

Introduction of Statutory Regulation of the Pharmacy Technician Workforce in Northern Ireland

Consultation Document

Foreword from Minister of Health Mr Robin Swann MLA March 2022

This document sets out a proposal for the regulation of pharmacy technicians in Northern Ireland (NI). For many members of the public, pharmacists and pharmacy staff are among the most accessible of all health care workers. We owe them a debt of gratitude as a key and significant part of the health care workforce and rely on their professionalism which has been particularly evident over the course of the pandemic.

Pharmacy technicians work with pharmacists and other pharmacy staff to support the delivery of safe, effective and efficient pharmacy services for patients. Their training and expertise enhances the skill mix that is available within teams which supports better patient care and improved capacity in the provision of pharmacy services.

The increasing scope of practice and range of responsibilities of pharmacy technicians requires a commensurate emphasis on their professional regulation, to ensure that the high regard in which pharmacy teams are held by patients and the public may be not only maintained but enhanced.

This consultation is seeking views on the proposal to regulate pharmacy technicians in NI and is the first step on a journey to bring forward this new healthcare profession.

It will establish pharmacy technicians as a registered and regulated profession in NI and enable the Regulator to strengthen its role in protecting patients and promoting high standards, thereby, enhancing the public's confidence and trust in pharmacy practice.

The steps that we are now taking together, and in the future, will contribute to these important goals and strengthen public confidence in professional regulation.

**Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health**

Introduction

The case for change

1. Across the Health Service in NI, reform is taking place to ensure future demands of the population are met. As part of the wider HSC agenda, the commitment to enhance existing roles, evolving new roles and developing a greater skill mix within multi-disciplinary healthcare teams, will ensure the delivery of high quality, safe and accessible healthcare.
2. The Department of Health (The Department) in Northern Ireland has recognised the important contribution of pharmacy technicians to the pharmacy and wider healthcare workforce. Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Togetherⁱ sets out a 10 year vision for the transformation of the health and social care system. The long term goal of this plan lies in making sure the system has the right people, with the right skills, and the right leadership to deliver safe, high quality services to patients.
3. The Department's Medicines Optimisation Quality Frameworkⁱⁱ aims to support better health outcomes for our population by focusing attention on gaining the best possible outcome from medicines every time they are prescribed, dispensed or administered. One of the ambitions is that medicines optimisation in all settings involves a pharmacist. The benefits for pharmacy and the wider health care team are widely acknowledged. An appropriately trained, skilled and registered pharmacy technician workforce can contribute to the required skill mix and support the pharmacy service transformation in community and hospital pharmacy through the introduction of new models for optimising patients' medicines.

Regulation of pharmacy staff across UK

4. The regulation of healthcare professionals is fully devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Many professions are regulated by regulators with a UK-wide remit, however the regulation of the pharmacy profession is split across two bodies. In England, Scotland and Wales this is the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC); whereas in Northern Ireland (only), regulation is undertaken by the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland (PSNI). While the general policy framework between these

two regulators has much in common, uniquely in the UK, pharmacy technicians in NI are not subject to statutory regulation.

Role of Pharmacy Technicians

5. Pharmacy technicians work closely with pharmacists and have a range of roles, mainly in the community pharmacy and hospital pharmacy settings in NI. Their duties can vary, particularly in the community sector. However generally, in the technical part of their role, they locate, pack, and label prescribed medication that has been clinically checked by a pharmacist and is then reviewed for accuracy before being dispensed to the patient. Pharmacy technicians also support specialist services such as aseptic preparation, vaccination, medicines reconciliation, and provide information and advice to patients on the safe supply and the appropriate use of medicines. They support the delivery of efficient pharmacy services, increasing both capacity and productivity within teams through optimal use of the skill mix of pharmacists and pharmacy staff.
6. The non-regulated status of pharmacy technicians in NI is a long standing issue that has been attracting growing interest among stakeholders in recent years, particularly given the pressures on the pharmacy workforce over the course of the pandemic. There are now substantial reasons for this matter to be addressed. The increasing responsibilities of pharmacists and pharmacy technicians require a corresponding emphasis on their professional regulation to ensure that the high regard in which pharmacy teams are held by patients and the public, may be not only maintained but increased.
7. Pharmacy technicians in NI are not regulated healthcare professionals, unlike their counterparts in Great Britain (GB), who have been regulated by the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) since 2011.

Pharmacy Workforce Review

8. The Department published a review of the Pharmacy Workforce Review (PWR)ⁱⁱⁱ and associated action plan in November 2020. The review analysed the current pharmacy workforce in NI, described the workforce model to support HSC transformation, and made recommendations regarding the commissioning of pharmacy pre-registration and post-registration training.

9. The scope of the review extended across all settings of pharmacy practice: community pharmacy, general practice and hospitals. It concluded that the number of newly qualified pharmacists from Northern Ireland Schools of Pharmacy will not be able to satisfy demand over the next 5-10 years, hence the importance of a highly skilled and developed pharmacy workforce to support and meet the needs of the health and social care service. Actions to address this supply issue will take many years to start seeing benefits, highlighting the need for additional strategies to be deployed to develop the pharmacy workforce. One such strategy is the Pharmacy Futures NI^{iv} Programme, which is run by the Pharmacy Forum NI and aims to attract, recruit and retain more pharmacists to live and work in Northern Ireland, as well as working with further education providers to ensure sufficient training places are available across all pharmacy sectors.
10. It is estimated in the PWR Pharmacy Technician Report^v, that there are approximately 400 pharmacy technicians working in community pharmacy across NI, with a further 507 posts across the HSC Trusts. In recent years, there has been some change in the role, utilisation and training of pharmacy technicians, particularly in HSC Trusts in response to the need to recruit and retain suitably trained staff to support the development of clinical pharmacy services. However, the recent PWR found that their role remains inconsistent across NI, particularly in community settings, and their potential contribution to the delivery of pharmacy services is not fully realised.

Statutory regulation of healthcare professionals

11. Regulation of healthcare professionals is primarily to protect patients and maintain standards and public confidence. It improves protection for patients by ensuring pharmacy technicians are trained to nationally defined qualifications before registration, adhere to a code of practice and standards and that they maintain competence through continuing professional development.
12. It is important that a regulatory framework for pharmacy technicians is introduced in NI as has been the case in GB for the past decade. Regulation provides the potential for the pharmacy technician role to evolve across all settings and thereby make a bigger contribution to service transformation. Pharmacy technicians practising safely

and effectively within their competencies and framework will enhance the safer use of medicines and contribute to overall public health. The PWR specifically noted that development of the technician role has the potential to enable pharmacists to concentrate on increased patient facing engagement, thereby relieving the pressures on other health professionals. It noted that appropriate skills-mix represented by the deployment of technicians could enable pharmacists to practice at the top of their licence, increasing the capacity of the skills available and expansion of the roles resulting in enhanced efficiency and job satisfaction for both roles.

13. It could also make an important contribution towards developing a career pathway for pharmacy technicians. Increased career prospects can be expected to lead to improved retention of pharmacy technicians, particularly in the community sector. This change will therefore contribute to realising the objectives of the Department's PWR report⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ and PWR, Pharmacy Technician Report^(iv).
14. The current legislative framework allows the PSNI to take fitness to practise action against a pharmacist for any errors that may have occurred under their supervision, regardless whether they or another member of the pharmacy support team has made the error. Registration and regulation of the technician workforce would make each pharmacy professional accountable for their own actions and enhance team working across the professions.
15. There are some useful lessons to be learned for NI from the experience in GB when pharmacy technicians were brought under statutory regulation. That process was prolonged, starting with a voluntary register in 2005 leading to the introduction of mandatory registration in 2011. Helpfully, we have the benefit of being able to draw upon the experiences of the GPhC and its predecessor, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB) and anticipate a more concise process and timeframe.
16. In January 2022, the Minister for Health considered and gave his approval to the Department commencing work on the regulation of pharmacy technicians. The first stage, addressed through this consultation with stakeholders, is to assess the broad approach most appropriate to the specific circumstances in NI.

17. The statutory registration and regulation of pharmacy technicians overseen by a regulator would involve a number of steps. Firstly, as outlined above, the Department's public consultation at this stage is seeking views on proposals to regulate the profession. Based on the findings of this consultation, the Department will develop and publish proposed policy on the appropriate level of qualifications required.
18. A consultation on the more detailed proposed changes to legislation will then follow. The Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 is the main statute governing the work of the PSNI. Depending on the outcome of this current consultation, consideration will be given to proposals to amend specific parts of this legislation including Article 5, granting powers to Council to make regulations regarding qualifications, fitness to practise, annotations, continuing professional development (CPD) and fees, as well as Article 6, which provides for statutory registers. In addition, this next consultation will give consideration to proposals relating to the eligibility of pharmacy technicians to have a place on the Regulators Council, Statutory and Scrutiny Committees. The required legislative change and detailed implementation plan will be taken forward under the next NI Assembly mandate.

Timelines

19. The timescale for implementation of these changes will be determined by the availability of financial and legal resources, and ultimately is subject to Ministerial approval. It is envisaged that the statutory registration of pharmacy technicians will commence in 2025.

Summary of the proposals

20. The proposals presented for consideration in this document include:
 - i. *Reasons to establish a statutory register of pharmacy technicians for NI.* Registration of the technician workforce would encourage confidence in the pharmacy technician profession. In addition, registration of pharmacy technicians would assure the public and pharmacists that they are competent in their role and practising to safe standards. It will also help to optimise the skill mix and enable the expansion of clinical and technical roles within pharmacy teams.

- ii. *The statutory register should be maintained by the pharmacy regulator in NI, the Pharmaceutical Society of NI (PSNI).*

The proposal would be to have the same regulator for pharmacy technicians, pharmacists and pharmacy premises in NI. The PSNI currently regulates the Pharmacy profession in NI. Their role is to protect the public and give them assurance that they will receive safe and effective care when using pharmacy services. They set standards for pharmacists and pharmacies to enter and remain on the register. They ask pharmacists for evidence that they are continuing to meet the standards. They act to protect the public and to uphold public confidence in pharmacists if there are concerns about a pharmacy professional or pharmacy on the register.

- iii. *To register as a pharmacy technician in NI, it is proposed applicants must have completed:*

- *qualification(s) as set out by the regulator;*

and

- *a minimum of two years' work-based experience in the UK as defined by the regulator.*

A person wishing to be registered will be required to satisfy the Registrar that they are appropriately qualified. The possible routes to this qualification and the registration process will be consulted on separately. The time to qualification is 2 years in GB. 'Qualifications' in this document means qualifications as listed in the GPhC qualifications frameworks^{vi} and other courses which may be accredited by the Regulator and that deliver the learning outcomes of any Standards for the initial education and training of pharmacy technicians in NI. The proposals for registration may mean that some of the current pharmacy support workforce will need to undertake further study to meet any minimum criteria set for entry to the register of Pharmacy Technician in NI.

Next steps

21. If following this consultation, a decision is made to introduce statutory regulation for pharmacy technicians, further consultation will be required once the drafting of the policy and the necessary legislation had been completed.

Consultation

22. The Department is seeking views on the proposals contained within this consultation document. Respondents are invited to consider the following questions:

Q1. Do you support the proposal to establish a statutory Register of pharmacy technicians for NI? If you disagree please explain why.

Q2. Do you agree that the statutory register for pharmacy technicians should be maintained by the regulator for pharmacists and pharmacy premises in NI, the Pharmaceutical Society of NI (PSNI)? If you disagree please explain why.

Q3. Do you agree with the proposal that to enable a pharmacy technician to be registered in NI, they must have completed one of the recognised competency-based qualifications or a combined competency qualification accredited by the regulator. If you disagree please explain why.

Q4. Are there any considerations and evidence that you think the Department should take into account when assessing the extent of the likely impact of the policy on groups of people within each of the Section 75 categories of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 or The Human Rights Act 1998 arising as a result of the proposed changes?

Q5. Are the proposed changes likely to have an adverse impact on rural areas? If yes, please provide comment on how these adverse impacts could be reduced or alleviated.

23. You can respond online by accessing the Northern Ireland Government Citizen Space website and completing the online survey there. A link to the Citizen Space website

can be found on; [Introduction of Statutory Regulation of the Pharmacy Technician Workforce in Northern Ireland - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)

24. You may also complete a response questionnaire accompanying this consultation which is available on the Department's website at: www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations

If completing a hard copy questionnaire, please respond to:

Medicines Policy Branch
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SQ
or by e-mail to: pharmacyconsultations@health-ni.gov.uk

25. The closing date for responses to the consultation is midnight **16th May 2022**. Responses received after this date will only be considered in exceptional circumstances and with prior agreement from the Department. It is the intention that a summary of responses to the consultation will be published on the Department's website.
26. Additional copies of the consultation document can be obtained by writing or e-mailing the Department at the address above or by telephoning 028 90520205. Alternatively, the consultation document and associated documentation can be downloaded from the Department's website as outlined above. Copies of the consultation documents can also be made available in alternative formats on request.

Equality and Human Rights considerations

27. The proposal to commence a statutory register of pharmacy technicians in NI has been subject to an interim equality impact screening in line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The screening document is available alongside this consultation on the Department's website.
28. At this stage, no evidence has been identified to show that the policy would have a significant differential impact on any of the Section 75 groups. It would be the intention, however, to rescreen the policy and consideration given as to whether a full Equality

Impact Assessment (EQIA) is required once this public consultation has been completed.

Rural Impact

29. Due regard has been considered in the development of these proposals for those living in rural communities and a screening document accompanies this consultation. An interim Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been undertaken and the screening document is available alongside this consultation on the Department's website.

Regulatory Impact

30. A Regulatory Impact Assessment screening exercise has been carried out and the Department considers that a full regulatory impact assessment is not appropriate. The proposals may result in minor costs associated with training and potential annual registration fees to join the register. However, these are considered as justifiable in terms of overall benefit for individuals, patient safety and businesses.

Freedom of Information

31. Please see the attached Appendix 1 to the consultation response document, concerning the confidentiality of responses to consultations.

Consultation Privacy Notice

32. Please see the attached Appendix 2 to the consultation response document, concerning consultation privacy notice.

Responding to this consultation

Responses to be forwarded by midnight on **16th May 2022** as detailed in paragraphs 23 and 24 above. Due to the Covid 19 situation please use citizen space or email if possible, as postal mail will only be monitored periodically.

References

ⁱ Department of Health NI. (2016) Health and Wellbeing 2026 - Delivering Together. Available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-and-wellbeing-2026-delivering-together>

ⁱⁱ Department of Health NI (2016) Medicines Optimisation Quality Framework Available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-medicines-optimisation-quality-framework>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Health NI (2020) Pharmacy Workforce Review. Available at: [Pharmacy Workforce Review 2020 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

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- ^{iv} Pharmacy Forum NI (2020) Pharmacy futures NI. Available at: [Pharmacy Futures NI - Home](#)
- ^v Department of Health NI (2020) Pharmacy Workforce Review. Pharmacy Technician Report. Available at: [doh-pharmacy-review-technician-report.pdf \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)
- ^{vi} General Pharmaceutical Council (2017). Standards for the initial education and training of pharmacy technicians. Available at: https://www.pharmacyregulation.org/sites/default/files/standards_for_the_initial_education_and_training_of_pharmacy_technicians_october_2017.pdf