



Hearing what matters to you

in our Annual Survey 2026

healthwatch
Northumberland

Aims

Each year we ask people living in Northumberland to tell us what they think of the NHS and social care services they have used over the last 12 months, in our Annual Survey.

We compare the results year on year.

The aims of this year's Annual Survey are to:

- Gain an overview of people's experiences with health and social care services in the previous 12 months
- Look at how this compares with the previous years' results

We also wanted to hear from Northumberland residents about which health and social care services they think we should focus on over the next year, and why.

However, this year, people chose from a shortlist of four suggested services plus an 'other' option. The shortlist was based on the concerns and issues that Northumberland residents had raised with us during the previous year.

Who we are

Healthwatch Northumberland is the independent health and social care champion for people in the county. If you use GP services, hospitals, dentists, pharmacies, care homes or other support services in your area, we want to hear about your experiences.

As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to local feedback and improve standards of care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

Healthwatch Northumberland is part of a network of over 150 local Healthwatch across the country. We're here to listen to the issues that really matter to people in Northumberland and to understand your experiences of using local health and social care services. We're entirely independent and impartial, and anything you share with us is confidential.

Summary

Our Annual Survey was open during February and March 2026. It was available online and as a printed document. It was promoted on our website, social media platforms, newsletters, through our network of contacts and at our 12 in-person events held during that time.

We received 220 responses to the survey from all parts of the county. This is less than last year, where we received 377 responses, and similar to the amount of responses we had in 2024 – 229 responses.

NHS services

Overall, in the last 12 months, most respondents were happy with the NHS services they had received with 62% of respondents saying they had been 'good' or 'excellent' – see Figure 1. Less than two percent of respondents skipped this question or said that they had not experienced NHS in the past 12 months. This is lower than last year's survey result and has fallen back to the 2024 level of satisfaction.

(Note on the term 'fair' – fair can have a variety of meanings to people. We are presuming that it means less than 'good' but better than 'poor'.)

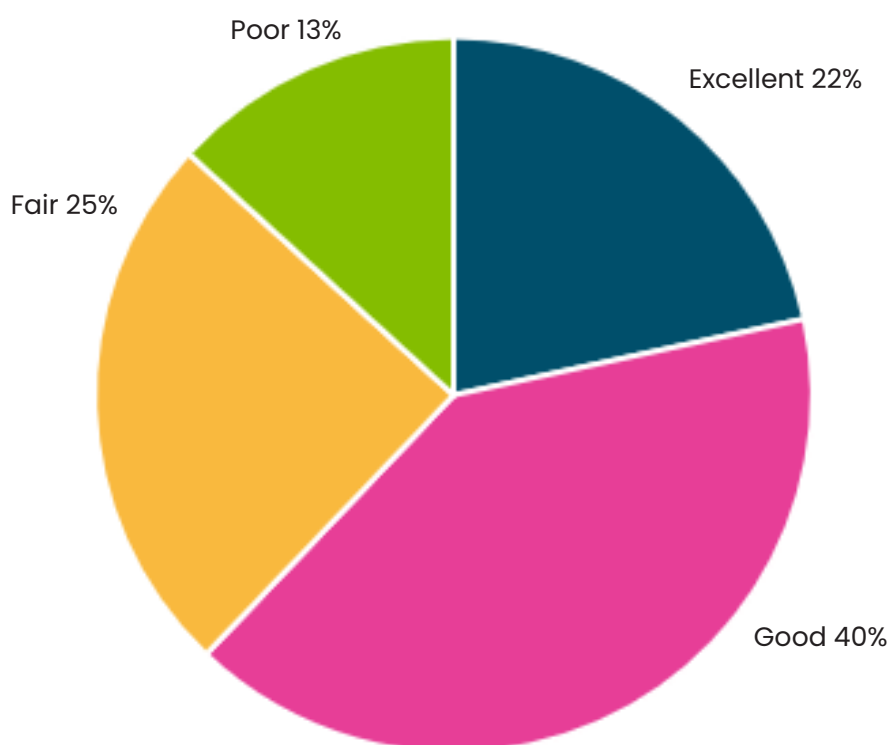


Figure 1. Overall, more people seemed happy with their experiences of NHS services over the past 12 months than not (n = 216)

We then asked whether people had felt the services had changed. Almost half of respondents felt that the services had stayed the same (49%) which was up from the previous year (45%) – see Figure 2. Likewise, the proportion of respondents who felt services had improved either a little or a lot rose from 25% in 2025 to 27% this year. The proportion of people who felt that services had got worse to some degree fell from 30% last year to 24% this year.

This is a continuation of the improvement in services, first seen in last year's survey, and would suggest that people still feel that services are staying the same or are improving despite the reduction in satisfaction levels this year.

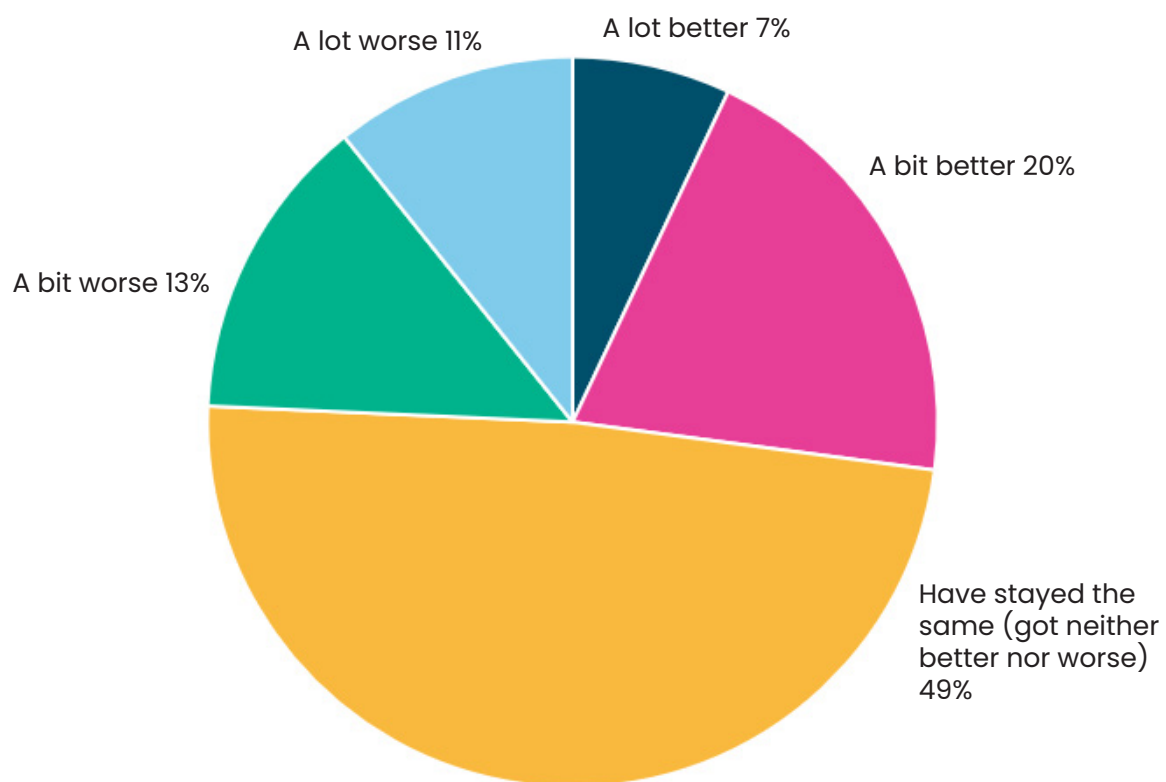


Figure. 2. In the past 12 months, over three-quarters of people felt that NHS services had remained the same or got better (n=214)



"I have been to the out of hours GP service in the last couple of months. I was grateful to have been seen so quickly.

"I have also seen a pharmacist who was very helpful."
Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley resident

Adult social care services

Unlike last year's survey, where less than a third of respondents gave an answer to 'Overall, how would you rate your experiences of adult social care in the past 12 months', this year 95% of the respondents answered this question. However, the majority of the respondents, 65%, still gave the answer that they had had no experience of adult social care services in the past 12 months.

Of those that had experienced adult social care services, those that felt that the services were 'fair' or 'poor' (21% in total) outnumbered those that felt services were 'good' or 'excellent' (14% in total) by a ratio of 2:1 (see figure 3). This ratio was largely the same as the previous year's responses.

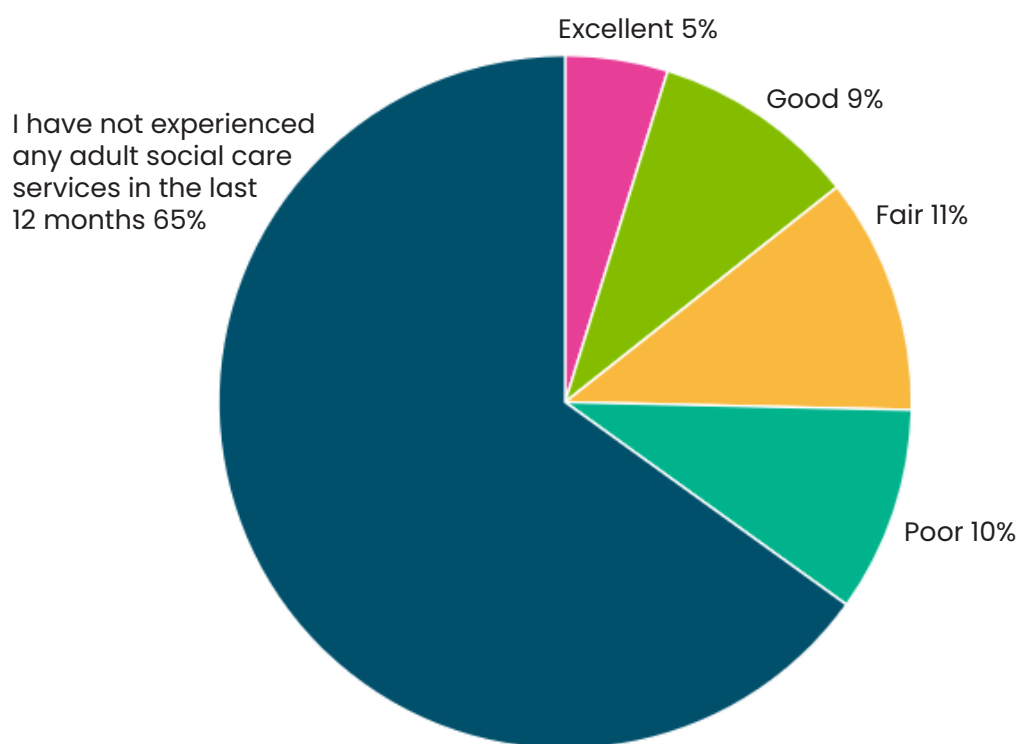


Figure 3. Overall, respondents who had used adult social care services in the last 12 months were more negative about them than positive (n=209)

"I had to ring adult social care for my dad, to see if we could get help as he had a major stroke a few years ago and my mam has been finding it hard lately.

"We got an appointment for a home visit quite quick and the lady that came was lovely and explained everything clearly."

Castle Morpeth resident



In answer to Question 4 – ‘In the past 12 months, do you feel adult social care services have got better or worse?’, two-thirds of respondents said they had not experienced adult social care services in the past 12 months. Of those that had experienced adult social care services, the majority said that services were unchanged from last year (17%) and slightly more had said the services had got a bit or a lot worse (9% total) rather than a bit or a lot better (8% total) – see Figure 4.

This is a slight improvement on the previous year’s results where 16% said things had remained the same, 11% said things had got a bit or a lot worse and 6% said things had got a bit or a lot better.

This shows that for our respondents, although adult social care services are still not up to expectations, there is improvement happening.

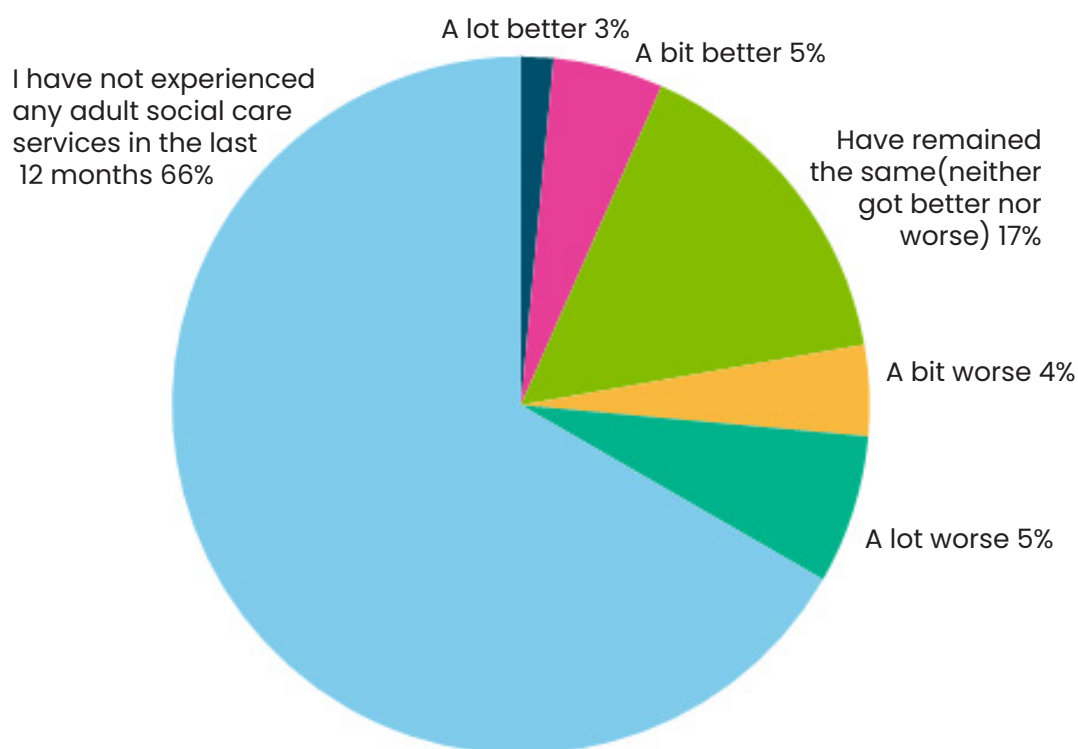


Figure 4. In the previous 12 months, respondents felt that adult social care had remained the same or got worse (n=206)

Our work priorities for the next year

From our day-to-day work we know that the following three service areas are of concern to Northumberland residents: GP services, hospital discharge services and audiology services. We intend to focus most of our work on these three areas over the coming year.

However, we also wanted a fourth service area to prioritise so we asked people to choose which of the following additional service they want us to focus on. The four service areas to choose from were:

- Digital access (such as GPs online booking service)
- Urgent dental care
- Travel for care (including Patient Transport Services)
- Accessible information (information that meets your needs)

We also asked why they had chosen the service.

Urgent dental care came out as the most popular option with almost a third of the responses (32%). See Table 1.

Service area	No. of votes	% of votes
Urgent dental care	60	32%
Digital access	45	24%
Accessible information	24	13%
Travel for care	18	9%
Routine dental care ('other' option)	5	3%

Table 1: Top five services chosen (n=190)

"Extremely difficult to get appointments with GP and hospitals. I care for a 92-year-old parent and routine follow up appointments don't happen, medication not delivered on time and everything is so hard to chase up.

"No consideration given to how difficult it is to physically get elderly people to appointments, i.e. getting in and out of cars, distance to walk from car parks. lack of local services – we have to drive a 40 mile round trip for a routine hearing appointment."

North Northumberland resident



Summary of reasons for choosing urgent dental care

- Respondents chose urgent dental care as a priority due to a widespread crisis in NHS dental provision across Northumberland.
- The core issue is a severe shortage of NHS dentists, particularly in rural areas like Hexham and the north of the county, forcing many people into unaffordable private care or leaving them without treatment altogether.
- Geographic barriers and lack of transport make the problem worse, with urgent care sometimes requiring long journeys.
- Respondents highlighted serious health risks from delayed treatment, including sepsis from untreated abscesses.
- The situation is worsened by NHS-trained dentists moving into private practice.
- Vulnerable groups – those on low incomes, older people, and those without transport – are hardest hit.
- An NHS 111 worker noted the system is failing at every level, with 111 unable to actually secure dental appointments, leaving patients with no clear route to urgent care.

(N.B. This summary of reasons was compiled by Claude AI by Anthropic from the answers received).

“Have only recently had to try to access adult care services following a stroke as need some care at home.

“My daughter-in-law deals with everything for me and has struggled to get anyone to come out due to turnover of staff. Unclear what is happening with care plan– communication and contact has been poor.”

Ashington and Blyth resident



Demographic and geographic variations to our priorities

As noted above, overall, NHS dental access dominates by a wide margin – 65 of 190 respondents (combining urgent and routine dental) chose it as their focus, with many describing deeply personal experiences of years without care or resorting to unaffordable private treatment.

Digital exclusion is the second major theme (45 responses), followed by accessible information (24), and transport and travel to care (18).

Looking at the five districts of the county, the pattern is the same for the top three choices per district except for North Northumberland where travel for care, including Patient Transport Services, is second choice.

North Northumberland

1. NHS dental access

The most intense expression of this theme across any district, dental provision in the north of the county is described as 'appalling'. No NHS dentist is available in many towns; those who can afford it go private, others go untreated entirely. Urgent dental care is inaccessible, with NHS 111 signposting patients back to dentists they aren't registered with.

2. Travel for care

Equally prominent as digital access in this district. Rural isolation, lack of transport to hospital appointments, concerns about patient transport driver shortages and poor compensation. Respondents describe being unable to travel to appointments when ill, worsening their conditions.

3. Digital exclusion

Older residents describe being effectively excluded from GP services due to lack of digital access. One respondent over 80 years describes themselves as 'allergic to digital access'. Another notes being signposted to Boots or an 'open forum' when unable to use digital systems.

Tynedale

1. NHS dental access

A strong local dimension — specifically, there are few NHS dentists in the Hexham area. Respondents describe it as ‘impossible to get NHS dental care’ in Hexham and highlight long-standing unmet need.

2. Digital exclusion

Multiple respondents describe elderly relatives or themselves being unable to use NHS Apps or online booking. One notes a mother over 80 “can’t use digital devices”; another says they’d rather attend Hexham General Hospital than navigate a digital service.

3. Accessible information

Requests for Plain English written communications, simplified paperwork, and clearer patient-facing language. Concern that complex language disadvantages patients making decisions about their care.

Castle Morpeth

1. NHS dental access

Lack of NHS dentists in Morpeth is the leading concern. People moving to the area struggle to register; one respondent has not had a dental appointment in seven years. Affordability of private dental care is a recurring barrier.

2. Digital exclusion

Strongly represented, with particular concern for elderly and people with learning disabilities. Several respondents have no internet, smartphone, or family support and rely entirely on telephone or face-to-face contact. One notes: “I don’t have a phone so rely on paper.”

3. Accessible information

Need for written, telephone, and face-to-face communication channels alongside digital. Concern that GP receptionists and practice staff are not resourced to support non-digital patients. A “dedicated person” to assist is suggested.

Ashington and Blyth

1. NHS dental access

Highly prominent, with vivid personal accounts: one respondent has not seen a dentist in six years; another has spent £1,862.50 on private care they could not really afford. An NHS 111 worker describes dental services as “diabolical” across the whole country.

2. Digital exclusion

Strong concern for those without online access by choice or affordability. One respondent highlights the GP digital access system as “too complex” and unable to handle simple requests. Patient records should flag non-digital contact preferences.

3. Accessible information

Information access as a barrier for disabled and elderly patients. One respondent (85, disabled) describes needing help to access services and hard-copy documentation as essential rather than optional.

Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley

1. NHS dental access

Insufficient NHS dentists is the top concern. Respondents note the knock-on effect: people only seek care when in crisis rather than getting routine treatment that would prevent emergencies. NHS-trained dentists leaving for private practice is specifically highlighted as a systemic failure.

2. Digital exclusion

Older and digitally excluded residents feel “disadvantaged.” A deaf respondent describes repeated issues being contacted only by phone, resulting in missed appointments — they must use PALS to obtain email contact instead.

3. Accessible information

Named contacts and improved communication for families of older patients. Specific need for information for carers. A named contact to voice concerns to would be valued by families of care recipients.

Priorities by levels of deprivation

The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) ranks places in England with the same levels of population in order of deprivation, from the most to the least deprived. These rankings are divided into ten bands, or 'deciles', where the first decile is the most deprived area, and the tenth decile is the least deprived area. Using a postcode tool, we can see the level of deprivation in the area where a person lives.

When looking at the choice of priorities by IMD decile, 6/10 deciles chose urgent dental care, 3/10 chose digital access and one decile (the least deprived decile) chose accessible information. See Table 2.

First decile (most deprived areas)	1. Urgent dental care chosen by 60% of respondents from this decile) 2. Digital access (30%) 3. Adult social care (10%)
Second decile	1. Urgent dental care (47%) 2. Digital access (20%) 3. Accessible information and Physiotherapists (10% each)
Third decile	1. Digital access (40%) 2. Urgent dental care (30%) 3. No clear third choice
Fourth decile	1. Digital access (33%) 2. Urgent dental care (27%) 3. GP appointment system and Travel for care (13% each)
Fifth decile	1. Urgent dental care (27%) 2. Digital access and Accessible information (23% each)
Sixth decile	1. Urgent dental care (36%) 2. Digital access (27%) 3. GP appointment system and Travel for care (9% each)
Seventh decile	1. Urgent dental care and Travel for care (22% each) 2. GP appointment system (17%)
Eighth decile	1. Digital access (50%) 2. Urgent dental care (25%) 3. GP services (13%)
Ninth decile	1. Urgent dental care (47%) 2. Accessible information (20%) 3. Digital access and Routine NHS dental care (13% each)
Tenth decile (least deprived areas)	1. Accessible information (28%) 2. Digital access (24%) 3. Urgent dental care (20%)

Conclusions

Our Annual Survey was held during February and March 2026 and received 220 responses from across the whole of Northumberland.

The feedback shows people feel more positive than negative about the NHS services and the delivery. Three quarters of respondents felt that NHS services had remained the same or improved over the past 12 months.

Feeling about adult social care services is more negative than positive and, although adult social care services are still not up to respondents' expectations, there is the perception that improvement is happening.

In terms of our fourth priority of work for the coming year, Urgent dental care came out as the most popular option with almost a third of the responses choosing this service.

What next?

We will use this information to guide our work in 2026/27 and you can read what happened as a result in our annual report each year.



Contact us

Healthwatch Northumberland
Adapt (NE), Burn Lane, Hexham
Northumberland NE46 3HN

tel: 03332 408468
text: 07413 385275
email: info@healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk
website: healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk
Facebook: [@healthwatchnorthumberland](https://www.facebook.com/healthwatchnorthumberland)
Instagram: [hwnland](https://www.instagram.com/hwnland)
LinkedIn: [healthwatch-northumberland](https://www.linkedin.com/company/healthwatch-northumberland)
X: [@HWNland](https://twitter.com/HWNland)

healthwatch
Northumberland