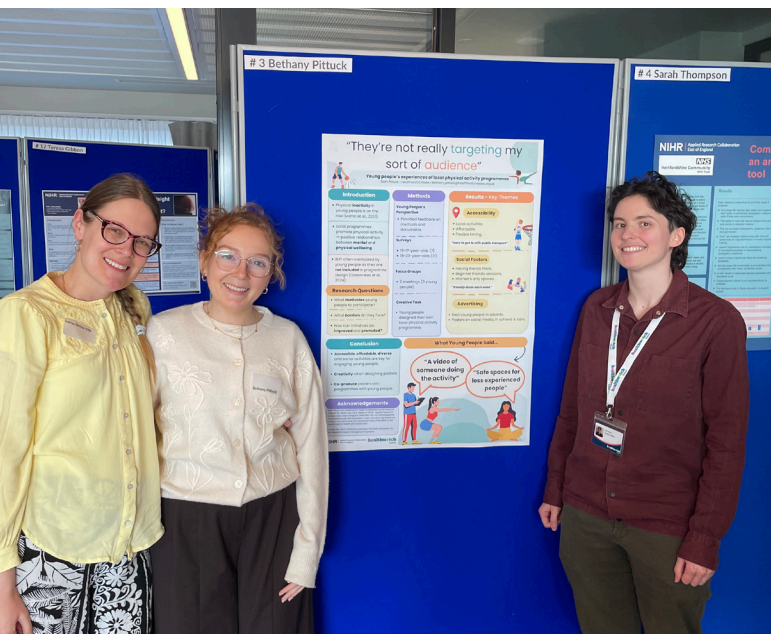


# Healthwatch Essex Annual Report 2025-2026

Your voice improving  
health and care





Photos below:  
 1 - The Information & Guidance team and the Communications team on a visit to HUC to learn about ILL.  
 2 - Jane and Grace at Essex Pride in Chelmsford.  
 3 - Luke, Lorna, Renée and Scott at the SNEE ICS awards.



Photos above:  
 1 - The Research Team (Lorna, Beth and Joe) at a conference.  
 2 - Lily, Sam and Grace at a Fellas' Fair event.  
 3 - The Healthwatch Essex team wearing blue for a dementia awareness day.

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# A Note From Us...



Following the publication of the NHS 10 Year Plan, the former Health Secretary Wes Streeting announced on 28th June 2025 that the government planned to abolish Healthwatch England and all 150 local Healthwatch organisations across England as part of a broader 'bonfire of NHS quangos'. This announcement sent shockwaves through the health and wider charity sectors. This follows several years of cuts for local Integrated Care Boards and Health and Care Partnerships, which has meant restructures, redundancies and reorganisations. It has left residents fearful of losing their independent voice in health and social decision-making.

Independence is too valuable to lose. The local Healthwatch network has united and stood together, calling for that decision to be formally reviewed. In particular, the East of England Local Healthwatch Network has provided a place for collaborative and supportive relationships. Whilst waiting for laws to be put in place, local Healthwatch have been continuing to support local communities and carry on with our 'business as usual'.

At this point in my introduction to our reports, I usually refer to a couple of projects that have been a highlight over the previous 12 months. This year there hasn't been one standout piece of work or programme – instead, it's the collective strength, energy and resilience of my staff, trustees and ambassadors that has inspired me. They have been pillars of strength and optimism during really challenging times. Despite the challenges we've faced this year, the team has continued growing and we've kept flexing what we do to be able to provide the greatest benefit for our community.

I'm thankful for the stakeholders and colleagues who have taken the time to reach out to our organisation and who have provided valuable feedback as to our strengths and the opportunities we will have in the changing landscape.

In this annual report we're not just reflecting on the past year, but the entire history of Healthwatch Essex. It has been a fantastic opportunity to reflect on the wealth of work we have delivered across a diverse range of topics and methodologies.

**Sam Glover, Healthwatch Essex CEO**



The team at Healthwatch Essex has had a busy and successful year ensuring that the lived experiences of health and social care in our communities are shared with our colleagues in the Local Authority and Integrated Care Partnerships and others involved in providing services and support. The information that we share influences many of the decisions and priorities that our colleagues across health and social care are working on to ensure the best possible care is available to everyone.

Our Research Team has welcomed more Research Ambassadors and continues to undertake a number of projects including Living Beyond Cancer to explore the long-term implications of cancer and/or its treatment and life after treatment which comes with many struggles, and the need for follow-up care and support. Our Supporting Partnerships report was well received at a patient experience group at Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust and a Networks Meeting hosted by the Integrated Care Academy and led to the development of our Co-production Training.

The Fellas' Forums continue to be a very popular way to engage with and support men. We asked members about how the forums have helped them – 100% said they felt less isolated and their mental health had improved, 80% stated that their physical health had improved, and 90% of the men are very satisfied and have formed new friendships. We have continued to run Fellas' Fairs and comedy events.

Following the success of the Trauma Card, which is still widely used, and wider discussions with younger survivors of trauma, we co-produced a Trauma Keyring which can be used to make people aware that they are trauma survivors and how they can be supported e.g. at appointments.

The Healthwatch Essex van has been well used by the team to attend events across the county – often in hard-to-reach areas – providing a private space at events for sensitive conversations.

The outcome of the Dash Report including the abolition of Healthwatch was unexpected and a huge shock to everyone working for Healthwatch. Healthwatch Essex has worked hard to diversify our income streams and is in a good position financially and optimistic about our future and continuing the vital work that we do in a different way. We have been able to reassure our staff and our colleagues across health and social care that we plan to continue our work. We have sought the views of our local communities, our staff and colleagues across health and social care and are in a transitional phase working on rebranding and a business plan for a new model of working and greater diversity of funding which we hope to launch in the middle of 2026.

**Amanda Cherry, Chair of the Board of Trustees**



# About Us

## Who we are and what we do

We are an independent voice for the people of Essex, helping to shape and improve health and social care services in the county. We believe that people's views and lived experience of health and care matters, so we're here to make sure your voice is heard and responded to. We also provide an Information and Guidance service to help you access, understand, and navigate the health and care system via a confidential phone call, text, or email.

## Our Vision

That people's voices and experiences influence all health, wellbeing, and care.

## Our Mission

Seeking and listening to people's experiences and voices to create opportunities to shape all health and wellbeing services and policy for Essex.

## What we do

Through innovative research and engagement activities – our reports, events, films, and outreach events – we make evidence-based recommendations to the NHS and social care authorities and demonstrate how lived experience can have a positive impact on the redesign and improvement of local services. We have powers in law, as set out in the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and updated in 2022, to encourage people to share their views and lived experience with us.

## What is ‘lived experience’?

‘Lived experience’ describes people’s first-hand accounts of their health and care. How people experience health and care services is affected by their own personal circumstances; for example, whether they have a family or whether they are in work. Their ‘lived experience’ (good or bad) can shape the trust and confidence they have in health and care services.

That’s why it’s important the system takes the time to find out about the people who use services – to empathise and recognise the impact their service has on the individual and to use this insight to better understand the health and care needs of the local population.



Sign from our Annual Event.

## Our governance

We want to make sure that as many people as possible can share their voice and stories with us and so we continue to take steps to involve the public and volunteers in our governance and decisions about our work.

Our Board of Trustees is responsible for the strategic oversight of Healthwatch Essex. They meet regularly to support and guide the organisation in its strategic ambitions.

## Who we work with

We work closely with the health and social care authorities in Essex to help make sure they put patients and the public first. This includes the three Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), one mental health trust, five acute hospitals, as well as Essex County Council which has responsibility for social care and public health.

As of 1st April 2026, the three ICSs working across Essex will be replaced by a singular Essex ICS. At the same time, the way local and county councils are run is changing due to devolution and local government reform. Currently, it appears that Essex will have five unitary authorities going forward.

We also work with regulators and other commissioners and providers of health, primary care, and community care alongside various voluntary organisations to ensure the voices of Essex residents are heard and taken into consideration when improving local services.

As part of the wider Healthwatch network, we share information with Healthwatch England, which provides a formal link to the Department of Health and Social Care and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Our performance and impact are closely monitored by this network and Essex County Council.



# **Listening & Engaging**

**Capturing and sharing your  
experiences to help improve  
health and social care services**

# 2025-26 in Numbers

## Sharing experiences

**6**  
**240**

ambassadors and **193** network members in our team who use their lived experience to shape local services. We have ambassadors with experience of mental health, trauma, caring, disabilities and more.

## Supporting people

**6**  
**1,399**

people got support from the Healthwatch Essex Information & Guidance Team via our website, phone, text, WhatsApp, or email and **5,160** were engaged with in person.

## Connecting online

**6**  
**795k**

views across our social media channels, **114,870** people visited our website and **141** pieces of feedback were provided to us via our online Feedback Centre.

# Our Projects

**Read about all the ways that sharing your lived experience in our projects this year has helped make a difference, as well as an update on our current projects.**



All our reports can be accessed through [healthwatchessex.org.uk/library/](https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/library/).  
We can provide alternative formats on request.

# Living Beyond Cancer

This research project aimed to explore the lived experience of individuals living beyond cancer. This topic was proposed as the number of individuals living beyond cancer continues to increase, yet little is known about the long-term implications that cancer and/or its treatment has on an individual's life. People often describe feeling as though they're on a 'cliffs edge' when they finish cancer treatment. Many are left with ongoing struggles which impact their life in several ways, including fear of recurrence, body image issues, lack of confidence, struggles with identity and wellbeing. Despite the continued role that cancer plays in people's lives following treatment, evidence has demonstrated an existing gap in the follow-up care and support provided to people post-treatment.

This project therefore aimed to explore what long-term implications cancer and/or its treatment has on an individual's life and how they navigate these experiences. We also wanted to identify the support that individuals have received since their final hospital-based treatment.

To explore people's experiences, ten individuals took part in a one-to-one interview. Four of these were walking interviews conducted around Essex, three took place in-person and three took place online. Participants were asked about their experiences taking part in this research and shared how 'walking helped me to open up'.

Lead Researcher Beth has also visited a variety of services and organisations that support people living with and beyond cancer. These include Breast Cancer Now, Helen Rollason and the Cancer Wellbeing Centre at Colchester Hospital. We have had the opportunity to observe some of the great support that these services provide and have produced a short series of blogs that have been published on our website to highlight the support available across Essex.

We have analysed our interviews to identify key themes and are now running a workshop with our research participants and several professionals from the services we have connected with to co-produce the study's recommendations. This meeting will involve discussing themes from the research to produce recommendations that can be shared with services supporting people living with and beyond cancer across Essex.

Research Officer Beth Pittuck with Kirstie who is The Beyond Breast Cancer Coach, recording a podcast about life beyond cancer.



# NIHR ARC EoE Research Fellowship

*Exploring adolescents and emerging adults' experiences engaging with and responding to local physical activity programmes.*

Over the past year Research Officer Beth Pittuck has been completing a Research Fellowship with the NIHR ARC EoE (National Institute for Health and Care Research, Applied Research Collaboration, East of England). Her project explored young people's perspectives of local physical activity programmes. Twenty-eight young people between the ages of 13-23 filled in a short online survey and three young people took part in two focus groups.

Young people shared common barriers to getting involved in local programmes. This included cost, lack of confidence and limited awareness of programmes available locally. When we discussed what would encourage their involvement, social connection was often repeated. Young people also flagged the value in having clearer, more engaging advertising in a range of locations such as bars, parks and more on social media so they are aware of local activities.

In between the two focus groups, young people were invited to design their own activities. The ideas they came up with were creative and centred on social connection. One participant shared how they 'really enjoyed the focus group' as it gave them 'the opportunity to do something creative'. Please see some of their ideas below:



Posters created by the young people in this project.



# Women and Multiple Long-Term Conditions

Over the last 16 years, women of working age are increasingly developing, and being diagnosed with, multiple long-term conditions. This research project explored women's experiences of living with multiple long-term conditions (MLTC) and the impact of previous service interactions. This qualitative study used creative research methods and life history interviewing to capture women's experiences. In total, 19 women took part.



Our key findings were that:

- Women with neurodivergence find it difficult to navigate services.
- Those with conditions such as fibromyalgia, ME and FND were more likely to report negative experiences and poor care.
- Services continue to operate with a singular-disease focus, leaving many with unmet needs.
- Most participants felt dismissed, that preventative care was lacking and services continued to be inaccessible.
- Communication preferences are frequently not adhered to by providers.

Our main recommendations were to:

- Extend appointment times for those with MLTC and/or neurodivergence.
- Implement hoists in primary care and dental settings.
- Improve accessibility including explaining in advance what an appointment will involve, no jargon, setting goals collaboratively with women, and ensuring quieter/low sensory stimulation areas for those with neurodivergence.
- Build or repair the trust between healthcare professionals and women with MLTC. This requires collaborative consultation, increased accessibility, open communication and incorporation of women's functional goals.

Alongside our study report and executive summary, we also shared the findings in many creative ways. We introduced a new podcast series, Research Reflections, to explore the findings. We showcased posters at the Society for Social Medicine annual conference and the East of England Public Health Research Conference, winning the poster competition. We presented at the NHS East of England International Women's Day seminar series and spoke on a panel at the Westminster Forum on Priorities for Women's Health in England. We have also developed a 'snakes & ladders' style game that puts players in the shoes of a woman with MLTC as they navigate a new diagnosis. This game is presented at outreach events and early feedback has been positive.



Top: Lead Researcher Lorna Orriss-Dib presenting her poster.  
Bottom: Podcast cover art featuring Kate, Lorna and Sarah.



# 'I am unsure on where to go and who to talk to': The impact of the end to Shared Care for ADHD

After GPs in Essex and Suffolk began to withdraw from Shared Care agreements for ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) medication following guidance from Local Medical Committees, Healthwatch Essex worked with Healthwatch Suffolk to understand the impact this change was having on people with ADHD. Our report highlighted the challenges facing people whose Shared Care had been withdrawn, as well as the wider struggles people with ADHD face waiting for care, accessing medication during shortages, and navigating complex assessment pathways.

Seventy people in Essex shared their experiences of accessing ADHD medication and the barriers they were facing. 73% of the 45 respondents who had previously been prescribed medication by their GP told us they had been affected by prescribing changes. Many told us they had received little notice of the changes, with more than half of those saying they had been given one month's notice or less, and 18% receiving no notice at all.

88% of those affected told us they had experienced stress and anxiety due to uncertainty about their care. Respondents shared how the instability and difficulty accessing medication during the changes negatively affected their mental health, education, work, and even finances, in cases where they felt turning to private care was their only option. The report was covered on the radio by Heart Essex and BBC Essex, and BBC News published a web article highlighting the report's findings. Louisa Garcia, who had regained access to her medication after seeking support from Healthwatch Essex's Information and Guidance Service, shared her experiences in an interview with BBC Essex. We also shared a podcast episode about Heidi's experiences of living with ADHD whilst working in the Police.

Findings were presented at North East Essex Adult Partnership meeting in September 2025, then with the Essex County Council Health Overview Policy & Scrutiny Committee in November 2025. The report was well-received by both Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board (SNEE ICB) and Mid and South Essex ICB.

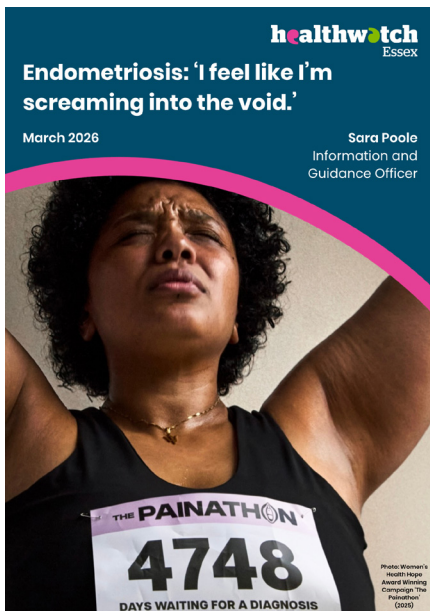
Tom Abell, Chief Executive of the Mid and South Essex ICB and now of the Essex ICB, welcomed the recommendations and highlighted the ICB's commitment to working in collaboration with local communities, local government and the education sector to improve services and consider new pathways. Since the report was released, commissioning for ADHD care has expanded in Essex, with the Integrated Care Board commissioning five new accredited providers to help address waiting times.

In March 2026, in partnership with Healthwatch Suffolk and SNEE ICB, we held a listening and action webinar with a panel of NHS commissioners, leaders and professionals whose work encompasses ADHD services in Suffolk and North East Essex. The panel answered the public's questions on ADHD services, waiting times, medication, Right to Choose providers, and support while waiting for an assessment. Panellists acknowledged the difficulties that patients have faced accessing ADHD services in recent years and gave context to explain the challenges facing the current system. They highlighted ongoing work on NHS-approved assessments via Right to Choose, updated FAQs for patients and carers, clearer communication materials, and outlined their aims to create a more coordinated, equitable, and patient-centred system.



Top: Podcast cover art for our episode about Heidi's experiences of living with ADHD and being a police officer.

Bottom: Louisa filming a video about her experiences for our social media channels.



# Endometriosis

## 'I feel like I'm screaming into the void.'

The aim of this project was to explore lived experiences around endometriosis in Essex and analyse this data in relation to current and future service provision. Women had also contacted us looking for support with accessing local advice and support for this condition and to be able to share their feedback and experiences with trying to access medical treatment or diagnosis.

Over 135 women completed our survey and over 90 women offered to talk to us for one-to-one interviews. We also visited the Rayleigh Endometriosis support group and the North Essex Endometriosis UK support group. Three members of the Rayleigh group took part in a podcast for our Hidden Voices series so they could share their experiences. They found the experience so helpful that they are now looking into producing their own podcast.

### **'It's not just an NHS problem, it's an everybody problem.'**

Women are being let down by the NHS and society in general in many aspects of women's health, but the lived experience shared by the women who have taken part in this project is, at times, extremely shocking. The lack of awareness and understanding, not just from health professionals but from the whole system is unacceptable. Women feel unheard, gaslit and are generally left to deal with debilitating pain that affects every aspect of their lives. It is not acceptable that in 2026 it is now taking over nine years for women to be diagnosed with endometriosis; this rises to 11 years for women from ethnically diverse communities.

The partner of one woman who took part in the project wanted to share her experience of caring for a loved one with endometriosis:

***'Living alongside endometriosis means living with unpredictability, stress, frustration, and helplessness. It impacts both partners, not just the person diagnosed. I hope sharing this perspective helps highlight the wider impact this condition has on relationships, work, mental health, and everyday life. During the worst episodes, especially through the night, I am the one caring for her – managing medication, refilling hot water bottles, helping her move when the pain becomes overwhelming, and monitoring her when she feels faint or unwell. There are nights where neither of us sleep. The pain keeps her awake, and I stay awake to make sure she is safe and supported. Over time, this has left me sleep deprived and physically exhausted myself. On particularly severe months, I have had to leave work to care for her because she has been so unwell – sometimes fainting or unable to stand properly. It puts pressure on my job as well, but in those moments, her wellbeing has to come first. The responsibility can feel heavy, but it is not something I would ever ignore – it is simply the reality of loving someone with a condition like this. Thank you for taking the time to read my experience. I do hope this helps future women who struggle and their partners.'***

# Hidden Homeless 3:

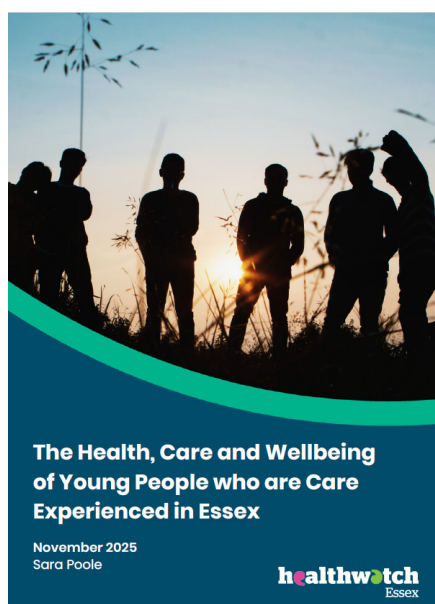
## *The Health, Care and Wellbeing Needs of Young People who are Care Experienced in Essex*

In line with our focus on Hidden Voices, we embarked upon a series of projects looking at 'Hidden Homeless' cohorts in society who generally experience increased barriers in achieving their health, care and wellbeing outcomes. This is the third report in the 'Hidden Homeless' series, focusing on the lived experience of care leavers and care experienced people in Essex.

The report was completed in November 2025 and released to the public via our website and social media channels, as well as shared directly with our stakeholders and partners.

There is still work to be done to improve the way that the care experienced and care leavers access help and advice regarding their health and wellbeing needs. These young people can struggle to build a trusted relationship with adults in their lives and having (at times) a constant change of foster carer, personal adviser or social worker does not help this situation. Many young people feel they are left to fend for themselves and are unable to access someone to help them when they need it.

There needs to be improved understanding from health professionals outside of the care system regarding the experiences of young people involved in the care system and how that may have impacted how and when they access healthcare. There needs to be improved information online for young people to access; some of the countywide websites that young people may use to access information were not very detailed.



The fact that young people are still feeling that they are not being heard or listened to when it comes to their health and wellbeing needs is an ongoing concern.

Report cover.

# Mould

Reacting to the instances of contacts to our Information & Guidance (IAG) service who were struggling with dealing with mould in their homes, IAG Officer Fergus Bird embarked upon a project to explore more deeply the impact and effects of living in properties affected by mould.

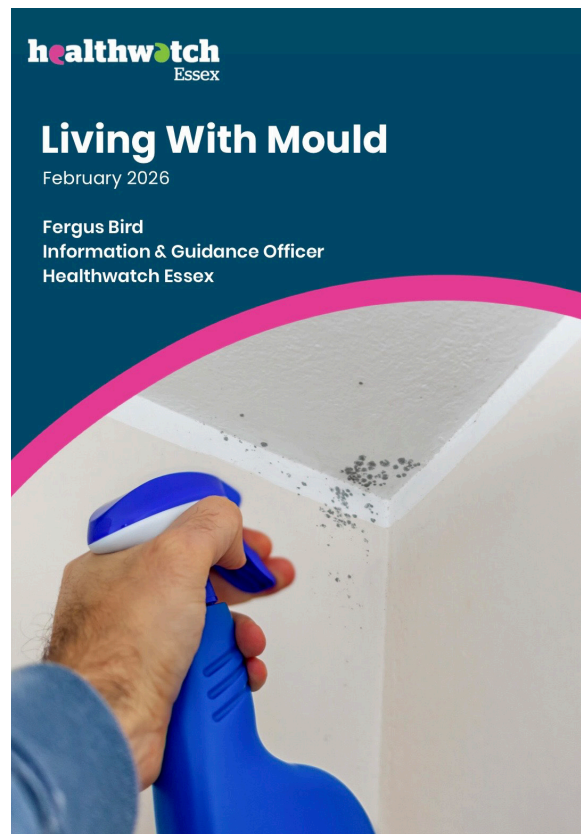
Hundreds of Essex residents engaged in the project, via a survey and one-to-one interviews, sharing candid details of the practical extent of the issue as well as the significant impact living with mould has on their physical health, mental wellbeing, and sense of safety at home. For many, this was the first opportunity they had had to discuss the problem and receive empathy and understanding, expressing a sense of judgmentalism and blame when previously reporting and seeking advice and support.

The report revealed a worrying lack of consistency in how mould is reported, responded to, and resolved across different housing tenures. Key findings included that reporting remains difficult and intimidating, delays cause significant harm, and the serious impact on physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Drawing on the positive practice which is emerging across the UK illustrated that early intervention, clear communication, and a people-centred approach can dramatically improve outcomes for residents. Our conclusion highlighted that tackling mould is about much more than policy compliance. It is about empathy, accountability, and recognising the profound impact that housing conditions have on people's lives.

Launching the report in January 2026, Fergus commented:

***'No one wants to live in a home blighted by mould, yet too many people across Essex are being forced to do exactly that. What we heard while producing this report was not just about damp walls or poor ventilation, but about people feeling dismissed, blamed, and worn down over time. A safe, warm home is fundamental to health and wellbeing. Mould must be treated not as a minor maintenance issue, but as a serious public health concern.'***



Report cover.

# Community Asset Mapping

We have continued our work on the latest phase of Community Asset Mapping – an ongoing series of reports commissioned by the North East Essex Health & Wellbeing Alliance. These reports explore the local assets that support health and social care across North East Essex, including people, places, organisations, and community services. Over the last four years, six reports have been developed in partnership with Community360 and Community Voluntary Services Tendring, focusing on the voluntary sector in Colchester and Tendring as part of the Live Well programme. These reports examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector and highlighted the critical role of community-based activities in supporting individuals across various stages of life – from Start Well and Feel Well through to Die Well.

This work entered a new phase with the focus shifting towards priority health conditions identified by the Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board (SNEE ICB), which included: Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Mental Health & Suicide Prevention, and Living with Frailty & Falls Prevention. The geographical focus remained in Colchester and Tendring, in areas where these conditions are most prevalent.

The third report, due to be published imminently, explores living with frailty with a focus on falls prevention within Greenstead, St Anne’s and St John’s wards in Colchester, and Clacton-on-Sea and Jaywick Sands in Tendring.

To inform this report, we launched an online survey that attracted over 30 responses, several of which were followed up with in-depth interviews that now feature as case studies in the report. In addition to this, we engaged extensively with community sector workers, patients and professionals from across the healthcare system, to gather a broad range of perspectives and experiences relating to these conditions. Frontline workers were interviewed including Frailty Nurses, Occupational Therapists, Primary Care Networks, and Exercise Programme Leaders.

A common theme cited from participants was loneliness and isolation, sharing that when mobility declines, they see fewer friends, lose social connections, and can feel ‘forgotten’. This sense of isolation is often as hard to cope with as the physical challenges.

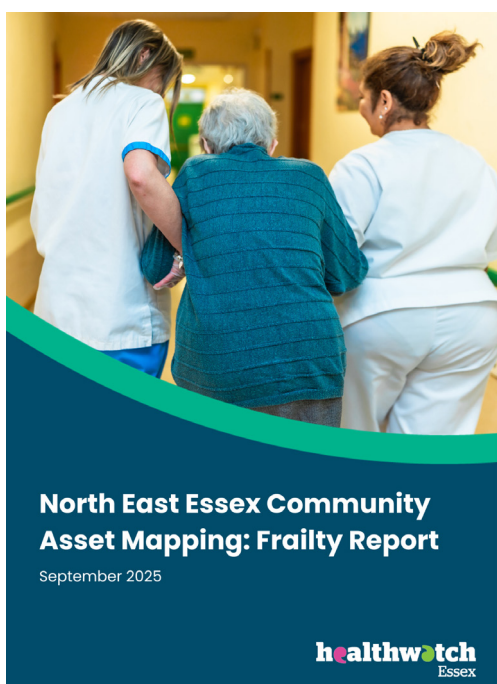
***‘Since I stopped going out, I feel cut off.’***

Colchester participant

***‘It’s the loneliness that gets you as much as the falling.’***

Tendring participant

The support of the community and the assets therein is essential to enable people to live independently for as long as possible and to prevent increased frailty and need.



Report cover.

# Tendring 100

Tendring 100 is a partnership project, jointly funded by East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust (ESNEFT) and Essex County Council, and the delivery partners are Colchester Institute and Career Track, working with Tendring District Council on the delivery of creating 100 apprenticeships in the Tendring area. We are capturing lived experience of apprentices to help gain an understanding of their apprenticeship journey.

We continue to follow their progress during the programme. A particular focus is the impact of an apprenticeship placement on a person's health and wellbeing, with themes fed back to ESNEFT. The programme is framed as improving employment which will improve health outcomes. Feedback from apprentices can be seen below:

***'I don't think I'd be in my current role if it wasn't for my apprenticeship.'***

***'My apprenticeship is going well, I wouldn't say that there have been any particular challenges, but I've enjoyed the chance to learn hands-on and be a more effective part of the team.'***

***'I feel much more confident not only in my work but also myself, I suffer with anxiety from time to time and have found that I've been much better since starting the apprenticeship.'***

## Women's Forum

Following the success of our Fellas' Forums, we are proposing a new Women's Forum which will enable a reduction in social isolation and introduce a co-produced community group who, by bringing people in the community together, can share lived life experience to improve each other's physical and mental wellbeing. Monthly sessions will be designed with the group and could include guest speakers who can give the community insight into women's health improvements through services; workshops; social activities; and creative sessions.

During the initial fact-finding stage we facilitated focus groups, engaging with women from a wide range of backgrounds across gender, ethnicity, age and/or disability, to ascertain what they would like from the forum, reaching out to less heard communities, including deprived areas. Findings included perimenopause/menopause; mental health and wellbeing; nutrition; physical activity; and personal safety have all been stand out topics. We continue to map the areas' assets and identify opportunities to link with and collaborate with other organisations to support this work.

We are actively seeking funding to enable us to implement the desired monthly sessions.

One of the Women's Forum's focus groups.



# Heart of Greenstead

Healthwatch Essex and The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS) have supported Colchester City Council to deliver the Heart of Greenstead (HoG) regeneration project. Hosting regular weekly engagements, via drop-in sessions, with residents and locally trusted organisations ensures that the community feels included, their voices heard, and issues/concerns and views regarding changes to Greenstead can be fed back to the HoG Board during the monthly meetings. Regular weekly social media posts providing updates, positive stories and upcoming community events are shared and cross-shared on other localised pages. The current phase and communication focus of the HoG is the building works due to start spring/summer of 2026, and so our engagement includes building excitement amongst the local community and their sense of belonging to the new campus. Community engagement key events carried out so far include:

- **I Love Greenstead – Schools Project:** This mini project involved taking the Heart of Greenstead Photo Booth to local schools and speaking with the children about what they love most about Greenstead and what they would like to see in their community with the aim being to create a sense of pride in their area. The children coloured in heart shapes.
- **Greenstead Fun Day:** This event during summer 2025 was planned and managed in partnership with the community and community volunteers. It had been a long time since an event of this scale had been held in Greenstead! A blueprint for the event is now in place for the community to use, and the event is being held again this year.
- **Art Project:** Over 70 entries were received for the HoG Art Project, including several local schools, pre-school nurseries and local groups contributed. Ward Councillors chose winners whose artwork will be printed and displayed around the HoG development.
- **Warm Hearts Winter Gathering:** This community engagement event wrapped around winter warmers, offering warm food, free coats, and winter accessories. Held at Greenstead Social club, over 50 people attended this successful event.
- **Drops-ins and Let's Talk Heart of Greenstead:** The main purpose of this was to develop strength in the community, building relationships between residents, encourage community pride and ownership and to create safe spaces for open conversation. Also, an opportunity for partners to meet with residents to improve communication, and share messages and updates about HoG, as well as listen and feedback and demonstrate how feedback has influenced decisions.
- **Skills and Opportunities event:** This event was designed to help Greenstead's residents explore new skills, training options, and upskilling opportunities. Our aim was to bring together local employers, training providers, and community organisations to give people easy access to information and guidance - all in one friendly place.



Mel (right) during Let's Talk Heart of Greenstead outreach.

# Medequip

We were commissioned by Medequip, the Essex Community Equipment Loan Service, which is in turn commissioned by Essex County Council and the NHS, to explore the experiences of people in Essex who have used, or are currently using, equipment provided by Medequip. We set about doing this by gathering, analysing and presenting feedback from those service users, in order to shape and inform continuous improvement of the equipment loan service.

We engaged in a variety of ways which included a survey, which ran for a period of six weeks, an online focus group which took place on 10th December 2025, and one-to-one interviews with individuals who were willing to discuss their experiences with us in a more in-depth manner.

The level of engagement achieved throughout this project was excellent, with 738 individual responses to the online survey alone, illustrating the willingness of Medequip service users to provide feedback. We were able to provide Medequip with a detailed report which incorporated findings and recommendations on service areas including delivery, communication, quality of equipment, functionality, useability and customer service.

We were able to see the positive impact that Medequip services have had on the lives of those requiring enablement aids. Clients, families and carers reported daily mobility enhancement and increased independence by the provision of the various pieces of equipment. The improvement to their health and wellbeing from this is undeniable and contributes to empowerment and heightened inclusion in day-to-day tasks and family life; illustrating the great impact which such a service can have. The opportunity to share views and experiences was also welcomed by those who participated in the project.



Report cover.

# Fellas' Forums

The aim of the Fellas' Forum is to reduce social isolation, improve physical and mental wellbeing, create a community of men supporting each other, offer volunteer pathways, and highlight other men's wellbeing initiatives. The Fellas' Forums now deliver sessions in Braintree, Colchester, and Harwich. Regular activities have included pool, darts, bowling, fishing, football, walking and snooker. Organisations such as Mid and North Essex Mind, Summit, CVST and Robin Cancer Trust have attended sessions to inform the attendees of services available to them. Below is an example from each forum of an impactful session:

**Colchester** - The Colchester Fellas' Forum is now well established. Throughout this journey we have had a great collaboration with Green Path Ventures led by Rob Mann. Their community allotment relocated and many of the men attend inside and outside of the monthly sessions. The men will help weed, feed the animals, pick vegetables together and it is heart-warming to see them cook together after the session. This volunteering opportunity is great and gives the men additional opportunities to meet up. Due to the impact of the Colchester Fellas' Forum, we were delighted to win Holistic, Neighbourhood Based Care Award at the SNEE ICB Awards.

**Braintree** - The Braintree Fellas' Forum is funded by Braintree District Council and the Active Braintree Foundation. We recently received great news that it will be funded for another year, and this group of men have formed a strong community. The highlight was a six-a-side football game versus our funders. We may have lost 6-4, but seeing the guys work together and laugh was a joy to see. It was great to see our funders heavily involved in sessions. We were thrilled that our Braintree Fellas' Forum won the Health and Wellbeing (Group) Award at the Braintree District Volunteer and Active Braintree Awards 2025.



The Braintree Fellas' Forum football match.

**Harwich** - This year we launched a new Fellas' Forum in Harwich with great success, funded by Colchester Catalyst and Tendring District Council. The average attendance has been 16 men per session and again, a strong community has been developed. We are delighted that the Harwich Fellas' Forum has been commissioned for another year as the community have really got behind the project. The highlight was a Mini Fellas' Fair delivered in collaboration with Mid and North Essex Mind with over 50 men in attendance. We had food and drink, powerful lived experience talks and Natalie Britt from Mind delivered a taster session of The Mental Health Toolkit. We had system partners letting the attendees know about services available to them.

**What's next?** - It has been an exciting year of impact and expansion, and we are delighted to share we are expanding again next year. We have been commissioned by Essex County Council to implement Fellas' Forums in Harlow, Epping Forest, and Basildon. We have also been commissioned by the Active Essex Foundation to implement a Young Fellas' Forum in Colchester aimed at men aged 17-25.

# Spotlight on Our Events



The Healthwatch Essex team at the event.

## An Evening with Healthwatch Essex 2025

Our Annual Event, also known as 'An Evening with Healthwatch Essex', is a yearly showcase where we present and celebrate the delivery of impactful projects aimed at improving health and care services across the county. Our 2025 Annual Event featured guest speakers, storytelling, and creative performances, while also providing an opportunity for community members, professionals, and partners to connect and reflect on the progress made over the past year.

The evening began with refreshments and networking, creating an opportunity for conversations and new connections, before our CEO Sam Glover introduced the night. Attendees then heard from a range of projects and initiatives that reflected the breadth of Healthwatch Essex's work. These included Carers Voices, which amplifies the experiences of carers, and Supporting Partnerships, which demonstrated the value of co-production. Community Asset Mapping showcased how understanding local strengths can help build healthier and more connected communities in north east Essex. A musical performance by our Trauma Ambassador Nix brought creativity and energy to the event. The programme also explored important themes including the health, care and wellbeing of young people who are care experienced, the contribution of Research Ambassadors in supporting insight and engagement, and a focus on men's health and wellbeing.

We are grateful to everyone who attended, contributed and engaged so thoughtfully throughout the evening, helping to make the event so meaningful.

# Fellas' Fairs

Last year we were commissioned by Mid and South Essex NHS to hold two Fellas' Fair events in Rochford and Billericay. The aim was to improve men's awareness of the support available to them to enhance their wellbeing. This year we have been commissioned by Essex County Council to deliver Fellas' Fairs in Harlow and Basildon (May 2026).

## Rochford

Our first Fellas' Fair of the year was one of our 'A Healthy Dose of Humour' comedy events, held at the Rochford 100 Rugby Club in collaboration with Lost Sock Productions. Over 50 men attended this event to hear powerful lived experience talks on addiction and ADHD and to meet stallholders sharing support around men's health. Our evening ended with comedy performances from Mike McClean and Garry K.

## Billericay

The second Fellas' Fair was held at Billericay Town Football Club, collaborating with Basildon Council, Basildon Mind, Essex FA, Billericay Town Walking Football, and Prostate Cancer UK. We delivered a walking football tournament (an Arsenal Prostate Cancer Survivor Team vs Billericay Town Prostate Cancer Survivor Team walking football match), followed by stakeholders such as Essex Working Well, Active Essex and Basildon Mind attending the Billericay Town vs Aldershot Town pre-season friendly. We spoke to hundreds of men on the day, sharing knowledge around the services and support available to them.

## Harlow

Following feedback from our previous comedy evenings, for the Harlow event we increased the focus on lived experience, with talks from Chris Gilham, Scott Tatum and Steve Lawson, followed by a panel discussion. It was incredible to see the high levels of engagement from the audience, with people asking insightful questions and sharing how the speakers' lived experience related to their own lives. To round off the night on a light-hearted note, we had performances from Stefano Paolini and Mike Gunn.

Chris Gilham, Scott Tatum and Steve Lawson at the Harlow Fellas' Fair.



# Expressions of Trauma

We continued to tour our Expressions of Trauma exhibition, kicking off with a month long stay at the beautiful Sentinel Gallery in Wivenhoe, in April 2025, and following up with another month at the Harwich Arts and Heritage Centre, as part of the town's annual Festival of the Arts. This collection of mixed media works of art, created by people from across the area who are living with the effects of trauma, was brought together with the aim of giving an insight into how people use creative outlets to express themselves during difficult times, as well as raising awareness and understanding of trauma and its significant effects.

The exhibition highlighted many causes of trauma, including bereavement, abuse, chronic pain, mental health crisis and forced adoption. Allie Watson, a member of the Trauma Ambassador Group who was pivotal in contributing to the exhibition, commented that:

***'Art has been lifesaving on many occasions in helping me cope with my trauma. Art helps me to express things that I find very difficult to put into words. It is a fundamental part of my life now to keep myself well and is something I turn to in crisis.'***

To further showcase the impact of these exhibitions, we began producing an Expressions of Trauma gallery book towards the end of 2025. This publication has been developed as a lasting record of the project, bringing together a curated selection of artworks featured throughout the exhibitions. The gallery book not only enables us to continue sharing these powerful creative outputs beyond the exhibition spaces but also serves as a valuable resource for partners, stakeholders, and the wider community to better understand the role of creativity in processing and communicating experiences of trauma. From paintings to more complex mixed-media pieces, the book captures the depth and range of expression explored by contributors. It also highlights the collaborative effort behind the project, recognising the partnerships and community engagement that made both the exhibitions and the publication possible. Looking ahead, the book will support ongoing conversations, learning, and future engagement opportunities.



Our exhibition in Wivenhoe.



Our exhibition in Harwich.

# Memory Day

As we begin an exciting new chapter as an organisation, we are working with historians and archivists to create a lasting archive of our work as Healthwatch Essex. We held a special 'Memory Day' at Essex Record Office on Saturday 25th April to celebrate over thirteen years of our work and impact.

This event was an opportunity to reflect on people's experiences of working or volunteering with Healthwatch Essex, share their story, and help preserve our collective history. There was a range of activities to get involved in, including contributing memories through oral history interviews, taking part in discussions, and exploring how our work will be archived for the future.

We asked, 'What do you want the future of patient voice to look like?':

- 'Person-centred and open to all'
- 'Empowering'
- 'Include all voices'
- 'Accessible ways to share'
- 'Continue to be a critical friend'



Top: Founding CEO Tom Nutt with current CEO Sam Glover.  
Bottom: Sam and Tom with our ambassador Sam Fox (left) and historian Alix Green (right) on a panel discussion.

Top: Research Ambassadors Munia and Jo volunteering as Oral Historians at the event.  
Bottom: Our ambassador Joe decorating a badge.



# **Information & Guidance**

**Helping you access the  
information you need about  
health and care services**

Our experienced staff in the Information & Guidance Service can help people access, understand, and navigate health, social care and wellbeing services in Essex. Anyone can contact us confidentially for help on health and social care services near you, how to access the support you need, what to do if you have a concern or complaint or how to share feedback about services.

Call **0300 500 1895**, text **07712395398** or email **info@healthwatchessex.org.uk**.

## How many people contacted us?

**1,399** people sought support and information from our Information and Guidance Team online, by text, phone call, email, letter, web chat and WhatsApp between 1st April 2025 and 31st March 2026, as well as **5,160** engaged with in person.

## What are people calling about?

Frequent lines of enquiry include



GP Complaint



Hospital Complaint



Hospital Discharge



Carers Support



Mental Health

## Who is contacting us?

1. Self.
2. Relative or friend.
3. Health or care professional.
4. Other professional.
5. Other.

*'Thank you so much for sending this – I've just read your email, and I can't tell you how much it means to have someone really standing up for me and making my voice heard; and for actually having a heart in all of this.'* – caller

## How did people find out about us?

1. Word of mouth.
2. Online search.
3. Outreach event.
4. Previous caller.
5. Healthwatch England website.

*'I can't tell you how much your kindness, knowledge and support have meant to me.'* – caller



Our Information and Guidance – Carers Voices Officers Matt, Jane and Tim with our van.

# Informing Essex

Our team travel across the county every month to different locations to ensure that people's voices are heard, especially those who might not typically engage with health and care services. Our Information and Guidance team visit hospitals, community centres, schools, theatres, care homes, shopping centres and more.

The team plays a key role in reaching underrepresented groups such as older adults, young people, carers, and minority communities, making sure their views help shape improvements in care. Alongside listening, the team also share information about available support and encourage people to access the Information and Guidance service when they need to. As well, they share current projects that the public can participate in to share their story and help us make a change to Essex services.



## How have we stayed up to date on the latest developments and shared our findings?

Alongside our outreach events, we maintain a regular presence at meetings across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors in every part of the county. We have continued to ensure that the public voice is heard and taken into account throughout the system. We have participated regularly in the Essex County Council Health Overview, Policy and Scrutiny and People and Families Committees, as well as many strategic meetings with our Integrated Care Services, Boards and Alliances, to name just a few.

# Slipper Swaps and Winter Warmers

Working in partnership with Braintree District Council this winter, we provided free, NHS grade slippers to people who were vulnerable and/or most at risk of slips, trips and falls, to help keep them steadier on their feet. We distributed the slippers widely throughout the Braintree district, holding events in over ten locations, including Witham, Kelvedon, Braintree and Steeple Bumpstead. This enabled us to engage with many people needing information and guidance who otherwise would not have come into contact with us. By giving them good quality slippers, we helped to keep their feet warm in the cold winter months and promote good health, care and wellbeing overall. We were also able to provide electric blankets, plus beautiful hand-knitted blankets, hats, scarves and other woolly garments to further aid winter resilience for those most likely to struggle to keep warm during the cold winter months.

We also worked with Councillor Jeff Henry to provide a supply of winter woollies, to help keep the people of Laindon warm during the winter months. We held two events at Laindon Community Centre during January, which again enabled us to engage with people to provide information, guidance and support on all matters relating to health, care and wellbeing.

The impact from these initiatives was resounding, with hundreds of pairs of slippers alone being given out. A lady in her nineties who came for a pair of slippers was identified as having extremely swollen legs, which we were able to support her to access a GP appointment for there and then. She had been unaware that there was an issue prior to us helping her try on the slippers. At another venue, a family of one adult and four children who had fled domestic abuse with none of their belongings were all given blankets, hats, scarves and gloves to keep them warm at home and on the daily walk to and from school.



Jane, Matt and Sara during a slipper swap.



Jane and Tim delivering slippers to an Essex resident Bill for his 104th Birthday.

# Reporting from West Essex

Healthwatch Essex and Healthwatch Hertfordshire were approached by the Hertfordshire and West Essex NHS Integrated Care Board (HWE ICB) to undertake a series of projects focusing on the lived experiences of people in the area in relation to their health, care and wellbeing. Two projects were selected per calendar year for in-depth engagement, with the production of a report based on this engagement, and a co-produced executive summary.

Following our reports on the 'Experiences of the Armed Forces Community in West Essex' and 'Children's Oral Health Experiences in West Essex' last year, we have produced two new reports this year. This includes a report on the 'Experiences of Frailty and Ageing Well in West Essex' and 'Experiences of Community Pharmacies in West Essex'.

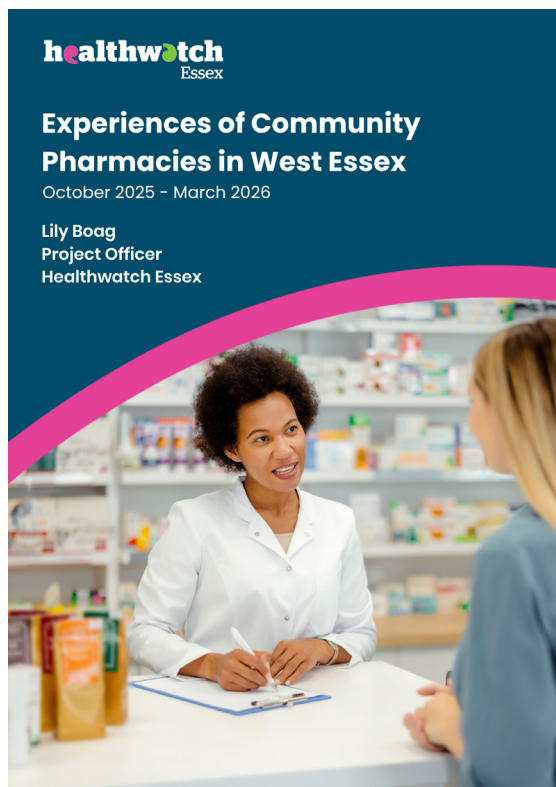
## Community Pharmacies

Our most recent report on the 'Experiences of Community Pharmacies in West Essex' provides an overview on the current use of pharmacy services. Also known as 'high-street pharmacies', they form part of the four pillars of the primary care system, alongside general practice, dental and optometry services.

A survey was produced by Healthwatch Essex, designed to gather views and feedback from residents on their experiences of using local community pharmacies. Key themes explored within the survey included the use and function of pharmacies, awareness of services such as the NHS Pharmacy First scheme, accessibility, confidence levels, perceptions, and service experiences.

A total of 110 participants engaged in the survey, with many residents viewing pharmacies as an 'underused' resource, while others thought they were 'overstretched'. We then produced five case studies, uncovering the personal stories and lived experiences which were shared in further discussions with local residents.

Our key recommendations from this report included improving communication and public awareness of pharmacy services, better integration and system coordination with GP services, improving quality of care, tackling barriers to access, investing in the pharmacy workforce, improving medication management, and expanding pharmacy services to support other NHS services.



# Experience of Frailty and Ageing Well in West Essex

In our report on the 'Experiences of Frailty and Ageing Well in West Essex', we canvassed the views and experiences of residents aged 65 years old and over, alongside their families, friends and carers, to highlight the key issues which impact their health outcomes and experiences. We also spoke with local support services and health and social care professionals who were able to provide further insight on the experiences of residents and service users across the area.

During our engagement, we produced nine case studies formed by the personal stories and lived experiences shared by participants who were living with frailty or an age-related condition. Many of these case studies involved experiences of multiple long-term health conditions, dementia care, falls and recovery, digital exclusion, social isolation, loneliness, and the emotional and physical toll of caring for a loved one.

Our key recommendations for improving local health and care services included improving access to primary care, strengthening hospital care and discharge, expanding care close to home, and enhancing dementia and mental health support. Further recommendations included embedding patient-centred inclusive care, improving communication and awareness, recognising and supporting carers, building age-friendly communities and addressing digital exclusion.

The research in this project was integral to the Integrated Neighbourhood work in west Essex. The National Neighbourhood Health Implementation Programme (NNHIP) was an offer that went out over all of the ICBs nationally and only 34 went forward, of which Hertfordshire and West Essex was one. This project has helped in its initial success and ongoing application.

# Armed Forces

Following the publication of our report on the 'Experiences of the Armed Forces Community in West Essex' in February 2025, our work to support the Armed Forces Community has expanded and continued into a workstream of several new projects. At the forefront of this work, we strive to support all members of the Armed Forces Community, including veterans and service-leavers, reservists, serving personnel, military families and carers. This includes understanding that a veteran or service leaver can be an individual of any age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality, with service life experiences varying for each individual.

Over the last year, key highlights from this workstream include achieving the Silver Award from the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS), presenting our work to Essex County Council's Public Health team, joining the Thrive Together Programme hosted by The Bridge for Heroes and funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, and sharing our progress and achievements at the East of England Armed Forces Conference (2026). We have also created a new webpage dedicated to our Armed Forces Community projects, invited Op Courage (NHS Veteran's Mental Health Service) to lead a military culture and awareness training session for our team, and marked Remembrance Day by highlighting the impact of Royal Star & Garter's Veteran Friendly Framework for care homes in Essex.

Throughout the year, we have also been continuing to uncover the lived experiences of the Armed Forces Community - to improve health and social care services, inform service design and policy, influence key leaders and decision makers, and shape better lives for those who have served, along with their families and carers.



## AFC Working Group & Primary Care Network

Over the last year, we have developed our 'Veterans Working Group' into a new two-strand engagement and networking forum. This consists of our Armed Forces Community Working Group (AFC WG) and our Armed Forces Community Primary Care Network (AFC PCN). Each of these forums operate as bi-monthly meetings, designed to enhance collaborative working, expand our outreach, and ensure the Armed Forces Community are at the forefront of services' minds.

Chaired by Healthwatch Essex, these meetings provide a platform for attendees to share latest research, new services, funding opportunities, and updates, to improve joint working,

identify service gaps, and resolve issues locally. We have members from various public sector organisations, including the NHS, Essex County Council, military support services and local charities. Our AFC PCN provides an additional sustainable network designed to improve communication and co-ordination between primary care services and military support services, promoting care pathways, sharing best practices and improving quality of care.

Throughout these meetings, we have raised awareness of several national and regional organisations which work to improve the lives of the Armed Forces Community, including the NHS Veteran Covenant Healthcare Alliance, Op Courage, Op Restore, Op Nova, Royal British Legion Admiral Nurse Service, Help for Heroes, Forces Employment, Defence Medical Welfare Services, and many more.

## Thrive Together

Earlier this year, we began collaborating with The Bridge for Heroes and were commissioned to join the Thrive Together East Professional Network, which brings together professionals and organisations working to improve outcomes for the veteran community across the East of England. In April of this year, we were invited to the East of England Armed Forces Conference, as part of the Thrive Together programme hosted by The Bridge for Heroes. During the conference, we presented on the progress and achievements from our current work to support the Armed Forces Community in Essex.

As part of our Thrive Together work, we have been delivering two projects including a 'Veterans Mental Health Event' which has been co-produced with the local community and designed to tackle mental health stigma among the Armed Forces Community. As part of the event, we will have lived experience speakers sharing their personal stories, military charities and support services to provide information and support, and an entertainment lineup of comedians.

The second project we have been delivering are our 'Mobile Awareness Stands' which have been commissioned to be enrolled across Essex to improve awareness of military support services and care pathways. As part of this work, we have been engaging with various public health and third sector organisations to promote their materials, and have been working in cooperation with the Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust and Healthwatch Suffolk to cover the local region.



Opposite left - Our Armed Forces Covenant Silver Award on our shelf.

Opposite right - Our CEO Sam collecting the award.

Right - Project Officer Lily presenting her research on Healthcare Experiences of the Armed Forces Community at a conference.

# Carers Voices

We have continued to extend our reach across Essex, working with Essex County Council (ECC) to help shape, influence and improve services for unpaid carers. We have continued to engage at every opportunity: carers groups, fairs, hospitals, community events and on the high street. We have targeted young carers and those in hard-to-reach communities across the county. Our impact has been considerable; we have reached over 6000 unpaid carers to date. Carers face many challenges; isolation, loneliness, difficulty finding employment and understanding what support is available and where to find it. Each carer finds themselves in a unique and dynamic situation, one that changes constantly and where templated support services rarely suit their needs. We have been able to engage with carers and offer advice and guidance to bridge the gap and enable and empower them to take control and build their own appropriate support.



We have worked closely with ECC on initiatives to improve carers support, including helping to draft the All Age Carers Strategy – including ensuring carers find time for breaks, enabling carers to look after their own mental health and wellbeing, improving relations with Health Support Workers, raising awareness of support available and how to access it, support that reflects carers unique circumstances and many other objectives. We have canvassed carers across the county to ensure the support works and is fit for purpose.

Our experience of meeting carers at hospitals across the county highlighted a common challenge faced by carers following discharge of loved ones from hospital. Although advice is provided at the point of discharge, it can be difficult to absorb due to the shock of diagnosis, anxiety about coping, and uncertainty about where to seek further support. Through our carer engagement work and ongoing feedback to ECC, this issue was identified and addressed through the development of a dedicated 'Helping someone home from hospital' booklet. The impact has been clear and measurable. Carers consistently report using the booklet as a practical and reliable guide. Healthcare professionals, including hospital and GP staff, have also adopted it as a valuable resource. More recently in Harlow, both patients and staff spoke very positively about its accessibility and usefulness.

The Healthwatch Van has been a valuable asset and has allowed us to travel the length and breadth of the county. Not only has it provided a safe, confidential space where we can meet, advise and guide carers but we have also used it to great effect delivering winter woollies during the colder months and using it as a base for our planned slipper swaps at care homes across the county, meeting carers and the cared for and helping to prevent trips and slips.

We have had a positive, impactful year and we are looking forward to further improving the support for unpaid carers.



# **In The Media & Online**

**How we communicate what we do**

**We are continuously reviewing the way we share information and connect online so that we can reach as many people in Essex as possible.**



# Our Reach

Connecting with our community

**Facebook** – This year we saw an additional 523 new followers, an increase from last year, which was 357. We’ve seen a huge increase in our posts being shared in local community groups which helps spread our messages across Essex.

**Instagram** – We reached 35,261 people over the year with a total of 1,434 likes and reactions to our posts.

**YouTube** – Over the past year, we have published many videos on our YouTube channel, resulting in a total of 7,943 views.

**LinkedIn** – We saw a total increase of 239 new followers over the year, as well as over 92,000 impressions over the year.

**TikTok** – We saw our podcast TikToks reach 36,561 people.

**E-newsletter** – Our subscriber count increased by around 10% over the past year.

**Media Coverage** – We featured in 78 articles reaching a total viewership of 56 million, as well as coverage on local radio stations such as BBC Essex.

# Hidden Voices

Our Hidden Voices podcast focuses on real-life experiences within health and social care. The podcast series aims to highlight voices that aren’t being heard, especially members of the public who may struggle to access support and whose experiences are often overlooked. Additionally, by sharing these lived experiences, we aim to influence change in health and social care services, as well as offer support for anyone going through similar experiences to our podcast guests.

Our most listened to episode.



Over the past year, we have covered many different topics in our podcast, exploring mental health in sport, dyslexia, ADHD, Borderline Personality Disorders (BPD), meningitis, bereavement, mother and baby homes, living beyond cancer, underactive thyroids, life after a stroke, the future of health, arthritis, and endometriosis.



You can listen to our podcast series by scanning the QR code, or you can now listen to our podcast on our YouTube Channel @healthwatchessex.

# Our Top Stories

Here are some of our top social media campaigns from the last 12 months, co-produced with our ambassadors to amplify their stories and experiences.



## Women and MLTC

Our Women and Multiple Long-Term Conditions (MLTC) campaign generated significant communications activity throughout the year, raising awareness of the challenges women face when managing multiple chronic health conditions. Through media coverage, social media content, stakeholder engagement and community outreach, we amplified lived experiences and highlighted the need for more joined-up care.

Communications highlight: We released our new podcast series Research Reflections, with our first episode, 'Research Reflections - Women's experiences of living with multiple long-term conditions' which received positive feedback online.



## Shared Care for ADHD

Our ADHD campaign attracted strong public and media interest following changes to Shared Care arrangements for ADHD medication. Working with Healthwatch Suffolk, we used local experiences to highlight challenges around access to care, medication shortages and assessment pathways.

Communications highlight: A key campaign moment included BBC Essex coverage featuring Louisa Garcia's story, helping bring wider attention to the issue.



## Research Engagement Network

The Research Engagement Network (REN) remained a key communications priority, helping to promote research opportunities and encourage wider public participation.

Communications highlight: We developed a series of creative, easy-to-understand posters designed to help people learn more about health and care research, why it matters, and how their experiences can contribute to improving services and outcomes. We distributed these resources through community groups, partner organisations and engagement events to increase awareness and accessibility of research opportunities.

Top to bottom: 1 – Podcast cover art.  
2 – A TikTok of Louisa.  
3 – A poster from the REN project.



# **Our Ambassadors & Networks**

**Helping more people have their say  
through co-production**

Want to become an ambassador too? Find out more on our website  
<https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/get-involved/>

## Trauma Ambassador Group (TAG)

This year has seen continued growth for the TAG, with our 44 members committed to using their lived experiences to increase awareness, empathy and understanding of trauma.

The Trauma Keyring.

In September, following on from the success of the group's Trauma Card, we launched the Trauma Keyring. This resource had been specifically co-produced with children and young people. It's small, simple, and easy to carry; something they can keep close without drawing unwanted attention. If in school, college, at the GP, in hospital, or anywhere else they need support, they can show it to a professional so they understand that what they're seeing is linked to trauma. Three hundred keyrings have been distributed across the county and an independent evaluation is now underway by the University of Essex, to assess how the keyring is working for people in practice.



We have shared a number of insightful blogs as part of this work. In May, Indigo and Nix shared their thoughts on the Supreme Court hearing on the meaning of the word 'sex' in the equality act and what this ruling might mean for transgender people. Nix also introduced herself via our first video blog. Georgina joined us and has shared a number of pieces focusing on trauma and neurodivergence, including her attempt to end her own life, navigating life after a diagnosis of autism, ADHD and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, the importance of reasonable adjustments, masking and mental exhaustion, burnout, misconceptions and the importance of being heard.

In September the TAG shared messages of hope and support, based on their own lived experiences, with people who are, or have, contemplated ending their lives, to mark World Suicide Prevention Day. Later, in November, we joined Fi at a taster session of the Survivors Steps programme by The Dandelion Project. Fi set up this initiative as a safe space for women who have experienced domestic abuse – a place where you can begin your journey of healing, rediscover your strength, and step into freedom.

We started 2026 with the wonderful news that Valerie had been awarded an MBE for services to the prevention of violence against women and girls. In February, Megan wrote for Time to Talk Day, reminding us that conversations about mental health don't need to be perfect – they just need to happen. In a world where we're constantly connected but often feel deeply alone, she explained that taking a moment to check in with someone can be transformative.

Valerie shared her thoughts on Female Genital Mutilation and why zero tolerance for this practice is essential, and Mary wrote about her experience of rape and how she has now, with support, been able to focus her purpose on efforts to help others. Rachel, too, wrote about her experiences of child and adulthood abuse, and her passion for justice and awareness raising.

Finally, in March, the group mobilised to address the coverage of the Epstein files, documents related to criminal investigations into sex trafficking, producing a joint statement showing solidarity with all survivors and calling for greater visibility of avenues of support, as well as awareness of the triggering nature of the coverage itself.

## Young Mental Health Ambassadors (YMHA)

The Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service for children and young people in Essex, now known as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), was scheduled for re-procurement six years ago. As part of this process, it was essential that services were shaped and delivered in a way that truly reflected the need of the young people who would be using them. To help achieve this, the voices of local children and young people with lived experience of mental health were sought. The YMHA programme was established to engage, train and support young people with lived experience of these services and empower them to contribute by sharing their views and perspectives. We now have 24 dedicated young people volunteering as Young Mental Health Ambassadors.



YMHA Faye with Renée recording a podcast.

This year, they have participated in a wide range of opportunities including:

- Sharing their views on children and young people's mental health priorities with North East London NHS Foundation Trust (NELFT, providers of CAMHS) with feedback presented to their Board to help shape future service strategy.
- Contributing their ideas to support children and young people during longer mental health related stays at Princess Alexandra Hospital including suggestions for meaningful activities and wellbeing care packages. This led to the introduction of an accessible resource trolley on the wards to help the young people build routine and reduce boredom during admission.
- Facilitating workshops at the Essex County Council Mental Health Conference where an ambassador shared their lived experience and engaged directly with the education and children's social care professionals. This led to open discussions on barriers to accessing services, potential solutions and personal pledges from the attendees on how they were going to improve their practice.
- Participating in the Healthwatch Essex Hidden Voices podcast series sharing a powerful story about their lived experience of bullying and mental health. They shared where they were now in their journey and how they were using their platform to support other children and young people. This helped raise awareness, challenge stigma and encourage other young people to speak openly with new participants joining the programme as a direct result.
- Leading a social media takeover for Children's Mental Health Week aligned with the theme, 'This Is My Place.' This featured creative outputs including audio recordings, photography, blogs and graphic design.

*'I found the mental health conference incredibly insightful and hearing from the keynote speakers was incredibly powerful. I found co-facilitating the two workshops really meaningful and it was lovely to hear back from the attendees. Overall, this experience was truly amazing and provided so much knowledge.'*

**Ramisa, Young Mental Health Ambassador**

*'Over the last year I've had the privilege of getting to hear the voice of young people through Healthwatch Essex. The Young Mental Health Ambassadors' group have been supporting NELFT with feedback on a host of different areas. Their feedback has been invaluable and supported us in our ongoing development as an organisation. In September of this year, I was invited to join one of the groups meetings. We had the opportunity to speak with ambassadors about how to increase meaningful co production across the SET CAMHS footprint. The young people provided lots of ideas which our teams are now putting to use. I want to say an enormous thank you to the ambassadors for their support and hope Healthwatch Essex continues its fantastic work.'*

**Joseph Stone, Consultant Systemic Family Psychotherapist and Social Worker, Psychological Professions Lead for Southend, Essex and Thurrock (SET CAMHS) and Partnerships**

## **Carer Experts by Experience (E by E)**

Our Experts by Experience (E by E) Ambassadors have played a vital role in amplifying carers' voices. By sharing their lived experiences, they bring authenticity and depth to engagement activities, helping others to better understand the realities of caring. This approach has proven highly effective in raising awareness, influencing service development, and encouraging more carers to come forward and seek support.

A good example is from last year's annual event, how empowered the ambassadors were by sharing their experiences and the impact on the audience. They have been our go-to people when we encounter thorny carers issues and will often have the lived experience to offer unique perspectives based on their personal experience caring and their interaction with health and social care services. They also add enthusiasm and energy to collaborative discussions to improve carers support. We meet regularly, often consulting with them on carer strategy, feeding back to Essex County Council their valuable inputs and making positive changes to services. We have found that a participatory, collaborative approach with our E by Es leads to meaningful involvement and improved outcomes, reinforcing the need for experts by experience to be recognised as essential equal contributors to improving carer services.



Some of our E of E's with Jane at our Annual Event.

## Collaborate Essex Disability & Carers Forum

In 2019, in collaboration with Essex County Council (ECC), the Collaborate Essex Disability & Carers Forum was created. The forum consists of people with lived experience of being in a carer role or living with a disability including sensory impairments, physical impairments, long term health conditions, learning disabilities and autism. The forum is additionally supported by SUMMIT's AB4D members and is attended by ECC senior commissioners to support positive changes being made to Adult Social Care.

In this past year, the forum has:

- Fed back on the Essex County Council website cookie banner leading to the banner being amended across the main site and microsites ensuring that it is more accessible for people using screen readers.
- Contributed their views on information, advice and guidance which have been incorporated into ECC's ongoing directory of services workstream, improving the clarity and usefulness of information for local residents.
- Shared their lived experience in workshops on preparing for adult social care assessments and reviews which is helping ECC improve how people access these.
- Co-produced "what good looks like" cards with Essex County Council, now in the final draft, to support adult social care colleagues in supporting local Essex residents and delivering better outcomes.
- Delivered an Accessible Information Standard 'Time to Learn' session to a GP surgery, resulting in all patient records being updated following this to clearly flag accessibility requirements.
- Raised their concerns with the CAPTCHA feature being used in ECC Teams meetings leading to its removal and improved accessibility for participants.
- Shared their lived experience of dialysis which is now being used to support the new hospital developments across the East of England.
- Tested research documents using screen readers for the Suffolk and North East Essex Research Engagement Network to help make research opportunities more accessible to a wider audience.
- Reviewed and supported the development of the new ECC co-production website pages, soon to be launched, ensuring that the information being shared on them is relevant, inclusive and accessible to local residents.



One of our Collaborate Essex meetings.

# Hidden Voice Network – MSE Breast Screening Champions Fund

The Hidden Voice Network was launched two years ago and consists of diverse communities and individuals who represent their communities, which include ethnically diverse communities, faith groups and the LGBTQ+ community. As part of being a network member, they receive a bi-monthly newsletter containing community involvement opportunities, funding opportunities and general information.

Due to the connections made through the Hidden Voice Network, Healthwatch Essex in partnership with NHS Mid and South Essex (MSE) distributed MSE Breast Screening Champions Fund micro-grants to both network members and external community groups and organisations. This was a community grants programme to support peer-led engagement and increase uptake of breast screening among people facing barriers in mid and south Essex. By supporting community-led advocacy, the fund aimed to create authentic, culturally appropriate messaging to improve screening participation.

Essex Sight Loss Council.

The successful applicants were:

- Age Concern Southend
- Angel Pavilion
- Essex Asian Women’s Association
- Essex Sight Loss Council
- Queer & Trans Action\*
- RCCG Majesty Connections
- RRAVS
- Sanctus



Each applicant held a session with members of their community in areas where uptake of breast screening appointments were low. Many of the sessions included guest speakers from NHS Breast Screening Teams or Lady McAdden to share information on what to expect from an appointment and to answer any questions that the attendees may have. All applicants shared that attendees increased their knowledge and shared that many felt more likely to attend their future breast screening appointments and would feel more confident doing so.

Chest screening with Queer & Trans\* Action.



RCCG Majesty Connections.



# Researcher Ambassador Network

The Research Ambassador Network is for anyone interested in learning more about health and care research and developing their research skills. We champion community-centred research, providing our 32 Research Ambassadors with the skills to develop research projects that are inclusive and accessible, all whilst building connections and supporting one another. The group is open to everyone, regardless of professional and educational background.

- **Journal Club:** At our monthly Journal Club, a Research Ambassador shares a journal article for other ambassadors to read and reflect on. Ambassadors are introduced to different research fields, topics, and methods. This year, our Journal Club had 26 members (including 15 new recruits). Ambassadors discussed 14 articles on diverse topics.
- **Meetings:** We hosted six meetings with Research Ambassadors this year with invited speakers from universities including London School of Economics and University of Suffolk. The meetings were also an opportunity for ambassadors to share their experiences, fostering supportive conversations on topics including researcher confidence.
- **Research Reflections:** Our blog series encourages Research Ambassadors to develop their skills communicating research to the public. This year, we've published three blogs from Ambassadors on topics including involving young carers in research and improving cancer information for disadvantaged communities.
- **Seminar Series:** In February 2026, we launched our lunchtime Seminar Series, a public seminar programme showcasing health researchers at different stages of their career. We're welcoming researchers from universities alongside our own Research Officers. So far, 30 people have registered to attend our sessions.
- **Supporting our projects:** Research Ambassadors kindly volunteer to support our projects. Ambassadors attend planning meetings, review project documents and support data analysis. They also receive training in different research methods and approaches. Fourteen Research Ambassadors supported our projects this year. They analysed 10 transcripts, which added up to 18 hours of lived experience data! Research Ambassadors have reported increased confidence and expertise in different research methods through volunteering on our projects. Their support for our project The Dual Challenge of Pregnancy and IBD was recognised at the Suffolk and North East Essex ICB Can Do Awards in 2025.
- **Research panels:** Through our meetings, we have supported ambassadors to speak on research panels for the first time. In May 2025, Research Ambassador Megan shared her experiences as a young carer alongside researchers from the London School of Economics and the Carers Trust.

Our Research Ambassadors have praised the programme for supporting their development:

***'Due to Healthwatch Essex...I found employment as a volunteer peer worker. Being a Research Ambassador and Peer Worker has given me a purpose, more motivation, increased confidence and self-esteem in both my working life and also personally.' Ben, former Research Ambassador***  
***'Without them I couldn't be able to learn about research as I am living in an island in Greece and I am working at the same time. They gave me the opportunity to learn, gain experience, and got accepted on a Master's, which I am very happy that I will finally get to experience learning on campus.'* Maria, Research Ambassador**



Our Research team with ambassador Maria.



# **Our Organisation**

**Reflecting on the last year and  
looking ahead to 2026–2027**



Centre for Lived Experience & Applied Research

Where your story shapes change

# A Sneak Peak at our New Branding...

Introducing 'CLEAR - Centre for Lived Experience & Applied Research'. CLEAR is where your story shapes change. We create clear insight to help shape change, give people clear information and guidance and provide communities with a platform so that their voices can be heard clearly.

In light of the government's announcement of the intended abolition of the Healthwatch network, we have worked with our stakeholders, staff, ambassadors and the public to understand what matters most to them and what they would like to see maintained and strengthened in the future. Our new brand has been shaped by this feedback and we're excited to roll it out more fully in Autumn 2026.

Over the coming summer, we will be working on our transition to CLEAR, ready to launch fully with our new website in September 2026. Although we will have a new name, we will continue to deliver our Healthwatch functions whilst it remains in law. After the Healthwatch network dissolves, we will still be your local lived experience champion.

## Partner Feedback

As part of our rebrand, we consulted our volunteers, trustees, key partners and stakeholders about our work. Here's some of their feedback...



**Healthwatch Essex needs to continue to be a voice, challenging the status quo in a constructive and impartial way, using the information gathered from engagement work to inform system partners in their strategy and aspirations.**



**You've normalised (lived experience) within health and care services to the point that people expect it. To lose that would be a big sort of step back.**



**Strong scrutiny creates strong governance (for the health & care services).**



**One of the core strengths is your ability to convene diverse stakeholders and foreground under-represented perspectives.**



**The work you do helps make healthcare transparent and supports the community in advocating for their health.**

# Finance

To help us carry out our work, we receive our funding from the Department of Health and Social Care via Essex County Council, as well as doing commissioned work. Here's how we've spent our money.



**Information and Guidance**

**£150k**



**Outreach and Engagement**

**£235k**



**Commissioning and Research**

**£205k**



**Communications**

**£158k**



**Governance**

**£12k**

Our total income from April 2025 – March 2026 was approximately £790,000 and expenditure was £760,000. Each of the figures above includes an appropriate share of company overheads and office running costs.

# Thank You!

None of the work you have read about would be possible without the bravery and dedication of our volunteers, ambassadors and research participants. Without their insight and engagement, we would not be able to deliver any of the work we do.

Thank you to everyone who attended our Fellas' Fairs, slipper swaps, outreach activities and engagement sessions. These have been so much fun and enabled the team to meet and help so many wonderful people across the county.

A huge thank you to all of our professional colleagues and stakeholders. You are so open to hearing the recommendations we gather in our research and have worked hard to use this insight to make meaningful change across health and social care. You hold us to account and are receptive to us doing the same. We enjoy working with you and look forward to continuing to play the role of critical friend as we move into the next chapter for Essex with its new Mayoral responsibilities and combined Essex Integrated Care Board.

Although the future is uncertain, we are keen to embrace the opportunities and challenges on the horizon over the next year. I would like to take this final sentence to reassure you that we are not going anywhere: we will continue to champion the voice of our local citizens, hold services to account and reach in to our communities to better understand the local need... even if we do this under a new name.

**Sam Glover, CEO**

We are extremely grateful to all our volunteers and ambassadors who bravely share their experiences and work with us to offer the best possible support and guidance and encourage others to share their experiences.

I am extremely proud of everything that the Healthwatch Essex team undertakes and the impact that our reports and collaboration have on improving peoples' experiences of health and care. A huge thank you to all our Trustees who support the Chief Executive and her team in the vital work they do.

**Amanda Cherry, Chair**



Left and right: Amanda and Sam unveiling our new branding.



**Committed  
to quality**

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

# healthwatch Essex

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Front cover images:  
Left - Carers Voices  
team in front of the  
van.  
Right - Fellas' Forum  
football match.



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