

HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Chair: Cllr John Usher

Vice-Chair: Cllr Fiona Miller

Committee Members: Councillors Lynne Dagg, Steven Donkin, Brandon Feeley, Juliana Heron, Catherine Hunter, Dominic McDonough, Lyall Reed, Dianne Snowdon, Fiona Tobin and Peter Walton.

I am pleased to be able, once again, to introduce this chapter of the annual report and share the work of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee over the previous year. Health and wellbeing remain a vital aspect for everyone in Sunderland because it shapes the quality of everyday life, strengthens communities, and supports a thriving local economy. When individuals feel physically and mentally well, they are more able to work, connect with others, and participate in their communities. Access to quality medical advice and treatment is paramount in ensuring people can live a healthy and independent life for as long as possible. The work the committee undertakes looks at many aspects of health and wellbeing and continually looks at how it can support the development, improvement and delivery of services to the people of Sunderland.

The Committee received Director of Public Health's Annual Report for 2023/24, which provided an overview of health needs in Sunderland and recommendations for improving resident wellbeing and reducing health inequalities. Members acknowledged the long-term challenges around life expectancy, inequality between wards, and the limits of what local authorities can influence compared to national drivers of health outcomes. Members discussed prevention, data use, and the importance of partnership working to address complex, system-wide issues. Members considered the quality, depth, and accessibility of data used in the report also explored some of the practical implications for neighbourhood-level action, social prescribing, community assets, and partnerships.

The South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust (STSFT) presented a detailed report and presentation on their Urgent Care and Admissions Avoidance in the Community programme. The focus was on helping patients remain at home rather than requiring hospital admission, supported by services such as the Urgent Community Response (UCR), Virtual Wards, enhanced patient monitoring, and coordinated care via a dedicated Care Coordination Hub. Members heard about the community offer across Sunderland, patient pathways, and integration between NHS providers.

Members focused on a number of issues including around patient safety and clinical oversight, technology and digital inclusion, capacity, workforce flexibility, and service resilience. Members also raised issues around integration with 111 service and the North East Ambulance Service, contingency arrangements and risk management as well as patient and family experience within virtual care. The Committee highlighted clear Member interest in ensuring the service delivered safe, accessible, and effective alternatives to hospital admission while remaining accountable for outcomes and practical implementation.

The Committee continues to have a strong relationship with Sunderland Integrated Care Board (ICB) and continues to receive performance updates from the ICB covering a range of issues. Members were informed of performance challenges across the system, efforts to reduce duplication in patient pathways, and the ongoing rollout of new initiatives including community diagnostic capacity, mental health pathway improvements, digital access, and work linked to the Guiding You Home Programme. The Committee continues to acknowledge the fundamental role that Sunderland ICB has in the delivery of health services across the area and will continue to monitor and challenge, where appropriate, around performance.

The availability and access of NHS dentist services in Sunderland is an issue that the Committee continues to monitor and challenge. The Committee maintains a good working relationship with the NHS Strategic Head of Dental Contracting for the area, and they were in attendance at the November 2025 meeting. A number of issues were discussed including national reforms and contractual mandates, NHS-commissioned dental capacity, improving oral health, especially in deprived areas, increasing access to urgent and routine NHS dental care and workforce challenges and initiatives. Members heard that Sunderland continues to face significant access issues despite targeted efforts to expand capacity, offer additional Units of Dental Activity (UDAs), and incentivise practices.

The Committee explored a number of themes including integration with wider health hubs, queried public awareness, communication and missed appointments and also highlighted a number of patient experiences around dental access and treatment. The Committee have also considered lobbying Government on their concerns around dental access in Sunderland and have written to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care outlining these issues.

The health of the local population is extremely important and initiatives like the Smokefree Sunderland Programme are significant in providing pathways to healthier lives and outcomes for local people. The Committee received a detailed update on the progress of the Smokefree Sunderland programme. The report and presentation covered smoking prevalence in Sunderland and its impact, local stop-smoking services, new investment through Smokefree Generation funding and the ongoing work to support smokers to quit across the city. Scrutiny Members highlighted key issues around young people vaping, health inequalities, the effectiveness of educational initiatives, and the use of grant funding. Members were keen to ensure that local policy was in alignment with national legislation, effectively protected young people, and supported the city-wide progress toward a Smokefree Sunderland.

The Committee, through the Public Health Team, also looked at the Local Approach to Healthy Weight in Sunderland and the draft Healthy Weight Strategy 2025–2030. Members acknowledged the scale of the challenge, with rising childhood obesity, the importance of adopting a whole-system, evidence-based approach and the plans for community-based support, prevention programmes, and strengthened citywide commitment through the upcoming strategy. Members were also informed that the strategy focused on reshaping environments, supporting families, and mobilising communities to create a healthier city. Members recognised the work that was being undertaken and also highlighted the importance of evidence-based action and the barriers facing families.

The Committee also established a working group to look at dementia services in Sunderland. The working group has conducted a number of sessions and visits as part of its evidence gathering phase this has included representatives of Sunderland City Council, South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, Cumbria, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear (CNTW) NHS Foundation Trust and Sunderland ICB. Members also had the opportunity to discuss dementia services with Professor June Andrews, a leading expert in the care of older people and those living with dementia. The working group has also visited Sunderland Essence Service and Sunderland Carers Centre. Once concluded the group will provide its report and recommendations to the Committee and then to Cabinet.

The Committee has also received a variety of reports that support the work programme of the Committee including Sunderland Safeguarding Adults Board Annual Report, adult social care local account, CNTW Quality Account, North East Ambulance Service update, pathways to information care and support, Pharmacy First and neighbourhood health. Members of the Committee have in all cases acknowledged success, provided challenge and supported improvement in service for the people of Sunderland.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of myself and the committee, to thank Members, officers, partners and stakeholders who have continued to contribute and work

with the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee. The Committee will continue in its role to act as a critical friend to monitor, challenge and support service providers in the delivery of health services across Sunderland.

Councillor John Usher
Chair of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

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