healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees

Working together with the NENC Healthwatch Network

Learning for Us All: From Access to Inclusion

What welcoming a Deaf Board member taught us about accessibility in practice

August 2026

At Healthwatch, we believe everyone should have the opportunity to share their experiences, influence decisions and play an active role in shaping the services that affect their lives.

Recently, we welcomed Colleen to our Board. As a Deaf person, Colleen brings valuable lived experience, insight and perspective to our discussions. Wanting to ensure she could fully participate in her first Board meeting, we trialled a digital speech-to-text app to support communication.

Like many organisations, we saw technology as part of the solution. What we quickly learned was that accessibility is about much more than technology alone.

Our Experience

The speech-to-text app provided real-time captions of the discussion, allowing Colleen to follow some of the conversation. However, it also highlighted a number of challenges.

Words were sometimes missed or mistranslated. There were delays before captions appeared on screen, by the time some comments were displayed, the conversation had already moved on.

We also discovered how much seemingly small things can affect accessibility:

- The pace of discussion
- Different accents and tones of voice
- People speaking quickly
- People speaking over one another
- The use of jargon and acronyms
- Where people were seated in the room
- Changes in the direction of conversation

For hearing Board members, these things often pass unnoticed. For Colleen, they created additional barriers to keeping up with the discussion and contributing at the same pace as everyone else.

The technology provided access to parts of the conversation, but it did not automatically create inclusion.

An Important Reflection

The experience prompted us to think differently about what accessibility really means.

If someone can technically access a meeting but still struggles to take part, are we truly being inclusive?

It highlighted the difference between being present and being able to actively participate.

True inclusion is about more than receiving information. It is about ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute, ask questions, challenge ideas and influence decisions equally.

Why This Matters

As Healthwatch, we regularly hear from people about the barriers they face when accessing health and care services. We encourage organisations to listen, adapt and improve.

That means we must be prepared to do the same ourselves. Colleen's experience challenged some of our own assumptions and reminded us that accessibility cannot be reduced to reliance solely on technology or a single adjustment. While digital tools can be incredibly valuable, they are only one part of the picture.

As services continue to become more digital, there is a risk that access is confused with inclusion. Our experience suggests they are not the same thing.

This is an important lesson not only for us, but for any organisation committed to genuinely involving people in decisions that affect them.

‘True inclusion is about more than receiving information.’

Walking Alongside Colleen

One of the most valuable outcomes of this experience has been the opportunity to learn.

We recognise that accessibility is best understood by listening to those who experience barriers themselves. Policies, training and technology all have an important role to play, but there is no substitute for learning directly from people with lived experience. Their insights help us challenge assumptions, identify barriers we may not otherwise see and create more meaningful inclusion.

We will be walking alongside Colleen as she helps us better understand what accessibility truly means in practice.

Through her experiences, feedback and guidance, we hope to identify barriers we may otherwise overlook, challenge our assumptions and continue improving how we work. Her voice will help shape our journey towards becoming a more inclusive organisation.

‘We recognise that accessibility is best understood by listening to those who experience barriers themselves.’

Walking Alongside Colleen (cont...)

“Healthwatch colleagues, thank you. When we quickly realised that the speech-to-text technology wasn't working, you didn't just offer a temporary fix and leave it there. Instead, you grasped the wider issue: that technology isn’t always a solution, and that proposing tech-based options can sometimes create entirely new accessibility barriers for users.

“You have made me feel truly seen and valued. By taking a self-critical and expansive perspective, I know you will carry these insights forward as we shape best practices for the deaf community. I expected to face hurdles joining the Healthwatch board, but I didn't expect you to meet my challenges with such deep understanding and a willingness to look critically inward for answers.

“I am hugely grateful, and I feel increasingly inspired and enthusiastic as we embark on this journey together.”

Colleen Metcalfe, Executive Board Member

Learning for Us All

This is not a story about what went wrong.

It is a story about learning.

Learning that accessibility is not a checklist.

Learning that good intentions do not always lead to the outcomes we hope for.

Learning that inclusion requires us to listen, reflect and adapt.

Most importantly, it reminds us that accessibility should not be measured by whether someone can enter the room or log into a meeting.

It should be measured by whether they can participate, contribute with confidence and feel that their voice is heard.

Through welcoming Colleen to our Board, we have been reminded that we cannot define accessibility on behalf of others. The people best placed to tell us what works, what doesn't and what needs to change are those with lived experience.

As Healthwatch, we are committed to championing people's voices, highlighting barriers and leading by example. By sharing our learning openly, we hope to encourage conversations about what meaningful accessibility looks like in organisations, communities and health and care services.

Because accessibility is not about helping people fit into existing systems.

It's about creating systems that work for everyone.

Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees
6 - 8 Yarm Road
Stockton-on-Tees
TS18 3NA

t: 0300 180 0660
e: info@healthwatchstocktononteees.co.uk

healthwatchstocktononteees.co.uk