



Speaking up for better care

Healthwatch Darlington annual report 2025/26

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Healthwatch England
Acting Chief Executive
Chris McCann

“

The NHS plays a vital role in our lives, and we know it faces real challenges. Listening to people’s thoughts about their care is one of the best ways to improve services. Every comment, concern, and compliment helps health and care professionals see what works and what needs to change, so care can be safer and better for everyone.

“We want to say a heartfelt thanks to all the local people who have taken the time to share their experiences, and to the health and social care professionals who have listened and acted on that feedback. Your commitment has helped make a real difference for our community.”

A message from our Chair

As Chair of Healthwatch Darlington, I am pleased to reflect on a year in which we listened to people from all parts of our community, ensuring that those whose voices are often least heard had opportunities to share their experiences. By identifying common themes in the feedback we received, we highlighted important issues relating to primary care access, mental health support, dentistry and the challenges people face when navigating services.

The experiences shared with us have informed discussions locally and across the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System, helping decision-makers better understand what matters most to local people. Through collaboration with neighbouring Healthwatch organisations, we have strengthened the collective voice of communities and contributed to positive change across the wider health and care system. Importantly, we have ensured that local insight is not only heard but acted upon, helping to shape service improvements and future planning.

This year also marked the departure of Michelle Thompson and Diane Lax, whose dedication and leadership helped shape Healthwatch Darlington from its earliest days. We thank them sincerely for their outstanding contribution and lasting legacy.

I would also like to recognise Andrea Goldie for her exceptional leadership during a period of significant change. Her commitment to partnership working and community engagement has ensured Healthwatch Darlington remains a trusted, influential and respected voice for local people.



**Healthwatch Darlington
Chair**
Valerie Douglas



"When people feel heard, services improve. By listening carefully, working collaboratively and acting on what communities tell us, we can ensure local voices continue to shape decisions, influence change and improve health and care outcomes for everyone."

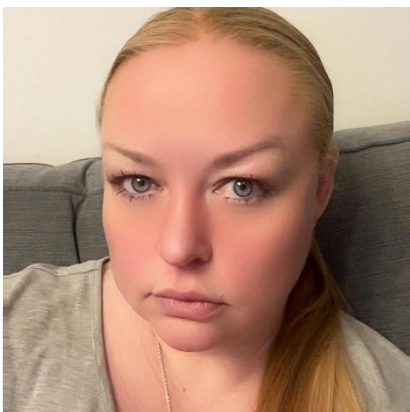
A message from our Manager

As I reflect on the past year, I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved together through the power of partnership, collaboration and community voice. Healthwatch Darlington has continued to play a unique role in bringing people, organisations and decision-makers together to improve health and wellbeing across our borough. Through Darlington Organisations Together (DOT), the Darlington Mental Health Network and our Community Mental Health partnerships, we have strengthened connections, shared learning and helped create opportunities that make a real difference to local people.

I am equally proud of the work we have undertaken alongside neighbouring Healthwatch organisations across the North East and North Cumbria. By working collectively, we have ensured that local experiences influence decisions at Integrated Care Board level and contribute to regional and national discussions on issues including primary care access, mental health, digital inclusion, workforce development and dentistry.

By working together across sectors and across boundaries, we can create healthier, more connected communities and ensure that the people of Darlington remain at the heart of decisions that affect their lives.

Thank you to everyone who has been part of that journey.



**Healthwatch Darlington
Manager**
Andrea Goldie



“Looking ahead, we will continue to build strong partnerships, champion lived experience and reach communities whose voices are not always heard.”

About us

Healthwatch Darlington is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS 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

To bring closer the day when everyone gets the care they need.



Our mission

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



Our values are:

Equity: We're compassionate and inclusive. We build strong connections and empower the communities we serve.

Collaboration: We build internal and external relationships. We communicate clearly and work with partners to amplify our influence.

Impact: We're ambitious about creating change for people and communities. We're accountable to those we serve and hold others to account.

Independence: Our agenda is driven by the public. We're a purposeful, critical friend to decision-makers.

Truth: We work with integrity and honesty, and we speak truth to power.

Our year in numbers

In 2025/2026 we supported more than 15,500 local people to have their say and get information about their care. The organisation began the year with 5 staff members. Due to a necessary restructure during the year, two posts were made redundant, leaving 3 staff in post at the end of the reporting period, our work was supported by 10 volunteers.



Reaching out:

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

A further **30** people contacted us directly for advice, support or help finding services. In addition, our website was used by **15,000** people, demonstrating the significant number of individuals accessing information independently online.

Together, this shows how people are using both direct contact and digital channels to access advice and information on topics such as accessing services and booking appointments.



Championing your voice:

During 2025–2026, Healthwatch Darlington worked with 13 other Healthwatch partners across the North East and North Cumbria to publish three collaborative insight reports on GP access, dentistry and mental health.

The voices of Darlington residents were a vital part of this shared evidence, now shaping system priorities, including neighbourhood health, demonstrating the power of collaboration to drive change locally.



Statutory funding:

We're funded by **Darlington Borough Council**. In 2025/26 we received **£77,941**, which is **£1,444 more** than last year.

Listening to your experiences

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 Darlington. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

NHS Complaints Process:

Individuals raising concerns were provided with information on how to formally complain, including signposting to NHS complaints procedures and guidance on escalating concerns.



Service Information and Advice:

People were supported with clearer explanations of how services work, helping them better understand care pathways and what to expect.



Summer

GP & NHS Information: Members of the public were regularly referred to NHS websites or GP-specific platforms for guidance on how to change practices, raise complaints, or access services.



Independent Advocacy Services (ICA): ICA was a key referral point in multiple cases where individuals wanted to escalate complaints, especially in complex or unresolved situations.



Autumn

Feedback and Experience

Recording: People were supported to share their experiences (particularly around dignity and respect), ensuring these were captured to inform service improvement.



Partnership Engagement:

Working within the community with others including events and focus groups, providing opportunities for people to share their experiences of care.



Winter

Access to Dental services:

Support was provided in finding dentists through signposting and information to help people understand how to access available dental care.



Hospital Services: Concerns were raised regarding the local A&E depart. Delays and communication failures were captured as areas for ongoing monitoring.



Information and signposting

When you're struggling to find an NHS dentist, looking for help about how to make a complaint, or need advice about a good care home for a loved one – we're your first port of call.

This year, **30** people reached out to us directly for advice, support or help finding services. These conversations also helped us to understand where, and how, care can be improved, particularly in relation to accessing services and navigating the health and care system.

In addition to this, our website provided information and guidance to a much wider audience. Over the year:

- **15,000** people used our website.
- Key pages accessed included information on services, news updates, and support schemes.
- Content relating to NHS services, financial support, and local care provision was widely viewed.

This demonstrates that many people are seeking support independently online, accessing trusted information to help them understand services, make decisions, and find the help they need.

Together, this highlights our dual role in providing:

- Direct, personalised support through one-to-one contact
- Accessible, self-service information through our digital platforms
- Both routes help people to better understand their options and take action.

69

"I didn't know where to start, but this has really helped me understand what I can do next."

69

"Thank you for explaining everything clearly, I feel more confident now."



Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of Darlington. 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:

- Creating a wide range of opportunities for people to have their voices heard,
- Ensuring that engagement extends beyond those who actively seek support.
- Using social media in extending our reach and sharing information with the community.
- Supporting people facing barriers and ensuring their voices are heard.



Our Impact: Amplifying Voices and Improving Care

This year, we created a wide range of opportunities for people to have their voices heard, ensuring that feedback was gathered in ways that were accessible, inclusive, and meaningful.

What difference did this make?

Through a combination of community outreach, events, focus groups, and one-to-one conversations, we recorded **632** interactions. These engagements reflect a broad cross-section of the community and demonstrate our continued commitment to listening to people's experiences.



Reaching Our Communities

We reached people in a variety of ways, ensuring that engagement extended beyond those who actively seek support.

Our work included attending community events, delivering awareness sessions, facilitating focus groups, and engaging with people in public and community settings.

What difference did this make?

These approaches enabled both informal and structured conversations, allowing individuals to share their experiences in environments where they felt comfortable. We also worked alongside community groups and partner organisations to deliver engagement activities. These partnerships helped us connect with a wider range of people and ensured that feedback was gathered from different parts of the community.

Digital Engagement and Social Media Reach



In addition to face-to-face and website engagement, social media played a key role in extending our reach and sharing information with the community.

Across our platforms, including Healthwatch and Youthwatch Facebook and Instagram accounts, we engaged with thousands of people:

- A combined following of over **4,200** people
- Over **1,400** posts shared across the year
- More than **164,000** post impressions, meaning our content appeared on screens over **160,000** times
- Over **25,000** people reached through our posts
- Hundreds of interactions, including likes, shares, and comments

Social media enabled us to:

- Share information about services and support
- Promote events and engagement opportunities
- Signpost people to advice and guidance
- Raise awareness of key health and care issues

What difference did this make?

This digital presence ensured we could reach people who may not engage through traditional channels and provided an additional way for individuals to connect with us.

Supporting People Facing Barriers

Many of the people we spoke to required support to navigate health and social care services.

This included help with understanding how to access GP services, book appointments, and raise concerns.

We provided clear information and signposting to appropriate services, including NHS information, complaints processes, and independent advocacy.

What difference did this make?

This support helped to reduce barriers for those who may struggle to navigate complex systems, ensuring more people were able to access services, understand their options, and seek the help they needed.

Making Sure Voices Are Heard

All feedback gathered through our engagement activities was recorded and analysed to identify common themes and issues.

Recurring concerns, particularly around access to services and appointment availability, provide valuable insight into the experiences of local people

What difference did this make?

By capturing both individual experiences and wider patterns, we have created a strong evidence base that can be shared with local NHS organisations and system partners. This ensures that the voices of our community contribute to ongoing conversations about service improvement and future planning.

What This Means

Our work this year demonstrates that:

- People are willing to share their experiences when given the opportunity
- Access to services and understanding how to navigate them remain key challenges
- Ongoing engagement, partnership working, and digital outreach are essential to reaching a diverse range of communities
- By continuing to listen, support, and amplify these voices, we play a vital role in helping to shape services that better meet the needs of local people.

Making a difference in our 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 Darlington 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.

Patient experiences from Darlington Urgent Care Access Centre highlighted barriers to NHS dentistry, with 12.5% having a regular dentist and some not seen for over ten years. Many were removed from lists or unable to secure appointments, often attending with urgent needs. The NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) used this feedback to shape future reforms, including urgent dental access centres.



Getting services to involve the public

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

The Modern General Practice Access report showed this through feedback from Healthwatch Darlington and Healthwatch teams across the North East and North Cumbria. People reported mixed GP access experiences, with 59% finding it easy, but many unaware of Extended Access, Pharmacy First and the NHS App. The ICB is using this insight to improve communication, service navigation and ensure future primary care access is clearer, fairer and more consistent.



Improving care over time

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

Healthwatch brought together lived experiences from people, families and carers across County Durham and Tees Valley to support TEWV's development of rehabilitation and reablement services. People described challenges across crisis, inpatient and community care, highlighting needs for clear communication, continuity, safe discharge and joined-up working. TEWV is using this insight to strengthen trauma-informed practice, improve transitions and collaboration with partners, supporting long-term improvement and more consistent, recovery-focused care across the region.

Working together in Darlington

Through trusted, independent leadership, Healthwatch Darlington facilitates partnerships that connect organisations, communities and lived experience to drive positive change

Darlington Organisations Together (DOT)

Bringing together charities, community groups and voluntary organisations to share information, collaborate and respond to local issues.

Darlington Mental Health Network

Uniting health, care, community organisations and lived experience to improve mental health and wellbeing across Darlington.

Community Mental Health Social Prescribers

Providing dedicated mental health-focused support while strengthening connections between Primary Care, community organisations and specialist services.



Bringing Partners Together

Strengthening collaboration across Darlington

Strong partnerships are at the heart of creating healthier, more connected communities. Throughout the year, Healthwatch Darlington has played a leading role in facilitating collaborative networks that enable organisations to share knowledge, identify challenges and work together on solutions that benefit local people.

The Darlington Organisations Together (DOT) Network has continued to provide an important forum for charities, community groups and voluntary sector organisations to network, exchange information and strengthen relationships. By creating opportunities for organisations to learn from one another and explore shared priorities, the network helps build a stronger and more resilient voluntary and community sector.

Alongside this, the Darlington Mental Health Network has brought together system leaders, health and care professionals, voluntary sector organisations and people with lived experience to improve mental health and emotional wellbeing across the borough. Through open discussion, shared learning and collaborative planning, partners have worked collectively to strengthen local pathways and identify opportunities for service improvement.

Healthwatch Darlington has also supported the delivery of Community Mental Health Social Prescribers through partnerships with First Stop Darlington and Tees Valley YMCA. These dedicated roles help connect people with community support, improve access to services and strengthen links between Primary Care, the voluntary sector and specialist mental health services.

Why it matters

By bringing together diverse voices, expertise and lived experience, Healthwatch Darlington helps create stronger partnerships, more joined-up services and better outcomes for people across our communities.



“Thanks to Andrea, her quality and her enthusiasm, from your leadership and getting us to do some work. On behalf of everyone, thank you Andrea and thank you to the Network”

“We need to include mental health network in everything we do, we need to make every contact count, we need to celebrate the diversity of our network.”



Darlington Organisations Together (DOT) Network

Facilitated by Healthwatch Darlington, DOT brings together voluntary, community and statutory partners to share knowledge, build relationships and strengthen support for local people.

Connecting

Building Local Connections:

DOT provides regular opportunities for charities, community groups and local organisations to come together, network and develop stronger working relationships across Darlington.

Creating a Shared Voice:

Partners share updates, challenges and opportunities, helping organisations stay informed about developments affecting local communities and services

Sharing

Learning from Partners:

Guest speakers and partner presentations help organisations increase awareness of local initiatives, funding opportunities and support available to residents.

Promoting Community

Services: The network provides a platform for organisations to showcase their work, raise awareness of projects and reach new audiences across the borough.

Collaboration

Supporting Partnership

Working: DOT encourages organisations to identify shared priorities, exchange ideas and explore opportunities to work together to address local challenges.

Improving Community Support:

By strengthening communication between organisations, the network helps improve signposting, referrals and access to support for local people.

Supporting

Championing the VCSE Sector:

Healthwatch Darlington continues to facilitate an inclusive and welcoming network, ensuring organisations of all sizes have opportunities to contribute and be heard.

Building a Stronger Community:

Through ongoing collaboration and information sharing, DOT continues to strengthen relationships across the VCSE and statutory sectors, supporting better outcomes for Darlington residents.

Darlington Mental Health Network

Over the year, the network has continued to strengthen relationships between services, improve information sharing, and ensure that local experiences help shape mental health support in Darlington.

Leadership

Sustaining the Network:

Healthwatch Darlington secured funding to facilitate the network for a further 2 years, ensuring continued partnership working and a strong, coordinated approach to improving mental health support.

System Coordination: The network continues to bring together organisations across health, social care and the voluntary sector, improving communication, sharing information, and supporting a more joined-up system.

Community

Peer and Lived Experience Support:

The network has supported and showcased community-led initiatives, including peer support projects reducing isolation and improving wellbeing, particularly for men and those in recovery.

Community Engagement:

Positive Wellbeing events in Darlington town centre have enabled organisations to connect with residents, raise awareness of support, and encourage open conversations about mental health.

Services

Early Intervention and Access:

Partners have strengthened early support, particularly for children and young people through school-based services, alongside new pharmacy follow-up support for people starting antidepressants.

Crisis and Care Pathways: The network has supported awareness of changes to urgent mental health support, including access via NHS 111, and contributed to discussions on developing local crisis provision..

Impact

Addressing Wider Needs: The network has highlighted the impact of poverty, employment and financial pressures on mental health, promoting services that provide practical support such as employment advice and money guidance..

Prevention and Insight: Partners have worked together on suicide prevention and contributed to research and insight, helping to shape future mental health support in Darlington.

Working in Partnership

Joined-up support for our community

Healthwatch Darlington has been working in partnership with Tees Valley YMCA and First Stop Darlington to deliver a Mental Health Social Prescribing project that is already making a positive difference for the local community including young people.

Through early intervention and personalised, one-to-one support, the programme is helping individuals build confidence, reduce isolation, and reconnect with their communities. By focusing on what matters to each person, the project supports people to take small but meaningful steps towards improved mental health and wellbeing.

For young people, this has included support to explore interests, develop social connections, and gradually re-engage with education and community activities. This flexible and person-centred approach is helping individuals move forward at their own pace, with trusted support alongside them.

The success of the programme highlights the value of strong partnership working. By bringing together the local insight and independence of Healthwatch Darlington with the specialist youth support from Tees Valley YMCA and the community expertise of First Stop Darlington, the project is reaching people who may otherwise struggle to access support.



“Working with Andrea at Healthwatch and the team has been a breath of fresh air, always on hand regarding paperwork and a fantastic support to the Community Mental Health Prescriber Programme. It is the first chance we have had to work on a funded programme together and it won't be the last. The programme is all the better through the shared partnership with ourselves, YMCA and Healthwatch Darlington, its great to be on the same page and all working towards the same goals for our residents”

Tracy Freeman, CEO, First Stop Darlington

“This project is making a real difference for young people in Darlington. By working in partnership with Healthwatch Darlington and First Stop, we are able to reach those who may otherwise struggle to access support and provide early, personalised help. Together, we are supporting young people to build confidence, connect with others, and take positive steps towards better mental health and wellbeing.”

Janine Browne, CEO, Tees Valley YMCA



Community Mental Health Social Prescribers

A Primary Care Network (PCN) initiative delivering community-based mental health social prescribing. The service strengthens early intervention by bridging primary care, VCSE organisations, and specialist mental health services.

Identifying need

Addressing a Gap in Support:

Working with Primary Care partners, a need was identified for additional community-based support for people experiencing low-level to moderate mental health challenges who may not require specialist intervention.

Creating a New Community Offer:

Funding from the PCN enabled the development of Community Mental Health Social Prescriber roles, providing dedicated mental health-focused support within the voluntary and community sector.

Working in Partnership

A Collaborative Approach:

Healthwatch Darlington facilitates the wider Community Mental Health Network, bringing partners together to strengthen pathways, improve access to support and promote joined-up working across the system.

Delivering Local Support:

Community Mental Health Social Prescribers are hosted by First Stop Darlington and Tees Valley YMCA, ensuring support is delivered through trusted community organisations with strong local connections.

Supporting People

Personalised Mental Health Support:

Individuals receive one-to-one support to help them manage challenges, build confidence and access the services and opportunities most relevant to their needs.

Connecting Communities and Services:

The service helps people access wellbeing and community groups, mentoring opportunities and wider support while also assisting those waiting for, or struggling to engage with, mental health services.

Making a Difference

Improving Wellbeing and Resilience:

A holistic approach supported people to reduce isolation, strengthen resilience and take positive steps towards improving their mental health and overall wellbeing.

Supporting Prevention and System Change:

The programme strengthens partnerships, improves access to support and demonstrates the value of early intervention.

Working together for change

We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in Darlington are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level, and they influence decisions made about services at the NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board



A collaborative network of local Healthwatch:

During 2025–2026, the Healthwatch North East and North Cumbria (NENC) network brought together insight from local communities to inform decision making across health and care. Working as a coordinated network of 14 local Healthwatch, we supported the system to understand what people experience in real life. What works, what doesn't, and what needs to change.

Our role is to be an independent, trusted voice. Sometimes that means leading large scale engagement. Sometimes it means supporting early service design, testing communications, or carefully gathering lived experience on sensitive issues.

Across all this work, one thing is clear, people are more willing to share their experiences when they feel listened to, included, and able to take part through people and organisations they trust, in ways that work for them.

Primary Care Access

Primary care access: understanding what works and what doesn't

Healthwatch NENC supported the rollout of Modern General Practice Access (MGPA) across all 14 local areas.

As changes to GP access were being introduced, Healthwatch teams worked together to help raise awareness and support understanding across local communities.

Teams went out into GP practices, pharmacies, libraries, warm spaces, foodbanks and other community venues. Using MGPA leaflets alongside face-to-face conversations, we were able to give people time to ask questions and better understand their options, particularly those often missed by digital only campaigns.

People told us they welcome having more choice, including the NHS App, Pharmacy First and Extended Access appointments. When systems work well, people experience quicker access and less stress.



Primary Care Access

Primary care access: understanding what works and what doesn't

Many people were unaware of Extended Access or told us they were never offered it. Understanding of Pharmacy First varied, with some people unsure what it could help with or receiving inconsistent information. Digital access worked for some but excluded others, particularly older people, Disabled people and those without confidence, devices or reliable internet access.

The biggest concern raised, continues to be getting a GP appointment. People told us about long waits on phone lines, frustration with online forms, the '8am rush', and difficulties maintaining continuity for ongoing or complex conditions.

Why this mattered

Bringing insight together across the region helped highlight where system intentions were not yet landing in people's real experiences. This strengthened the focus on clearer communication, more consistent offers, accessible information from day one, and non digital routes that work for everyone, not just those who find systems easy to navigate.



"I didn't know about Extended Access until Healthwatch explained it. No one had ever mentioned it before."

"Online works for some people, but if you're not confident or don't have the right phone, it just shuts you out."

"I still go to the surgery in person because I can't get through on the phone, but then you're told there's nothing available."



Winter Care

Helping people understand winter care and pharmacy options

Working with the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB), Healthwatch supported work to understand whether information about winter care and pharmacy services was clear and useful for local people.

People told us that while some messages were helpful, others were confusing or easy to miss, particularly for those who don't use digital channels or who rely on clear, simple explanations. Testing information face-to-face helped show where messages needed to be clearer, more consistent and easier to act on.

This insight was shared with the ICB to support improvements to winter communications, helping ensure information about pharmacy options and access routes was easier to understand and more likely to reach people who might otherwise be missed.

What this helped change

Testing information with local people helped the ICB understand which messages were working and where clarity was missing, supporting improvements to how winter and pharmacy information was shared across the region.



Winter Care

Helping people understand winter care and pharmacy options

NHS

What additional conditions are covered as part of this service?

- **Aches and pains** - back pain, headache, migraine, muscle ache, period pain, teething, toothache
- **Allergies** - bites and stings, hay fever, skin reaction
- **Colds and flu** - cough, congestion, sore throat, fever / temperature (including fever following immunisation)
- **Ear care** - earache, ear infection, ear wax
- **Eye care** - bacterial conjunctivitis, styes
- **Gastrointestinal care** - diarrhoea, constipation, indigestion, haemorrhoids (piles), reflux, threadworms, vomiting
- **Head lice**
- **Mouth care** - cold sores, oral thrush, ulcers
- **Skin care** - athlete's foot, chicken pox, contact dermatitis / atopic eczema, fungal skin infections, nappy rash, pruritis (itching), scabies, warts, verrucas
- **Vaginal thrush**

NHS

Got an itchy?

Tummy trouble?

Tickly cough?

Head to your local pharmacy.

HERE TO HELP

Find further information at: www.thinkpharmacyfirst.health



“I’d seen the posters, but I didn’t really understand what they were asking me to do until someone explained it.”

“Pharmacies can help with more than people realise, but the information isn’t always clear.”

“If you’re not online, it’s easy to miss important messages.”



WorkWell

Shaping WorkWell: early service design through lived experience

Healthwatch supported the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) with early engagement to inform the development of WorkWell, a new service designed to help people with long term health conditions stay in or return to work.

At the ICB's request, Healthwatch helped gather targeted feedback from people with lived experience of managing health, disability and work. Given tight timescales and a limited number of sessions, this was delivered through a small number of focus groups, either directly by Healthwatch or through trusted community partners.

People shared the real barriers they face when trying to balance health and work, including caring responsibilities, mental health challenges, stigma and the difficulty of navigating joined up support. Their feedback highlighted the importance of flexibility, trauma informed approaches, and better awareness and understanding from employers.

This work helped ensure that early service design was grounded in lived experience, demonstrating how Healthwatch adds value at the earliest stages by supporting services to be shaped around people's real lives and needs.

What this influenced

This insight helped ensure that WorkWell was shaped early around people's real circumstances, rather than assumptions, particularly for those balancing health, work and caring responsibilities.



"It's not just about my health, it's juggling work, appointments and caring responsibilities."

"Employers don't always understand what people are managing alongside their job."



Palliative Care

Listening on sensitive issues: Palliative and end of life care

Healthwatch supported system led engagement to inform future palliative and end of life care planning across the region.

While the primary approach relied on a regional survey, Healthwatch involvement focused on engaging people who are least likely to share their views through standard engagement routes. Conversations about death, dying and end of life care are deeply personal and can be especially difficult for people facing multiple disadvantage.

Healthwatch's contribution highlighted important learning for the system, people do not all engage in the same way. Meaningful insight comes from trusted relationships, safe and supportive environments, and the right approach for the people involved.

Feedback gathered through Healthwatch helped complement survey findings and ensured that voices often missed were considered in future planning.

What this reinforced

This work reinforced the importance of using trusted, supportive approaches when engaging on sensitive topics, ensuring insight from people least likely to take part in surveys was considered alongside wider findings.



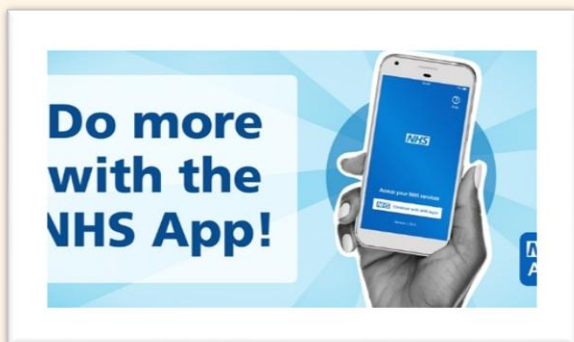
“Talking about end of life isn’t easy, you need time and people you trust.”

“I wouldn’t have taken part in a survey, but I was able to talk openly in person.”

“You don’t speak up unless you feel safe.”



Influencing national policy: Developing NHS Online



During 2025–2026, the Healthwatch NENC network submitted a joint response to a national consultation on Developing NHS Online, bringing together what people across the region have told Healthwatch about digital health services.

Based on what people have told Healthwatch over several years, the response reflected mixed experiences of digital health services. Many people value the convenience of online access, particularly the NHS App.

However, people also raised ongoing concerns about:

- digital exclusion
- communication
- continuity of care
- having real choice about how they access services

Healthwatch highlighted that online services must remain an option, not an expectation. Essential to ensure people are not excluded or disadvantaged as services change are:

- clear communication
- meeting the Accessible Information Standard
- strong non-digital alternatives

This work demonstrates how collective Healthwatch insight helps ensure local people's experiences are heard in national discussions about the future of health and care.

Why this mattered

By bringing together experiences from across the region, Healthwatch helped ensure national discussions about digital health reflected both the benefits people value and the risks of exclusion if choice and accessibility are not protected.

Workforce Voices

Making national work more accessible

Through the NIHR-funded Workforce Voices programme, Healthwatch across the North East and North Cumbria played a direct role in improving how national projects involve people with real experience of health and care.

Healthwatch helped challenge the way information is usually written and shared. We pushed for clearer language, simpler formats and more accessible ways of involving people, so they can understand what's being asked of them and feel confident giving their views.

What difference this made

This work led to clear, practical guidance and tools that show project teams how to communicate better and involve people more meaningfully. It helps prevent people being excluded because information is too technical, unclear or overwhelming.

Why this matters

By working together at a network level within a national programme, Healthwatch showed how lived experience from across the region can change how involvement is done. This helps ensure people's voices are a core part of how national work is designed and delivered.



Mental Health Rehabilitation

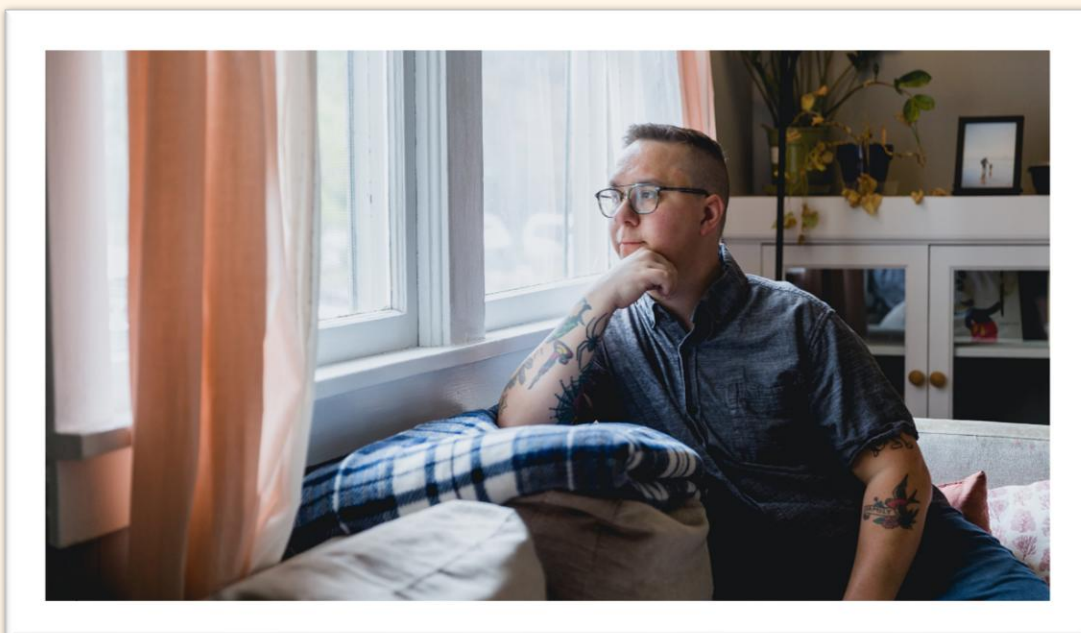
Mental health rehabilitation: what helps people recover – and what puts them at risk

This year Healthwatch supported Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust to gather in depth lived experience insight to inform mental health rehabilitation and reablement services across County Durham and Tees Valley.

This work focused on people's stories, not statistics, capturing what it actually feels like to move through crisis services, inpatient care, discharge and community mental health support.

Across all areas, people consistently told us about:

- Long waits for help
- Calls and appointments that didn't happen
- Being passed between services with no one clearly responsible
- Discharge feeling rushed, unsafe or unclear



“Discharge feeling rushed, unsafe or unclear.”

Mental Health Rehabilitation

Mental health rehabilitation: what helps people recover – and what puts them at risk

These experiences often left people frightened, isolated and less likely to seek help again.

At the same time, people were very clear about what makes recovery possible.

They told us they need:

- One person or team who stays involved
- Face to face contact when distressed
- Clear follow up and communication that actually happens
- Safe, joined up discharge planning
- Support that understands trauma and neurodiversity
- Strong links to trusted voluntary and community organisations



Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys
NHS Foundation Trust

“As part of our commitment to co production and improvement, we approached Healthwatch to gather insight on people’s experiences of mental health rehabilitation services. This feedback has directly shaped a programme of investment responding to the issues and opportunities identified.

“As we move forward, rehabilitation teams will continue to work collaboratively with partners across our local communities to ensure services are embedded in ways that promote equitable access and respond to local need.”

Jamie Todd

Director of Operations and Transformation

Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust

Mental Health Rehabilitation

Mental health rehabilitation: what helps people recover – and what puts them at risk

Families and carers described carrying huge responsibility, often managing risk alone. Many said the only consistent support came from local VCSE organisations, offering familiarity, safety and continuity when statutory services could not.

The findings were brought together in a published insight report with practical, constructive recommendations focused on continuity, safe transitions and community-based support.

System partners have welcomed this insight as a powerful reminder that rehabilitation succeeds when relationships, not just pathways, are in place.

This work shows the unique role Healthwatch plays in bringing lived experience into mental health service design, safely, independently and with the depth needed to drive meaningful change.

What this changed

The report provided system partners with a clear, human picture of how continuity, communication and safe transitions affect recovery, helping reinforce the importance of relationship-based approaches alongside pathway redesign.



“I just want someone to listen.”

“I don’t fit anywhere in the system.”

“I was discharged without a plan and didn’t know who to contact.”

“They saved my life.”



University Hospital Tees

Keeping people involved during system change: University Hospitals Tees



Healthwatch continued to support University Hospitals Tees and system partners as they developed and implemented their Group Model.

Although the main community research took

place in 2024 and was published in 2025, Healthwatch's role continued into 2025–2026. This included supporting follow up work, reflecting on what was learned, and helping shape public facing engagement so people could see how their feedback was being used.

Healthwatch involvement helped maintain trust with local communities by ensuring conversations remained open, transparent and focused on 'you said, we did'. This reinforced the importance of ongoing dialogue, not one-off consultation, when major service changes are being planned and delivered.



"We want to know what happened after we shared our views."

"It makes a difference when you can see change, not just be asked again."

"Keep involving people, don't just consult once."



Looking Ahead

Across this work, one thing comes through clearly, engagement makes the biggest difference when it is inclusive, trusted and built in from the start.

As services and policies change, the Healthwatch NENC network has shown it can respond quickly and meaningfully, working across 14 local Healthwatch to bring together what people are experiencing in real time.

Our independence means people are willing to speak honestly, especially when things are confusing, difficult or not working as planned.

Looking ahead, Healthwatch will continue to build on this position of trust. This includes contributing to Fit for the Future, an ICB-led programme focused on strengthening the health and care workforce and supporting services to meet future demand.

Healthwatch's role in this work is to bring forward the experiences of people and staff, particularly where access, communication and everyday experiences shape how care is received.



Looking Ahead

We are also continuing our involvement in workforce work linked to the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), building on the Healthwatch NENC partnership set out in last year's Raising Voices Together report.

For Healthwatch, this means helping ensure learning about the health and care workforce is grounded in lived experience, from patients, communities and staff themselves.

This includes understanding the everyday realities of roles such as GP reception and practice teams, and how these experiences affect access to care.

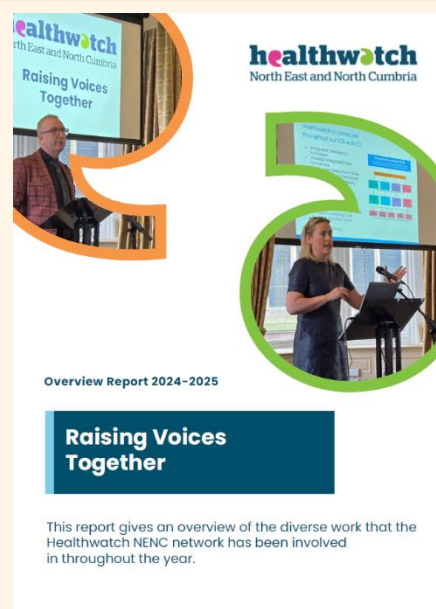
By connecting local insight with regional and national conversations, Healthwatch NENC helps ensure decisions are shaped by real lives. This can be seen clearly in areas such as dentistry, where people's experiences have helped drive change.

As the system continues to evolve, we will remain independent, responsive and firmly focused on making sure people's experiences lead to meaningful change.

Dentistry: making a difference

People told Healthwatch they were struggling to access NHS dental care and didn't know where to go for urgent help.

Healthwatch brought these experiences directly into system discussions. At ICB Board level, leaders confirmed that progress in dentistry would not have been possible without Healthwatch's involvement. This has led to clearer urgent dental pathways, online booking for urgent care, and improved access across the region.



“By connecting local insight with regional and national conversations, Healthwatch NENC helps ensure decisions are shaped by real lives.”

Reflecting on Impact

Reflecting on impact: recognition and moving forward together

Healthwatch's impact is often built over time. Through sustained engagement and trusted relationships, earlier work across the North East and North Cumbria is now influencing system priorities and discussions.

Over the past year, Healthwatch insight has been recognised at system level, including through ICB Board discussions on women's health, dentistry and University Hospitals Tees. This reflects the value of Healthwatch's independent role in bringing people's experiences into decision making beyond one off consultations.

Messages people have consistently shared with Healthwatch, about access, communication, continuity and meaningful engagement, are now visible in current system priorities, including the growing focus on Neighbourhood Health and care closer to home.

This provides a strong foundation for continued collaboration as the system moves forward.



'Over the past year, Healthwatch insight has been recognised at system level, including through ICB Board discussions on women's health, dentistry and University Hospitals Tees.'

Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Darlington Borough Council under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to help us do our work.

Our income and expenditure:

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£77,941	Expenditure on pay	£125,582
Additional income	£110,676	Non-pay expenditure	£39,931
		Office Costs	£11,966
Total income	£188,617	Total Expenditure	£177,479

Additional income is broken down into:

- **£47,486** received from the NHS ICB Mental Health Transformation Funding for the Mental Health Network programme.
- **£57,740** received from the NHS Primary Care Network Integrated Neighbourhood Team for the Mental Health Social Prescribing Project.
- **£ 800** received from Healthwatch England.

Integrated Care System (ICS) funding:

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

Purpose of ICS funding	Amount
Healthwatch Network Administration	£4,000
Primary Care Recover Action Plan (PCARP) Local Engagement	£300
Winter Pressures / Pharmacy Local Engagement	£350
Total ICS funding	£4,650

Finance and future priorities

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

We will also 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.

Our top three priorities for the next year are:

1. Continue to build strong partnerships
2. Champion lived experience
3. Reach communities whose voices are not always heard

Statutory statements

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 **5** members who work voluntarily 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.

During 2025–26, the Board met **7** times and considered a number of important strategic issues affecting the future of Healthwatch Darlington. A key focus was responding to the Government's announcement of its intention to abolish Healthwatch England and the uncertainty this created around future funding arrangements.

Following a thorough review of the organisation's financial position, the Board approved a voluntary redundancy programme involving two members of staff. The Board would like to place on record its sincere thanks to the Chief Executive Officer and Operations Manager, who, as the organisation's most senior employees, chose to take voluntary redundancy to help safeguard the future of Healthwatch Darlington and protect the employment of the remaining team members.

While difficult, these decisions enabled the organisation to restructure, strengthen its financial resilience and remain stable during a period of significant uncertainty. The Board also approved the recruitment of a temporary member of staff to provide maternity cover, ensuring continuity of service delivery and maintaining organisational capacity to meet the needs of local people and stakeholders.

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

We use a range of methods to gather feedback on people's experiences of health and social care services, including phone, email, our website, social media and community events.

This annual report is available to the public and our partners and can be accessed through our website. www.healthwatchdarlington.co.uk

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

We had **no** providers who did not respond to requests for information or recommendations. 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 Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee, where we share feedback from local people about their experiences of health and social care services and highlight areas for improvement.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (NENC ICS). Healthwatch Darlington contributes to a range of partnership and strategic groups, including Darlington ICB Place, Urgent Care Partnership, Mental Health Network, Social Care and Carers Strategy Group, Darlington Cares Strategy, VCSE Steering Group, and the Darlington Locality Oversight Group.

We also work collaboratively with other local Healthwatch organisations through the NENC Healthwatch Network regional meeting and the Tees Valley Healthwatch Network local meeting, ensuring that the experiences of local people inform decisions across the wider health and care system.

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 by Andrea Goldie, Healthwatch Manager

During 2025/26, our representative effectively carried out this role by attending and contributing to a wide range of meetings and partnership boards, presenting community feedback, raising issues identified through engagement activities, and ensuring that the voices of local people influenced the planning, delivery and improvement of health and social care services.

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