

Mental Health Network Pilot Review

March 2025

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Executive Summary

As we reflect on the past year of the **Darlington Mental Health Network**, I cannot overstate how incredibly proud we are of what has been achieved. When **Healthwatch Darlington** re-established this network in **April 2024**, we did so in response to a **clear and urgent need**. Since the network's disbandment in **2017** due to a significant cut to Healthwatch Darlington's **statutory funding**, the absence of a coordinated mental health forum left a substantial gap in support and collaboration across services. The **reinstatement of the network** was driven by the shared ambition of **service providers, commissioners, and community organisations** to come together and strengthen **mental health support** in Darlington. One year on, it is clear that this ambition has been realised—and **surpassed**.

The network has fostered **strong relationships**, improved **collaboration**, and created a **vital space for knowledge-sharing**. Participants have told us how valuable it has been in building **connections**, increasing **confidence in referrals**, and strengthening the **collective understanding** of mental health services in Darlington. Meetings have inspired **new ways of working**, shaped **discussions**, and encouraged **meaningful partnerships** that continue to benefit both **providers** and **service users**.

We are proud to highlight several **key successes** that have laid the groundwork for the **next phase** of the network:

- **Enhanced Collaboration:** The network has facilitated valuable **partnerships**, including strengthened ties with **Darlington Primary Care Network (PCN)**, and has enabled **joint funding bids** for mental health coordinator roles.
- **Improved Referral Pathways:** Organisations have reported **increased confidence** in **signposting** and making **referrals**, helping to ensure individuals receive the **right support** at the right time.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Network members have gained valuable **insights** into available services, **policy developments**, and **best practices**, contributing to a stronger and more connected mental health landscape.

- **Community-Centred Approach:** The network has proven instrumental in identifying local **gaps**, shaping **relevant discussions**, and **co-producing solutions** that reflect the lived experiences and needs of **service users**.

While the network has been incredibly well received, we also recognise the importance of continuing to evolve. Suggestions for improvement, such as developing an **accessible database of mental health services**, reflect the ongoing commitment of everyone involved to make this network as **effective** and **inclusive** as possible.

The fact that this initiative was initially commissioned as a **one-year pilot** by **Darlington Public Health** but has now secured a future under the **North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB)** and **Darlington PCN** speaks volumes about its success. **Healthwatch Darlington** is honoured to continue leading the network for the **next two years**, ensuring that it not only continues but grows, bringing even greater benefits to those working in and accessing mental health services in our community.

None of this would have been possible without the **dedication** and hard work of **Andrea Goldie**, **Healthwatch Darlington Community Facilitator**, whose commitment and expertise have been instrumental in making this network the success it is today. Her efforts, alongside the passion and engagement of every **network member**, have made a **real difference**, and we are deeply grateful for all that has been achieved.

This network is proof of what can be accomplished when organisations come together with a **shared purpose**. It has been a privilege to witness the **collaboration, dedication, and expertise** of everyone involved, and we look forward to building on this **strong foundation** in the years ahead. **Thank you** to everyone who has played a part—this is just the **beginning**.



Michelle Thompson B.E.M.
Chief Executive Officer
Healthwatch Darlington



Darlington Mental Health Network meeting at the Edge Centre, as reported by Peter Barron, The Northern Echo Wednesday 15th January 2025.

1. Introduction

The Darlington Mental Health Network was re-established in April 2024 in response to a substantial need for improved collaboration, communication, and partnership working among key stakeholders in mental health services.

Since the network's disbandment in 2017 due to a significant cut to Healthwatch Darlington's statutory funding, a considerable gap emerged, leaving public sector organisations and the voluntary and community sector without the coordinated support needed to address mental health challenges in the community.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, people across Darlington, like many other communities, faced a significant rise in mental health challenges. Prolonged isolation, uncertainty, bereavement, financial pressures, and disrupted routines led to a surge in issues such as anxiety, depression, grief, and substance misuse.

Many individuals who had never struggled with their mental health before began to experience difficulties, while those with pre-existing conditions saw their

symptoms worsen. Frontline workers, carers, young people, and the elderly were particularly affected, with increased reports of loneliness, burnout, eating disorders, and emotional distress.

Services were stretched, and navigating support became harder just as demand was growing. In response to these complex and growing needs, a dedicated Darlington Mental Health Network was needed to bring together local organisations, share knowledge and resources, and ensure that people could access timely, appropriate, and coordinated support for their mental wellbeing.

Re-establishing the network aims to enhance the mental health and emotional wellbeing of Darlington residents over the next year, aligning with both local and national strategies:

- [NHS England Neighbourhood Health Guidelines-2025-26](#)
- [Change NHS Help Build A Health Service Fit For The Future](#)
- [NHS NENC Joint Forward Plan March 2024](#)
- [DBC Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#)
- [TEWV Community Mental Health Transformation](#)

Good mental health is essential to a thriving community, and it is our shared responsibility to ensure accessible and effective support. This network adopts a whole-system approach, focusing on three key areas:

- **Prevention and Early Intervention:** Prioritising proactive measures to reduce future crises.
- **Personalised Support and Services:** Empowering individuals with choices and control, co-producing services with those directly affected and their supporters.
- **Partnership Delivery:** Strengthening collaboration across organisations to achieve more effective and sustainable outcomes.

2. Purpose

The network provides a platform for sharing information, updates, and best practices related to mental health services in Darlington. It identifies and addresses gaps, challenges, and opportunities within the local mental health system. Additionally, it collaborates on initiatives to improve the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of mental health services. The network also facilitates communication and partnership working among commissioners, providers, and service users to enhance the overall mental health support system in Darlington.

3. Membership

The network consists of representatives from local health and social care commissioners responsible for mental health services, mental health service providers operating within Darlington, service users and carers with lived experience of mental health challenges, and Healthwatch Darlington, which acts as the facilitator and coordinator of the network. Membership also includes representatives from relevant voluntary and community organisations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders with an interest in mental health.

4. Meetings

The network meets bi-monthly, with additional meetings scheduled as necessary. Meetings are held in person to ensure active and engaging participation and encourage relationship building and collaboration. Agendas and meeting minutes are circulated in advance to all members. These meetings provide opportunities for open discussion, information sharing, and decision-making on relevant topics.

5. Roles and responsibilities

Healthwatch Darlington:

- Facilitates meetings and coordinates network activities.
- Provides administrative support, including agenda setting and minute-taking.
- Acts as a liaison between network members and other stakeholders.
- Implements and oversees 'subgroups' where necessary.

Commissioners:

- Share updates on mental health commissioning priorities, plans, and initiatives.
- Seek input and feedback from providers and service users to inform commissioning decisions.

Providers:

- Share information on service provision, challenges, and innovations.
- Collaborate with commissioners and service users to address identified needs and improve service delivery.

Service Users and Carers:

- Share lived experiences, perspectives, and feedback on mental health services.
- Contribute to discussions on service improvement and development.

6. Decision Making

Decisions within the network are made by consensus wherever possible. If consensus cannot be reached, decisions may be made through a democratic voting process, with each member having one vote. Healthwatch Darlington facilitates the decision-making process and ensures that all members have the opportunity to express their views.

7. Pilot Impact Study

To evaluate the impact of the network, Healthwatch Darlington conducted a survey as the pilot phase neared its conclusion. The results are in, and they highlight the significant difference this network has made! **See Appendix 1 for full survey results.**

Summary of Comments

1. Networking & Relationships

- The initiative continues to **build new relationships and strengthen networking** among organisations in Darlington.

- Participants have had opportunities to connect with professionals within the **mental health framework**, including those they may not have engaged with previously.
- The network fosters **more collaboration and idea-sharing**, leading to **better working relationships** among organisations.
- The **collaborative approach and atmosphere** of the network are highly valued, as they create opportunities to **discuss ideas, shape services, and ensure they complement rather than duplicate existing support**.
- Participants enjoy hearing from **VCSE organisations** and would like **more engagement with the public sector** as well.
- Attendees find the meetings inspiring, often leaving with **ideas they can implement in their work**.

2. Useful Connections & Partnerships

- After recognising a gap in services **Darlington PCN** was approached by Triage Darlington with a proposal for bridging the gap. This has led to a **pilot project funded by Darlington PCN and led by Triage**. The project will support patients who are economically inactive to progress towards meaningful activity in the form of employment, skills development, training or volunteering transitioning out of prescribed support.
- A **partnership bid for mental health coordinators** with two other organisations has been developed through the network.
- The network has helped to establish the **Gambling Champions Support Network**, which highlights gambling-related harms as a **serious mental health risk**.
- The **NECA Gambling Service**, a **short-term treatment service**, has benefited from the network by improving its **local signposting and referral processes**.
- The network has provided **useful contacts and knowledge** about other services that can support organisations' work.

3. Knowledge Sharing & Collaboration

- The network provides a **platform** for discussions on upcoming changes, enabling organisations to **prepare clients, give feedback, and contribute ideas** for new ways of working together.
- It offers a **space to discuss ideas, learn what others are doing, and shape services** to work alongside new opportunities rather than duplicate efforts—**adding quality rather than diluting the pool**.
- **Increased awareness and confidence in signposting and referrals** to appropriate organisations.
- Information from the **Integrated Care Board (ICB)** has been particularly useful for understanding the **wider agenda**.
- Interest has been expressed in **structured service provision** from both the **voluntary sector and public sector**.
- The following organisations and discussions have been found particularly valuable:
 - **Recovery Connections**
 - **ICB Place Committee**
 - **IPS (Individual Placement and Support)**
 - **The Edge Centre**
 - **Mind**
 - **Discussions on recovery and support**
- Some participants have had **limited engagement due to personal circumstances (e.g., compassionate leave)** but expect to contribute more now that they are back in their roles.

4. Measurable Improvements & Overall Impact

- The network has led to **measurable improvements** in mental health services through **better collaboration, referrals, and support structures**.
- **Increased confidence in making referrals** to the appropriate organisations.

- The network is regarded as **highly useful**, with all aspects considered valuable by participants.
- It has **strengthened partnerships**, enhanced knowledge of local mental health services, and supported the development of new initiatives such as the Darlington PCN Pilot and the Gambling Champions Support Network.
- Participants have **gained a much better understanding** of the support available in Darlington.
- The **talks, discussions, and insights gained** at the network are considered valuable and engaging.
- The network is seen as an **absolutely valuable forum** for collaboration, learning, and service development for those working in mental health across Darlington.

5. Suggested Improvements for the Network

- Participants are generally happy with the running of the network but suggest **planning a future event together** to raise awareness of available services, such as a **roadshow to take around communities**.
- There is a strong interest in the ongoing **creation of a comprehensive and up-to-date online database** of all services available in Darlington to improve accessibility such as [MECC Gateway](#)
- **Mapping the support available** would help organisations and individuals navigate services more effectively.
- Moving forward we will need to encourage **more inclusive participation** during discussions. Some participants feel that conversations are sometimes dominated by a small number of representatives, limiting contributions from others.
 - A suggestion was made to **moderate discussions better**, including asking people to **raise hands before speaking** to allow all voices to be heard. – As a network we are trying to steer clear of this in an attempt to keep the network less formal, but as we develop we may look at this.

- It is recognised that **charities in the network have very valuable insights** that would benefit public sector organisations as well.
- Participants acknowledge that this is a **teething issue** caused by **strong personalities who are passionate about improving Mental Health**. —We will actively encourage wider participation which will hopefully lead to a more balanced and inclusive conversation.

International Women's Day

In response to social media feedback, Healthwatch Darlington recognised a clear need for a peer support mental health group for women in Darlington.

To address this, Healthwatch Darlington partnered with Darlington Connect and, on behalf of the Mental Health Network hosted a **"Tea and Talk/Coffee and Chat"** event on **International Women's Day**. The event provided a welcoming space where women could enjoy free refreshments while sharing their thoughts and ideas with Healthwatch Darlington and other service providers about what they would like from a support group. For those unable to attend in person, an **online survey** was offered to ensure everyone had the opportunity to have their voices heard. The feedback gathered will be shared with the **Mental Health Network**, providing valuable data to support future funding bids for peer support initiatives in Darlington.



Attendees of the Tea and Talk/Coffee and Chat

Following the success of this event, Healthwatch Darlington has been offered the use of the market marquee over the summer months. This exciting opportunity allows Healthwatch Darlington to host two full days dedicated to social interaction in a **safe, central location**. Anyone is welcome to drop by, whether they're feeling lonely, want to learn more about available support services, or simply want to enjoy a hot drink and connect with new people.



L - R Adele Morris (Darlington Connect Manager), DBC Cllr Kate Mammolotti, DBC Cllr Jim Garner, DBC Cllr Rebecca Baker, Andrea Goldie (Healthwatch Darlington Community Facilitator).

This initiative will be supported by other organisations within the network, offering everyone **the chance to get involved and work together**. By collaborating in this way, Healthwatch Darlington not only provides **essential support** for the community but also demonstrates a collective commitment to improving services and **fostering a stronger, more connected Darlington**.

Next Steps for the Darlington Mental Health Network

The Darlington Mental Health Network, originally commissioned by Public Health, has proven to be a **resounding success**, fostering **strong partnerships**, **improved collaboration**, and **measurable impacts** on mental health services in Darlington.

Through regular engagement, participants have highlighted the **value of networking, shared learning, and the ability to shape services collaboratively.**

As the current funding comes to an end on **March 31, 2025**, the network's achievements have led to a new and exciting development—the transition to a **sustainable, structured model under a partnership with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Darlington Primary Care Network (PCN).**

Key Successes Leading to the Next Phase

- **Enhanced Collaboration:** The network has facilitated **valuable partnerships**, including **Darlington PCN** and **joint funding bids** for mental health coordinators.
- **Improved Referral Pathways:** Organisations have reported increased **confidence in signposting and referrals**, ensuring individuals receive the right support.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Participants have gained **insights into available services, policy changes, and best practices**, strengthening the mental health landscape in Darlington.
- **Community-Centred Approach:** The network has been instrumental in **identifying gaps, shaping discussions, and co-producing solutions** that reflect the needs of service users.

Looking Ahead: Sustaining and Expanding the Network

Under the new proposal, Healthwatch Darlington will take on **project management and administrative responsibilities** to ensure the network remains an **effective and sustainable resource** for the next **two years**. The scope of work will include:

- **Facilitating governance, coordination, and strategic oversight** to align activities with key priorities.
- **Organising and leading bi-monthly Mental Health Network and INT subgroup meetings** to maintain momentum.
- **Developing a structured project plan, tracking progress, and reporting on measurable outcomes.**

- Expanding engagement across sectors, ensuring that both VCSE and public sector voices are equally represented.
- Providing administrative support, meeting facilitation, and communications management to streamline operations.

A Vision for Growth and Impact

The continuation of the Mental Health Network under the ICB and PCN's backing reflects the **clear value and necessity** of this initiative. The next two years will focus on:

- Strengthening cross-sector relationships to enhance service delivery.
- Developing an accessible database of mental health services to improve visibility and referrals.
- Ensuring inclusive and well-structured discussions, giving all organisations a platform to contribute meaningfully.
- Exploring community engagement opportunities, such as a roadshow or outreach events, to raise awareness of available services.

This transition represents an **exciting new chapter** for the Mental Health Network—one that builds upon **proven success** and ensures continued **collaboration, innovation, and impact** for mental health services in Darlington.

Public Health Darlington Response:

"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 proven to be a beneficial mechanism to improve knowledge of and access to mental health services for people in Darlington.

The collaborative approach has created a platform to share information and insight, and to promote good practice. It has improved joined-up working relationships between organisations and sectors, creating a greater understanding of the wider landscape of mental health services, improving referral pathways, highlighting challenges and gaps, and informing future service provision. We look forward to

continuing to support the growth and success of the network, in improving access to mental health services for the people of Darlington.”

**Rebecca Morgan, Public Health Portfolio Lead (Mental Health and Ageing Well),
Darlington Borough Council**

Darlington Primary Care Network Response:

“Reflecting over the last 12 months from a primary care perspective, Darlington's Mental Health Network has shaped how Darlington PCN think, plans, and approaches challenges associated with mental health demand and capacity at a system level. Through collaboration, the PCN has listened to the challenges faced by community services and has used this insight to influence how funding can be used to draw on and increase the strength and capacity of Darlington's mental health support system. Finally, providing an opportunity to network, connect, and share knowledge has been valued by primary care, and we look forward to continuing to strengthen relationships and feed insight into Darlington's Mental Health Integrated Neighbourhood Team.”

Rachel Gault, Business Manager, Darlington Primary Care Network

Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust Response:

“We welcome the development of the Mental Health Network in Darlington. When we started the community mental health transformation programme, the biggest challenge was getting meaningful engagement with local populations to ensure we focus on the right things for local populations. This was a particular challenge in Darlington with the absence of a voluntary sector infrastructure organisation or Voluntary Development Agency presence, alongside the gap in a co-ordinated mental health forum.

To help address this, we launched Darlington Connect as a drop-in point for people to access mental health support and information. Subsequently, the development of the Mental Health Network by Healthwatch Darlington created an important space for

organisations and service users to come together. This has given us the opportunity to consolidate the work and test out thinking whilst hearing from the communities affected by decisions, allowing us to better tailor our offer to meet people's needs more effectively.

John Stamp, Associate Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust (TEWV)/North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Acknowledgments

Healthwatch Darlington would like to thank everyone who contributed to the success of the Darlington Mental Health Network pilot. Our sincere gratitude goes to all members, partners, service users, and organisations who shared their time, insights, and support throughout this journey. Special thanks to Andrea Goldie, our Community Facilitator, whose passion and dedication helped shape the network into a vital and collaborative space. We also acknowledge the commitment of Darlington Borough Council Public Health, Darlington Primary Care Network, and the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust for their continued support. This work would not have been possible without your shared ambition to improve mental health services in Darlington.



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Darlington

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