



Annual Report 2024–2025

Unlocking the power of people-driven care

Healthwatch Darlington

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"The impact that local Healthwatch have is vitally important. Healthwatch are empowering their communities to share their experiences. They're changing the health and care landscape and making sure that people's views are central to making care better and tackling health inequalities."

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive, Healthwatch England

A message from our Chair

Over the past year, Healthwatch Darlington has continued to champion the voices of local people, working hard to ensure everyone is heard – especially those from often-overlooked communities.

We've supported over **895** people, listened to more than **560** experiences, and helped more than **320** people access clear, trusted health and care information. Through our powerful reports, we've highlighted community needs around mental health, social care, wheelchair services, young people's health, and more.

These insights helped improve services, from **better mental health networks** and **faster dental care access** to changes in local and regional NHS planning.

We've built strong relationships with our **Integrated Care System**, ensuring the real experiences of Darlington residents shape decisions across the North East and North Cumbria.

As a proud member of a 14-strong Healthwatch network, we've worked together to amplify public voice, secure regional funding, and influence strategic plans.

Most importantly, we've made a difference in people's lives whether it's helping someone find mental health support, connecting isolated older people, or improving communication between care services.

We'll keep listening, learning, and speaking up, so that services work better for everyone.



"At Healthwatch Darlington, we make sure every voice counts. By listening closely and acting on what people tell us, we help shape services that work better for everyone – because real change starts with real experiences."

Valerie Douglas, Chair, Healthwatch Darlington

About us

Healthwatch Darlington is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



Our vision

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



Our mission

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



Our values are:

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

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

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

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

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

Our year in numbers

We've supported more than 895 people to have their say and get information about their care. We currently employ 5 staff (1 full-time, 4 part-time) and, our work is supported by 10 volunteers.

Reaching out:



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

328 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as **mental health support, making a complaint** and **finding an NHS dentist**.

Championing your voice:



Over the past year, we published **11** reports highlighting the improvements people want to see in areas such as **mental health, sexual health, wheelchair access, diabetes care, and adult social care**. (See page 7)

Read all our published reports at:

www.healthwatchdarlington.co.uk/news-and-reports

Statutory funding:



Our funding comes from the Department of Health and Social Care and is passed to us through **Darlington Borough Council**.

However, the council does not control what we do. We are an independent organisation with a legal duty to listen to people and speak up for them on health and care issues, without influence from the council or the NHS.

In 2024/25 we received **£76,497** which is **the same as** last year.

Our digital reach

Over the past year, we've continued to expand the ways people engage with Healthwatch Darlington through our digital platforms.

Reaching out through our website:



Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, we recorded **76,000 page views** and **22,823** people were using it. The most visited pages were our **News page, Advice and Information, Contact us and What we do**. This shows people are not only reading our content – they're actively looking to us to find out what is happening locally, to connect and find information.

Social Media:



Facebook.

Views: Between our Healthwatch Darlington and Youthwatch Darlington pages, our posts appeared **100,086 times**

Reach: Our posts were seen **95,176 times**



Instagram.

Views: Between our Healthwatch Darlington and Youthwatch Darlington pages, our posts appeared **7,172 times**

Reach: Our posts were seen **7,601 times**

Email newsletters:



This year, we sent out **50** of our popular newsletters, landing in approximately **34,900** inboxes – sharing powerful stories, local opportunities, events, and ways for people to get involved and shape services. Our newsletters have become a vital connection between local voices and the changes they help inspire.

Summary of Published Reports

Throughout 2024–2025, Healthwatch Darlington published 12 reports that reflect the voices of local people and communities.

Local Reports:

Mental Health Network Pilot Review (March 2025): Assessed the impact of reintroducing a local mental health network, which improved referrals, collaboration, and access to support across services.

Wheelchair Service Access Report (March 2025): Gathered experiences from wheelchair users in Darlington, highlighting challenges with access and support.

Young People's Sexual Health Report (March 2025): Explored awareness and access to sexual health services among 12–24-year-olds, revealing stigma, gaps in education, and a preference for online information.

The Day Opportunities Engagement Project (April 2024): Collected views from over 100 people on how day services for adults in Darlington could be more personal, inclusive, and accessible.

Improving Diabetic Outcomes (April 2024): Worked with partners to support people with mental health conditions or learning disabilities to better understand and manage diabetes.

Vaping: Young People (April 2024): Captured young people's views and concerns about vaping, including the role of education and peer influence.

Adult Social Care: Lived Experience (April 2024): Shared real-life experiences of people using or supporting others through local care services.

Regional Collaboration Reports:

NEAS Clinical Strategy Engagement (March 2025): Healthwatch Darlington led coordinated engagement involving 12 other Healthwatch to gather feedback for the NEAS Clinical Strategy across the North East.

North Tees & South Tees Trusts Community Research (March 2025): Healthwatch Darlington led engagement looking at views on hospital trust service changes and the group model in partnership with several local Healthwatch in the Tees Valley.

The Big Conversation: Women's Health (March 2025): Highlighted regional concerns around access to menstrual, reproductive, and menopause care, with over 4,500 responses.

Accessing NHS Dental Care in NENC (January 2025): Revealed widespread difficulties in accessing NHS dental services, including availability and cost.

Growing Older, Planning Ahead (June 2024): Healthwatch Darlington led engagement across the Tees Valley Healthwatch Network exploring how people are preparing for later life, identifying gaps in support, information, and future planning.

A year of making a difference

Over the year we've been out and about in the community listening to your stories, engaging with partners and working to improve care in Darlington. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We identified a communication gap in physiotherapy services, which led to direct liaison with the service provider to address delays in follow-up exercises.



After hearing concerns about a child struggling to access dental treatment, we began investigating local availability and advocated for improved access to NHS dental services.



Summer

We established a Mental Health Network to strengthen local collaboration, aiming to improve residents' mental health and wellbeing through joined-up support and shared priorities..

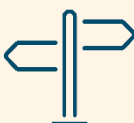


We raised concerns about gaps in mental health & prescription support, prompting improved GP follow-up and highlighting delays affecting patient safety and treatment continuity..

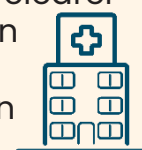


Autumn

We supported a newly relocated elderly resident by connecting her with local groups, benefits advice, and care options, helping reduce isolation and improve wellbeing.



We helped improve post-hospital care by raising concerns about poor coordination, leading to clearer communication between teams and more consistent support for an elderly patient.



Winter

We escalated a case of inaccurate vaccination records, prompting action to resolve data errors and highlighting the need for better record-keeping in patient care systems.



We escalated concerns after an 82-year-old patient waited 14 hours in A&E, highlighting serious issues with care delays and communication following a GP referral.



Working together for change

Introduction to the work between the North East & North Cumbria (NENC) ICB and the NENC Healthwatch Network

Throughout 2024 -2025 The Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the Healthwatch Network have worked together to build robust relationships to improve health and wellbeing for everyone in our communities. This partnership aims to:

- **Enhance Health Services:** By working together, the ICB can better understand and address the health needs of our communities.
- **Promote Wellbeing:** The collaboration focuses on creating opportunities that support improved wellbeing, including mental health, physical health, and social care.
- **Reduce Health Inequalities:** The partnership aims to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, has access to quality health services.
- **Engage the Community:** Healthwatch ensures feedback gathered from the public is escalated appropriately to help the ICB make informed decisions about health and care services.
- **Innovate and Improve:** Together, support the development of new and better ways to deliver health care, making it more efficient and effective.

This partnership is a significant step towards healthier, fairer, and more inclusive communities.



Working together for change

Our goal is to make sure people's experiences with health and care services are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level and help influence decisions made about health and care services.

A collaborative network of local Healthwatch:



Building a Strong Healthwatch Network

We formed a network of 14 local Healthwatch groups to improve health and care services both regionally and nationally. Funding from our Integrated Care Board helped us build strong, meaningful relationships within this network, consistently adding value to the design of health and care services.

We have representatives from our network on local and regional strategic boards. These boards have robust reporting structures that support coordinated and effective engagement with our communities.

Our collaborative approach is recognised nationally as best practice.



**Claire Riley, Chief
Corporate
Services Officer,
NENC ICB**

Working together for change

Work carried out during 2024 – 2025:



Integrated Care Strategy

We received over 400 responses during our engagement period. A review of the feedback showed that children and young people were under-represented.

Impact:

The ICB added a fourth goal: **"Giving children and young people the best start in life."** This goal increases the focus on people of all ages throughout the strategy.

ICB Involvement Strategy



Refreshing the ICB Involvement Strategy

Healthwatch spoke with over 100 people to help update the ICB Involvement Strategy.

Impact:

Based on their feedback, the ICB has updated its principles to include:

- Meaningful involvement
- Removing barriers
- Listening to feedback

We also helped create a shorter, easier-to-read document and a workplan based on these new principles, including ways to measure success.



Working together for change

Access to dental care



Listening to People's Dental Care Challenges

Over 3,800 people shared their views with us.

We engaged with people across the region to understand the difficulties they face in accessing dental services. We used various methods, including surveys, mystery shopping, general conversations, and one-on-one interviews at Darlington Urgent Dental Access Centre (UDAC).

The ICB has provided the following response

Improving access to dentistry will not be a quick fix but we are working on it, our key focus areas are;

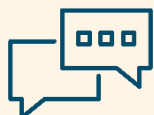
- Stabilising services – additional investment including incentivised access, additional dental out of hours treatment capacity and dental clinical assessment workforce/triage capacity.
- Funding available to deliver a new model of dental care via Urgent Dental Access Centres and provide additional general dental access.
- Working with 'at risk' practices to identify and address financial issues of delivering NHS dental care.
- Working with local dental networks and NHS England North East Workforce Training and Education Directorate to improve recruitment, retention, training and education across the region.
- Developing an oral health strategy to improve oral health and reduce the pressure on dentistry.

We are continuing to work closely with the ICB as new ways of working are developed.



Working together for change

The big conversation: Women's Health



Listening to Women's Health Needs

We spoke to nearly 4,500 people and held six focus groups with women who face extra health challenges. We wanted to understand what matters most to them and their priorities.

What We Learned:

- Mental health and wellbeing
- Healthy ageing and long-term conditions (like bone, joint, and muscle health)
- Menopause, perimenopause, and hormone replacement therapy
- Screening services (like cervical, breast, bowel, and cancer screenings)
- Menstrual and gynecological health

Impact:

We're now working with our partners to create a "Woman's Promise." This will help women, health professionals, and others understand and support women's health needs and rights.

Change NHS:



We supported engagement for the NHS 10 Year Strategy, delivering over 17 workshops throughout North East & North Cumbria including people from an ethnic minority, people with a learning disability and/or autism and young people.

In Darlington, people told us they want mental health services to be faster and easier to use, with more chances to talk to real staff instead of just relying on technology.

They're concerned about some groups being left out, as well as staff shortages, keeping personal information safe, and loneliness. Young people especially want better mental health education and prevention programs in schools to help early on.

Working together for change

North East Ambulance Service (NEAS) clinical strategy engagement:



Gathering Feedback to Improve NEAS Services

Over 1,700 people shared their valuable feedback. 14 Healthwatch organisations in the North East, along with Voluntary Organisations' Network North East, (VONNE) engaged with the public and patients as part of the NEAS clinical strategy review. This work will be ongoing throughout 2025-2026.

Key Strengths:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Compassionate and professional staff | Community involvement |
| Patient Transport Services | Effective emergency care |

Areas for Improvement:

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Response times | Mental health support |
| Communication transparency | Resource and staffing limitation |
| Coordination with other services | |

Raising Voices Together:



To showcase the work carried out by the NENC Healthwatch network, all 14 local Healthwatch came together. We shared experiences and learning, highlighting how local engagement has made an impact both regionally and nationally. This gathering helped strengthen relationships, with a commitment to continue collaborative efforts.

Claire Riley, Chief Corporate Services Officer, emphasised that our efforts have ensured that citizen voices are embedded within the ICB at every level of decision-making. She stressed the importance of involving and engaging with communities in any changes and developments. Claire also highlighted the need for consistent, long-term funding to build on our success and ensure people's voices are heard and acted upon.

Chris McCann, Deputy CEO of Healthwatch England, supported Claire's views on the power of the network. He expressed the ambition for Healthwatch nationally to develop strong systems of work, using NENC Healthwatch as a model for best practice.

Working together for change



"The effective way that the Healthwatch Network has engaged with the North East and North Cumbria ICB is extremely impressive. By working with other Healthwatch across their ICB footprint in establishing strong relationships within their ICB, they have ensured that the voice of the public is heard at every level of decision making in their region.

"They are to be commended on their exemplary approach which means that views of users, families and carers are taken into account by health and social care partners across the North East and North Cumbria ICS."

Chris McCann, Deputy Chief Executive, Healthwatch England."



Working together for change

Developing Our Shared Values Across Our NENC Network

We know the importance of collaboration and together we created these values by talking, listening, and learning from each other. Everyone has a voice – our team, our partners, and the people we support. These values are important to us because they reflect what we believe in and how we want to work: with kindness, honesty, and a real drive to make things better for everyone.

Equity

We listen with compassion, value every voice, and work to include those who are often left out. We build strong relationships and support people to shape the services they use.

Empowerment

We create a safe and inclusive space where people feel respected, supported, and confident to speak up and shape the changes that matter to them.

Collaboration

We work openly and honestly with others, inside and outside our organisations, to share learning, build trust, and make a bigger difference together.

Independence

We stand up for what matters to the public. We work alongside decision-makers but stay true to our role as an independent, trusted voice.

Truth

We act with honesty and integrity. We speak up when things need to change and make sure those in power hear the truth, even when it's hard to hear.

Learning

We never stop growing. We listen, reflect, and adapt—always open to new ideas and experiences that help us do better for the people we serve.

Working together for change

What's Next?

Newcastle University asked the Healthwatch NENC network to help with a funding bid to research NHS workforce shortages. These shortages affect staff wellbeing and patient care, especially in underserved areas.

The Healthwatch Network agreed to be a co-applicant for the bid to the National Institute for Health & Social Care Research (NIHR). In 2024, we were thrilled to learn that our bid was successful! We now have a £5 million NIHR Workforce Research Partnership, led by Newcastle University's Medical Education team, to tackle this urgent issue.

Our Focus:

Primary care and maternity services in remote and deprived areas, where staff face intense pressure and fewer resources.

Our Approach:

We are working directly with staff, patients, educators, and policy leaders to co-design solutions that make a real difference.

This Partnership Includes:

- Researchers from Newcastle, Northumbria, Oxford, Birmingham, and York
- NHS leaders and Integrated Care Boards
- Healthwatch and public advisors
- Design experts to turn insights into action

Our Goals:

- Better working conditions
- Reduced staff turnover
- Improved care in underserved areas
- Smarter, more inclusive workforce planning

Working together for change

Shaping Outcomes Together

These outcomes won't be decided from the top down. Instead, they'll be shaped through ongoing collaboration with those delivering and receiving care.

Partnership Details:

- The Partnership will run for 5 years, and we'll share our learning along the way.
- If you work in primary care, maternity, or workforce planning, or live in an underserved area, contact the Healthwatch Network to get involved.
- Look out for the launch of the Partnership's social media in the coming months.

Special Thanks:

A huge thanks to our amazing co-leads, Professor Gill Vance and Dr. Bryan Burford, whose leadership and commitment have brought this Partnership to life.

Read more about the Partnership launch here: [Multi-million-pound investment tackling healthcare workforce challenge](#)



“Underserved areas are likely to be on the sharp end of challenges to workforce sustainability, and so are priorities for research.”

Professor Gill Vance





Next Steps: Stronger Together

As we move forward, we're committed to strengthening our partnerships with other local Healthwatch teams – because when we raise voices together, we're louder, clearer, and more powerful. By working as one, we can escalate the issues that matter most and push for change that benefits communities across our region.

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Christopher Akers-Belcher | christopher@healthwatchhartlepool.co.uk | Network Regional Coordinator and ICB Rep |
| Lindsay Graham | lindsay@wearepeoplefirst.co.uk | Area Coordinator – North Cumbria ICP Area (Healthwatch Cumberland & Westmorland and Furness) |
| Natasha Douglas | natasha@healthwatchstocktonontees.co.uk | Area Coordinator – South ICP Area (Healthwatch Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland, Darlington, Stockton & Hartlepool) |
| Gail McGee | gail@healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk | Area Coordinator – Central ICP Area (Healthwatch County Durham, South Tyneside, Sunderland) |
| Paul Jones | p.jones@hwnt.co.uk | Area Coordinator – North ICP Area (North Tyneside, Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead) |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Gateshead | info@healthwatchgateshead.co.uk |
| Newcastle | info@healthwatchnewcastle.co.uk |
| Northumberland | info@healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk |
| South Tyneside | info@healthwatchsouthtyneside.co.uk |
| Hartlepool | yoursay@healthwatchhartlepool.co.uk |
| Stockton-on-Tees | info@healthwatchstocktonontees.co.uk |
| Middlesbrough | healthwatchsouthtees@pcp.uk.net |
| Redcar & Cleveland | healthwatchsouthtees@pcp.uk.net |
| Cumberland | info@healthwatchcumberland.co.uk |
| Westmorland & Furness | info@healthwatchwestfurn.co.uk |
| Sunderland | healthwatchsunderland@pcp.uk.net |
| Darlington | info@healthwatchdarlington.co.uk |
| County Durham | info@healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk |

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time.

Getting services to involve the public



Supporting Better Communication Between Services and the Community

We led a project to explore the experiences of wheelchair users in Darlington following concerns about delays, poor communication, and lack of awareness of available support.

What We Did:

- Conducted a survey completed by 20 local wheelchair users.
- Held a one-to-one interview and focus groups to gather detailed personal feedback.
- Identified key issues: long waiting times, lack of updates, limited understanding of needs, and low awareness of the Personal Wheelchair Budget (PWB).

Key findings:

- 40% were waiting for assessment or equipment.
 - 35% waited over six months; some over a year.
 - 53% reported poor communication.
 - 94.7% had not been informed about PWB.
 - Nearly half reported a decline in health or wellbeing due to delays.
- Personal accounts highlighted emotional strain, physical discomfort, and loss of independence. One example included a person receiving end-of-life care who passed away before receiving appropriate equipment.

Our Impact:

We presented the findings in a formal report and shared it directly with County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust (CDDFT). In response, the Trust:

- Acknowledged the feedback and its alignment with ongoing service improvements.
- Provided updates on staffing and transformation plans.
- Committed to improving communication, awareness of PWB, and service access.
- Welcomed further partnership working with Healthwatch and service users.

This project enabled wheelchair users to share their voices and experiences. Healthwatch Darlington acted as a bridge between the community and the provider, helping improve communication, raise awareness, and support positive changes in service delivery.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time.

Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life



Using Real Experiences to Influence Day Opportunities in Darlington

We partnered with Darlington Borough Council (DBC) to engage with people who use local Day Opportunities, as well as carers and families. The aim was to ensure future services reflected real needs by highlighting personal experiences and everyday challenges.

What We Did:

- Gathered feedback from over 100 participants through surveys and focus groups.
- Captured detailed and moving stories from people with learning disabilities, autism, mental health needs, and carers.
- Brought to light examples of joy, like individuals thriving through creative activities, making friends, or simply enjoying a structured day – but also stories of isolation, unmet needs, and the emotional toll on carers.

One participant described being “just sat in on my own” due to affordability barriers, while a parent feared what would happen when their child finished school, as “post-college there is very little out there.”

Healthwatch brought these voices directly to decision-makers, showing the impact of gaps in services, such as transport, holiday provision, and support for people living with dementia. These personal accounts helped council staff and commissioners understand how system limitations affect real lives.

Our Impact:

The report directly informed DBC's future commissioning plans and strategy for Day Opportunities. The Council acknowledged the emotional and practical value of these personal stories and committed to using the findings to shape more inclusive, flexible, and community-based services.

This work shows how Healthwatch Darlington used the lived experiences of a small number of local people to create empathy and drive meaningful change. By bringing these voices to life, we helped decision-makers see the person behind the data – and act on it.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time.

Improving care over time



Darlington Mental Health Network – Making Change Happen, One Step at a Time

In April 2024, we brought back the Darlington Mental Health Network. This group had been closed in 2017 because of funding cuts, and since then, there was no place for organisations to come together to talk about mental health in the town.

We brought together **local health and social care services, charities, mental health experts, carers, and people with lived experience** to meet every two months. The goal was simple: to work together better, share ideas, and make sure mental health services are easier to find and more joined-up.

What People Said:

- *"The network fosters more collaboration and idea-sharing, leading to better working relationships among organisations."*
- *"Attendees find the meetings inspiring, often leaving with ideas they can implement in their work."*
- *"Participants have had opportunities to connect with professionals within the mental health framework, including those they may not have engaged with previously."*

People told us the network gave them the confidence to signpost individuals to the right support:

- *"Increased confidence in making referrals to the appropriate organisations."*
- *"Participants have gained a much better understanding of the support available in Darlington."*

Making a Difference

Some great new projects started thanks to the network. For example,

- **Darlington Primary Care Network (PCN)** teamed up with **Triage Darlington** to help people who are struggling with their mental health and are out of work. This new pilot project supports people to move towards training, volunteering or jobs.
- The network also supported the start of the **Gambling Champions Support Network**, which looks at the link between gambling and mental health. The **NECA Gambling Service** told us the network helped them improve how they signpost people locally.

continued.....

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time.

Improving care over time continued.....



Darlington Mental Health Network – Making Change Happen, One Step at a Time continued.....

Real Voices, Real Change:

On **International Women's Day**, we hosted a "Tea and Talk" event in response to women asking for more peer support. Women came to chat over tea and coffee and gave feedback on what kind of support they wanted. Those who couldn't attend shared their views online. Now, thanks to that feedback, we're planning two summer events in the town centre where people can drop by for support, information – or just a hot drink and a friendly chat.

What Happens Next:

The Mental Health Network started as a one-year trial, funded by Darlington Public Health. But because it worked so well, the **North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB)** and **Darlington PCN** have agreed to fund it for another two years. Healthwatch Darlington will continue to run it.

"The pilot of the Mental Health Network, delivered by Healthwatch Darlington and funded by Public Health, has been highly valued by partners and stakeholders across VCSE and statutory services... It has improved joined-up working relationships between organisations and sectors."

— **Rebecca Morgan, Public Health Darlington**

"Darlington's Mental Health Network has shaped how Darlington PCN think, plans, and approaches challenges... providing an opportunity to network, connect, and share knowledge."

— **Rachel Gault, Business Manager, Darlington Primary Care Network**

"The development of the Mental Health Network by Healthwatch Darlington created an important space for organisations and service users to come together... allowing us to better tailor our offer to meet people's needs."

— **John Stamp, Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust**

This shows how **change takes time**. Behind the scenes, Healthwatch Darlington has been **quietly building relationships, listening, and connecting people** – and now that work is making a real difference to mental health support in Darlington.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, we've listened to feedback from all areas of our community. People's experiences of care help us know what's working and what isn't, so we can give feedback on services and help them improve.



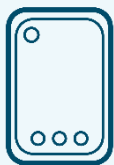
Listening to your experiences

Working together to improve your local hospitals

North Tees & Hartlepool and South Tees Hospitals are now teaming up under a new partnership called a 'Group Model.' This means they're working more closely together to improve healthcare services for everyone across Tees Valley, North Yorkshire and County Durham.

To help make sure these improvements reflect what local people really need, Healthwatch Darlington joined with other local Healthwatch to listen to patients, carers, and the wider community. The feedback gathered will help the hospitals understand what's going well and what could be better.

What people said:



- **Quality of Care:** Generally positive but **long waits** and **poor communication** were common frustrations.
- **Hospital Facilities:** Many felt the **buildings were outdated**, with **uncomfortable waiting areas** and **cleanliness concerns**.
- **Access to Services:** Barriers included **long waits, parking issues**, and **limited public transport**. Digital tools were helpful for some but **not inclusive for all**.
- **Hospitals Working Together:** People want **shorter waits, better communication**, and **easier access**, especially for those in **rural areas**.

Top 5 Recommendations

1. **Consistent, high-quality care** across all hospitals.
2. **Modernise hospital environments** for better comfort and cleanliness.
3. **Reduce waiting times**, especially in emergency and surgical services.
4. **Improve rural access** with better transport and more local services.
5. **Enhance communication** so patients feel informed and involved.

"Thank you again to you and your colleagues for the time spent on pulling this work together. It has already played an integral role in the work of the clinical boards and wider. The recommendations are being actively discussed and considered as part of our design work."

Maxine Crutwell, Programme Manager for Group Development



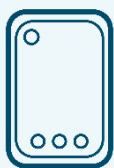
Listening to your experiences

NEAS Clinical Strategy Engagement

The North East Ambulance Service (NEAS), in partnership with the North East and North Cumbria Healthwatch Network and Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE), conducted a regional engagement to inform its new clinical strategy.

Led by Healthwatch Darlington, the project gathered feedback via surveys and events to assess how NEAS services are perceived and to shape service improvements, especially considering rising demand and an aging population

What people said:



Feedback from nearly **1,700** respondents and over **25** events revealed **widespread praise** for NEAS **staff professionalism** and **compassion**.

However, concerns emerged about **long response times, delays in patient transport, inconsistent NHS111 triage**, and **lack of communication during waits**.

Darlington participants echoed these points, emphasising the need **for timely arrival, better coordination with other services**, and **clearer public guidance on when to call 999 vs. 111**

Key Recommendations

1. Increasing NEAS staffing and ambulance availability
2. Introducing real-time communication and tracking for patients
3. Improving NHS111 triage and reducing scripted questioning
4. Strengthening patient transport reliability and coordination
5. Enhancing integration with GPs and community services
6. Educating the public on appropriate service use

Next Steps

NEAS will now use this community feedback to shape its forthcoming **Clinical Strategy**, ensuring it aligns with public needs and expectations. The insights gathered by **the North East and North Cumbria Healthwatch Network** will inform service priorities, workforce planning, and partnership development. NEAS has committed to reviewing all recommendations and is expected to publish an updated strategy and action plan. Ongoing dialogue with Healthwatch and the public will help monitor progress and ensure accountability.

Listening to your experiences

Listening to Young People About Sexual Health

Understanding the Need

Young people in Darlington told us they wanted better access to clear, honest, and supportive sexual health services and information. But many didn't know where to go, what was available, or how to get help without feeling judged or embarrassed.

What did we do?

We carried out a survey asking young people in Darlington about their experiences with sexual health services. We wanted to know what they were aware of, what worked well, and what could be improved.

45 young people aged 12–24 responded. Their answers helped us understand how local services and education can better meet their needs.

Key things we heard:



38%

of young people said they were not aware of local sexual health services.

50%

said their sexual health education did not cover STIs adequately.

60%

said they prefer to access sexual health information online.

What difference did this make?

We made clear, evidence-based recommendations – more awareness campaigns, better access to condoms through the C-card scheme, improved school education, and more youth-friendly services.

“We are looking at increasing the C-Card Scheme across Darlington Practices and administering our own patient survey in the future to gather feedback from a larger sample of young people, then implementing changes as appropriate.”

**Elizabeth Simpson, Operations Manager,
Primary Healthcare Darlington**



Information and signposting

Whether it's finding an NHS dentist, making a complaint, or choosing a good care home for a loved one – you can count on us. This year 328 people have reached out to us for advice, support or help finding services.

This year, we've helped people by:

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Supporting people to look after their health
- Signposting people to additional support services



Post-Hospital Care Coordination:

A family member reported difficulties in coordinating post-hospital care for an elderly patient. After being discharged, there was confusion between hospital and community care teams regarding referrals for home physical therapy and bathing assistance.

Initially, the **Rapid Response team** lacked time for in-depth care; however, when the **Enablement Team** became involved, they provided compassionate, thorough support.

Healthwatch's involvement helped streamline communication between teams, emphasising the importance of continuity in elderly patient care and proactive communication across departments.

Mental Health and Disability Support:

A caller with a disability asked for help in navigating mental health services, expressing frustration over the lack of targeted assistance for their specific needs.

Healthwatch Darlington connected them with **Darlington Mind** and **Darlington Association on Disability (DAD)** for specialised support.

This case highlighted the need for tailored mental health resources and reinforced the importance of comprehensive support networks for those with disabilities facing mental health challenges.

Elderly Care and Social Support:

An elderly woman newly relocated to Darlington faced isolation and unfamiliarity with local services. Her family member reached out to Healthwatch Darlington seeking advice on social groups and financial assistance.

Healthwatch provided details on nearby elderly support groups, local benefits assistance through **Darlington Connect**, and options for social care assessments.

This advice enabled her to access a more supportive network, addressing the critical role of social integration for older residents new to the area.

Finance and future priorities

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

Our income and expenditure:

| Income | | Expenditure | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Annual grant from Government | £76,497 | Expenditure on pay | £108,812 |
| Additional income | £27,368 | Non-pay expenditure | £26,779 |
| | | | |
| Total income | £103,865 | Total Expenditure | £135,591 |

Additional income is broken down into:

- £1,200 received from Healthwatch England for work on a project
- £9,668 received from the local ICS for joint work on a project
- £5000 funding received from Darlington Borough Council to support their Day Opportunities project
- £11,500 funding received from the North East Ambulance Service (NEAS) to support their clinical strategy engagement project

Integrated Care System (ICS) funding:

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

| Purpose of ICS funding | Amount |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Urgent Dental Access Centre (UDAC) | £2,018 |
| NHS Involvement Strategy | £2,000 |
| Women's Health | £950 |
| ICB Core Funding | £3,500 |
| NHS 10 Year Plan | £1,200 |

Finance and future priorities

Next steps:

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

We will also work together with partners and our local Integrated Care System to help develop an NHS culture where, at every level, staff strive to listen and learn from patients to make care better.

Our top three priorities for the next year are:

- 1. Darlington Mental Health Network and the Integrated Neighbourhood Team (INT) Mental Health Sub Group** – working in partnership with others to champion a more holistic, person-centred approach to health and care – one that supports the overall wellbeing of the community and helps shape services around the needs of the population.
- 2. Primary Care Network (PCN) Mental Health Co-ordinators:** A partnership with **First Stop Darlington** and the **YMCA** facilitating several Primary Care mental health co-ordinators across the Borough.
- 3. CDDFT Breast Service Review:** We will continue to gather and share patient feedback to support ongoing improvements to breast services at **County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust (CDDFT)**, helping ensure local voices are heard and valued throughout the review process.

We will continue to monitor the following services based on the feedback we have gathered during the last year:

- GP Access
- Dentistry Access
- Hospital Waiting Lists
- Pharmacy First



Statutory statements

Healthwatch Darlington Limited
c/o Tandem Hub,
Morton Park Business Training Centre
Morton Park Way
DARLINGTON
DL1 4PJ
01325 380145 or 07525237723

Healthwatch Darlington uses the Healthwatch Trademark when undertaking our statutory activities as covered by the licence agreement.

The way we work

Involvement of volunteers and lay people in our governance and decision-making.

Our Healthwatch Board consists of **five** members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities.

Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2024/25, the Board met **eight** times and made decisions on matters such as **governance and finance**. We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities.

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

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible can provide us with insight into their experience of using services.

During 2024/25, we have been available by phone and email, provided a web form on our website and through social media, and attended meetings of community groups and forums.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We will publish it on our website and social media channels.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

We had **no** providers who did not respond to requests for information or recommendations. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so there were no resulting reviews or investigations.

Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences shared with us. For example, in our local authority area, we take information to:

- Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee,
- Health and Wellbeing Board,
- Darlington Locality Oversight Group,
- Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Steering Group,
- Darlington Organisations Together (DOT) Network,
- Mental Health Network,
- Darlington Cares Strategy,
- Children and Young People Multi Agency Steering Group,
- Learning Impairment Network,
- Social Care and Carers Strategy,
- Darlington ICB Place Committee.

Healthwatch Darlington is represented on the **Darlington Health and Wellbeing** Board by **Michelle Thompson B.E.M.**, Chief Executive Officer and is the Board's Vice Chair.

Healthwatch representatives

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in the **North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board** via our **Network Regional Coordinator and ICB Representative Christopher Akers-Belcher, CEO of Healthwatch Hartlepool**. We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

Healthwatch Darlington is represented on **the South Integrated Care Partnership** by **Natasha Douglas Lead Officer of Healthwatch Stockton**. She represents the Tees Valley Healthwatch including Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Darlington, Hartlepool and Stockton.

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Morton Park Way
DARLINGTON
DL1 4PJ



www.healthwatchdarlington.co.uk



01325 380145 or 07525237723



info@healthwatchdarlington.co.uk



@HealthwatchDarlington



@healthwatchDton @YouthWatchDarlo



@healthwatchdarlington



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