

GCHQ – supporting pharmacy deliveries

As the coronavirus began to spread throughout the country, it became clear to me that we were going to need local action in response. I saw neighbours helping neighbours; new street WhatsApp groups popping up and local community “mutual aid” hubs being quickly established.

One of the things that began to bother me was the sight of lengthening queues outside pharmacies. On the one hand, government advice was to shield vulnerable people and where possible, the rest of us should stay at home. Outside pharmacies, queues were getting longer. I was hearing from friends and neighbours who were sometimes queueing for over an hour, only to find their prescription wasn't ready. I knew that many pharmacies had a delivery service in place, but that some regular drivers were unwell or self-isolating. There was also huge additional pressure on some pharmacies; GP surgeries were no longer dispensing drugs and some patients were anxious to collect prescriptions sooner than usual. I wondered how the pressure could be alleviated.

At the same time, my friend and ex-colleague, Caroline, was having similar thoughts. As the corporate lead for volunteer services at GCHQ, Caroline was looking at a range of community activities that staff working from home might be able to perform. She had already made contact with the person heading the council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the pharmacy front, Caroline had been in discussion with the Local Pharmaceutical Committee (LPC) to determine what help was needed and what protocols should be put in place – to give confidence to pharmacists that volunteers would be responsible and reliable – and to protect the volunteers by ensuring appropriate health advice.

It was at this point that Caroline and I had a conversation about how we could quickly line up a set of delivery teams to help the pharmacies most in need of additional support. Feedback from the LPC indicated that around half a dozen pharmacies would welcome extra driver capacity. I contacted my network of friends to explain that I needed people to set up driver teams. Within 24 hours, we had teams in place allocated to the pharmacies identified by the LPC. We piloted the first team, assigned to St Marks Pharmacy, the following day. Following a successful pilot, we disseminated the protocols to each team and they in turn, agreed a process for collection and delivery of drugs with the resident pharmacist. The team leaders shared feedback and progress with each which proved a very quick and effective learning mechanism.

Currently, we are providing (additional) delivery driver capacity to 13 pharmacies and one care home in Cheltenham.... We are enormously grateful to all those who agreed to help so readily and enthusiastically and are doing great work in support of stretched community pharmacy services. Drivers report that they are enjoying doing something useful, discovering new areas of the town (and the wider county!) and that it is very rewarding and worthwhile work – people are pleased not only to have their medicines delivered, but also for the few minutes of human contact often on an otherwise pretty lonely, necessarily isolated day. In addition, drivers are able to pass on specific concerns – for example a diabetic resident who was unable to get a food delivery order and was getting increasingly worried about running out of items he needed. A quick referral led to help with shopping being identified within half an hour.

Reflecting on this local response, I am hugely encouraged to see the rekindling of a community spirit that was perhaps always there, but had become buried in the busy-ness and pace of our daily lives. My sense is that the desire to help others in need had never really gone away and once the need became clear, I was not surprised to see how keenly people wished to help. My hope for the future is that we can have a big local conversation about how we capture the spirit of goodwill and

neighbourliness of so many people. How can we apply it, longer term, so that we can better support those most vulnerable in our towns and villages as we slowly, over time, become once again, busy people.

Cliff – Team Leader Hawkes Pharmacy, Up Hatherley

In January I gave up my consulting job so I could re-train for some community-based work. I volunteered at a local school and a homeless charity, but within a few weeks that was put on hold as I found myself coordinating the Covid-19 volunteer effort in The Reddings! All it took was a speculative facebook message and within a few days we had more than 20 volunteers and had delivered 800+ flyers to our neighbours. A prediction that we would not get a huge



number of requests but perhaps a few people that needed quite a bit of help has proved to be correct, but we have a steady stream of enquires from residents and their concerned families. Overwhelmingly the reaction has been that people are thankful that we are there if they need help. I sense that some volunteers would like to do more if they could find a way to contribute - the GoodSam initiative has not really kicked in yet and local groups and institutions are just getting on with it.

Subsequently I was asked to recruit and coordinate a small team to help out with deliveries for a local pharmacy. Fortunately, we have a number of people with DBS or other clearances amongst our volunteers and had a rota in place pretty quickly. To be honest the gratitude we have received from patients and the pharmacy is completely disproportionate to the effort, but it's an initiative where it is easy to see that we are making a contribution. There can't be too many jobs where people are so pleased to see you!

Graham: From my first day helping Hawkes Pharmacy...

I had volunteered to help the local community at the start of the COVID lockdown, leafleting houses in our areas to see if we could assist with shopping or prescriptions. There were a few people to help at that time, but with the 13 week lockdown for vulnerable people it became clear more help would be needed over an extended time. I agreed to help my local pharmacy deliver prescriptions to people who could now not get out to pick them up.

The staff at the pharmacy were all well prepared with PPE and had filled a large box with 25+ items that needed delivering that day, including 2 that had to be refrigerated. I looked down the list and recognised some of the roads but not others, starting with the 2 priority items and moving on from there. It took about 2 hours to deliver all the items but it was a warm sunny day and everyone who came to door seemed very happy to see me and receive their medicine in advance of when it was needed. Everyone thanked me for my help and seemed pleased to have some contact (over 2 metres apart and with my mask on!) as well as feeling included in the pharmacy scheme to help them in the next few months.

I will be doing a shift each week for the next month or so and plotting a course at the start should save about half an hour in the future. It really did give me a connection with the people in my area and was a positive in all of the negative news we currently receive.