



Unlocking the power of the public voice

healthwatch
County Durham

**Annual Report
2024 – 2025**

Contents

A message from our Chair	3
A message from the host organisation	4
About us	5
Our year in numbers	6
A year of making a difference	7
Working together for change	8
Making a difference in the community	9
Listening to your experiences	10
Hearing from all communities	13
Information and signposting	15
The contribution of volunteers	17
Enter and View	19
Finance and future priorities	20
Statutory statements	22



69

"The impact that local Healthwatch have is vitally important. Healthwatch are empowering their communities to share their experiences. They're changing the health and care landscape and making sure that people's views are central to making care better and tackling health inequalities."

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive, Healthwatch England

A message from our Chair

It is an absolute privilege for me to say a few words as Chair of the Healthwatch County Durham Board.

I wish to record thanks from myself and my colleague Board members to our volunteers who have again committed a huge amount of time and effort to support the staff to reach out to our communities. The details of individual initiatives are included in this year's annual report, including the progress and successes in two specific areas – Youth Health and Inclusion – that we advised had started last year.

In addition, our involvement in the regional Healthwatch Network and our relationship with the Integrated Care Board has ensured that the voices of our communities have contributed to work which should lead to improving or developing new initiatives across the North East and North Cumbria.

With the end of the financial year, the hosting arrangements for Healthwatch County Durham will change – from the 1st April 2025 we will move to a new provider organisation. I wish to acknowledge the services provided by the Pioneering Care Partnership during the past seven years.

Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to the staff, volunteers and my Board colleagues for all the work they undertake on behalf of the County Durham residents, and I commend this report to you.



Like all partners, we await the outcome and final report from the Department of Health and Social Care regarding the new NHS Plan. Whatever changes this may bring, we will continue to represent the Patient Voice, and to raise the issues identified by the residents of County Durham.

Chris Cunnington-Shore
Healthwatch County Durham Chair

A message from the host organisation

Pioneering Care Partnership was proud to host Healthwatch County Durham, and our team worked tirelessly to seek and listen to views, review provision and learn about local people's aspirations for health and care service in the future. The information and intelligence gathered locally leads to impactful reports with clear recommendations, and these are proactively used to shape commissioning based on real experience.

The Healthwatch Annual Report provides some of the year's highlights, but it is only a snapshot of the incredible Healthwatch achievements. I extend my thanks to the team of paid staff and volunteers for their work, reaching into and across communities, for the way they engage with partners and for taking positive and solutions-focused approaches to system change.

Thank you also to the Healthwatch Board, who are also volunteers, giving their time to guide and support Healthwatch, ensuring good governance whilst overseeing the statutory responsibilities.

My final thank you is to the people of County Durham – without your views, thoughts and opinions Healthwatch would not be able to influence and improve services, you are helping to make improvements for years ahead, for which we are very grateful.

Healthwatch County Durham will be hosted by a new organisation after March 2025 – People First will support the team and Board from 1st April 2025.

Carol Gaskarth
Chief Executive – Pioneering Care Partnership

Are you signed up to receive the Healthwatch County Durham monthly newsletter?

We send out updates about our work, and highlight other health and care information from across the county.

You can sign up on our website:
<https://www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk>



Or email us at
info@healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk



About us

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

We make sure that NHS and social care leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you 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 that people's experiences help make health and care better.

Our values:

Equity – We listen with compassion, value every voice, and work to include those who are often left out. We build strong relationships and support people to shape the services they use.

Empowerment – We create a safe and inclusive space where people feel respected, supported, and confident to speak up and shape the changes that matter to them.

Collaboration – We work openly and honestly with others, inside and outside our organisations, to share learning, build trust, and make a bigger difference together.

Independence – We stand up for what matters to the public. We work alongside decision-makers but stay true to our role as an independent, trusted voice.

Truth – We act with honesty and integrity. We speak up when things need to change and make sure those in power hear the truth, even when it's hard to hear.

Impact – We focus on making a real difference in people's lives. We're ambitious, accountable, and committed to helping others take responsibility to make change happen.

Our year in numbers

During the 2024 – 2025 year we employed 8 staff and our work was supported by 23 volunteers.

Reaching out:



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

We signposted 167 people to the relevant services to access support or to make a complaint.

904 people helped us gather information by completing surveys.

4729 people follow us across our social media channels where we share health and social care information.

Championing your voice:



We published 12 reports about the improvements people would like to see in health and social care services.

These included reports about hospital waiting times, accessing GPs and women's health, as well as our Enter & View reports from our visits to Community Mental Health units.

Statutory funding:



We are funded by Durham County Council.

In 2024/25 we received £187,378 which is 2% more than the previous year.

A year of making a difference

Over the year we've been out and about in the community listening to your stories, engaging with partners and working to improve care in County Durham. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We worked with the Durham County Council Library Engagement Support Officer to provide advice and information to the public at drop in events in libraries across the county. We raised awareness of Healthwatch and listened to people's feedback



We were involved in facilitating public consultation when North Tees & Hartlepool and South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trusts came together to work in partnership. We helped make sure the Trusts heard the public views.



Summer

We began a new programme of Enter & View visits, focused on Community Mental Health units – we spoke to service users and staff about what works well and what could be improved.



We published and distributed our 'How to get the best from your GP' booklet, providing information for the public about making appointments, the different staff roles and how to request adjustments.



Autumn

We contributed to the Public Health Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment, using data gathered from talking to the public about their pharmacy experiences.



We published our report looking at hospital waiting times, sharing people's experiences of waiting for elective surgery.



Winter

We spent time at local leisure centres, talking to people about their experiences of using health & social care services. We were able to signpost people to the right services, and help people with their queries.



We held workshops to get the public feedback about the NHS 10 year plan. We sent this information directly to the NHS to help inform their decision making.



Working together for change

Our network of 14 local Healthwatch, funded by our Integrated Care Board, works in partnership to improve health and care services across the North East and North Cumbria region. By working collaboratively, we add real value to the design of health and care services, and make the public voice stronger.

We have representatives from our network on local and regional strategic boards, allowing us to support coordinated and effective engagement with our communities. Our collaborative approach is recognised nationally as best practice.

These are some of our achievements across the region:

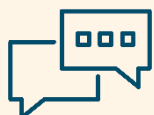
The big conversation: Women's Health



We spoke to nearly 4,500 people and held six focus groups with women who face extra health challenges, to learn about their priorities. Priorities included Mental Health, Healthy Aging, and Menopause.

We're now working with ICB partners to create a "Women's Promise." This will help women, health professionals, and others to understand and support women's health needs and rights.

Change NHS



We supported engagement for the NHS 10 Year Strategy, delivering over 17 workshops throughout North East & North Cumbria. We talked through the NHS proposed changes and gathered people's views, including people from an ethnic minority, people with a learning disability and/or autism and young people. All the feedback was shared with the NHS to help inform their decisions.

North East Ambulance Service clinical strategy review



Over 1,700 people shared their feedback with 12 Healthwatch, to help the North East Ambulance Service review what people are happy with and where improvements could be made. This feedback will support ongoing work throughout 2025-2026. Positive areas included 'Compassionate staff' and 'Emergency care'.

Areas for improvement included 'Response times' and 'Co-ordination with other services'.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time.

Here are some examples of our work in County Durham this year:

Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life



Hearing personal experiences and their impact on people's lives helps services better understand the issues people face.

We heard that some people who experienced loss through miscarriage felt they did not get the right support when they needed it.

We have spoken to individuals and groups to better understand their experiences and the effect this had on them.

All the information from this sensitive topic will be shared with the relevant service providers and we will make recommendations about where improvements could be made, making a difficult time easier for patients and families.

Getting services to involve the public



By involving local people, services help improve care for all.

We worked closely with partners to support a reduction in cancer healthcare inequalities for veterans, by developing information tailored to their needs.

Finding cancer information and support was highlighted as a barrier by veterans, and the partners worked with veterans themselves to develop information which would meet their needs.

The work was shortlisted for a 'Contribution to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' award at the North East Public Health Conference in December 2024.

Improving care over time



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

Mental health is a priority topic for many of you. We have been monitoring the implementation of the Community Mental Health Transformation programme, and we are now carrying out a review to give your feedback to partners.

We have formed strong links with our local mental health trust (Tees, Esk & Wear Valley) so that we can raise the issues you tell us about directly with the people who influence change.

We have also been involved in setting up a Suicide Prevention group, looking at one of our particularly high-risk areas.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, we've listened to residents from all areas of our community. People's experiences of care help us know what's working and what isn't, so we can give feedback to services and help them improve.

Two of the areas we wanted to focus on were Children and Young People, and our Rural Communities, which you can read about in more detail on the next pages.



Listening to your experiences

Working with local GP practices to improve health care for farming communities

Farmers told us that accessibility is a huge barrier – it is difficult for them to make appointments because of the unpredictable nature of their work. Many put off seeing a GP which can end up making health issues worse.

What did we do?

We encouraged key partners to come together to look at the issues farmers face around accessing health care.

We spoke to rural GP practices about feedback from farmers and helped them to explore different ways of working.

We supported practices to offer 'walk-in clinics' where farmers / farming families could drop in at the surgery for a check up without the need for an appointment.

We gathered the outcomes from the pilot events, shared them with service commissioners and encouraged more rural practices to get involved.

Key achievements:

63% of farmers attending the first event at Pinfold surgery received referrals or follow up care.

Old Forge surgery has committed to monthly themed walk-in clinics, with 2 of these a year being dedicated to farming families.

Rural practices are now proactively monitoring how many of their registered patients are farmers, so they can better meet their needs.

As well as physical health checks, through the events, farmers and their families have also been able to access information and support around mental health and domestic abuse.

Wider impact:

In February 2025 the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board included this initiative in the Healthcare Inequalities part of its Healthier and Fairer Programme, saying;

"This policy framework, co-produced with partners from across the Voluntary and Community Sector, academia, NHS teams, and Healthwatch, has established principles that drive change and reform services to meet the needs of people experiencing healthcare inequalities"

Jon Quine, Strategic Programme Manager, Healthcare Inequalities.

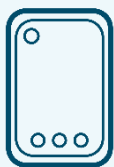
Listening to your experiences

Understanding more about the mental health experiences of children and young people

Children and young people told us about the challenges they have faced when they need mental health support.

We spoke with over 200 local children and young people (aged 14 – 25) in County Durham about their understanding of mental health and their experiences of mental health support. Their stories highlighted that there is a lack of knowledge, and that stigma is still an issue, as well as people struggling to find the right support.

Key things we heard:



90%

of children and young people told us about things that would stop them from asking for help.

21%

of children and young people asked 'Can you catch mental health?'

"I am powerless, I am not an adult, I can't make appointments for myself, I can't decide for myself either, but nobody in my family understands what I am trying to explain." (Female, aged 15)



What happens next?

We worked with the young people who spoke to us, to develop some recommendations about what improvements could be made within mental health services, which we will follow up on in the coming year. Our recommendations include:

- Dedicated lived experience peer support workers specifically for young people.
- 'Safe spaces' to be established in places accessible by young people, where they can speak in confidence about their concerns.
- Improved transitional support when moving from children to adult services, ensuring that the young person and relevant individuals are involved in the process.
- Better education around mental health, which should include how to support family members who have mental health issues.

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of County Durham. That's why, over the past year, we've worked hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Every member of the community should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

This year, we have reached different communities by, for example:

- Engaging with our d/Deaf community through the Deaf Wellbeing Network
- Meeting with young first-time parents in supported housing
- Gathering feedback from those with specific health conditions about regional health care issues



Hearing from all communities

Improving understanding of accessing health care for the LGBTQ+ community

We reached out to LGBTQ+ support groups in the area, to ask whether they had any difficulties or barriers in accessing health care.

In particular, we received feedback from Trans individuals telling us about challenges they were facing in health care settings. We have fed this back to service providers and will continue the conversation to increase understanding and ultimately improve care.

What did people tell us?

- There are issues with respect and dignity – people have been made to feel like ‘a curiosity’, faced antagonistic staff or felt like they were discriminated against.
- There is a lack of knowledge and understanding in how to treat Trans individuals – even to the extent of staff being reluctant to do a blood test.
- People are likely to put off attending for routine health issues, due to concerns about how they might be treated.

Helping people to understand and access the Pharmacy First service

We attended multiple community events across the county, raising awareness of the new service, and helping people understand how to access treatment without the need for a GP appointment.

We gathered feedback about the service from local communities, including those with long term health conditions, and found out how residents felt the service was working well, and where it could be improved.

What difference did this make?

More people are aware of the Pharmacy First service and the conditions that can be treated.

People with long term conditions, such as high blood pressure, are more confident in using a pharmacy to manage their health.

We presented our findings to the Community Pharmacy Durham & Sunderland Chief Officer – our recommendations will be discussed at the next meeting of the Community Pharmacy Executive Team in June 2025, where the public feedback will help inform what improvements can be made.

Information and signposting

Our Information & Signposting service can help the public find out what services are in the area – anything from looking at care homes to trying to find mental health support.

This year, we've helped people by:

- Providing up-to-date information for the public – both through answering individual enquiries or via our published information.
- Helping people to look after their health by signposting to the appropriate services, and sharing public health information on social media and in our newsletter.
- Supporting people to resolve issues and complaints in order to improve their health care – whether this is directly with the services, or through contact with PALS or the Independent Complaints Advocacy service.



Resolving issues around 'Right to Choose'

Healthwatch County Durham were contacted by a patient who felt his GP was not respecting his 'Right to Choose' by refusing to complete a referral form to his choice of external service provider.

We contacted the GP practice manager, and found that the PCN had made the decision not to complete lengthy and time consuming referral forms – they would instead send a letter to the external provider with the relevant information; however, this had not been fully explained to the patient.

Within a matter of days, the letter was prepared and the patient received an apology from the GP practice for any inconvenience caused.

"Thanking you very much, it's such a relief to know I can finally get the treatment I want."



Improving information for amputees

We were contacted by Healthwatch Sunderland to contribute to a booklet being designed to provide signposting information for amputees.

Our local intelligence confirmed that there was a lack of knowledge about where amputees could access further support after their discharge from hospital, so we worked with Healthwatch Sunderland to pull together this information – covering topics such as rehabilitation, general support, lifestyle advice and advice on finances.

Individual booklets were developed for County Durham, Sunderland and South Tyneside with relevant contact details for local and regional support services.

The booklets are given out by Ward C36 at Sunderland Royal Hospital, as well as being available digitally from each local Healthwatch – meaning that all amputees now have a readily available source of information to help them adapt to a life-changing event.

The booklets are dedicated to Andrea Smith, who first raised the issue with Healthwatch Sunderland, and led us to be able to help amputees across our region.

The contribution of volunteers

We are supported by a team of amazing volunteers who are at the heart of what we do. This year they have given 1792 hours to support our work (that's almost 239 working days). Thanks to their efforts, we can reach more of our community and better understand what is working and what needs improving.

This year, our volunteers:

- Took part in our Enter & View programme, visiting five Community Mental Health units, and speaking to service users to hear their experiences.
- Followed up at previous Enter & View sites to see what improvements had been made following our recommendations.
- Carried out research – checking that dentists and GP surgeries have the correct information on their websites and on their telephone messages.
- Managed stalls at community events and drop-ins, and helped at Welcome Spaces.



Meet our volunteers

At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think, to helping raise awareness, our volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.

"My main driver for applying to volunteer is to give something back and engage with other like-minded people. Volunteering with Healthwatch County Durham (HWCD) I will be able to support the local community by sharing my experiences and knowledge concerning health and wellness. Previously volunteering with 'Breast Cancer Now', 'Macmillan' & 'Changing Faces', I have been with HWCD for 6 months.

I hope to engage positively with people in the local community, to encourage conversations around what health issues matter to them most. I feel there needs to be a greater awareness of loneliness in the community, highlighting the importance of being able to meet others and share concerns, obtain support, and know that someone is listening. This makes a great difference to people's health and wellbeing."

Paulette



"Although my background is in dentistry, I am interested in 'Public Health'. I approached HWCD to gain experience, polish my skills and learn about how systems work in this area.

I have volunteered for around 18 months now - initially I worried about the balance of time between my study needs and volunteering, and I was a little concerned about committing to particular tasks. So, it's useful to know that volunteering is flexible in fitting around what an individual can and cannot do at any one time. For some people there might be religious needs, others may have caring needs or personal health difficulties etc. I think it's important to make sure there's time /opportunity to talk with HWCD about areas of interests and keeping in regular contact to enable effective volunteering".

Saad



Be part of the change.

If you're interested in volunteering with us, contact us today and find out how you can be part of helping your community.



www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk



Claire 0191 9169806



volunteers@healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk

Enter and View

2024 – 2025 Enter and View visits

This year we carried out 5 visits, which were all to Community Mental Health Units (CMHU). This was in addition to the one CMHU we carried out at the end of 2023–24.

Mental Health is one of our biggest areas of feedback from the public, and we wanted to hear from more people using the services, as well as speak to staff to get their views.

The sites we visited were Derwent Clinic, Enterprise House, Chester Le Street, Kirkstone Villa (Lanchester Road) and the Goodall Centre. Reports were published for all visits, and we will follow up on our recommendations during the 2025 – 26 year.

2023 – 2024 Outcomes

With help from our volunteers, we reviewed how some GP practices had responded to our recommendations during last year's programme of Enter and View visits. These are some examples of where changes have been made.

What you told us	Improvements made
Some people found it difficult to order repeat prescriptions or make appointments online.	Practices now review patients needs and allow telephone booking / ordering for those who need it.
People were unclear about the different staff roles at the practice.	Pictures of the different uniforms are now displayed, identifying the relevant roles.
People asked what support was available for those with additional needs.	Patient passports have been introduced; practices are ensuring signage is clear and in line with recommendations; long term conditions are overseen by designated GP partners with their own specialisms.
People said it was difficult to get through on the telephone.	Telephone lines have been increased, and admin staff now operate 2 screens to help with co-ordination.

Finance and future priorities

In order for us to carry out our work, our host organisation receives funding on our behalf from Durham County Council under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Our income and expenditure:

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£187,378	Expenditure on pay	£184,498
Additional income	£14,098	Non-pay expenditure	£39,867
		Office and management fee	£21,031
Total income	£201,476	Total Expenditure	£245,396*

*Our 2 additional, fixed term staff were agreed to be funded through resources carried forward from previous years where we had carried staff vacancies.

Additional income is broken down into:

£5,000 for NEAS Core Engagement

£512 for Healthwatch National Conference Attendance Support

Integrated Care System (ICS) funding:

Healthwatch across North East and North Cumbria also receive funding from our Integrated Care System (ICS) to support collaborative work at this level, including:

Purpose of ICS funding	Amount
Core funding for involvement in the regional Healthwatch network	£3,500
The Big Conversation – public engagement and report writing	£4,436
NHS 10 year plan workshops	£650

Finance and future priorities

Next steps:

We are finalising our work plan for the year ahead, looking at the feedback from the public. The areas we will be looking at include:

1. Primary Care – we still hear more about people’s experiences with GPs than any other area of health care. Recently we have heard a lot about issues with medication changes or medication not being prescribed, so we will be looking into this over the year ahead.
2. Mental Health – this continues to be one of our most common areas of feedback. We have started to carry out an evaluation of the Community Mental Health Transformation Programme, and this will continue into 2025. We want to speak to as many service users, families / carers, and staff as possible to get a good picture of what differences the changes have made to people in need of community based mental health support.
3. Hospitals – we heard a lot about hospital issues from the public during 2024/25, so we will make this an area to focus on. We will be asking for the public to help narrow down which aspect of hospital care is most important to them, so we can look at that area more closely.

Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society, especially to people who are less likely to come forward or might find it difficult to share their experiences. We will make sure that those in power hear views and experiences from across our communities.

We will continue to work together with partners and our local Integrated Care System to help develop an NHS culture where, at every level, staff strive to listen and learn from patients to make care better.



Statutory statements

Healthwatch County Durham

Unit 3, Crook Business Centre, New Rd, Crook, Co. Durham, DL15 8QX

**During the 2024–25 year, the Healthwatch County Durham contract was hosted by the 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.

The way we work

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

Our Healthwatch Board consists of 8 members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities. Throughout 2024/25, the Board met formally 6 times to maintain that overview and discuss our strategic plans and direction.

Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community. We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities by analysing the feedback we receive throughout the year, and asking for public opinion on health themes.

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 can provide us with insight into their experience of using services.

During 2024/25, we have been available by phone, text and email, through social media, and provided a 'Contact us' link on our website. We also attended a wide range of 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 our newsletter subscribers, and the link is shared on our social media channels. On request, we can provide printed copies.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

We had 0 providers who did not respond at all to requests for information or recommendations. We had 4 providers who did not respond within the required timeframe.

There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so there were 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 shared with us.

For example, in our local authority area, we take information to Durham County Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committees; we attend the Safeguarding Assurance Group and sit on Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategic Partnership Groups.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in 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 intelligence to national research projects.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch County Durham is represented on the County Durham Health and Wellbeing Board by Chris Cunnington-Shore, Chair of the Healthwatch County Durham Board. During 2024/25, our representative has 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 Board.

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 and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board by Christopher Akers-Belcher (Regional Co-Ordinator for the Healthwatch Network).

Healthwatch County Durham
Unit 3
Crook Business Centre
New Road
Crook
DL15 8QX



www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk



0300 1800025



info@healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk



[/healthwatchcountydurham](https://www.facebook.com/healthwatchcountydurham)



[@HWCountyDurham](https://twitter.com/HWCountyDurham)



[@healthwatchcodurham](https://www.instagram.com/healthwatchcodurham)



[/company/healthwatch-co-durham](https://www.linkedin.com/company/healthwatch-co-durham)