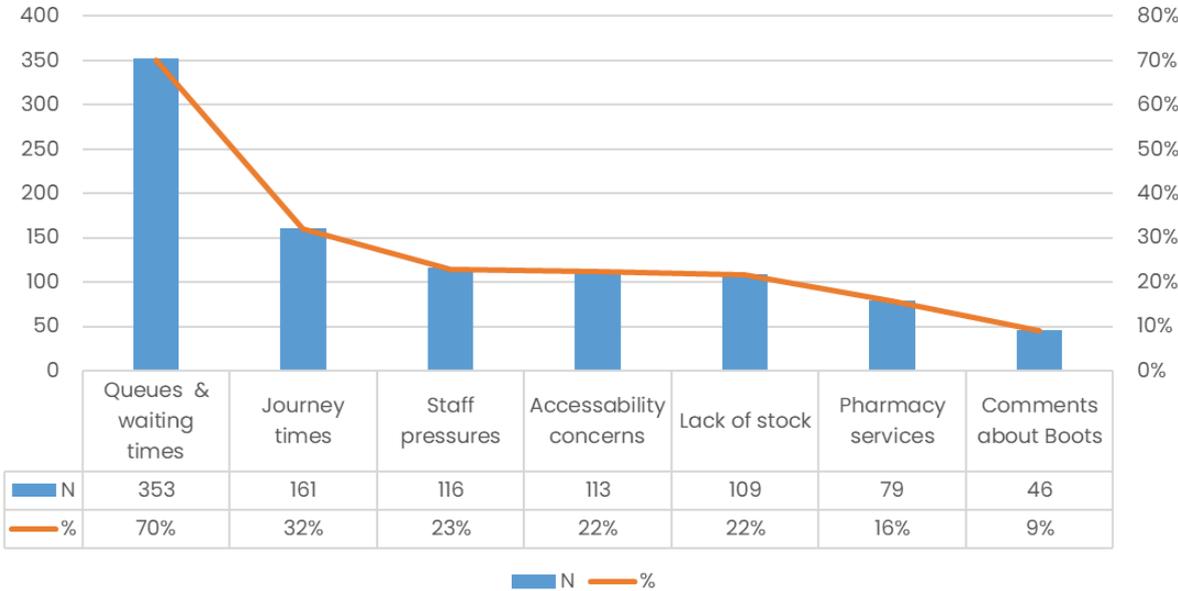
In November 2023, we launched a survey to understand the impact of the two pharmacy closures. Over 600 responses were received within the first week of data collection.

We also visited 5 locations including community centres, GP practices, Boots Station Approach Pharmacy and Boots Bear Road Pharmacy in Hanworth.

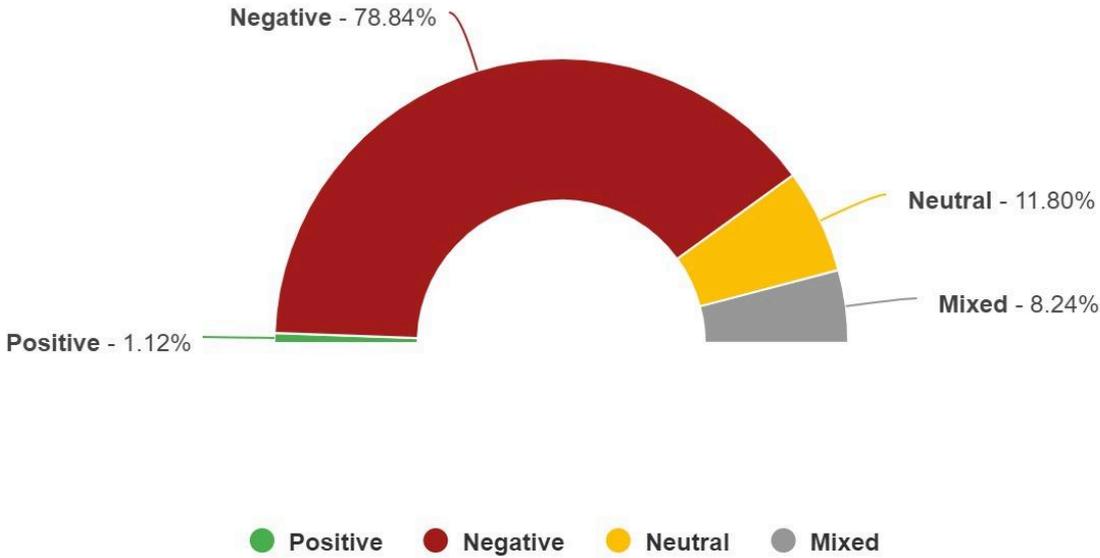
Key findings

The number of respondents using the pharmacy at Station Approach increased from 26% prior to the closures to 62% after the closures. Similarly, the number of respondents using Bear Road pharmacy increased from 2% to 13%. The additional demand has had major implications on waiting times, pharmacy staff workload and prescriptions. The strength of feeling about queuing and waiting times at the pharmacy expressed in responses was overwhelming, clearly indicating that the pharmacy was struggling to cope with demand.

How have the pharmacy closures affected you?



Sentiment analysis shows that respondents provided largely negative feedback:



Thematic analysis

1. Queues & waiting times

- 98% of those using Station Approach Pharmacy stated that waiting times are worse or significantly worse since the closures.
- 79% of users reported their waiting time has increased across all pharmacies since the closures.
- 215 people reported long queues at the Station Approach pharmacy. 190 of these responses referenced the weather and having to wait outside.
- 35% of survey respondents stated they waited 30 minutes to 1 hour for their prescription to be ready upon arriving at the pharmacy since the closures.

Concerns about service users having no choice but to wait outside of a pharmacy cannot be overstated.

“Due to [the] number of people and the size of the Boots, the queues are outside of shop and it's hard to stand for long periods of time. I do not blame the staff I feel they are in an impossible position.”

“Queueing is very difficult for both of us as we are both pensioners with very bad osteoarthritis.”

“I had to wait over an hour outside Boots Station Road in the cold in a queue with a sick child for an urgent prescription as only 2 people could fit into the small customer area at a time during the refit.”

“Very long waits to get repeat medications - I have to request at least 2 weeks in advance to stand any chance of getting them by when needed. Then when I am told they are ready to collect, often medicines are missing and I have to go back again and then wait for an hour or more in the queue. They don't answer the phone when you try to ring to check progress. Only 3 people are allowed in the shop at a time which means a long wait outside in bad weather. No seating if you have to wait which is difficult when like me you cannot stand for long periods.”

“I have gone without medication as I can't stand very long. There are que[ue]s - I have waited over half hour.”

"You have to wait at least half an hour before being seen at the pharmacy. I have terminal cancer and my partner has to go to queue for me and I'm alone the whole time he is waiting and queuing..."

"3 week no tablet's/diabetic."

2. Journey times

- 95% of people rated 'short travel distance from home' as an important factor when choosing a pharmacy.
- 61% stated travel time has increased by at least 15 minutes.
- Before the pharmacy closures, 84% stated they walked to the pharmacy. This has since reduced to 47%. At the same time, the percentage of respondents travelling by car to a pharmacy has more than doubled from 21% to 44%.
- 118 people provided qualitative responses about the increased journey times.

"I used to walk but both options available now are just a little too far, especially if the weather is poor. So I now have three options: 1. by bus (much longer journey time) 2. by car (but parking at any of the local options is difficult or impossible) 3. By post (which is looking to be the better option but doesn't get me out of the house)"

"The only pharmacy remaining open is not on the bus route from Hampton North, requiring a long walk or car drive - and parking is a nightmare."

3. Accessibility concerns

- 113 people provided responses related to accessibility challenges at Station Approach pharmacy. While some people reported that their own accessibility needs weren't met, many expressed concern for others, especially elderly people, parents with young or special needs children and those with mobility needs. In particular, the concerns relate to vulnerable people having to stand and wait for prolonged periods of time in the cold or rain. Social anxiety was also highlighted as a cause for concern. There is also not enough space available for wheelchair users.

"I am 76 yr old and had to stand outside in the cold and rain and I need a walking aid also with the stopping of over the counter remedies stopped I now have to go to the local shops to try and purchase them with no help as to what would work best"

- There was a big car park within walking distance of the previous pharmacy at Tangle Park. This enabled people who relied on cars for transport to access a pharmacy. There is very limited parking available at the remaining Boots Station Approach pharmacy, and it is not easily accessible via public transport. This is particularly important to consider for people with reduced mobility.

"Dreadful ! I can't walk very far so have to travel by car and it so very difficult to find a parking space... when I get to the chemist have to stand and wait outside, last week standing for so long I felt faint."

4. Staff pressures

- 10% of respondents unprompted reported concerns about staff working conditions. They emphasised the empathy they felt towards the Station Approach pharmacy staff, praising them for doing their best to meet the increased demand; however, these concerns also reflect the pressure strain that the pharmacy staff are currently facing.
- However, respondents also reported multiple issues with prescriptions, including not being able to get their prescriptions in a timely manner, the pharmacy being out of stock and pharmacists making mistakes. This was also echoed by staff at GP Surgeries who raised concerns about mistakes being made and patients coming into the surgery blaming them.
- The increased demand also reduces the pharmacy's capacity to speak to patients due to queues.
- 50% of respondents felt that staff attitudes had gotten worse since the closures.

"Whilst in the Station Approach branch the pharmacists got something wrong when trying to find prescriptions every time someone was served - including myself. People were sent away to try other chemists as they didn't have the medication in stock or on order."

“The staff are totally overwhelmed. The prescription is rarely ready on time even if you allow 3 days from when the doctor sends it off so it is hard to get a prescription without at least two visits. The staff also lie about when they get the prescription or delay ordering the medication.”

“Very long queues – often in the rain and bad weather. Staff (NOT their fault) taking longer than normal to find medications or medications not being in stock.”

“I tried station approach. They told me I must [have] collected my son’s essential medication as they couldn’t find it. I hadn’t so they had lost it. Then I tried Bear Road, but the parking is near on impossible and they don’t text when prescription is available. I feel so sorry and concerned for the elderly and vulnerable.”

5. Lack of stock

- 52% stated that medication stock had gotten worse since the closures.
- 50 people reported significant issues with their prescriptions. This includes prescriptions not being available to collect, misplaced and redirected to other pharmacies.
- Staff at GP Surgeries have stated their workload has also increased, as often medication is not in stock and patients call the surgery to request a prescription for a different drug. There are also more calls coming through to GP surgeries regarding the pharmacy issues.

“Awful wait time and queues, very poor stock availability of basic prescription medicines. Sent to Bear Road Boots in Hanworth (required a car trip) by staff in Station Approach as Station Approach had run out of stock of a basic antibiotic for a sick child.”

“Patients come in and complain saying we haven’t signed off our prescriptions, when they have to wait for the pharmacy to process it, pharmacy tells them its our fault too so we get the blame for it.”

“Patients ring up regarding prescriptions asking if its been sent, is it ready etc as the pharmacy isn’t answering. It’s not the pharmacy’s fault.”

6. Pharmacy Services

- Station Approach pharmacy has become a prescription collection only pharmacy. 58 people unprompted raised the issue of being unable to access over the counter medication or supplies anywhere in Hampton. Most people reported having to travel a much further distance via public transport or drive outside of the area to access these.

“Changed to prescription only means I cannot buy essential items such as shampoo, pain relievers or indeed Christmas presents!”

“I have to travel to Kingston now as pharmacy in ashley road is prescriptions only and no other goods can be purchased.”

“More stressful to make prescription enquiries and to ask for general advice regarding health matters seeking over the counter remedies. This was extremely good before closures. No longer able to purchase toiletries, personal hygiene products, plasters, ointments, health remedies.”

- Issues were raised about confidentiality issues when wanting to speak to a pharmacist privately. This can be problematic, especially if people have queries about their prescriptions.

“Wait times [are] very long with queues outside in the cold. I can't talk to pharmacist on the quiet as there's no quiet times. I had a problem with [the] prescription but didn't want the shop to hear.”

“Station approach boots is now very busy. I visit regularly to get my sons prescriptions. Now the queue is very long. I can't squeeze it in a lunch break. I wouldn't want to ask for advice and hold the queue up. Staff are doing their best, but I feel for them because people get impatient.”

7. Comments about Boots

When asked an open question for 'any other comments', 64 respondents reported negativity towards Boots. .

“Boots continue to show shameful disregard to the community, and especially the older or less mobile people who this hurts the most.”

"All in all - I'd given up on Boots generally as I have close friends (living as far as Fleet, GU51) and we all have experienced declining service at Boots."

"I think Boots Management are a disgrace for putting people in this position... It's sheer greed..."

"I would not use Boots Station Rd on principle now - they created a monopoly by buying up other pharmacies and have now let the community down."

A lot of quotes directly related to the inconvenience caused by ongoing renovations in the last remaining pharmacy while the other two closed down.

"The poor pharmacists are rushed off their feet and working in a "building site". A 45 plus minute wait in the cold/winter/rain is unacceptable and the pharmacists cannot be blamed. Poorly and elderly people suffer even more. I'm quite sure the people who made these decisions have only ever seen Hampton in a map. They have no idea how many people live in this area and therefore need a pharmacy. Yes it's called Hampton Village, but more "homework" needed to be done. And Why wait until you've closed the pharmacies before starting building work on the one you leave open?....!!"

Observations from visiting the Pharmacies

We visited Station Approach on 7th December and both Station Approach and Bear Road pharmacy in Hanworth on 19th December.

Station Approach

We recognised a significant improvement between our two visits to Station Approach.

On our first visit, our observations aligned entirely with the feedback we received from stakeholders and the public. The pharmacy was severely challenged: staff were clearly working to the best of their ability but under unsustainable pressure; and patients, whilst supportive of staff in the main, were frustrated by long waits and unfulfilled needs. There was very limited space inside the premises and long queues outside the building. We wrote to Boots following this visit to express our concerns.

At our second visit, we observed 2 additional staff working in the pharmacy. Whilst patient volumes were similar, queues outside, waiting times and delays for prescriptions were significantly reduced. We were informed that the pharmacy was now up to date with prescriptions.

Bear Road, Hanworth

During our visit to Bear Road, we observed significant queues with relatively shorter waiting times than we had observed on our first visit to Station Approach. The environment was calmer, but the reports of people queuing outside of the pharmacy were credible and we were not assured that action had been taken to avoid this occurring in the future.

We observed that the pharmacy is regularly targeted by shoplifters when busy. Staff would not realistically be able to prevent shoplifting when the pharmacy is busy, especially at the current staffing level.

Service users reported long queues and waiting times. The staff also told us there is a large backlog of prescriptions. They are visibly struggling to meet demands and keep up to date with prescription requests.

Conclusions

Both the results of the survey and our own observations align to demonstrate that significant challenges have been caused by the closures of the two pharmacies. Challenges were made worse by a lack of planning and no prior action taken to ensure that the remaining pharmacy was able to continue to provide sufficient service for Hampton residents. While the renovations have been completed at Station Approach and capacity has increased, the changes made demonstrate that the significant difficulties faced by large numbers of people were avoidable.

Our observations at Bear Road demonstrate that the issues have not been resolved for surrounding pharmacies. Action must be taken to address the issues caused by insufficient staffing levels. Our observations also raise concerns regarding changes at Station Approach: what will happen if staff are off sick, if there are interruptions to deliveries or if there are changes of management? There is a need for robust contingency plans.

In the future, Boots must take steps to engage with the local system and service users before future closures to avoid the unacceptable disruption that we have witnessed in Hampton. Where actions can be taken to mitigate against this disruption, these must be taken before closures have occurred.

We have requested confirmation from Boots of the lessons that they have learnt from this and resulting changes to their planning processes. We also request a contingency plan to ensure staffing levels are maintained.

Recommendations:

Based on the data we have collected, along with observations from stakeholders and ourselves, it is clear that changes need to be implemented. We propose the following recommendations.

We are formally recommending that Boots set out an action plan for reducing the disruption at pharmacies in Hampton. We are also requesting that they provide us with that action plan.

Under the Health & Social Care Act 2012, recipients of recommendations and requests for information from a Healthwatch must respond within 20 days to

provide the requested information, explain what they will do to address the issues raised, or, if they will not address them, explain why.

Station Approach

Since our first visit, we recognise that Boots have increased the number of pharmacists and service staff at the Station Approach Pharmacy. This was previously on our list of recommendations. This increased staffing has had a positive impact on the ability of the pharmacy to meet demand and must become business as usual. It has helped to reduce pressures on staff, meet additional demands and reduce the number of people queuing outside pharmacies and waiting times.

Our recommendations for the Station Approach Pharmacy are as follows:

- 1) **Staffing:** Robust contingency and business continuity plans must be put in place to manage any short term changes to staffing (e.g. staff sickness, absence, and attrition) and any interruption to deliveries of pre-prepared prescriptions.
- 2) **Over the counter medication and pharmacy first medications:** While these are beginning to be provided, many items were not available at the time of our last visit. This must be addressed and sufficient stock should be retained.
- 3) **Other pharmacy products:** Supplies of first aid, baby and continence care products were not available. Whilst we recognise that space is limited, providing such items would significantly benefit patients.
- 4) **Text message notification service:** Many residents were unaware of the text message service available at Station Approach. Better advertising and signing more residents up for this service would help to reduce waiting times.
- 5) **Waiting area:** We observed that there were only 3 seats on our first visit and only 2 on our second visit. This is insufficient. There is also limited indoor standing space. Both of these issues need to be addressed to make the pharmacy more accessible.
- 6) **Private consultation rooms:** These, alongside the necessary staff, should be in place to enable pharmacy services, consultations and private discussions. At the staffing level observed at our first visit, this was not realistic.

Bear Road

- 1) **Staffing:** From discussions and our own observations, the pharmacy would benefit from having more staff on duty. We would suggest a front of house member and another dispensing staff member, as they seemed inundated with deliveries. Consideration and continuity plans should be given to support the increase in demand to ensure the staff are well equipped to manage.
- 2) **Temporary support** to catch up on the backlog that builds up when staffing is below minimum levels should be considered.
- 3) **Safety** of staff and patients should be given thought to due to targeting of criminal activity within the premises.