

Together

healthwatch
Darlington

**we're making health
and social care better**

Annual Report 2022–23



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"In the last ten years, the health and social care landscape has changed dramatically, but the dedication of local Healthwatch hasn't. Your local Healthwatch has worked tirelessly to make sure the views of local people are heard, and NHS and social care leaders use your feedback to make care better."

Louise Ansari, Healthwatch National Director

Message from our Chair

Welcome to our annual report for 2022 to 2023. Last year I said that it was a challenging year and we have still had our challenges, but these are different. The pandemic hasn't completely gone away, and people are still getting Covid, but the impact on the hospital service and on society in general is different.

During 2022/23 we published our report on the pandemic. One of the things that we discovered and highlighted in the report is that the pandemic accelerated the move to online working and digital working.

We recognised that this could lead to people being left behind because of what has come to be called 'digital exclusion'. Also, of course, the pandemic has caused persistent symptoms in some people – Long Covid – and has also impacted on mental health.



Robert Upshall
Healthwatch
Darlington Chair

These are new challenges and there has been an adverse effect on the ability of Secondary care to deal with people waiting for treatment.

Another focus of our attention has been dentistry and was the subject of a report published by us in February 2022, but the problems continue. The current situation in dentistry isn't satisfactory for either patients or dentists. Last year the Integrated Care Board that covers all the North East and North Cumbria for the NHS became a statutory body which means it now has some teeth. It has been highlighted by Healthwatch throughout our region that there is a serious problem with dentistry. We will continue to monitor any measures that might bring some improvements in the patient experience of dentistry.

Healthwatch Darlington has been working increasingly closely with other Healthwatch to mirror the developments in the new way that the NHS is being administered in our region. Christopher Akers-Belcher, who is the coordinator for the 14 Healthwatch in our region, hosted an event celebrating 10 years of Healthwatch and this is referred to at length in our report.

Finances have always been a struggle for us, and they continue to be so, but as a Board we have been very careful in how we spend the charity's money and consequently we believe that we have kept Healthwatch Darlington on a sustainable footing.

As well as continuing to do the 'bread and butter' work of collecting public feedback; influencing the decision makers of local health and care services; and signposting people towards the services that are most likely to meet their need, we are also carrying out project work both for the Integrated Care Board and other health and social care organisations. This ensures they are more responsive and equitable to the people of Darlington.

About us

Healthwatch Darlington is your local health and social care champion.

We make sure NHS 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.

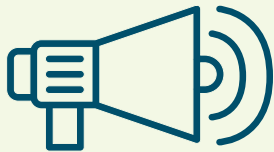


Our values are:

- **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



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

523 people came to us for clear advice and information about topics such as mental health and the cost-of-living crisis.

18,500 people opened and read our weekly e-newsletter

168,000 people saw our posts on our Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages.

Making a difference to care

We published

2 reports

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

Our most popular report was

Pandemic Experiences

which highlighted the experiences of local people at each stage of the COVID-19 pandemic



Health and care that works for you



We're lucky to have

16

outstanding volunteers who gave up 65 days to make care better for our community.

We're funded by our local authority. In 2022-23 we received

£76,634

which is the same as the previous year.

We currently employ

4 staff

who help us carry out our work.

How we've made a difference this year

Spring



From running information stands to social media posts, our volunteers helped us provide local communities with essential information.



We gathered your experiences of COVID-19 which highlighted the importance of community centered care.

Summer



Our Sensory Impairment Report highlighted the importance of providing Accessible Information to patients and carers



Our local information stands throughout Darlington helped us understand what is important to you in your health and care needs.

Autumn



Our ongoing partnership working with the Integrated Care Partnership is providing a solid basis to improve the wellbeing of our local communities.



We started working with our Tees Valley Healthwatch colleagues to refresh our Youthwatch project across the region.

Winter



We shared a survey to help us understand local experiences of pharmacy services. 31% of participants told us how the prescription collection service was not meeting their needs.



Due to NHS winter pressures, we encouraged local people to share their experiences of care as part of the 'Because We All Care' joint campaign run by Healthwatch and the Care Quality Commission.

10 years of improving care

This year marks a special milestone for Healthwatch. Over the last ten years, people have shared their experiences, good and bad, to help improve health and social care. A big thank you to all our Healthwatch Heroes that have stepped up and inspired change. Here are a few of our highlights:

How have we made care better, together?

Vaccination programme

Our pandemic experiences report based on public feedback, provided our local Integrated Care Board with valuable insights to plan for Phase 5 of the COVID vaccination programme.



Transforming mental health services

We helped our local mental health hospital trust understand the needs of our communities and commit to working collaboratively to overcome barriers faced in accessing mental health support.



NHS Long Term Plan

Healthwatch Darlington coordinated feedback across the 13 northern local Healthwatch teams. One of the key findings in Darlington was the importance for carers to be supported, involved and listened to.



Sharing your health records

Healthwatch Darlington coordinated feedback from 13 local Healthwatch concerning the Great North Care Record. This regional feedback helped decision makers understand what is important to those whose data would be shared.



Care Homes

We shared recommendations from our visits to local Care Homes and received positive responses from those who run and commission them.



10 years of improving care

On Wednesday 8th March 2023 fourteen local Healthwatch from across the North East & North Cumbria (NENC) came together to celebrate its 10th birthday at the Riverside Stadium in Middlesbrough. The fourteen Healthwatch work collectively across the NENC Integrated Care System (NENC ICS) region to add value and service user voice to the changing health and care landscape.

Staff past and present, board members, volunteers and partner organisations came together to share in the success that Healthwatch has achieved to date.

Since the commencement of Healthwatch there has been a strong commitment to ensure that the voice of service users and the public remains embedded in the decision-making process of health and care services, championing the views of those that access services to ensure service delivery and changes made promote the best wellbeing outcomes for individuals, carers and families.

With the introduction of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) it is recognised that only through partnership working, meaningful engagement and combined resources will we make a positive difference to the health, wellbeing, and care of the communities we represent.

The event provided an opportunity for reflection of the journey of Healthwatch so far. The trials and tribulations, the growth, the changes and more importantly the successes that demonstrated the passion that remains with us on our journey to change.



The day was hosted by Christopher Akers-Belcher – Chief Executive of Healthwatch Hartlepool. Christopher is also the Regional Coordinator for the North East & North Cumbria Healthwatch Network.

10 years of improving care

Throughout the day guest speakers spoke of their own experience and involvement with Healthwatch and shared their vision and hopes for the future.

Jennifer Clark and Delana Lawson from Healthwatch England presented detail of our vision, mission and values, providing reference to our changing world with its challenges and opportunities and building on our success with three key objectives:

1. To support more people who face the worst outcomes to speak-up about their care and access the advice they need.
2. To ensure care decision-makers act on public feedback and involve communities in decisions that affect them.
3. To be a more effective organisation and build a stronger Healthwatch movement.

“What an incredible way to mark 10 years of Healthwatch in the region. It was a privilege to be invited to join in. I am as ever blown away by the passion, dedication, and talent of Healthwatch volunteers, boards and staff members. People working within limited resources to create real changes in people’s lives. This Healthwatch region has moved deftly towards becoming a truly effective collaborative in a way other regions have struggled to do. It was clear to me how Healthwatch is valued by the ICB, providers and partners. Personally, this is my home region, where I started my own Healthwatch journey, and I couldn’t be prouder of how far you have all come in the last decade. I look forward to seeing what the next decade brings.”

Jenny Clark

Deputy Head of Engagement and Sustainability, Healthwatch England

“Thank you so much North East. What a fabulous day, well done to you all. You have set the standard for celebrations and collaboration nationally.

I heard some interesting conversations throughout the day and during the networking session and am looking forward to the implementation of ideas we should take forward as a region.”

Delana Lawson

Quality Assurance & Regional Manager (North East, Yorkshire & Humberside)
Healthwatch England

“I’d like to thank the various Healthwatch organisations across Tees Valley for inviting me to the 10th anniversary event. I’d particularly like to say thank you for the opportunity to talk about the collaborative work that we have undertaken to ensure the patient voice is at the heart of the Community Mental Health Transformation Programme that is now underway. I am looking forward to the continued input of Healthwatch as we progress with the agreed changes in our local communities, and I very much welcome their continued support to understand and address the key health inequalities that impact upon access, effectiveness, and experience of our mental health services.”

Dominic Gardner

Care Group Director MHSOP / AMH, Durham Tees Valley Care Group
Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust

10 years of improving care

We were delighted that **Claire Riley** from the NENC ICS was able to attend the event and share with us her ambition for the future of health and care services.

With the ICS transformation underway Claire spoke of her desire to ensure insight and feedback from the public was used at both a national and local level. Claire welcomed the opportunity she has had to work alongside Healthwatch and is looking forward to continued collaboration that will support system wide planning and service delivery.

Claire acknowledged there will be challenges and 'hard conversations' along the way and that positive system change will only be achieved through meaningful partnership working. Claire welcomed the opportunity to answer questions raised and provided honest feedback on the challenges ahead, with a determination to ensure positive outcomes for health and care services.

"Thank you for inviting me to join the Healthwatch 10-year celebration. It is important to celebrate the great work of Healthwatch teams and the impact this has had on patients, carers and the public. Now we have the opportunity to learn from this work and ensure the voices of our communities are at the heart of health and care services."

Claire Riley

**Executive Director of Corporate Governance, communications and involvement,
North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System**





Listening to your experiences

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

Sensory impairment and access to health and care services

By law, all publicly funded health and care providers must fully comply with the Accessible Information Standard (AIS) which requires services to meet the information & communication needs of people with a learning disability or sensory impairment

As a follow up to our Digital Inclusion Report in June 2021 and our involvement in the current Healthwatch England campaign to promote the Accessible Information Standard, we wanted to understand how residents of Darlington who had sensory impairment were impacted when accessing health and care services.

The experiences of those who shared their views with us were mixed. Whilst we welcome the services who have protocols in place to accommodate those with a sensory impairment, it is disappointing that the picture is not consistent.

Healthwatch Darlington urges all health and care providers to comply with their legal obligations, and made the following recommendations:



- Darlington Primary Care Network to provide an update on its review of the findings and recommendations of our Digital Inclusion Report.
- All health and care services supporting residents of Darlington to provide a consistent service by adopting the Accessible Information Standard (AIS).
- Health and care services to promote the principles of the AIS in their communications and health and care venues.

What difference will this make?

County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust committed to review their compliance to the Accessible Information Standard and to develop an action plan based upon the report findings.

Tees Valley NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (now North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board) committed to supporting their colleagues throughout the NHS to ensure they are meeting the criteria within the NHS.



“Adoption and adherence to the Accessible Information Standard would resolve concerns experienced by those who completed our survey and many others who use health and care services in Darlington.”

Michelle Thompson BEM, Chief Executive Officer, Healthwatch Darlington

Positive changes as a result of your pandemic experiences

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire healthcare system was forced to rethink how they could make services accessible to service users whilst keeping our communities safe. Covid did not just affect individuals, it affected everyone, and many challenges had to be faced.

Our report highlighted the close relationships fostered with many different partners such as local authorities, primary care, public health and voluntary and community sector organisations should not be lost, but used to improve services for our communities right across the North East and North Cumbria.

Our recommendations:

1. Accessibility of existing services and keeping the public up to date with any changes needed through good communication.
2. Digital inclusion – that no one is left out because they cannot or do not access online services, or systems that require digital process.
3. The ability of carers and loved ones to be present at health and care appointments to provide emotional and practical support to patients.
4. The right to choose face to face or online consultations.
5. Acknowledgement and solutions of communication barriers, such as wearing masks, when talking to those requiring health and care services.
6. Support for 'Long COVID'.
7. Support for mental health.

What difference will this make?

Tees Valley NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (now North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board), told us the insights of local people within the report has provided them with valuable information and will allow them to support the residents of Darlington regarding future vaccination programmes and help them plan for future campaigns.

They also committed to sharing the findings with the Tees Valley Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance to help inform their ongoing work.

County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust welcomed the findings within the report and thanked all involved for their feedback.



“This reports findings in relation to experiences of mental health services throughout the pandemic will support our ongoing work across the region as part of the Tees Valley Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance.”

Director of Finance, North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board

Three ways we have made a difference for the community

Throughout our work we gather information about health inequalities by speaking to people whose experiences aren't often heard.

Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life



It is important for services to see the bigger picture. Hearing personal experiences and the impact on people's lives provides them with a better understanding of the problems.

Our pandemic report brought to life people's experiences during and after the pandemic. The awareness of concerns expressed has helped the local NHS to plan future campaigns as well as Phase 5 of the Vaccination Programme from September.

These insights are very valuable to the NHS and have allowed them to support the residents of Darlington to be informed about receiving a vaccination.

Getting services to involve the public



Services need to understand the benefits of involving local people to help improve care for everyone.

Tees, Esk and Wear Valley's (TEWV) NHS Mental Health Foundation Trust used the insight contained within our report to support delivery of a new mental health community-based offer aligned with primary care networks, voluntary sector organisations and local community groups.

We continue to monitor the delivery and commitment given by TEWV to work collaboratively to overcome the barriers faced by our local communities in accessing and receiving mental health support.

Improving care over time



Change takes time. We often work behind the scenes with services to consistently raise issues and bring about change.

Healthwatch Darlington will continue listening to people about how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting people living and working in our Borough, engaging with those communities hardest hit.

We will share what our local health and care services are doing to support our communities during this time.



Hearing from all communities

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

This year we have reached different communities by:

- Focussing on supporting those with sensory impairments and receiving accessible care
- Highlighting the experiences of those who found it difficult to access health and care services during the pandemic
- Working with the Integrated Care Board to help them understand the needs of our local communities.

Darlington Organisations Together Network

The lack of a Darlington Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) infrastructure organisation has resulted in many local VCSE groups relying on us to distribute and raise awareness of their services. So much so that our Darlington Organisations Together (DOT) network has become very popular with the smaller VCSE organisations.

DOT provides a forum to generate opportunities to work together and promote and showcase all their work and news via our popular weekly e-newsletter which has over 800 subscribers. We have opened up conversations and encouraged collaboration in a totally unbiased approach.

In addition, we have collated a wealth of knowledge needed to direct people to the VCSE organisations across Darlington as well as public sector organisations. Our e-newsletter and face to face information community hubs helps to distribute this information to both individuals and organisations across the Borough. We are able to help local people receive the information and advice they need to make the right decisions for themselves and those they care for, and to obtain the support they deserve.

Putting people at the heart of decision making in Darlington is what we strive to achieve on an ongoing basis and is one of our statutory duties. With the excellent relationships we enjoy with our vibrant VCSE sector we have seen first-hand how putting people at the heart of collaboration requires an investment of time and money, but the potential results make it worthwhile.

Enabling organisations to meet and start working together has resulted in plans to tackle unemployment in families, mental health services, social prescribing, young carers and many more community services that cannot be solved by services that work in isolation.

We have seen first-hand how partnering with other organisations, sharing people, expertise and operational models can significantly increase social impact, whilst reducing inefficiencies and unnecessary duplication across the sector.

Such an approach has been especially relevant for communities who might otherwise find it difficult to access information or influence provider decision making, including ethnic minority groups; people with disabilities; the LGBTQ+ community; children and young people and our ageing population.

We have supported work with the NHS Integrated Care System (ICS) leads and health and care system leaders to actively engage with VCSE organisations by increasing their knowledge and understanding of the VCSE sector and brokering relationships.



“We really enjoy attending the DOT network, it’s friendly, informative and a great way to find out what else is going on in Darlington. Healthwatch Darlington’s weekly newsletter also keeps us updated in between meetings and we know we can send them all our news, events and updates for publishing each week for free!”



Advice and information

If you feel lost and don't know where to turn, Healthwatch is here for you. In times of worry or stress, we can provide confidential support and free information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. Whether it's finding an NHS dentist, how to make a complaint or choosing a good care home for a loved one – you can count on us.

This year we've helped people by:

- Providing up to date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Helping people access NHS dentistry
- Supporting people to look after their health during the cost of living crisis

Help to find dental care in Darlington

We had 41 people contact us for advice and information on dental services. You told us that many practices were not taking on new patients, and that some had waiting lists of up to five years.

The impact of delayed treatment has resulted in people living with considerable pain, developing medical resistance and dental conditions worsening.

“I can’t find an NHS dentist – and I can’t afford to go private.”

We met with our local MP, Peter Gibson, and discussed ways he could support local people and raise questions in Parliament regarding new dentistry reforms.

“Thank you for listening to me and for the information you provided.”

We continue to promote the work we undertook last year in our dentistry report and supporting local people in their struggles to find dental care. You can find our Myth Buster online here: [Dentistry Myth Buster](#)

Helping residents access local GP services

We had 24 people contact us about their GP Practice.

Some of you wanted to tell us about positive experiences you had with your GP practice, including how well they worked with local hospital services around referrals.

Other experiences were not so good. You let us know about:

- Lack of support for LGBT groups including incorrect gender markers.
- Lack of communication between the GP practice and the local pharmacy
- Lack of communication between the GP practice and hospital services
- Waiting lists to see a GP

Let us know your experience of local GP services.

We can help direct you to the right service or help you understand how to make a complaint.

Whatever your experience, the more people share their ideas, experiences and concerns, the more services can understand what works and what doesn't.



Volunteering

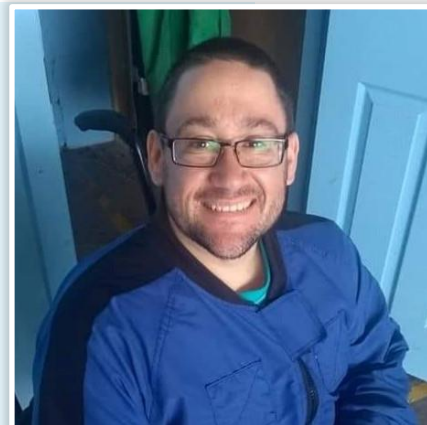
We're supported by a team of amazing volunteers who are at the heart of what we do. Thanks to their efforts in the community, we're able to understand what is working and what needs improving.

This year our volunteers:

- Visited communities to promote their local Healthwatch and what we have to offer
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views
- Shared up-to-date information on health and care services, and health and care events of interest to local people

Jamie

"Volunteering for me is all about making a difference. Knowing that I am contributing to making a positive difference in the community gives me a sense of accomplishment to know I am helping others. It is wonderful to meet members of the public and hear their stories. It makes volunteering feel worthwhile when I can help them with a problem."



Robert

"I joined Healthwatch shortly after its inception. I had recently retired from being an NHS GP and was looking for something to occupy me that was related to healthcare and Healthwatch fitted the bill. Being a board member of Healthwatch keeps me in touch with how healthcare is working for people and acting as a Governor of County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, appointed by Healthwatch Darlington, is particularly fascinating."



Edgar

"Volunteering for Healthwatch is a great way to interact, help others, give back to the community, work for worthwhile causes and overall helping someone with their health, mentally and physically.

It is a good way to meet new people that can improve social skills."



Do you feel inspired?

We are always on the lookout for new volunteers, so please get in touch today.



www.healthwatchdarlington.co.uk



01325 380145



info@healthwatchdarlington.co.uk

Finance and future priorities

To help us 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	£76,634	Expenditure on pay	£69,727
Additional income	£20,624	Office expenditure	£10,292
Total income	£97,258	Total expenditure	£80,019

Additional income is broken down by:

- **£8,145 funding** NECS children's services
- **£5,000 funding** CCG Community Council
- **£2,479 funding** Healthwatch England website and management system
- **£4,500 funding** ICS participants
- **£500 sale** of furniture

Next steps

In the ten years since Healthwatch was launched, we've demonstrated the power of public feedback in helping the health and care system understand what is working, spot issues and think about how things can be better in the future.

Services are currently facing unprecedented challenges and tackling the backlog needs to be a key priority for the NHS to ensure everyone gets the care they need. Over the next year we will continue our role in collecting feedback from everyone in our local community and giving them a voice to help shape improvements to services.

We will also continue our work to tackling inequalities that exist and work to reduce the barriers you face when accessing care, regardless whether that is because of where you live, income or race.

Top three priorities for 2023-24

1. **Mental Health** – Continue to influence local strategies by following up on our recommendations and evidencing impact.
2. **GP and Dental Services** – Continue to monitor the experiences of people accessing services and the impact of extra funding and commissioning changes.
3. **NHS Pressures** – Monitor the impact that workforce issues and industrial action are having on people accessing services.



Statutory statements

Healthwatch Darlington, Sterling House, 22 St Cuthbert's Way, Darlington. DL1 1GB.

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

The way we work

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

Our Healthwatch Board consists of five members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny to our activities. Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community. Throughout 2022/23 the Board met 12 times and made decisions regarding where we would focus our valuable time and resources to support our local communities.

We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities.

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

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to provide us with insight about their experience of using services.

During 2022/23 we have been available by phone, email, provided a webform on our website and through social media, as well as attending meetings of community groups and forums.

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.

Responses to recommendations

All providers responded to requests for information or recommendations. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to Healthwatch England Committee, so no resulting reviews or investigations.

The way we work

Taking people's experiences to decision makers

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

We take insight and experiences to decision makers in the North East and North Cumbria (NENC) Integrated Care Board. (ICB)

While we have worked together informally for many years, recent funding from the ICB has enabled the Network to formalise working arrangements through our Operational Protocol, so that it can systematically represent the views of service users, families and carers with partners across the Integrated Care System (ICS).

Local intelligence is collated across each of the four sub-regional areas and shared at Area Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) meetings.

At regional level, the Healthwatch Regional Coordinator represents service-user voices from across the region at the NENC ICP strategic meeting, Quality & Safety Committee, Primary Care Strategy & Delivery sub-committee, Healthy & Fairness Advisory Group, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion meetings and System Quality Group meetings.

The network of local Healthwatch has also been commissioned to undertake additional research to ensure local opinions are represented in the ICB's work priorities, including focus groups for the Waiting Well, and consultation around the development of the ICB strategy.

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

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Darlington is represented on the Darlington Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB) by **Michelle Thompson B.E.M., Chief Executive Officer**. Michelle is also the Vice Chair of the Health and Wellbeing Board.

During 2022/23 our representative has effectively carried out this role by participating in the decisions made by the HWBB and supporting the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise those very decisions, by providing information and local intelligence.

Healthwatch Darlington is represented on the South Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System by **Toni McHale** and **Christopher Akers-Belcher**.

The Regional ICP is attended by **Christopher Akers-Belcher**, Healthwatch Regional Integrated Care Board (ICB) Coordinator. The ICB Participant for the network is **David Thompson**, Chair of Healthwatch Northumberland.



healthwatch

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