

Alston Medical Practice Enter and View report

Wednesday 20th August 2025



The front of the former cottage hospital, where the practice is based

Contact details

Service visited

The Surgery, Ruth Lancaster James Cottage Hospital, Church Road, Alston, CA9 3QX

Telephone: 01434 381214

Website: www.alstonmedicalpractice.co.uk

Service opening hours: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 8am– 6.30pm; Tuesday and Wednesday 8am–5pm, with a GP on call until 6.30pm.

Registered Manager

Tania Rymer

Date and time of our visit

Date: Wednesday 20th August, 2025

Time: 1pm–4pm

Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness (HWW&F) representatives:

Leila Platt, Engagement Officer HWW&F

Kate Rees, Manager HWW&F

Acknowledgements

HWW&F would like to thank management, staff and patients for welcoming us, and taking the time to speak to us.

Disclaimer: This report relates only to the service viewed at the time of the visit and is only representative of the views of the staff and patients who met members of the Enter and View team on that date.



One of our posters advertising the visit

Introduction

Our role at Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness (HWW&F) is to gather people's views and experiences, especially those who are under-represented, to give them the opportunity to express how they feel about a service.

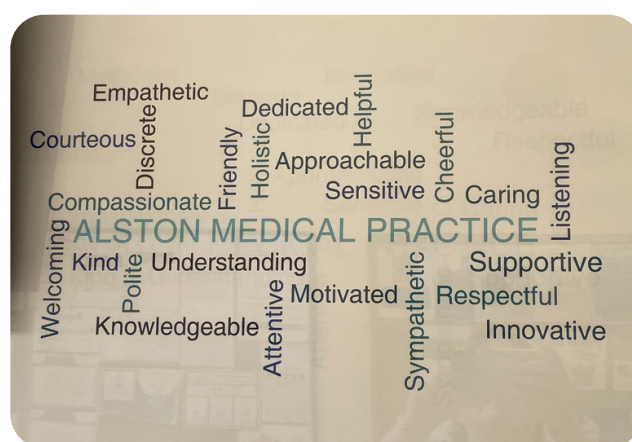
The aim of an Enter and View visit is to gather views and experiences of patients relatives and staff of a service and observe the environment to assess the quality of the service. The team collate feedback gathered and observations made to compile a report, such as this one.

This was an announced Enter and View visit undertaken by trained, authorised representatives who have the authority to enter health and social care premises, announced or unannounced.

The report identifies aspects of good practice as well as possible areas of improvement. HWW&F is an independent organisation, therefore we do not make judgements or express personal opinions, but rely on feedback received and objective observations of the environment. It is sent to the service manager to give them an opportunity to respond before it is published on our website at www.healthwatchwestfurn.co.uk.

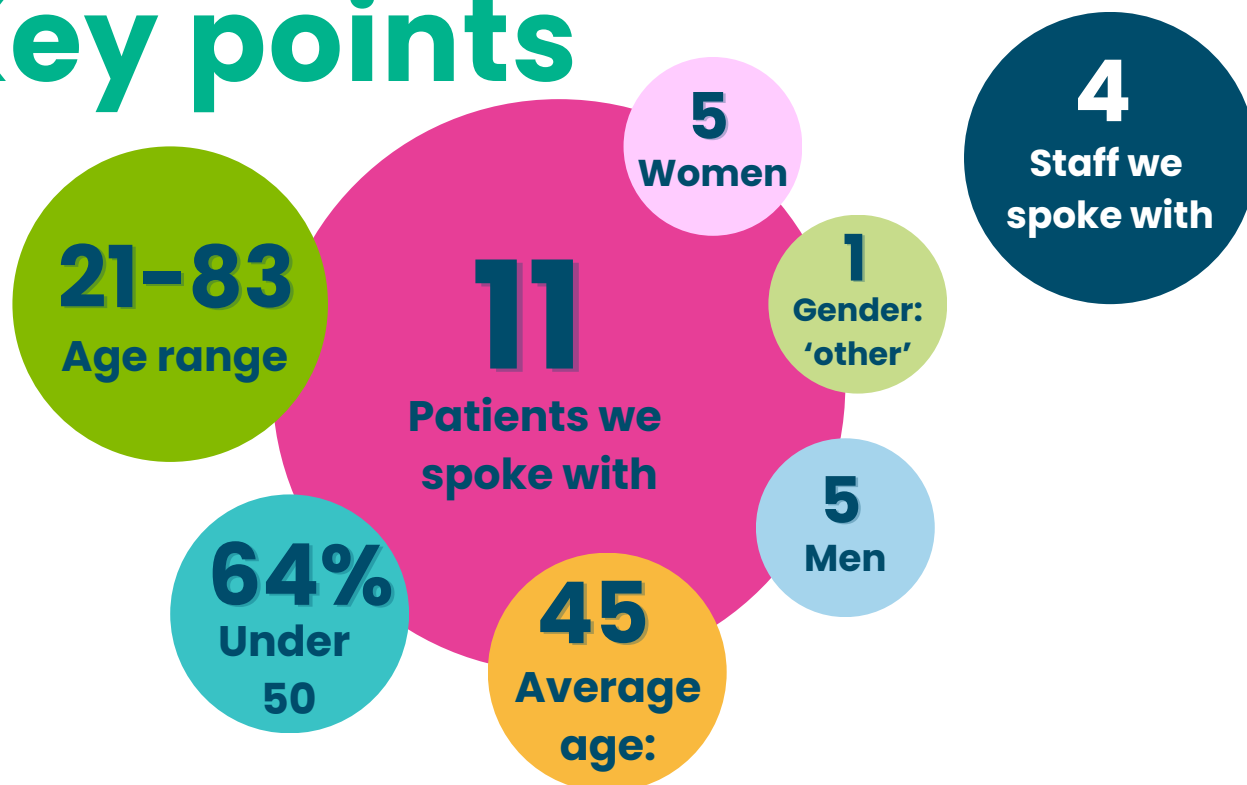
Where appropriate, Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness may arrange a revisit to check the progress of improvements.

The report is also sent to the Care Quality Commission (CQC), Healthwatch England, Westmorland and Furness Council, and North East North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB).



Left, information on the notice board about the number of appointments and services provided. Right, a 'word cloud' of comments received from patients

Key points



36%

Have
unpaid
caring
duties



64%

Have long
term
conditions

Themes

A community service

- Geographic convenience valued by patients.
- Local access to quality care seen as important.
- Social day unit highly valued for its care and social value.

Appointments

- Overwhelming majority found booking 'very easy' or easy'.

Strong overall satisfaction

- High ratings consistently given (8/10, 10/10, 'excellent', 'very good').
- General consensus that communication works well.
- Quick response times highlighted as a strength.
- Quick turnaround times – several patients seen that day or next.

General information

Alston Medical Practice covers Alston Moor and has 2,198 registered patients. The practice is run by [Cumbria Health](#). There are 16 staff: three GPs; one GP Registrar, two practice nurses, one healthcare assistant, one Practice Manager, three dispenser/administrators, two receptionists. 75% of patients are seen that day.

As well as an on-site pharmacy, services and clinics include: veterans' health checks, a health and wellbeing coach, social day unit (activities include dominoes and cards, games, pottery, yoga and exercise, pottery, and social connection), Integrated Community Ageing Team (iCAT) visits (which the surgery picked up when the PCN stopped doing them), quarterly diabetic eye screening, a midwife, a health visitor, and pharmacy clinics. The practice offers support to install and use the NHS app. They have an active Facebook page, which they use for communication with their patients.

They receive feedback through the [NHS Friends and Family Test](#).

Social day care unit

Alston Medical Practice runs a social day care unit for the elderly, parents and young children. It is a friendly, social environment for patients to meet up, as well as get advice and support. There is a toddler group on a Monday, and on Tuesdays and Wednesdays the social day unit hosts activities for the elderly.



**"No one leaves here
[the day centre]
without being
listened to."**

We spoke to the ladies' session when we visited. They offered collective feedback on the medical centre as well as the social day unit. Aged 64 to 90 years old, they were all very happy with the services provided, and receive good care that meets their needs. They mentioned that they can ring for an appointment at 9am and get one the same day, and that they are very well looked after at the day unit.

One lady said that they see a variety of doctors and that some people need continuity of care. In terms of giving feedback or making a complaint they said they would do this by going to reception. If needed, they speak privately to staff.

Staff fundraise to keep the unit going, make food for service users, and pick up and drop-off housebound members of the community.

About Alston Moor

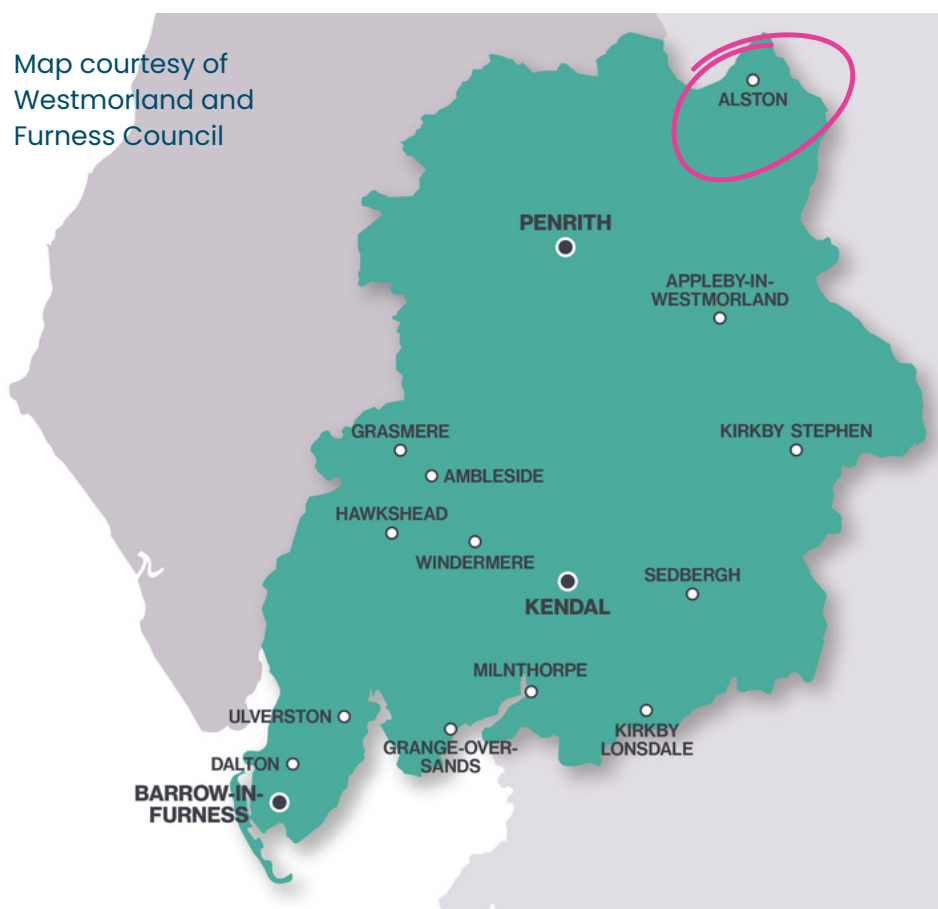
Alston is located at about 1,000 feet (300m) above sea level in the North Pennines and holds the distinction of being 'highest market town in England'.

Alston Moor's remoteness is significant. It is about 20 miles from the nearest sizeable town (Penrith), and includes not just Alston town but the villages of Garrigill and Nenthead. The area had a population of 2,088 at the 2011 census. The area is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

This geographical isolation and challenging terrain makes the provision of accessible healthcare services particularly important for the local community. The positive patient feedback about appointment availability and communication becomes even more significant given the area's remoteness and the fact that patients may have limited alternative options without significant travel.

The practice serves a dispersed rural population across challenging Pennine topography, making their responsive service and communication through several methods especially valuable for patient care.

Map courtesy of
Westmorland and
Furness Council



Map of Westmorland
and Furness showing
Alston in the north east
of the area

Ages of patients at the practice

Children and young
people (0-24)

Female	Male
192	210

Working age people
(25-64)

Female	Male
569	556

Older people (65+)

Female	Male
351	320

Our observations

Alston Medical Practice offers a high standard of care in terms of environment and accessibility. While access from the main road (and bus stop) is difficult for those without a vehicle, the practice makes the most of adaptations for patients with additional needs and in fostering a welcoming, respectful atmosphere.

Minor improvements, such as clearer PPG information and enhanced dementia-friendly toilet features, could further strengthen the patient experience.

Accessibility and general environment

Alston Medical Practice presents a clean, well-maintained, and welcoming environment. The building is fully accessible by the main entrance, with no steps or obstructions, and offers ample parking, including disabled spaces at the front. However, access from the bus stop is difficult for those who are not fully mobile. The bus stop is down a hill and only reachable by steep steps or walking up the long driveway.

Signage throughout the building is clear and helpful, and the [practice website](#) is informative and easy to navigate.

Reception and booking in

Reception is directly opposite the main entrance and is staffed while the practice is open. Staff were observed to be professional, courteous, and friendly, contributing to a supportive atmosphere. A private room is available for confidential conversations, which is good practice and supports patient dignity.

The booking-in process is straightforward, with patients welcomed and checked in promptly. Given the small size of the practice, patients are called for appointments in person, which works well.



Our observations

Waiting area and patient information

The waiting area is small but adequate, with eight chairs, a low table, and a TV screen. Seating is clean and in good condition. Notice boards are well-maintained and display up-to-date NHS and community information.

There is no visible information about the Patient Participation Group (PPG), although the practice does have representation on Cumbria Health's PPG. This limits patient awareness and engagement and clearer communication on this would be beneficial.

Adaptations for specific needs

The practice demonstrates a commendable commitment to inclusivity. The accessible toilet includes coloured rails and a safety pull-cord, although the absence of a contrasting toilet seat may reduce usability for patients with dementia. Hygiene facilities are appropriate, with hot water and hand wash available.

Support for patients with communication needs is strong. A tablet-based on-demand interpreter service provides access to British Sign Language and translation services. The practice is dementia-friendly, with a large clock in the waiting area and a layout that is simple to navigate. While picture signage is not used, the small scale of the surgery makes this less critical.

Staff confirmed that a quiet room is available for patients with sensory sensitivities, such as those with autism or social anxiety, which is a positive and inclusive feature.



Left, reception immediately opposite the main entrance. Right, part of the waiting area

Patient feedback

During our visit Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness undertook a short survey of patients there. Some filled in a written version of the questionnaire while others completed it verbally. We received feedback from 11 patients. We received generally positive feedback from everyone. They all agreed that they receive care and treatment that meets their needs, the staff were praised and the building maintenance, accessibility and cleanliness were all noted as good.

Access to appointments

Patients consistently told us about positive experiences with appointment booking at the practice, with the telephone system being particularly well-regarded for its efficiency and ease of use. The practice demonstrates good responsiveness by offering next-day and same-day appointments when needed, though there's a clear patient preference for traditional phone booking over booking through an app.

A speech bubble with a black outline and a teal drop shadow, containing a patient quote.

"They're amazing. I can often get an appointment on the same day."

Communication

Patients generally gave positive feedback on communications between the surgery and themselves. The practice operates a multi-channel approach that accommodates different patient preferences and digital capabilities.

A speech bubble with a black outline and a teal drop shadow, containing a patient quote.

"Really good. Use My GP App. Get texts. Phone calls for queries about prescriptions."

Four patients highlighted the use of text messages to communicate appointments, although one patient said they didn't use the text service as they didn't have a mobile phone. One patient said they will not use the online services because a significant number of local people are unable to do this. This patient highlighted that they felt they needed to keep face to face and telephone access for all the people who cannot use the internet.

One patient said that feedback about test results was sometimes not as good.

Patient feedback

Care and treatment

There was unanimous satisfaction with the care and treatment provided by Alston Medical Practice. Patients feel confident that their needs are met through appropriate treatment, effective referrals when necessary, and strong follow-up care. The practice has built trust through consistent, responsive service that encourages patients to seek help when needed.

"You get the treatment you need and they send you to places for more care if needed."

Maintenance, accessibility and cleanliness

"The doorways and entrances to the loo could do with being slightly wider for the larger wheelchair user."

All 11 patients were satisfied with the premises at Alston Medical Practice, particularly praising cleanliness and maintenance standards. There is recognition that the practice maintains high standards despite healthcare resource constraints.

The only specific improvement suggestion relates to widening doorways for better wheelchair accessibility for those users with larger mobility equipment, however the practice meets most needs.

Additional services

The majority of people, nine out of 11 respondents did not use the additional services offered at the medical practice (see page 4). One respondent referred to the fact that they had to travel to Penrith to see a Parkinson's nurse, as they did not come to Alston, highlighting the challenges of providing comprehensive healthcare in this remote location. Another respondent praised the community toddler group, which runs on a Monday at the medical practice.



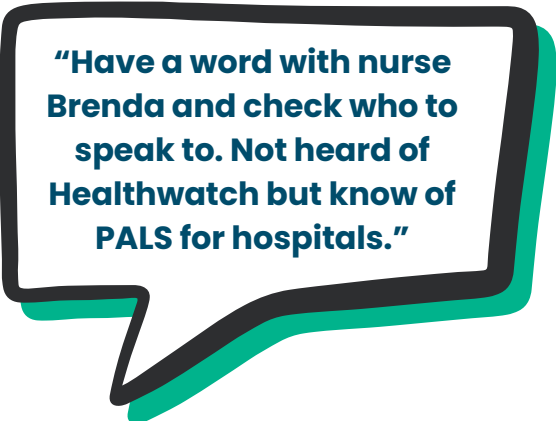
On-site pharmacy

Patient feedback

Feedback and complaints

The practice has established a proactive feedback culture through post-appointment texts, which patients appreciate. While multiple feedback channels exist and staff are seen as approachable, there are knowledge gaps about formal complaint procedures.

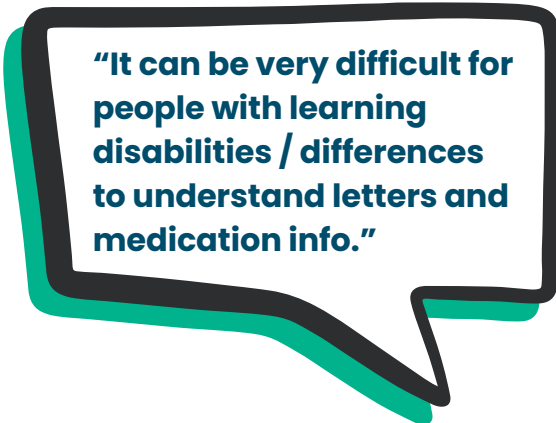
There was mixed feedback on how to raise feedback or make a complaint. Four patients referred to the text they received after any clinical interaction with the medical practice, as a way to raise feedback or a complaint. Six people said that they would ask/raise the feedback or complaint in person. One person referred to the suggestion box.



"Have a word with nurse Brenda and check who to speak to. Not heard of Healthwatch but know of PALS for hospitals."

The low complaint levels suggest good service quality, but the practice could benefit from clearer communication about complaint processes and external advocacy services such as Healthwatch.

Other comments



"It can be very difficult for people with learning disabilities / differences to understand letters and medication info."

Patients express exceptionally high satisfaction with Alston Medical Practice, particularly praising staff quality and the caring approach. While there have been challenges with GP continuity following retirement, the practice has successfully navigated this transition. The referral system works well, which is crucial for this remote location.

However, there is an important accessibility concern regarding communication materials for patients with learning disabilities, although this relates more to the language used by the NHS generally.



"We have recently had some fantastic locum GPs. It is a shame that they don't stay for longer."

Conclusion

Patient satisfaction with care quality at Alston Medical Practice, combined with consistently high ratings for communication and premises maintenance, reflects a GP practice that has successfully adapted to serve a remote rural community with complex healthcare needs.

Patient demographics reveal potential significant challenges: 64% have long-term conditions requiring ongoing management, while 36% provide unpaid care. In a location where the nearest alternative services are 20 miles away and specialist services require travel to Penrith or Carlisle, the practice serves as a vital healthcare lifeline for the community.

"The staff at the surgery are excellent. Best practice I have ever attended."

"Everyone is so lovely especially coming from a Bradford practice where we were before. The nurse is lovely."

Patients particularly value the responsive appointment system, with many securing same-day or next-day appointments, and the proactive text reminder service. The multi-channel communication approach successfully accommodates different patient preferences and digital capabilities. The effective referral system is crucial given limited local specialist provision, especially following the reduction in cottage hospital services.



Notice board at the entrance to Alston Medical Practice

Recommendations

The consistently positive feedback on Alston Medical Practice reflects a service that genuinely meets the many and complex needs of its patient population. The team balances efficiency with the personal touch which the communities values. How they have taken on important community services in their remote community (iCAT provision, the social day centre) is praiseworthy.

There is very little opportunity to make recommendations as we would normally do following an Enter and View visit. Rather than make recommendations for the sake of making them, on issues which are out of the practice's control (such as the steep steps and long drive from the bus stop, and the need for wider doors for the biggest electric mobility chairs and 'scooters'), we have four small recommendations which could have a big impact.

1 Accessible communication support

Consider offering brief face-to-face explanations of medication instructions and important correspondence for patients with learning difficulties. **Reason:** One patient specifically highlighted difficulties understanding letters and medication information. This could be addressed without requiring system-wide changes.

2 Formal complaints process clarity

Display clear information about how to make formal complaints and signpost external support services such as Healthwatch and NHS Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). **Reason:** Several patients were uncertain about complaint procedures. Simple information displays would address this knowledge gap while maintaining the practice's approachable culture.

3 Promote the Patient Participation Group (PPG)

Display information from Cumbria Health's PPG meetings on noticeboards. **Reason:** PPGs encourage two-way communication between the patient population and practice, and provide an additional means of sharing messages. Raising awareness of the PPG encourages more representative membership.

4 Contrasting coloured toilet seat

Change the current white toilet seat for one in a contrasting colour (such as dark blue). **Reason:** To better support independent toilet-use by those with dementia.

Provider response

Cumbria Health would like to thank Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness for their Enter and View visit to Alston Medical Practice and for producing such a detailed and balanced report.

We are very pleased that the report reflects the high levels of patient satisfaction with care quality, communication and accessibility at the practice. The feedback highlights the dedication of our staff and their commitment to providing compassionate, responsive care to a geographically remote community.

We are particularly proud that the report recognises the important contribution Alston Medical Practice makes to the wellbeing of the wider community, not only through medical care, but also through the valued Social Day Care Unit and our team's ongoing efforts to support social connection and inclusion.

The positive findings on same day appointment access, effective communication, and staff approachability are a credit to the team at Alston, who work hard to maintain excellent standards despite the challenges of serving a dispersed rural population.

We welcome the four recommendations made by Healthwatch and have already considered how best to respond to each.

Once again, we thank Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness for their constructive feedback and recognition of the commitment shown by the Alston Medical Practice team. We remain dedicated to sustaining the high-quality, community-focused healthcare that local residents value so highly.

Jane Little, Head of Primary Care, Cumbria Health

healthwatch
Westmorland
and Furness



0300 373 2820

info@healthwatchwestfurn.co.uk

healthwatchwestfurn.co.uk