

Healthwatch Essex Annual Report 2023–2024

Your voice improving
health and care



healthwatch
Essex



Photos below:
 1 - Business Apprentice Grace at the East of England Healthwatch Learning Event.
 2 - Information and Guidance Officer Sara at iCARP.
 3 - Digital Marketing Apprentice Sam at Firstsite.



Photos above:
 1 - Engagement Manager Dan at a BBQ.
 2 - CEO Sam at a Fella's Fair.
 3 - Research Officers Lorna and Beth at a Pride event.
 Front cover:
 L - Ambassador Sam with Engagement Officer Mel.
 R - Research Manager Kate talking to a man at a Fella's Fair.

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A Note From Us...



Health and social care in Essex has been changing as the Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) have developed and restructured. Our engagement with the three ICBs across Essex has been vital to ensure that user voice and lived experience are central features as these organisations develop.

We are really excited to see the Hospital Discharge work carried out at Princess Alexandra Hospital published this year. This case study approach highlighted the benefits and challenges faced when leaving the hospital from the perspective of all involved.

The Trauma Ambassador Group has continued to grow and develop. They created an informational video to support access to cervical screening and have been commended in a national award for the Trauma Card.

One of our research officers researched inflammatory bowel disease and maternity; not only did this research result in an in-depth and fascinating report, but it also provided an evidence base which led to the creation of a practical short resource for pregnant people.

We have taken on a new programme of work listening to the voices of unpaid carers. Approximately 124,000 unpaid carers living in Essex support individuals, friends and family. Listening to this army of support is vital in shaping the services and support offered to residents across Essex.

This year has been very challenging, and the team have had to work harder than ever to produce an impact for Essex citizens. It has been a humbling privilege to see the team at Healthwatch Essex work so hard to support the community and share resources and insights with stakeholders at every level.

My personal highlights of the year have been the array of development days that we have carried out as a team. Not only has this enabled us to grow, learn, and develop as a team, but it's also been great fun.

Sam Glover, Healthwatch Essex CEO



The team at Healthwatch Essex (HWE) has had another busy and successful year. We have recruited more staff and been successful in securing more interesting projects from a wide range of partners. The teams have enjoyed being able to get out and about to attend meetings and make our community aware of the vital work that we do capturing and sharing the lived experience of health and social care.

We have supported our colleagues in the Integrated Care Partnerships in their first year to develop their plans and agree their priorities in their local communities. It has been

a huge learning curve for everyone involved and we are optimistic that this new way of providing health and social care will, over time, better meet the needs of our communities.

The impact of the cost-of-living increases continues to affect everyone, in particular the most vulnerable people in our communities. HWE will continue to support our staff to deal with the cost-of-living crisis and ensure their health and wellbeing with access to a range of support and advice. The worsening situation in terms of health and social care provision has had, and continues to have, a huge impact on the health and wellbeing of our local communities, with increasing numbers seeking support and guidance from our teams.

The work of the Trauma Ambassador Group and the creation of the Trauma Card has been extremely successful in supporting survivors of trauma and helping professionals who may be dealing with survivors better understand how to approach conversations with them. There has been national and international interest in having the Trauma Cards to distribute.

The Research Ambassador Network has been extremely popular – widening our reach across research programmes, adding to the research we do and supporting others involved in research.

HWE hosted a very successful and warmly received East of England Healthwatch Learning Event with a different format to previous events. Our team shared some of the work they have done, particularly the co-production work. We also invited a number of our ambassadors who were willing to share their various challenges and difficulties and give voice to their lived experiences. The delegates very much enjoyed the event with many subsequently coming back to us for more information and guidance.

Everyone in health and social care is concerned about the need to make cost savings and the team at Healthwatch Essex are extremely concerned about the impact this will have on services and support in our communities. We are all aware that the NHS and social care are in crisis and not meeting the needs of the population which are becoming increasingly complex often due to delays accessing care and support. We will continue to work closely with our colleagues in the Integrated Care Partnerships and support them to find innovative new ways of working together to provide more and improved care and support for our local communities.

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 matter, 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.

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.

We also provide an information service to help people navigate the health and social care system via a confidential phone call, text or email.

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, one mental health trust, five acute hospitals, as well as Essex County Council which has responsibility for social care and public health.

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, which receives our funding each year.



Some of the team at the East of England Healthwatch Learning Event.

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.

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.

Our Year at a Glance

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April 23

We celebrated the start of our 10th Anniversary year with a BBQ for staff and ambassadors.

We also shared on social media our biggest achievements across the decade.

We released two of our reports for North East Essex Integrated Care System on mould and dermatology services.

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May 23

The Trauma Card won the 'Most Promising Pilot' award at the Integrated Health Awards.

We marked the King's Coronation at an event hosted by Blind Veterans UK.

For Carers Week, we recorded a podcast with Collaborate Essex member Joe and his wife Joan.

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June 23

We championed inclusion at the first of the Pride events we attended this year in Chelmsford (followed by Clacton, Colchester and Basildon!)

We produced an 'In Your Shoes Event' in Harlow.

We shared our 2022-23 Annual Report.

July 23

We kicked off the first in the series of Fella's Fairs at a football match in Heybridge.

Our team attended and presented at the Suffolk and North East Essex Can Do Expo 2023.

We hosted the East of England Healthwatch Learning Event for other Healthwatch teams in our network.

August 23

Our Prison report was widely acknowledged, featuring on BBC Radio Essex and in prison magazines.

We were invited to try new technology in dance with Dance Network Association after they featured on Hidden Voices.

Our Adult Mental Health Ambassadors had a sunny BBQ get together.

September 23

We attended Fresher's Fairs and careers fairs to engage with young people.

We attended an Older People's Fair in Clacton.

Several of our Trauma Ambassadors shared their experiences on our blog.

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6

Here are some of our highlights from the last 12 months...



October 23

Our Trauma Ambassador Group created a film to make cervical screening better for other trauma survivors.

We marked World Mental Health Day with a series of videos by our ambassadors around 'Stigma'.

We joined Anglia Ruskin's Panel of Public Collaborators.



November 23

We were awarded a bronze award from the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme.

We were also Primary Care Impact Award finalists for our work on community pharmacies in West Essex.

Allie's TikToks about childhood abuse and related trauma went viral and attracted media attention.



December 23

Our team celebrated together with a Christmas party and pizza.

Collaborate Essex and the Fella's Forum held their Christmas celebrations.

Our Information and Guidance team visited Old Park Meadow, a natural burial ground.

January 24

We released our report and resource booklet for Inflammatory Bowel Disease and Pregnancy.

We visited The Hold to learn more about the Ipswich Romanian Community.

Our Research and Engagement teams led co-production training for the rest of the team.



February 24

Engagement work on Carers Voices project began.

The Communications Team started filming for a video explaining the transition from child to adult mental health services.

We celebrated Children's Mental Health Week and National Apprenticeships Week.



March 24

Our second Fella's Fair in Braintree featured on ITV News.

The Trauma Card initiative received a national commendation.

One of our Ambassadors, Valerie, gave a speech at the UN in New York attracting lots of media attention.





Listening & Engaging

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

2023–24 in Numbers

Sharing experiences



117

ambassadors now 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



1383

people got support from the Healthwatch Essex Information & Guidance Team via our website, phone, text, Whatsapp, face-to-face, live chat or email.

Connecting online



811k

views across our social media channels, 47,000 people visited our website and 94 people provided information to us via our online Feedback Centre.

Our projects

Read how we've captured your voice through our research and engagement, working with a wide range of people on various projects.



To promote the Transitions project, we attended several Pride events throughout the county in summer 2023 as seen on this page, which has also led to other projects and podcasts with the LGBTQ+ community.



Transitions

Exploring people's experience of being on the gender identity clinic waiting list

Transitioning refers to the steps a person may take to live in the gender with which they identify. Each person's transition is unique and personal to them. For some, transition involves medical intervention, such as hormone therapy and surgeries. Adults who seek help with their gender identify are supported by a set of specialist centres, often known as 'gender identity clinics' (GICs). Those that seek this support face significant barriers, including lengthy waiting times that stretch into years. The NHS Constitution sets out that patients should wait no longer than 18 weeks from GP referral to treatment. Despite this, the waiting times for GICs can be around 5 years, from referral to first appointment.

We wanted to raise awareness about the impact of these waiting times on people living in Essex. Our in-depth research project, led by former Research Associate Sarah Krauze, generated a survey with 29 individuals and in-depth interviews with 3 participants. We aimed to gain insight into people's experience of being referred to the GIC, the impact of waiting times for services, and support mechanisms that people had accessed during this time. One participant also engaged in photo-interviewing, sharing images that they felt represented their everyday life. This method can elicit a deeper understanding of a participant's lived experience, empowering them to share their personal narrative on their own terms.



Through sharing their lived experiences, participants detailed their complex journeys of self-discovery in relation to their gender identity. They also highlighted that the wait for medical care was just one facet of their transition. Other services including beauty salons, and friends' acceptance of a name change also constituted gender-affirming care. Participants highlighted multiple recommendations for services, including mandatory trans awareness training for GPs and effective communication from GICs. These recommendations, along with our findings, are detailed in a research report. We will also be showcasing the images captured over the course of this project at numerous events in the coming year.

A photograph of a mushroom provided by one of our participants, who felt that it highlighted how 'all of our journeys are like completely individual and unique and beautiful in their own way'.

IBD and Pregnancy

This year, we conducted research about women and birthing people's experiences of pregnancy and the postnatal period whilst living with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). We drew on our findings to produce a research report and an information resource to support others with IBD on their pregnancy journey.

Over half a million people in the UK live with IBD. IBD is an umbrella term for two chronic gastrointestinal conditions: Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. IBD is characterised by a cycle of relapse (often referred to as 'flare-ups') and remission. It is typically diagnosed in adolescence or early adulthood. There is little qualitative research on how pregnancy and caring for a newborn affects the lives of women and birthing people who are already self-managing a long-term condition like IBD. Our report, 'The Dual Challenge of Pregnancy and IBD', fills this gap. It draws on in-depth interviews to understand how women manage their disease during and after pregnancy, and their experiences of care under multiple specialities, such as the GP, maternity and gastroenterology services.

Our study found that it is never too early for individuals to discuss pregnancy with their IBD team. These conversations reduce anxiety about medications, fertility, and maintaining remission. IBD nurses provided our participants with vital support throughout their pregnancy journey. One woman shared that she was diagnosed with Crohn's during her pregnancy, and wanted to tell her story so that others in a similar situation would feel less alone.

Participants highlighted the balancing act that they performed whilst attending multiple appointments, searching for information on pregnancy and IBD, and liaising with several specialist doctors, all while maintaining their other daily responsibilities. All participants agreed that women and birthing people with IBD need better support over the postnatal period, as flare-ups can occur shortly after childbirth. None of our participants were warned by clinicians that this would be the case. They experienced debilitating fatigue, significant weight loss and a frequent urge to go to the toilet whilst caring for a newborn.

Our participants highlighted a lack of centralised information on IBD during pregnancy and the postnatal period so we worked with them to produce the informational resource 'From Bump to Baby with IBD: Pregnancy and postnatal information for those with IBD'. The resource provides guidance on each stage of pregnancy, suggestions on what to discuss with your maternity and IBD teams, personal reflections from women with IBD, and links to reliable websites and support forums. It also features an alert card for individuals who are immunosuppressed and/or taking biologic medication. The card helps mothers and birthing people to discuss their baby's immunisation schedule with their healthcare providers.

Since publication, our report and resource have been very well-received. In March, lead researcher, Lorna Orriss-Dib, facilitated a training session on pregnancy and IBD for Parents 1st's Parent Peer Supporters. She will be sharing her findings at Crohn's and Colitis UK support groups and shared learning events across the Integrated Care Boards in Essex. National charity Best Beginnings are also showcasing our findings in their parent support app Baby Buddy.

Front cover of the IBD and Pregnancy report.



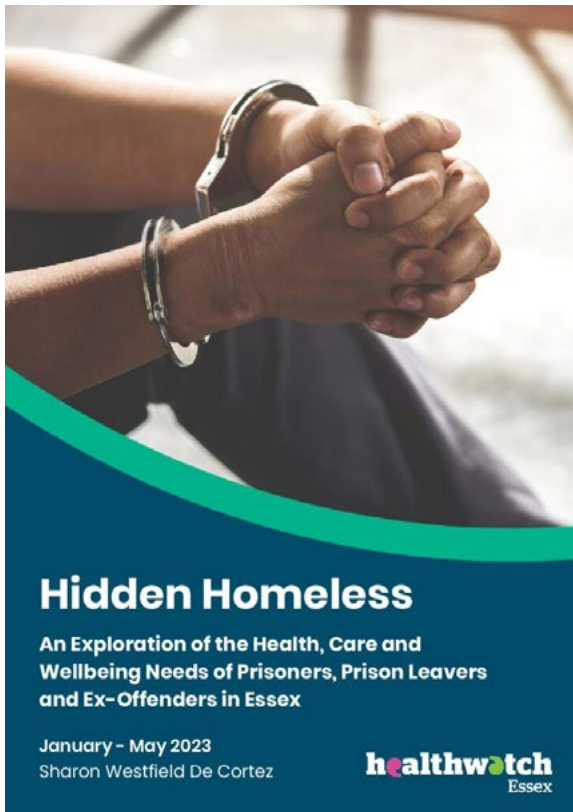
Front cover of the Supporting Partnership report.



Supporting Partnership

Over the past year we have conducted an in-depth research project exploring hospital staffs' experiences of co-production. NHS Foundation Trusts (FTs) are increasingly using participatory methods to encourage collaborative partnerships between patients, carers, families, and members of the public to help design service improvements. Co-production is a participatory method which foregrounds patients' lived experience and actively involves them in decision-making processes from the design of services to their delivery. Existing research often emphasises how important it is for patients to get involved in these approaches. Less attention is directed to hospital staffs' perspectives on co-production and how they can be encouraged to take part. To address this gap, we carried out in-depth interviews with staff from different divisions across a FT to capture their views on co-production. We also observed professional meetings to see how staff were included in the design of co-production projects at a strategic level.

Our research found that staff had varied levels of knowledge around co-production and what it entails. They also felt that the term had only been recently introduced, with one participant referring to it as a "buzzword". Several staff believed that they had engaged in informal forms of co-production in the past but had not defined it as such. Our participants highlighted numerous factors that influenced what a co-production project might look like and staffs' attitudes towards involvement, including operational and time pressures. They also highlighted the need to develop further training on approaches like co-production as this could help to foster new ways of collaborating between staff and patients. Our findings will be available to access in our upcoming research report, along with a series of recommendations for all FTs that demonstrate how staff can be best supported to get involved in co-production in a hospital setting.



Hidden Homeless

An Exploration of the Health, Care, and Wellbeing Needs of Prisoners, Prison Leavers, and Ex-Offenders in Essex

This year, we launched the first instalment in our Hidden Homeless series of reports, 'An Exploration of the Health, Care, and Wellbeing Needs of Prisoners, Prison Leavers, and Ex-Offenders in Essex.' The report delved into the lived experiences of prisoners, prison leavers, and ex-offenders, aiming to identify their specific health, care, and wellbeing needs and the challenges they face in achieving positive outcomes. Through surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews, the report shed light on the voices of this group, highlighting challenges and advocating for necessary improvements in support and services.

Among the key themes that emerged, mental health stood out as the primary concern. The prevalence of mental health conditions, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts among prisoners emphasised the urgent need for equitable access to mental health support services within the prison system. While initiatives within the voluntary sector are supportive, it was highlighted that they should complement, not replace, proper NHS healthcare provisions. Persistent self-harming, depression, and inadequate mental health support feature strongly in the stories of many of the prisoners and ex-offenders engaged with.

Trauma emerged as another significant challenge faced by prisoners and ex-offenders, with a considerable number of participants revealing highly traumatic experiences in their lives, including abuse, familial separation, and mental health crises. The lack of appropriate support since these traumatic events left a lasting impact, leading to potential triggers and severe reactions that could be debilitating for individuals. Recognising the comorbidities associated with trauma, such as substance misuse and self-harm, the report calls for timely and comprehensive trauma support within the prison system, alongside structured mental health provision.

This page – front cover of the Hidden Homeless report.

Opposite page top to bottom:

1 – Front cover of the Hidden Homeless Information Leaflet.

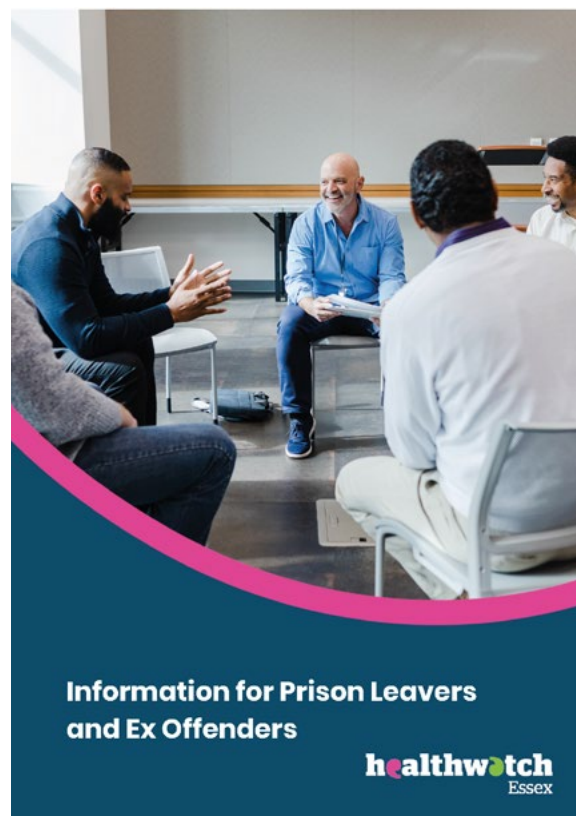
2 – Information and Guidance Manager Sharon presenting the research at our 2024 Annual Showcase.

Addiction emerged as another pressing concern, with a significant number of individuals entering prison with addiction issues, primarily opiates. The report stresses the importance of prison as an opportunity for addiction services to provide support and treatment to prisoners, enabling them to overcome their addictions before release. Greater collaboration between prison and community-based agencies for continuous support post-release is essential to ensure positive outcomes and reduce reoffending.

The report also identified the need for a streamlined system to address prisoners' physical and mental health needs promptly. For instance, the 'apps' system, relying on notes passed between prisoners and prison staff to access appointments, was found to have pitfalls causing delays in receiving necessary care. Implementing electronic systems can ensure faster and more efficient healthcare delivery.

For prisoners, release can be both a daunting and overwhelming experience, especially for those lacking support networks. To facilitate successful reintegration, the report advocates for greater integrated working between prison staff and community agencies, creating a structured process with individualized plans covering health, housing, employment, and more. Additionally, providing adequate information and resources for individuals upon release can significantly reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes, such as homelessness, poor health, and continued addiction. We produced a simple information resource to provide to prison leavers.

The powerful lived experiences that were shared underline the urgent need for comprehensive support in mental health, trauma care, addiction treatment, and reintegration efforts. Investments in these areas not only improve the lives of individuals in this cohort group but also contribute to reducing reoffending rates and the associated costs to society.



Installment two of 'Hidden Homeless' in 2024-2025 will explore the health, care and wellbeing needs of those involved in sex work.

Children's and Young People's Asthma Support

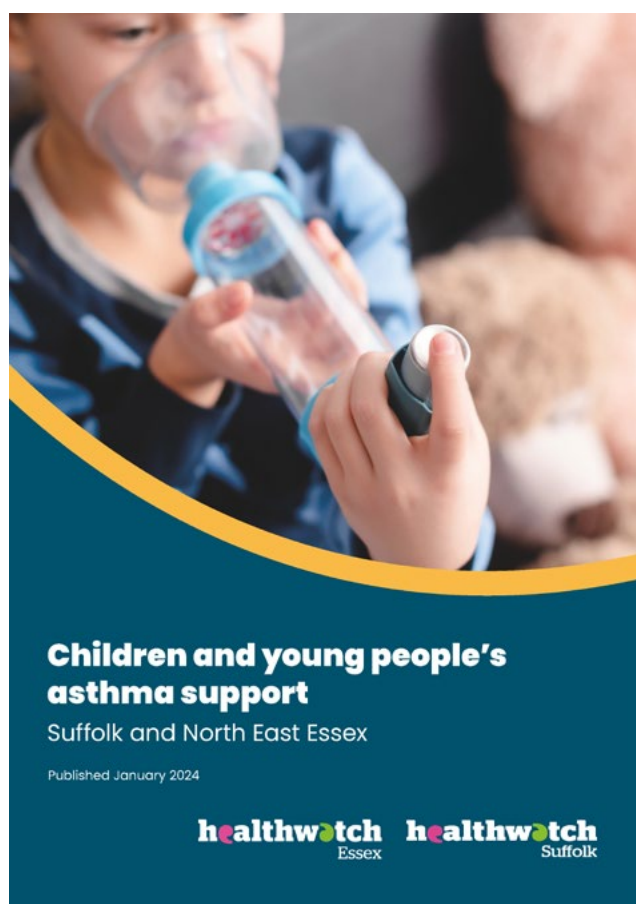
Alongside Healthwatch Suffolk, we were commissioned by Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board to explore people's experiences of support for children and young people with asthma.

We engaged with children, young people and their families via a workshop and a co-produced survey to learn more about their lived experience, the asthma care they had received, and areas for potential improvement. Overall, across the engagement period, over 140 local residents shared their views and the findings revealed that:

- People had an inconsistent experience of getting a diagnosis, and some people had found it very difficult.
- A large proportion of parents, carers and guardians and young people felt a professional had explained to them or their child what asthma medicines they had, what they do and when to use them.
- Only half of respondents felt children and young people's asthma was monitored regularly enough.
- Just over a third of parents, carers and guardians had not had a follow-up review of their child's asthma after being admitted to hospital.
- Parents and guardians shared they would most like to receive information about asthma care via asthma clinics and children aged between 11-15 shared they would like to receive information via email and social media.

From the findings of the engagement methods, clear recommendations could be made including ensuring that parents, young people and professionals are clearly informed about the signs and symptoms of asthma, being given a regularly reviewed personalised asthma plan and ensuring that children and young people are given a primary care review appointment after a hospital admittance for asthma.

The experiences shared and the findings from the report will be used to help support NHS leaders and consultants to shape and improve asthma care for children and young people across east and west Suffolk, and north east Essex.



Front cover of the Asthma report.

Exploring Hospital Discharge

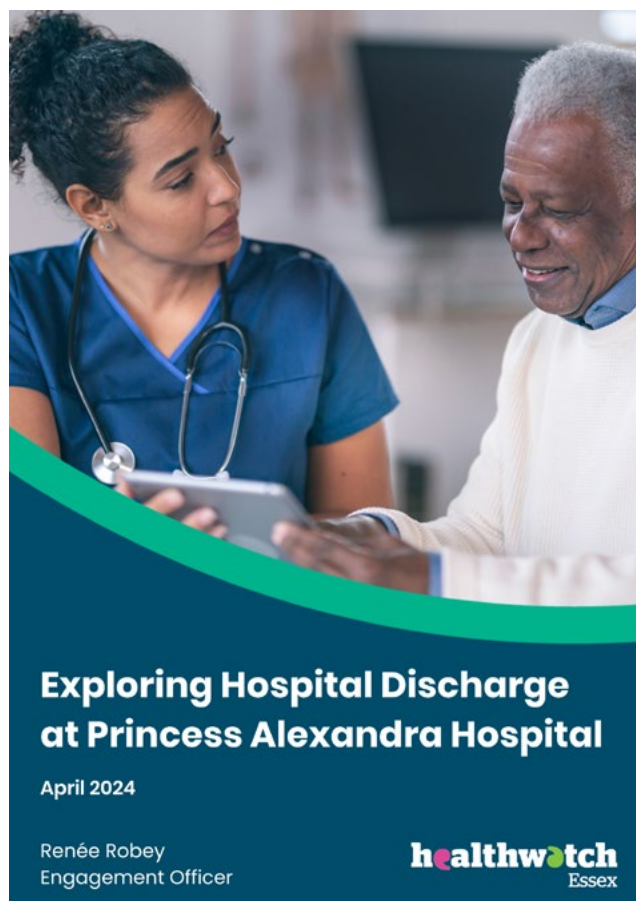
Our Information & Guidance Team had noticed a rise in calls regarding hospital discharge across Essex hospitals. Princess Alexandra Hospital (PAH) was undergoing improvement and development, and therefore West Essex was chosen as an appropriate area for Healthwatch Essex to explore during this project.

We interviewed a variety of participants linked to the hospital discharge process including PAH colleagues, non-emergency transport, voluntary, community and social enterprises and a local hospice. Patient voice was also included to ensure that patients' experiences and perspectives were shared.

Participants were keen to share their views and from the interviews, recommendations were made including:

- Staff training to support accuracy of Transfer of Care referral forms and training to include encouragement of staff to think of the patients' needs after the hospital discharge.
- PAH to continue using support from local charities and organisations which can help patients when they are due to be discharged and support them in their home or place of care.
- Developing an understanding of potential limitations between PAH and non-emergency transport and discussing what the solutions may be.
- Local hospices to be provided with direct ward numbers to quicken the process of a patient being transferred to a hospice bed.

The report will be used by the Princess Alexandra Hospital to support, shape and improve their hospital discharge process to benefit staff members, external stakeholders and patients.



Front cover of the Exploring Hospital Discharge report.

Community Asset Mapping

This year we worked alongside Community 360, Community Voluntary Services Tendring and the North East Essex Alliance to explore the assets available in the community in the context of the 'Be Well' domain. Being Well in North East Essex is supported by a breadth of voluntary and community organisations committed to enabling people to maintain their quality of life for longer, engage in purposeful activity and connect into local networks. We carried out the work within Pier Ward in Tendring and Old Health in Colchester. The common key findings were variable housing quality, high levels of deprivation and increasing house prices in the local area which resulted in many local residents being priced out of the market. The impact of COVID-19 could still be felt in some communities including Old Health in Colchester where we saw how local groups had overcome barriers to increasing physical activity by developing new local exercise groups.

The report highlighted how partnership working across the whole system was critical in effecting meaningful change. It was clear that poor quality housing was an issue within the private rented sector – an issue which needs to be tackled through a multi-agency approach. Food sustainability was another important issue and it was recommended that more work takes place to support people to equip themselves with the skills to buy nutritious food and cook while on a budget. Initiatives continue to develop to make physical activity more accessible to the majority of residents – using the park, community centres, outdoor gyms and sea swimming to keep people moving, improving longer term health outcomes.

Growing Older in Essex

Working alongside Adult Social Care at Essex County Council we ran an engagement project focusing on the experience of people over the age of 65 living across Essex. Through a series of conversations at a variety of different locations across the county, we explored what is important to them in their lives as they grow older.

The project revealed a number of themes including continuing anxiety related to Covid paired with health concerns about growing older in general. Many of the participants discussed how they had a sense that their local areas had changed over time and some highlighted that they felt their area had been overdeveloped without adequate provision for the services needed to support the residents.

Another theme related to digital literacy with there being a wide variety of ability amongst the people we spoke to. Some felt that a poorer grasp of technology impeded their ability to achieve day-to-day activities and was linked to a sense of vulnerability. A few of the participants also discussed loneliness and isolation, having experienced it in the past, and the measures they took to avoid this continuing to be a feature of their lives in the future.



Sandra, Mike and Sue, participants in a series of short films about Growing Older in Essex.



Co-production Training

Healthwatch Essex has spent the last year designing a comprehensive co-production training programme. Co-production is a fundamental part of what we do at Healthwatch Essex. Through our ambassador programmes, research projects, and engagement initiatives, we work in collaboration with those who have lived experience to improve health and care across the county. An increasing number of organisations, ranging from local charities to universities and Foundation Trusts, are seeking to embed co-production practices into their work. However, definitions of co-production vary, and it can be difficult to know how to truly co-produce something.

Our training programme helps participants to navigate what co-production means and how they can employ it within their own organisations. After breaking down the different facets of the co-production process and showcasing real life examples, participants are supported to design their own co-production project through interactive scenarios. Our training fosters a relaxed and supportive environment, with questions and open discussion actively encouraged. We have carried out training sessions at local charities and universities and received the following feedback:

‘Nice blend of theory, examples and “practice”’

‘It was a good opportunity to share experiences and listen to other participants’

‘Really thought-provoking and lots to think about moving forward’

‘Trainers very engaging, good energy, coverage of subject matter was thorough.
Atmosphere and “head space” was very positive throughout’

If your organisation is interested in receiving co-production training, please contact our CEO Sam Glover at: sam.glover@healthwatchessex.org.uk.

Spotlight On Our Events

Fella's Fairs

Our Fella's Fairs are community events designed to address and improve men's health and well-being. These fairs provide a platform for men to access health checks and support services in a relaxed and approachable environment that they would attend anyway.

So far, we have held two fairs at local football matches in Heybridge and Braintree, offering fans the chance to engage with health services and discussions before kick-off. Each event has featured speakers on topics such as addiction and prostate cancer giving talks to the public and to the players. Stallholders included organisations providing information about gambling, hearing loss, mental health, weight management, domestic violence, NHS health checks and many more.

The fairs reach men between the ages of 30 and 60 who are considered the most difficult to reach, as well as being events that the whole family can attend and benefit from.

Looking ahead to 2024, we have even more Fella's Fairs planned. Our next one will be held in collaboration with Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Service. This summer we are also planning something slightly different by taking the Fella's Fair format to a comedy show.

Clockwise - 1 - Heybridge footballers listening to a talk about prostate cancer by Errol McKellar MBE; 2 - Trustee Neil talking to one of the speakers; 3 - Errol McKellar MBE being presented a cheque by Braintree Town F.C.; 4 - Research Officer Beth engaging with two men at Braintree.





East of England Healthwatch Learning Event

Each year a different Healthwatch hosts an event for the local network and associated professionals. This year, at the Jobserve Community Stadium in Colchester, we ran a series of workshops highlighting the ways we work at Healthwatch Essex.

Our Information and Guidance Team, along with one of our Trauma Ambassadors, Kari, held a session around co-production. They shared insights from the process of co-producing the Trauma Card and encouraged attendees to reflect on some of the challenges of co-production as well as the benefits it can bring to projects.

Our Engagement and Communications Teams ran a 'Human Library' experience. We invited previous podcast guests and project participants to share their lived experience in the form of human books, which attendees could choose to 'check out' and listen to their stories and ask insightful questions.

Our Research Team demonstrated creative research methods, in particular storyboarding and collaging, and encouraged attendees to explore how these could be used in their future engagement and research activities.

Over lunch, our attendees got to know each other better using our 'Conversation Cards' designed to encourage deeper conversations. One attendee said 'One key takeaway for me was the power of storytelling and creating meaningful content that resonates with people on a deep level.'

Clockwise - 1 - Attendees listening to Michael share his story in the Human Library; 2 - Attendees creating collages; 3- Attendee looking at a gallery of storyboards and collages; 4 - Kari sticking up post it notes with reflections on co-production.



Information & Guidance

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

How many people contacted us?

1383 people sought support and information from our Information and Guidance Team online, face-to-face, by text, phone call, email, letter, web chat and WhatsApp between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024.

How did people find out about us?

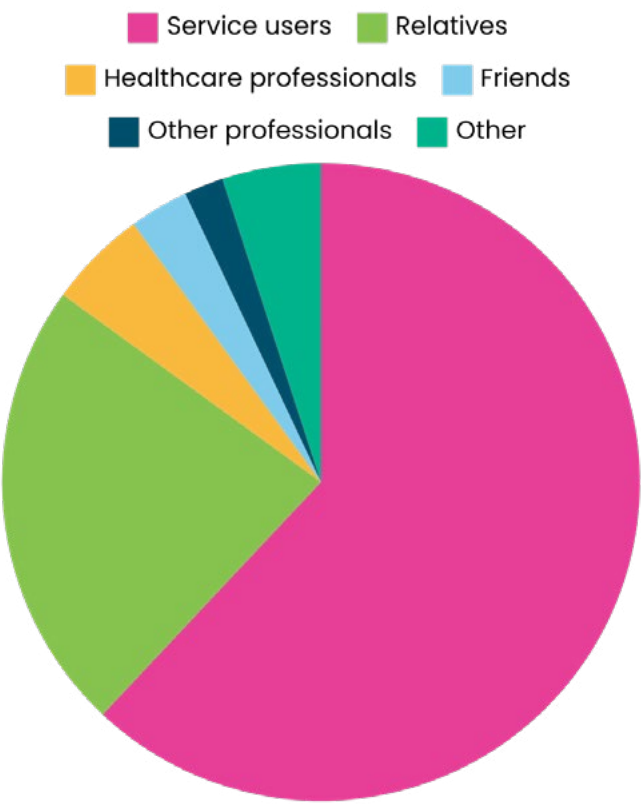
- 17%** Previously used our service
- 12%** Our website
- 12%** Internet search
- 10%** Friends/word of mouth
- 8%** Outreach

What are people calling about?

Frequent lines of enquiry include



Who is contacting us?



Informing Essex

The Information and Guidance Team have had an eventful year, continuing to support the people of Essex with their health, care and wellbeing matters, producing a variety of reports and attending meetings and events across the county. With the addition of Jane, Mel and Tim to our Carers Voices Team, joining Sharon, Sara and Fergus under the Information and Guidance Team umbrella, we have been able to cover even more ground and engage with more of our citizens in Essex.

Maintaining our 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 (ICS), Boards (ICB) and Alliances, to name just a few.

Our ongoing collaboration with Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS has progressed, producing a variety of reports on topics including the menopause and diabetes, and we have been able to support both Blackwater Medical Centre and the Burnham Surgery in mid Essex with their patient engagement. In addition, we supported patients and Mid and South Essex ICB during the closure of Dickens Place GP Surgery in Chelmsford.

We have continued to produce the quarterly Spotlight On Services data, featuring the nature of the contacts we receive from across the county, and a quarterly report of the Healthwatch Essex teams' activities, which we share widely both on our website and via direct communication to partners.

Our outreach work has also continued with vigour, taking us across the county to different events and group meetings. In May we had the privilege of joining the Blind Veterans UK Coronation Tea Party, and summer saw us attend the county's Pride Festivals in Chelmsford, Basildon, Clacton and Colchester, as well as RideColchester and Maldon UFEST. We spent a day on the Essex train lines with the Essex Rail Pastors, and visited the Old Park Meadow natural burial ground, producing blogs to highlight these invaluable services.

Our commitment to supporting those perhaps less likely to be heard in our communities was embedded further with the team providing drop-in sessions at some of the centres for homeless people and joining the SOS Bus in north east Essex to engage with vulnerable people in areas including Clacton, Harwich and Dovercourt.

Working with our partners, we gave information talks to groups focussed on supporting carers and people with dementia and attended several of our schools and colleges to engage with pupils. We joined Essex County Fire and Rescue Service on their community safety visits in Tendring and popped into menopause and mental health crisis cafes.



Clockwise: 1 – Jane promoting the Carers Voices project at an event in Harlow; 2 – Sara on Look East talking about the potential closure of a hospital in Maldon; 3 – Fergus at the Blind Veterans Coronation Tea party; 4 – Business Apprentice Grace with Mel at Colchester Pride.

We were commissioned by the Mid & South Essex Hospices Collaboration to undertake a project to help shape the future of palliative care services for local people of all ages in the area. We gathered lived experiences and information about what matters to those who are dying, as well as to their loved ones and carers. We asked what is currently working well in the services provided, and what could be done better, creating an informative report to inform the hospices who were working to improve the provision for the current and future generations.

We worked with our Communications Team to produce podcasts with some of the people we had engaged with, including Valerie, who shared her experience of female genital mutilation, Josh, who spoke about his use of nitrous oxide, and Allie, who told us about being abused as a child.

To keep their knowledge and skills current, the team have undertaken training in the past year including in counter terrorism and online risks, modern slavery, stalking, contraception, male victims of domestic abuse, perinatal mental health, multiple sclerosis, eating disorders, the housing crisis, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and access to NHS services for people with no recourse to public funding. We are looking forward to developing and expanding our work even further as we enter the new fiscal year.

Reporting From...

West Essex

Healthwatch Essex was approached by Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board to undertake a series of projects focussing on the lived experiences of people in the area in relation to their health, care and wellbeing.

An Insight Into Health and Care Access, Including Self-Care, for Adults with a Learning Disability (LD)

The aim of this project was to gather the experiences of people living with LD when accessing and using primary care across West Essex. Findings included:

- A significant number of adults with LD need the support of family/carers to manage their health appointments and medication.
- GP surgeries can be noisy and too busy for some adults with LD to cope with, creating a barrier to them attending annual health checks.
- Talking to the person who the face-to-face appointment is for is vital for them not to feel excluded.
- Often combined issues aren't dealt with in a holistic manner, leading adults with LD and their carers unable to access appropriate services.
- It was difficult for people with LD to access mental health services and, when they could, they were often discharged without treatment.

Experiences of Cervical Screening in West Essex

The aim of this project was to gather people's lived experience of accessing and using the cervical screening programme across west Essex. The findings were varied:

- Many struggled to get through to the surgery and to get a suitable appointment. Lots of participants believed online booking would be easier.
- Many shared traumatic historical experiences which, for some, led to them delaying or avoiding future appointments. Trauma awareness must be part of the cervical screening process to enable women who are survivors to access the same service as others.
- Language used by the health professional has to be appropriate in all situations, but especially around trauma. Shockingly, a number of respondents stated that when they told the health professional that what they were doing was hurting, they were told it wasn't or to stop being silly and just relax.
- Many respondents however did have positive experiences and recognised the kindness, respect and professionalism shown to them by health professionals.



All of our reports can be accessed through <https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/library/>

Experiences in West Essex of The Menopause and Perimenopause

The aim of this project was to explore lived experiences of people in west Essex around menopause and perimenopause to inform current and future service provision. Participants shared a wealth of insight and knowledge:

- It is a highly significant and impactful experience which can occur during a much wider age-frame than may be expected and lasts for much longer than may be anticipated; in some cases, over a decade.
- Many women are struggling with the symptoms and effects largely alone, and not receiving the levels of care, understanding and support that they should.
- There are clear gaps in knowledge and a wide differential across GP practices, which are the first port of call for most women. For such a life changing process, an acceptable minimum standard of response is a reasonable expectation across healthcare providers.
- Improvements have been made but there is still some way to go in bringing awareness into education, employment and general society, to remove any taboo and create a more holistic, understood experience for women.

Explored experiences of accessing treatment and support for COPD and other respiratory & lung conditions amongst people in West Essex

This project aimed to gather the experiences of people living with respiratory and lung conditions in West Essex. The findings included:

- As respiratory conditions develop over time, people often had to make multiple presentations to their GP surgery before getting a referral and diagnosis with only 30% diagnosed within 6 months of seeing their GP.
- Written self-management plans are not being offered to the vast majority
- Patients are very open to having technology help them self-manage their condition.
- The long-term nature of the conditions and the slow 'inevitable' decline in health is leaving people anxious and depressed.

A proactive approach from primary care could increase early referrals and detection rates. There are pockets of successful intervention and treatment that indicate the pathways that are in place can and do work, but too often the opportunities are missed.

Neurodiversity and Accessing Health and Care

The purpose of this report was to understand the relationship between the NHS in West Essex and its neurodiverse population and their carers and families, particularly regarding the provision of, and access to, GP services – ultimately to inform the ICS strategy. The findings indicated that:

- Early diagnosis was key.
- It is important that neurodiversity is more widely understood and supported.
- Ongoing care needs to be consistent to allow trusted relationships to develop, which increase the likelihood of neurodivergent patients remaining relaxed and open.
- It is vital that an environment in and around GP surgeries and services where patients are sympathetically dealt with by every member of staff.

The conclusions of the final report highlighted that there are straightforward provisions that can be implemented in quick time with little investment.

Diabetes

The purpose of this report was to explore the lived experience of people in west Essex living with diabetes. Our findings indicated that the following is important in managing this increasingly common condition:

- Patients and carers must play a part in designing the education programmes which should focus on motivating people to control their diabetes rather than it controlling them.
- Understanding what technology is available and how transformative it can be in controlling symptoms will help thousands of people.
- Emotional understanding from across the integrated care system helps people not to feel stupid for not understanding their condition well enough, and for not controlling their diet and taking enough exercise.

Mid and South Essex

Burnham Surgery

The Burnham Surgery commissioned us to gather feedback and views from their patients regarding the services they currently offer and could offer in the future. This project was very emotive for many patients as the proposal involved a potential move of location. Many felt this was unacceptable, due to lack of public transport, unsafe and unsuitable pathways and lack of parking.

We gathered feedback via various formats; the surgery and Healthwatch Essex co-designed a survey which was available online and in paper format; we carried out face to face engagement sessions at the surgery and patients were also able to contact us via email and phone if they wanted to give their views without completing the survey. The survey was completed by nearly 500 patients and many of them wanted to talk to us on a one-to-one basis also.

This enabled us to write a clear and detailed report stating what the patients felt, detailing very strong feelings from the majority of the people we spoke to. Many felt that the surgery is a vital part of the community and needed to stay in a central location with strong transport links and other services nearby, such as the pharmacy.

Blackwater Medical Centre Project

We worked with the Blackwater Medical Centre in Maldon to support their commitment to patient engagement in late 2023. Through a survey, one to one interviews with patients and time spent on site by our Information and Guidance Team, we were able to gather a significant volume of information on people's experiences at the surgery; what was working well, what could be improved and suggestions for changes and developments.

It was vital that the voices of the patients were heard, to enable the surgery team to continue the positive work that had already been implemented, and we were able to provide them with an informative report with helpful observations and recommendations.

Carers Voices



Carers Voices team at a focus group event in Laindon.

We were commissioned by Essex County Council to deliver the Carers Voices project. The purpose of our engagement was to gather lived experience and information about what matters to an unpaid carer, what is currently working well in the services provided, and what could be done better. We linked with the many unpaid carers across the county empowering them to have their voices heard, and therefore positively influence changes and improvements to the support and resources available to them with a view to improve this for the current and future generations.

We also ensured that carers fully linked in with avenues of support for themselves and the person they care for. We were aware that many 'carers' simply don't identify themselves as that, and in those circumstances may not have been aware that they qualified for help and support. We hosted several events throughout the first year to engage with as many diverse groups and areas as possible and welcomed the voices of those who may no longer actively care for another but have done so within the last five years.



In The Media & Online

How we communicate what we do

Our Reach

The impact of our posts over the past 12 months



X

We tweeted 411 times and received 1,896 engagements with our content, with our tweets being seen 53,968 times overall.



Facebook

Our followers grew by 10%. We posted on Facebook 354 times throughout the year. Our posts were seen 107,292 times in total.



TikTok

Our TikTok channel saw a lot of growth this year. We now have 4321 followers on TikTok. Our content received 20,064 likes throughout the year and 1,523 comments. We reached nearly half a million people.



Instagram

Our Instagram channel has continued to grow, with 219 new followers. Our posts reached 31,123 users and our profile was visited 1546 times.



LinkedIn

We now have 1,056 followers on LinkedIn. Our posts were seen 60,688 times and reached 35,124 users.



E-newsletter

Each month we distribute a newsletter informing our subscribers of project updates, research and more. In the past 12 months our subscribers have increased by 18%.



Media Coverage

We had 90 articles featured in the media, reaching a total audience of 44.3 million people. This included our ambassador, Valerie, visiting the UN to discuss female genital mutilation which featured on BBC World Service and BBC Arabic, our Fella's Fair on ITV News, and Radio Essex covering support for prison leavers and carers.

We have worked to become as inclusive as possible, sharing our work in lots of different ways and attempting to reach new audiences regularly. This has included sharing lived experience, data and information from our reports and supporting national awareness days on topics of particular relevance to our work plan.

Top to bottom: 1- AMHA Chris holding the Weight of Stigma prop; 2 - A drawing for Children's Mental Health Week; 3 - Podcast cover art for the Hidden Homeless podcast; 4 - Nurse Michelle, TAG member Della and Sharon during the cervical screening filming day.

A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a black polo shirt, stands outdoors in a garden setting. He is holding a large black weight plate with both hands in front of his chest. The weight plate has white text: 'WEIGHT' at the top, '20.4 KGS' on the left, '45 LBS' on the right, and 'OF STIGMA' at the bottom. A small white logo is visible on the right side of the plate. The background shows a green trellis, a wooden shed, and a blue sky with clouds.

Our Young and Adult Mental Health Ambassadors (AMHA) joined forces to create a video, 'The Weight of Stigma', highlighting stigmas they have faced regarding mental health. They also shared their own mental health stories in a series of YouTube and TikTok videos.



Based on the theme 'My Voice Matters' our Young Mental Health Ambassadors (YMHA) took over our social media sharing blogs, music, drawings and playlists to creatively share the impact of using their voice to improve mental health care.



Highlighting the health and wellbeing situation for prisoners and prison leavers, we recorded a podcast and TikToks with an ex-offender, promoted a report and information leaflet, and featured on the radio and in articles. We were particularly pleased to be featured in Inside Times – the national newspaper for prisoners and detainees, which is distributed throughout the prison estate of the United Kingdom.



Our Trauma Ambassadors wanted to address trauma in cervical screening appointments through a video that provided other trauma survivors with suggestions on how to make themselves more comfortable as well as best practice for professionals. On TikTok, we shared a demonstration of a nurse explaining what should happen during an appointment, which was also very well received.

Hidden Voices



SCAN ME

Our podcast series, Hidden Voices, captures the less heard stories in health and social care. Previous topics have ranged from addiction to alopecia and this year's topics have been just as diverse.

Season Two

- In 'One Lump or Two', Darren shared his experience of being diagnosed with testicular cancer at a young age after losing his parents.
- In 'The Resilient Woman', Valerie bravely shared her experience of female genital mutilation.
- Our Collaborate Essex member, Joe, talked about his experience of caring for his wife Joan in 'The Pursuit of Happiness'.
- Gemma and Jane shared the power of dance for living with Parkinsons and other health conditions in 'Keep Smiling and Dancing'.
- Billy talked openly about his experiences in and out of prison in 'The Impossible Can Happen', released alongside our Hidden Homeless report.
- Following on from the Pride events and gender identity clinic research in the summer, we spoke to Jacob about their experience of coming out as agender in 'Being Agender'.
- Prior to the ban on nitrous oxide in November, we spoke to Josh about his addiction to balloons which led to him being paralysed in 'Don't Follow This Path'.
- Our Trauma Ambassador, Allie, candidly shared her experiences of childhood abuse and alternative forms of self-harm in 'I wasn't bad, they were mad'.
- In 'Victim to Victor', founder of the 21Up movement Perry shared his journey from a difficult childhood to helping young people to realise their potential and preventing knife crime.

Season Three

- Our Vice Chair, Neil, shared his experience of being diagnosed with bladder cancer in 'Honey, Here's My Junk'.
- We spoke to Romeo, founder of the Ipswich Romanian Community, in 'Another Romeo's Story', a podcast about migration and inclusion.
- For Prostate Cancer awareness month in March, we spoke to Errol McKellar MBE about his prostate cancer diagnosis and the awareness raising work he does.

Going beyond the podcast

Some of our stories this year have had a wide impact beyond the initial podcast. Valerie has filmed with news crews and had articles published following a speech at a UN conference. Josh's story attracted media attention following the reclassification of nitrous oxide. Allie and Billy's TikToks went viral, with lots of people sharing their experiences in the comments.



Our Ambassadors and Networks

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

At Healthwatch Essex, we could not influence positive change without the support of our large volunteer network. We have a variety of different types of volunteers who work with Healthwatch Essex to support our efforts to ensure health and care services better meet the needs of the people of Essex. Volunteers have donated many hours of their time this year and have been involved in numerous projects.

Collaborate Essex

The Collaborate Essex Disability and Carers Forum was established in collaboration with Essex County Council to give adults with an experience of disability a voice in shaping services and policy. The forum was created in 2019 and currently has 12 members, who have experience of disabilities which range from sensory impairments, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, long term health conditions and includes the voices of carers.

Over the past year, we have held forum meetings on topics including patient experience in hospitals, technology in health and care, carers and growing older. Forum members have engaged with their networks to collect their views and have helped support other people with lived experience to have their voices heard within health and social care decisions. They have additionally:

- Participated in an 'In Your Shoes' event at Princess Alexandra Hospital where professionals were paired up with forum members to discuss digital health records and how their experience within hospitals could be improved.
- Recorded videos for Breaking Barrier Innovations on technology accessibility to be shared at a CareTech event held at the University of Essex.
- Shared feedback to be fed into the service specification for the new carers support service.
- Attended a co-production session to discuss digital upskilling in community pharmacies.
- Participated in frequent meetings to support local Essex hospitals and GPs with Accessible Information Standards.
- Recorded a podcast to share the lived experience of being a carer.
- Offered feedback on website accessibility.



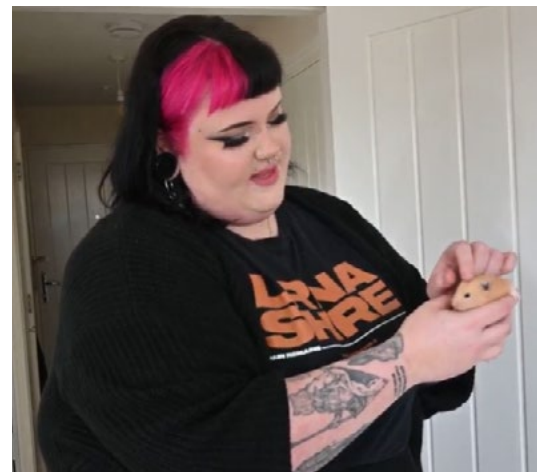
Left – Business Apprentice Grace with forum member Donna at our 10 year anniversary BBQ.
Right – Forum members Sam and Todorina at a Christmas celebration.

Young Mental Health Ambassadors (YMHA)

Healthwatch Essex has been supporting young people since 2018 to share their lived experience and shape local mental health services for children and young people. The Young Mental Health Ambassador programme was established in partnership with CAMHS (Children's and Adolescents Mental Health Services) and provides the opportunity for young people to be vocal and involved with decisions being made within mental health services. We currently have 17 Young Mental Health Ambassadors aged between 13 and 23, all of whom have experience accessing local mental health services.

In the last year, the Mental Health Ambassadors have:

- Created self-care resources for Essex County Council (ECC).
- Provided social media content for Children's Mental Health Week including writing blogs and creating drawings to empower other young people to share their experiences.
- Participated in World Mental Health Day by recording clips discussing the 'Weight of Stigma' for TikTok and YouTube.
- Shared their experiences and feedback on transitioning between children's and adult's mental health services and co-produced a video explaining the process.
- Discussed with ECC how they access mental health services in the community and how they use digital services to support their mental health and wellbeing, to aid the shaping of ECC community support.
- Provided feedback on the Trauma Card and detailed where to share these to reach children and young people who may be in need of one.
- Shared their experiences and concerns when transitioning between educational settings which was fed back to Mind Trailblazers and Mental Health Support Teams in schools.
- Completed surveys on suicide and self-harm prevention, the impact of social media on mental health, the Children's and Young People's Mental Health Coalition strategy, vaping and attitudes towards drugs and alcohol.



Adult Mental Health Ambassadors (AMHA)

We are working in collaboration with Adult Social Care Mental Health at Essex County Council to incorporate lived experience of using adult mental health services in Essex. We have recruited 25 ambassadors who all have different backgrounds and experiences related to mental health in Essex.

Each quarter they meet alongside senior commissioners online to discuss topics that matter to their community with a focus on mental health. Topics have included:

- Early intervention and mental health in schools
- Counselling and community access to mental health support
- Addiction
- Eating disorders
- Medication
- Diagnosis

The key issues raised are then taken forward and actioned using a co-production plan with a dedicated specific point of contact. The ambassadors have attended regular events dedicated to mental health awareness, have spoken at webinars, and delivered presentations, with one of our ambassadors talking at the House of Commons about early intervention for children. They have also played a valuable role in sharing their lived experience at events in the format of a human library which has received positive feedback from our partners. Alongside our Young Mental Health Ambassadors, they collaborated on our World Mental Health Day video series, 'Weight of Stigma' as well as sharing their thoughts for International Women's Day.



Opposite page

Top to bottom: 1 - YMHA Beau whilst recording a video for World Mental Health Day (WMHD); 2 - YMHA Aimee whilst recording the transitioning from children's to adult's services video; 3 - YMHA Zoe created a photo series for Children's Mental Health Week; 4 - Art created to depict a YMHA member.

This page

Top to bottom: 1 - AMHA Karl during filming for WMHD; 2 - AMHA Emma during filming for WMHD; 3 - Some ambassadors with Healthwatch Essex staff during a BBQ for ambassadors; 4 - AMHA Julie during filming for WMHD.

Research Ambassador Network

Over the past year, our Research Ambassador Network has gone from strength to strength. Originally established in January 2023, the Network invites individuals with an interest in health and social care, qualitative methods and lived experience to volunteer with us to gain experience conducting research in a charity. Our Research Ambassadors have the chance to develop their research skills, build connections, and share their experiences and expertise in a supportive environment. The Network is open to anyone, regardless of educational and professional background.



Research Ambassador Marianne at our East of England Healthwatch Learning Event explaining her collage.

We now have over 30 members who have contributed to the Research Ambassador Network in a variety of different ways. Over the past year, we've hosted Network meetings, welcoming researchers talking on a range of different topics including co-production, inclusivity and accessibility in research, and public engagement at universities. Our Ambassadors have written extensively for our Research Reflections blog, writing posts underpinned by academic research about anxiety, women's health, and austerity. Our research projects have also significantly benefitted from the support of our Research Ambassadors, who have kindly given up their time to support our data analysis, review study documents, and read through report drafts. In return, we have provided our Research Ambassadors with employability support, produced references for national awards (for which they were shortlisted!), and provided feedback on draft journal articles. Reflecting on her experiences joining the Network, one Research Ambassador said:

'They not only welcomed me into the network but have continued to share their knowledge. Working under Lorna's supervision was truly rewarding, and I eagerly anticipate the impactful contributions Healthwatch Essex will continue to make in building healthy communities'.

Carer Experts by Experience

Our new ambassador programme for 2024 is our Carer Experts by Experience. So far, our experts have been getting involved by:

- Sharing their lived experience of caring on BBC Essex radio.
- Taking part in a podcast and TikToks leading up to Carers Week.
- Assisting with the format of a survey for carers for a local hospice and with a carers policy for ESNEFT.
- Making documents more user-friendly for carers.
- Contributing to surveys and focus group discussions so that any issues they are facing are reported back to Essex County Council and any other relevant organisations.



Expert by Experience Michelle recording a podcast with Carers Voices Officer Jane.



Left to right: 1 - Della during filming for the cervical screening film; 2 - Kari and Valerie during filming with the BBC for a story about brains and trauma; 3 - Denise Hills speaking at our 2023 Annual Event.

Trauma Ambassador Group

The Trauma Ambassador Group had an extremely busy year, meeting regularly to have lively, insightful discussions, maintaining pre-existing projects and creating new ones. The Trauma Card continued to go from strength to strength, following its launch in November 2022, with a consistent stream of individuals asking to be supplied with one, as well as a wide range of services and organisations across the county, and far beyond, requesting to hold stocks of the card for their own service users. The Trauma Ambassadors continued to promote and present the card widely in different meetings, groups and events, contributing to in excess of an astounding 15,000 cards being given out to date. As testament to the dedication and passion of the Trauma Ambassadors, the trauma card won the award for 'Most Promising Pilot' at the 2023 Integrated Health Awards, which focus upon initiatives supporting transformation and change, and was commended in the 2024 National Healthwatch Impact Awards, which recognises outstanding examples of where the views of local people have been used to make positive changes.

Cervical screening was also a subject which the group turned its attention to, following on from the government messaging about the low uptake of cervical screening across the country. Led by our Trauma Ambassador Della, we identified the need to raise awareness and understanding of the significant role that trauma plays as a barrier to accessing screening, and in response, created a trauma-informed cervical screening awareness film. This gave a platform to not only empower and inform survivors about the cervical screening process, but also to assist practitioners in understanding and working with survivors of trauma, with the end goal of increasing the uptake of screening and improving the experiences for those who do. Della also wrote a blog about the project, reflecting on the positivity of the co-production and her pride in the film and its impact.

We continued to produce our series of blogs, featuring informative insights into the lived experiences of Ambassadors Jean, Marilyn and Lauren, who put pen to paper in order to share their stories, and launched two podcasts where we spoke in depth with Valerie, who shared with us her lived experience of female genital mutilation, and Allie, who discussed the different methods of self-harm she uses following on from the effects of a highly abusive childhood.

Lastly, we cannot sum up our work without mentioning Denise Hills, who was a founder member of the Trauma Ambassador Group and a pivotal influence in the concept, design and launch of the trauma card. With her own lived experience of trauma, Denise was a passionate and dedicated member of the group, and rightly proud of its achievements. Sadly, Denise passed away in July 2023 after battling an illness, which she did with her usual strength and courage. She was helping to spread the word about the Trauma Card just a couple of months before her passing, and it seems fitting that it is a small part of the legacy which she leaves behind.

Learning Disability Ambassadors

This year we facilitated co-production opportunities alongside our Learning Disability (LD) Ambassadors. We recruited 12 LD Ambassadors all of whom had experience of a learning disability and were part of a network representing views and opinions of those with lived experience. We visited all 5 hospitals in Essex alongside the LD nurse and patient experience leads at the hospitals and conducted a 15 steps model which looked at the ways in which the hospital experience could be improved or made easier for those living with LD. This was a great opportunity for the ambassadors to raise any issues from their disability cohort meetings and share them with decision makers at the hospital so that those views and opinions could be taken forward by the hospital teams. We also facilitated five focus groups on topics including:

- Easy read and Accessible Information Standards
- Volunteers, floorwalkers and wayfinding
- Needle phobia
- Waiting rooms and quiet spaces
- Training and understanding



LD Ambassadors at a hospital walkthrough.

The hospital visits and findings from the focus groups were collated into a report and shared with all five hospital teams. Our LD Ambassadors are also now heavily involved in the Disability and Carers Forum run through Collaborate Essex and Essex County Council, with their views and concerns raised at each quarterly meeting at County Hall.

Hidden Voices Network

The Hidden Voice Network is a new network established towards the end of 2022, made up of diverse community groups and individuals. The network members represent their communities by sharing their voices and ensuring that they are heard in decisions being made within health and social care. Following feedback from network members, the Hidden Voices Network bi-monthly newsletter was created sharing community involvement opportunities, funding opportunities and general information.

Following its establishment, the network has:

- Participated in a case study sharing the challenges encountered with language barriers within healthcare.
- Provided feedback on an FAQ information sheet for refugees during their housing process.
- Shared their lived experience within a University of Essex study on 'Mental Health in Coastal Communities.'
- Connected with patient experience leads across Essex hospitals to discuss how to support survivors of female genital mutilation.
- Helped support the creation of the new Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board 'Hidden Voices' workstream.



Communications Manager Rachel making samosas with a member of the Bangladeshi Woman's Association.

Healthwatch Essex Ambassadors

Throughout the last year our Healthwatch Essex Ambassadors have been working hard representing us at a number of key meetings and events such as advisory boards for Colchester and Tendring, Dementia Friendly Communities meetings, All Age Autism and older people's forums, and patient experience meetings at hospitals across Essex. This ensures that we are always kept up to date with the latest social and health care developments throughout the county and are also able to update other organisations and professionals attending those meetings with the work we are currently doing within Healthwatch Essex.



One of our HWE Ambassadors at Tendring Older People's Forum with Communications Officer Chloe and Information and Guidance Officer Fergus.

Our team have a hugely diverse and valuable range of professions, skills, passions and lived experiences that they all bring when representing Healthwatch Essex, as well as contributing enormously to all of our other ambassador groups. We are incredibly proud and grateful for all their time invested, dedication and unwavering support.

Fella's Forum

The Fella's Forum is our group which allows men from all walks of life to meet up in a safe and pressure-free environment. This year the Essex Fellas Forum has again grown, from five men regularly attending in 2021 to 40 members in total now, with each monthly meeting seeing 10-18 Fellas attending. The warmer summer months saw the group involved in physical exercise and outdoor activities such as gardening, community allotments, walk and talks, and BBQs.

The group also had guest speakers attend their monthly pub meet ups to discuss topics such as mental health, mindfulness, and wellbeing. The impact the forum is having on the fellas is clear to see. Many are working in partnership on projects in the community and building networks this way. Others have grown in confidence and learned new skillsets. The main obvious benefit is prevention of loneliness and isolation which has been prevalent off the back of COVID-19.



The fellas at one of their meetings during an Inner Child workshop led by Suzi, one of the Trauma Ambassadors.

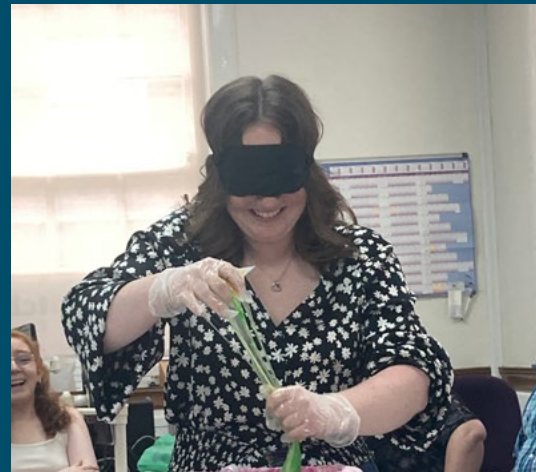
We celebrated the festive period with a Christmas meal and invited all members of the forum plus their partners to attend and eat together to thank everyone for their work over the year. Over the next year we are excited to expand the forum further with a series of men's health videos.

Want to become an ambassador too?

Find out more on our website

<https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/get-involved/>

Our Organisation



A selection of photos from the various Development Days.

Development Days

Our team development days have been a big hit again this year. It is important for us to come together as a whole team once a month, especially with hybrid working, and foster creativity, reflection, teamwork and learn about the groups that we work with.

April

We discussed event feedback and looked ahead to new projects. Debs Crelly, Strategic Lead for Health, Wellbeing and Retention, presented to the team on Women's Health.

May

The Engagement Team ran a Senses Workshop, getting us in touch with our sight, taste, smell and touch.

June

We visited the Bangladeshi Women's Association at Firstsite, Colchester, for a day of cooking and learning.

July

Our Business Apprentice, Grace, ran an 'I'm a Celebrity' themed challenge, once again engaging our senses and testing our teamwork.

August

We visited Colchester Allotments, a plot run by Fella's Forum member Rob, to see his community work. We painted rocks, collected vegetables and did an allergy training session.

September

We returned to iCARP in Great Oakley for fishing and a BBQ, but this time we also got to meet their new chickens.

October

The Communications Team held a Halloween themed day to test the team's creativity and photography skills, with fancy dress, cupcake decorating and spooky photoshoots.

November

One of our Trauma Ambassadors, Suzi, led an 'Inner Child' workshop, encouraging us to reflect on our fears and talents, as well as connect with each other.

December

The development day was replaced with the Christmas Party and pizza gift exchange, along with some competitive board game playing.

January

The Research and Engagement Teams demonstrated their new co-production workshops to the rest of the teams.

February

We took some time to plan and prepare for upcoming projects including this year's annual showcase event to be held in June 2024.

March

Our Research Team ran a quiz testing the team's knowledge of health and social care, our organisation and each other.

Celebrating 10 Years of Healthwatch Essex 2013-2023

Healthwatch was set up under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to ensure that your voice helps to shape health and care. Healthwatch Essex officially opened in 2013, making April 2023 our 10 year anniversary. To mark the special occasion, we held a BBQ at our office for staff, trustees and volunteers and we reflected on our highlights over the past decade...

Below: Photos of Healthwatch Essex staff in a photo frame.
Right: CEO Sam and Chair Amanda cutting a cake.



Our Top Ten Highlights:

- Addiction TikToks which went viral and had almost one million views.
- Collaborate Essex's impact over five years.
- Our award winning film content for COVID-19, addiction and mental health.
- Josh's story of meeting his healthcare hero.
- Launching the Trauma Card.
- The stories shared on our Hidden Voices podcast.
- Taking part in One Day Free of Poverty.
- Sharing our 55 reports.
- Winning the Active Workplace Award.
- The impact of our Sensory Awareness Campaign.



Finance

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



Information and Guidance

£156k



Outreach and Engagement

£140k



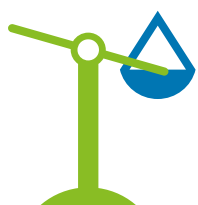
Commissioning and Research

£170k



Communications

£40k



Governance

£9.5k

Our total expenditure from April 2023 – March 2024 was £515,563.
All income received but not spent has been carried forward.

Each of the figures above includes an appropriate share of company overheads and office running costs.

In The Pipeline

2024-25

Looking ahead to next year, along with continuing our amazing ambassador programmes and working on our existing projects, we also have lots of new exciting projects in the pipeline. Here is a sneak peek at what we will be getting up to over the next year...

- Holding an art exhibition exploring what it is like to live with trauma.
- Bringing you a twist on our Fella's Fair format with a special comedy show.
- Creating a series of videos around the interaction between faith and mental health for Mental Health Awareness Day.
- Running a research project holistically exploring experiences of living with cancer.
- Releasing the second instalment of Hidden Homeless, focussing this time on the experiences of those involved in sex work.
- Taking a wider look at the impact of multiple long-term conditions on women's health.

The Healthwatch Essex team at a Christmas celebration.





The Healthwatch Essex team at a Fella's Fair.

Thank you!

Huge thanks to Sam, the CEO, and all her team at HWE for the exceptional work they continue to do. We are very fortunate to have three apprentices in the team, one about to complete her Level 3 in Business Administration and two doing Digital Marketing degrees. They make a huge contribution across the teams by bringing a new perspective.

The Board is extremely proud of everyone in the team, their commitment and enthusiasm, and the vital work they undertake to ensure that lived experiences feed into improvements in health and social care. The information that we share enables providers to offer accessible and equitable care and support to meet the ever-increasing needs of people living in our communities.

Thanks to all our trustees who continue to support the CEO and her team, sharing their knowledge, skills and expertise and promoting the vital work that Healthwatch Essex does. Thanks also to all our volunteers who share their experiences and speak up for some of the more vulnerable people in our communities acting as their Ambassadors to ensure that they are heard.

Amanda Cherry, Chair

I am ever grateful to everyone who has shared their story with us this year. From those involved in podcasts, interviews and surveys to those who attend events – thank you. Without people being so generous with their time and knowledge we would never be able to do what we do. It is not always easy but it is always valuable.

Thank you to the stakeholders and partners who have worked with us over the past year; your commitment and openness to hearing the voices and lived experience of our community is vital to making change and improving services for everyone.

Finally, thank you to my staff and volunteers for all your hard work, passion and enthusiasm. You make coming to work a privilege and a pleasure.

Sam Glover, CEO



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