



**Annual Report
2023-2024**

The value of listening



Meet the Team



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"Over the last year, local Healthwatch have shown what happens when people speak up about their care, and services listen. They are helping the NHS unlock the power of people's views and experiences, especially those facing the most serious health inequalities."

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive at Healthwatch England



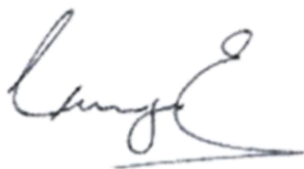
Message from our Chair

Another year has passed, and it is a privilege for me once again to report that the team and volunteers have been very busy out and about across County Durham.

A few words at the beginning of this Annual Report allows me to briefly again thank the team and volunteers on behalf of the Board and our communities for the work undertaken by Healthwatch – a small but dedicated number of people working on behalf of our community.

This year, work has been undertaken linked to some ICB initiatives as well as our workplan, and this report will give you an indication of just some of that work. We have been able to ‘reach out’ into the community, particularly in rural areas working with farming communities, and the d/Deaf community. The team have carried out significant work across mental health and learning difficulties, and in addition we have been able to reach out to younger people. This report gives you far more detail than could be included here.

I am grateful to the team, volunteers and Board for the work they undertake on behalf of County Durham residents, and I commend the report to you.



Chris Cunnington-Shore
Healthwatch County Durham Chair



“Healthwatch sits at the heart of our communities and represents the views of our people as an independent voice. We have supported the Integrated Care System developments with our Healthwatch Network, and of course the local authority and NHS as they continue to evolve to meet the challenges which we all continue to face. ”

Chris Cunnington-Shore, Healthwatch County Durham Chair



About us

Healthwatch County Durham is your local independent health and social care champion.

We make sure NHS and social care leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

Our vision

A world where we can all get the health and care we need.



Our mission

To make sure people's experiences help make health and care better.



Our values are:

- **Listening** to people and making sure their voices are heard.
- **Including** everyone in the conversation – especially those who don't always have their voice heard.
- **Analysing** different people's experiences to learn how to improve care.
- **Acting** on feedback and driving change.
- **Partnering** with care providers, Government, and the voluntary sector – serving as the public's independent advocate.



Year in review

Reaching out:

277 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

311 people came to us for clear advice and information about topics such as mental health and accessing care services.

1210 people helped us gather information by completing surveys we published.

4646 people follow us across our social media channels to keep up to date with health and social care information.



Making a difference to care:

We published

9 reports

about the improvements people would like to see in health and social care services.

These included reports about hospital discharge, our Enter & View visits, and the experiences of the d/Deaf community (including people who are deaf from birth and those with hearing loss) when accessing GP led services.



Health and social care that works for you:

We're lucky to have

23 outstanding volunteers who gave up **231 days** of their time to make care better for our community.

We currently employ

**6 (5 fte) permanent staff and
2 (1.1 fte) temporary staff**

who help us carry out our work.

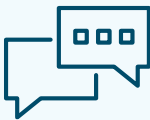





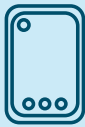

We're funded by our local authority.
In 2023 - 24 we received

£183,704

which is the same as the previous year.



How we've made a difference this year

Spring	 <p>We drew attention to the voice of young people using mental health services, with the public launch of our Video Diaries.</p>	 <p>We employed an Engagement & Inclusion Lead so we could be better at hearing from all our diverse communities.</p>
Summer	 <p>We reached out to those people struggling with the cost of living crisis by helping out at The Bread & Butter Thing across the county, and hearing about people's health care experiences.</p>	 <p>We began a new programme of Enter & View visits, focused on GP Practices – we listened to patient's views and made recommendations for improvements in our published reports.</p>
Autumn	 <p>We raised awareness of the role of Healthwatch at our biggest ever event. Wolsingham Show attracts over 30,000 visitors, and we were there to listen to feedback and advise about local services.</p>	 <p>We visited 'Welcome Spaces' across the county to talk to people about their experiences of health & social care, gathering feedback and helping individuals with specific enquiries.</p>
Winter	 <p>We employed a Youth Engagement Lead to make sure we include the voice of younger people in our work – she started by making contact with youth organisations and groups in our area.</p>	 <p>We raised an issue about how safeguarding alerts are responded to, and initiated discussions about how this could be improved to better protect our vulnerable residents.</p>

Your voice heard at a wider level

We collaborate with other Healthwatch to ensure the experiences of people in County Durham influence decisions made about services at North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care System (ICS) level.

This year we've worked with Healthwatch across the North East & North Cumbria to achieve:

A collaborative network of Local Healthwatch



All 14 Local Healthwatch were involved in the formation of a network which enables us to work together, both on a regional and an area basis. Through funding from the Integrated Care Board we appointed co-ordinators to facilitate engagement projects and the gathering of region-wide public feedback; our Board representative ensures that the public voice is heard at ICS level, influencing decision making across the whole of the North East and North Cumbria.

Understanding the public view of Dentistry services

At the end of 2023-24, the Healthwatch Network was commissioned to carry out public engagement about dentistry, to help inform the Integrated Care Board's decisions around improvements to services. Healthwatch carried out extensive public engagement across the region, including surveys and mystery shopper exercises – we gathered over 3500 responses to our general survey alone. Our list of recommendations formed part of our report to the ICB earlier this year.



Involvement Strategy review



The NENC Integrated Care Board wanted to review their 'Communities and People Involvement and Engagement Framework 2022-23' a year on from publication. The Healthwatch Network was commissioned to speak to seldom heard groups across the region to get their views on what an Involvement Strategy should include. We gathered valuable insight and made recommendations to the ICB about improvements to their strategy and public engagement processes.

Making health research more relevant

In February 2024, the Healthwatch Network was asked to support the ICB and partners in a Be Part Of Research Project (known as REN 3). Healthwatch were funded to speak to local under-represented groups to understand the level of interest in, and barriers to, taking part in NHS and health research. Our feedback will help the Research Engagement Network encourage more diverse participation, so their research better reflects our communities.





Listening to your experiences

Services can't make improvements without hearing your views. That's why listening to feedback from all areas of the community is always a priority. This allows us to understand the full picture, and feed this back to services and help them improve.

Many people don't feel comfortable speaking directly to services, but our independent status means that we can be trusted to represent the public voice.

Improving GP access for autistic people

We heard from many autistic people about the challenges they face when trying to make an appointment, or when attending appointments, at their GP practice.

We spoke to autistic individuals, support organisations and decision makers to find out what the issues were, and where improvements could be made. Together with a group of autistic individuals, we co-created 2 simple guidance sheets for use in GP Practices – one for the reception area and one for consultation rooms. The guidance covers the most common themes that were raised by autistic people during our conversations.

100% of the autistic people we spoke to told us they have experienced some challenge or difficulty when booking or attending a GP appointment.

"I am really glad I was able to contribute to this [work] and I hope it makes a real difference for autistic people accessing healthcare."

Participant at the Dept. of Psychology, Durham University

Who listened?

We shared the documents and got agreement of its use from the following bodies:

- NENC ICB Mental Health Parity of Esteem Group
- NENC ICB Learning Disability Network
- NHS England Training & Education Directorate (North East & North Yorkshire region)
- Reasonable Adjustments Digital Flag Project Team
- Co Durham & Tees Valley Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Autism Partnership
- Primary Care Training Hub

What happened as a result?

- The guidance is endorsed by the Reasonable Adjustments Digital Flag (RADF) and carries dual branding – being rolled out alongside the RADF, it will provide an easy reference point when clinicians see the RADF on patient records.
- The guidance will be included in the training for GPs and practice staff by the NHS Training & Education Directorate and the Primary Care Training Hub.
- The guidance has also been published on the following websites:
 - Primary Care Training Hub Team
 - Co Durham & Tees Valley Mental Health, Learning Disabilities and Autism Partnership networks
 - Prevention of Adult Not Brought website

Influencing improvements in local nursing homes

Our Enter & View programme in 2019 focused on care homes. Due to the pandemic, we weren't able to follow up on our recommendations as soon as we would like, but during 2023 we were able to find out what impact our visits had. These are some examples of improvements made as a result of Healthwatch speaking to residents, families and staff at some of those nursing homes.

We heard:	Improvements made:
<p>Residents really valued the activity co-ordinators.</p> <p>Residents would like to get out more, and would like to see more services brought into the home for those who couldn't get out.</p>	<p>There are now more activity co-ordinator staff, meaning more work can be done in this area.</p> <p>More outings now take place, so residents get to the coast, local villages, and can go for meals and to coffee shops.</p> <p>Online activities and shopping have also been introduced.</p>
<p>Residents told us they liked the homely feel created by having their own personal things around them.</p> <p>Residents also enjoyed having pets allowed into the home.</p>	<p>Since our visit, the home has put in place an ongoing decorating plan, and now asks residents to choose their own colours and decoration.</p> <p>The home has also continued to allow dogs to be brought in by residents' relatives.</p>
<p>Residents appreciated it when staff took the time to meet their personal preferences, and could encourage residents to be more independent.</p>	<p>Since our visit the home increased staffing levels to have 9 staff on duty at all times throughout the day, which allows more time to interact with and encourage residents.</p>
<p>Residents told us that sometimes their food might not be hot enough if eating in their rooms.</p>	<p>The home now uses food covers to ensure all food is served at the right temperature. They have also introduced a more varied menu, based on resident's preferences.</p>



Recognising personal needs and preferences came across as very important to residents, and people were pleased when changes were made to reflect this.

“You can have your breakfast at a different time, as you wish!”

Resident – Devonshire House Nursing Home

Three ways we have made a difference to our communities

Healthwatch County Durham were able to help a Middle Eastern mother receive an explanation about treatment given to her son . The mother speaks some English but felt that due to the language barrier, she hadn't been given enough information to understand what was wrong with her son and how to deal with it.

We contacted the Patient Experience Team concerned and an investigation resulted in the woman receiving a written response, and an apology, in Arabic.

A "wonderful" response, she said, that was "appreciated".

This has raised the hospital's awareness of effective communication, and the importance of making sure patients understand the information they are given.



We worked with professionals and the general public to produce an accessibility poster for people with communication needs. We wanted to empower people by explaining the rights we all have when using health and care services, and highlighting what we should expect from services.



To improve our own communication, we have also added an accessibility button to our website. This allows people to change the size of the text, change the contrast, hide images and more.

This small button on the website could make a big difference to those trying to access information.

We know how important it is that people can find information easily, including who to go to if they have a concern about their care.

Healthwatch County Durham volunteers reviewed GP practice websites and out of hours telephone information. We looked at whether information was up to date, easy to understand, and whether information was given about how to raise a concern – including links to Healthwatch County Durham.

We shared the findings with the Primary Care team, who encouraged practices to update their information. This resulted in more practices making the correct information available.

This is something we will continue to review, and we will also be looking at how those details are made more accessible, so that everybody has correct, up to date information.





Hearing from all communities

Over the past year, we have worked hard to make sure we hear from everyone within our local area. It is important to reach out to the communities we hear from less frequently to gather their feedback. We want to make sure their voice is heard, and that services are meeting their needs.

This year we have reached different communities by:

- Working in our rural areas to talk to farmers, their families and farming communities about the challenges they face when they need services.
- Basing one of our staff in East Durham, and working in partnership with support organisations to reach our coastal communities and areas facing higher levels of poverty.
- Visiting support groups across the county, speaking to under-represented groups, including veterans, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ groups, people with disabilities and people with mental health issues.

Helping people from Ukraine understand the NHS

Ukrainians adapting to life in Durham City told us they didn't understand how the NHS worked as it was different to the Ukrainian health system.

To help, we produced a one-page summary explaining how a GP practice operates. We shared this with on-line Ukrainian communities, Durham County Council's "Homes for Ukraine" scheme, and NHS Social Prescribing Link Workers. We made sure a Ukrainian version of the document was made available, and we have had positive feedback that this has helped Ukrainian guests feel more confident in accessing health care.

We also helped to promote and explain the process of taking UK health records back to Ukraine, offering reassurance that those records will not be lost when people return to their homes.

"We will now make sure this is in every pack for our guests on arrival. Support Officers can now take [this] out on visits as we know health appointments have been an issue for our guests."

Natalie – Senior Refugee Resettlement Officer, Durham County Council

Highlighting the barriers to accessing GP appointments for the d/Deaf community

We have established links with the d/Deaf community and organisations providing support, and we spoke to people about their experiences of accessing GP appointments. In November 2023 we published a report of our findings and our recommendations for improvement, which included:

- Deaf awareness training for all GP Practice staff
- A flag on the records of d/Deaf patients to outline preferred communication methods
- More communication options to be used, such as text, email or video calls
- Investment in basic sign language training for GP Practice staff
- Interpreters to be booked and confirmed with the patient when necessary

Our research showed that although GP practices thought they were offering an accessible service, in most cases the experience of d/Deaf patients was very different.

We reminded GP Practices of their responsibilities under the Accessible Information Standard, and highlighted where patient's individual needs are not being met.

We will be following up on our recommendations in 2024 to see what improvements have been made.

As well as raising awareness of the challenges faced by d/Deaf patients, we also used their experiences to co-produce our new Accessible Information poster.



Advice and information

Healthwatch is here for the residents of County Durham. We provide advice and information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. Whether you need to find out about services in the area, understand how to make a complaint, or get help to communicate with services – our support is free, independent and confidential.

This year we've helped people by:

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust about local services and resources
- Helping people find and access the services they need
- Promoting health related information and taking part in national health campaigns
- Helping people to resolve problems or challenges they come up against when using services – including liaising with the service or organisation, signposting to the Independent Advocacy service, and helping people to understand information they are given.

Appointment system review for local Neurology Department

Reducing the risk of unnecessary delays

Thanks to the efforts of Healthwatch County Durham, University Hospital of North Durham Neurology Department have reviewed their appointments booking procedure to reduce the risk of unnecessary delays for appointments and treatment.

Healthwatch County Durham were contacted by a patient who had been waiting over 2 years for a medication review appointment at the Neurology Department, after numerous cancellations. The individual told us that the delays had severely impacted their mental health.

We contacted the department to raise the concerns and to understand what had caused the repeated cancellations.

The patient received an apology from the department, who agreed that the situation was unsatisfactory, and offered the patient the next available cancellation appointment. They also agreed to review their appointments procedure to improve the service and ensure the risk of repeated cancellations and delays was minimised.

Resolving patient record errors

We were contacted by a local resident after she received an appointment for her young son – despite being registered at a County Durham practice, this appointment was for a GP in Hull.

When her own practice said they were unable to help, she spoke to the practice in Hull and discovered that her son's records had apparently been merged with another patient of the same name and date of birth in Hull – they referred her back to her own GP, which is when she contacted Healthwatch, as she was unsure who should be helping her.

We spoke to the Primary Care Support Team at NHS England, who explained that there is a process in place for this type of error. We were then able to advise the client's GP practice of the process, which they followed to resolve the issue and updated the client.

- **The situation was resolved for the client, and a flag was put on her son's account to ensure the error could not be repeated.**
- **Thanks to the intervention of Healthwatch, the GP practice now has a better understanding of how to resolve this type of error.**





Volunteering

We are supported by a team of amazing volunteers who are at the heart of what we do. Thanks to their efforts in the community, we're able to understand what is working and what needs improving, carry out more research, and hear the views of more people.

This year our volunteers:

- Visited public events to promote their local Healthwatch and what we have to offer
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views
- Carried out Enter and View visits at local services to help them improve
- Attended local forums and community groups to hear about what's important to people
- Carried out research and information gathering online and over the phone
- Took part in research across the North East and North Cumbria region



"I really enjoy being part of the 'Enter & View' team – meeting new people that I would never meet normally. Listening to them talking about their likes and dislikes, and what they think can be improved or what they like most at the premises being visited. I certainly feel supported in doing this work, especially through meeting staff and other volunteers regularly to talk about the project. I chose to volunteer with Healthwatch specifically so that we have a chance to complement or suggest how to improve services, in the NHS and care. I think the work carried out by Healthwatch through volunteers and staff has made a difference to a lot of people and services."



Paul –
Healthwatch County
Durham volunteer



"I most enjoy being able to listen and understand other people's perspective of a service. To be aware of issues people may face that go unnoticed. I decided Healthwatch was a great place for me to volunteer because it will give me a great insight into a wide range of health care settings, this will also help me better understand what type of role suits me best for a career. I feel like I will also gain from meeting different people and feeling part of a team. I believe I can contribute to making a positive impact for the people living in Durham, by listening to them and reporting what issues they have, especially where they feel their concerns aren't going to be heard".



Eve –
Healthwatch County
Durham volunteer

Do you feel inspired?



We are always on the lookout for new volunteers – if you're interested in finding out more, please get in touch with our Volunteer Support Officer.

 www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk

 07756 654223

 claire.sisterson@pcp.uk.net



Enter and view

Healthwatch have a legal power to visit health and social care services and see them in action. We speak to service users, families, carers and staff to identify what is working well and where services could be improved.

This year, we carried out 8 Enter and View visits.

Location	Reason for visit	What we did
Meadowfield Surgery	<p>GP practices were chosen as a focus area for Enter & View visits, because GP access was one of the main areas of public feedback.</p> <p>6 GP practices were originally selected, based on those who responded to an open offer of an Enter & View visit and geographical spread.</p>	<p>For all Enter & View visits, a report is published with details of the visit, feedback received from the people we spoke to, and a list of recommendations.</p> <p>You can read these reports on our website at www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk</p> <p>We will follow up on these recommendations during 2024 – 25.</p>
Ushaw Moor Surgery		
Tow Law Surgery		
Great Lumley Surgery		
Bridge End Surgery		
Marlborough Surgery		
Sacriston Medical Centre	Requested by Practice Manager	
Merrick House, Easington	Negative feedback from service users	

The way we work

Involvement of volunteers and lay people in our governance and decision-making

Our current Healthwatch Board consists of 6 members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny of our activities. Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2023/24, the Board met 6 times and made decisions on matters such as the recruitment of a Youth Engagement Lead to help us reach out to younger people, our focus for the Enter & View programme, and how to use the resources available to reach as many people as possible.

Our work priorities are decided based on common areas of public feedback, where concerns have been raised.

Methods and systems used across the year to obtain people's experiences

We use a variety of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible can provide us with insight into their experience of using services. During 2023/24, we have been available by phone, text and email, provided a 'Contact us' form on our website and through social media. We also attended a wide range of meetings, community groups and forums across the county.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We will publish it on our website, it is sent to a list of stakeholders, and the link is shared on our social media channels. On request, we can provide printed copies and versions in alternate languages.

Responses to recommendations

We provided one of our reports to 6 participating providers – none of the 6 responded to the report or recommendations. We had 6 providers who exceeded the formal deadline given to respond to an Enter & View report and recommendations. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so no resulting reviews or investigations.

Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences that have been shared with us.

In our local authority area, we take information to Durham County Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committees for Adults Wellbeing & Health, and for Children & Young People; we attend the Safeguarding Assurance Group and sit on Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategic Partnership Groups.

We take insight and experiences to decision-makers in the North East and North Cumbria. As part of a network of 14 Local Healthwatch, we share information and service user feedback with the Integrated Care Board.

We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level, and contribute local research to national projects.



Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch County Durham is represented on the County Durham Health and Wellbeing Board by Chris Cunnington-Shore, our Chair. During 2023/24 our representative effectively carried out this role by attending Health and Wellbeing Board meetings, providing an annual update on the work of Healthwatch County Durham and responding to items under consideration by the committee.

Healthwatch County Durham is represented on the Central Integrated Care Partnership by Gail McGee, Central Area Co-Ordinator for the Healthwatch Network, and at the North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board by Christopher Akers-Belcher, Regional Co-Ordinator for the Healthwatch Network.

Finance

To carry out our work we receive funding from our local authority under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Our income and expenditure

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£183,704	Staff costs (salary, travel, expenses)	£158,286
Additional income	£15,579	Non-staff expenditure	£6667
Brought forward	£35,817	Office costs and management fees	£51,115
Total income	£235,100	Total expenditure	£216,068

Additional income is broken down by:

- £2,865 received from Healthwatch England - £2500 for work on a Pharmacy Research project and £365 for reimbursement of conference costs.
- £2,366 received from Tees, Esk & Wear Valleys NHS Trust for an interim evaluation of Community Mental Health Transformation.
- £2000 received from North Tees & Hartlepool and South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trusts for public engagement about the Group Model (taking place in 2024-25).
- £240 received from NHS England for research into digital screen displays in pharmacies.
- ICB funding, detailed below:

ICB funding

Healthwatch across North East & North Cumbria also receive funding from our Integrated Care Board (ICB) to support new areas of collaborative work at this level. Healthwatch County Durham received:

Purpose of ICB funding	Amount
Involvement in the Healthwatch Network for NENC (Nov 2023 – March 2024)	£1875
Dentistry engagement and production of region-wide report	£4783
Public engagement and focus groups (Waiting Well; Involvement Strategy; Research Engagement Network)	£1450

Next steps

Ongoing work from 2023 – 2024

Project	Progress so far
We raised concerns with our local Mental Health NHS Trust about negative public feedback we received relating to some of their services.	We now have a regular forum to share public feedback and raise issues, and we will make this a priority area to continue into 2024-25, including using our Enter & View programme.
Our Youth Engagement Lead spoke to young people in different settings across the county.	We have a new 'Youth Health' group to take forward into 2024-25, so we can focus on what health topics are important to younger people.
We began work on a 'Farming Outreach' initiative, to address the barriers faced by farming communities when needing health care.	We enlisted support from other bodies, including Public Health, NHS and support organisations such as UTASS. Public engagement is underway and the work will continue into 2024-25.

New work plan priorities for 2024 – 2025

Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society, including people in the most deprived areas, and those we hear from less often, so that those in power hear their views and experiences.

Our top priorities for the next year are:

- 1. Mental Health**
- 2. Pharmacy**
- 3. Maternity (miscarriage support)**
- 4. Patient Transport**

In addition to our work plan priorities, we will also focus on young people – we will be talking to people aged 14 – 24 to get their views on our priorities, and hear their experiences of health & social care services.

We will also continue our focus on reaching out to some of the more excluded groups in our communities – including the farming community and people with substance addiction issues.

We will be following up on recommendations made in our reports, to find out whether improvements have been made following your feedback, and if not, why not. We will continue to report our findings and outcomes on our website, so you know the impact that speaking to us has had.



Statutory statements

Healthwatch County Durham, Whitfield House, St John's Road,
Meadowfield Industrial Estate, Durham, DH7 8XL.

The organisation currently holding the Healthwatch contract is:

Pioneering Care Partnership, Pioneering Care Centre, Carer's Way,
Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, DL5 4SF

Registered Charity No. 1067888

Healthwatch County Durham uses the Healthwatch Trademark
when undertaking our statutory activities as covered by
the licence agreement.


Thank you

The team at Healthwatch County Durham would like to thank all the partners and organisations who work with us to improve services in our area.

We would also especially like to thank the members of the public who contact us with feedback – the voice of local people is crucial to bringing about positive change, and every bit of information we hear helps us to influence improvements.

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**Committed
to quality**

We are committed to the quality of our information. Every three years we perform an in depth audit so that we can be certain of this.

