healthwatch Sunderland

Annual Report 2024–2025

Unlocking the power of people-driven care

Healthwatch Sunderland

Contents

A message from our Chair	3
A message from our CEO	4
About us	5
Our year in numbers	6
A year of making a difference	7
Working together for change	8
Making a difference in the community	9
Listening to your experiences	10
Hearing from all communities	13
Information and signposting	15
Showcasing volunteer impact	17
Finance and future priorities	19
Statutory statements	21

"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

This report outlines the priorities we have focused on over the last year and the progress we have made with them. I hope it will give you some assurance that your local Healthwatch continues to strive to champion the views and experiences of local people using health and care services.

The feedback we gathered from male carers of people with dementia about their experiences of using the local Emergency Care Department last year, resulted in a dedicated room for them to wait with access to resources to manage their needs.

Engagement with a wide range of local groups in deprived areas of the city, including seldom heard groups, about their experiences and preferences when accessing primary care services took place last year. The resulting report was presented at our local Integrated Care Board (ICB) Place Committee, where senior officers challenged their staff to address the 'So what?' question. An example of one outcome was the use of a mobile bus taking NHS services to where people are comfortable receiving them.

We have continued to work in collaboration with the 13 Healthwatch bodies within the North East and North Cumbria ICB area, leading to at-scale intelligence about key issues. Over the last year, this included researching how women experience local health services and what matters to them most. This resulted in 5 clear priorities which have informed the ICB Women's Health Strategy.

And finally, I want to thank the Board, team and volunteers for their continued commitment to the work set out in this report.

"What is clear from the last year is the increase in complexity of the calls coming into our signposting service from individuals who either don't know how or are struggling to navigate the local health and care system."

Debbie Burnicle, Chair, Healthwatch Sunderland

A message from our CEO

PCP is proud to host and lead Healthwatch Sunderland and our team has worked tirelessly to seek and listen to views, review provision and learn about local people's aspirations for health and care service in the future.

Working with people, communities and stakeholders is crucial to the success of Healthwatch. The information and intelligence gathered locally leads to impactful reports with clear recommendations, and these are proactively used to shape commissioning based on real experience.

Our Annual Report provides some of the year's highlights, but it is only a snapshot of their incredible achievements. Our team of paid staff and volunteers are fundamental to the success of Healthwatch. I extend my thanks to them for their work, reaching into and across communities, for the way in which they engage with partners and for taking positive and solutions-focused approaches to system change.

Thank you also to the Healthwatch Board, who are also volunteers, giving their time to guide and support Healthwatch, ensuring good governance whilst overseeing the statutory responsibilities.

My final thank you is to the people of Sunderland, without your views, thoughts and opinions, Healthwatch would not be able to influence and improve services, you are helping to make improvements for years ahead, for which we are very grateful.

"Our brilliant team of dedicated staff and volunteers continue to successfully influence the health and care system whilst also providing practical support to local people. I am incredibly proud of the work they do and in particular I know the dementia booklets will be a welcome resource for the future."

Carol Gaskarth, Chief Executive, PCP

About us

Healthwatch Sunderland is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS, social care 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 3161 people to have their say and get information about their care. We currently employ 4 staff and, our work is supported by 26 volunteers.

Reaching out:

1729 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

1432 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as **hospital care** and **finding an NHS dentist.**

Championing your voice:

We published **4 reports** about the improvements people would like to see in areas of primary care services and support for young people.

Our most popular report was **Access to Primary Care,** which highlighted some of the barriers individuals face in accessing Primary Care services, and how these can be improved.

Statutory funding:

We're funded by Sunderland City Council. In 2024/25 we received 171,989.

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 Sunderland. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We supported patients to have their concerns listened to and heard on the workings of their GP surgery and how the appointment booking systems work.

Our "Star Awards" provided local people with the opportunity to recognise the outstanding care and professionalism received from staff and teams, including a physiotherapist, a social worker, ambulance staff and a local care home.

Summer

Our work connecting local groups with visits from health and care professionals, including nurses and social workers, has empowered people to receive the information they need, to support positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

We assisted women from the local Bangladeshi community to better understand how the new online GP appointment system works, which has improved their confidence in using it in the future.

Autumn

Our research into adult social care services will assist the local council to shape future services. This will enable individuals to access accurate and timely support, make informed decisions and improve their overall well-being.

By using our local knowledge and professional relationships, we were able to provide local carers the opportunity to shape the bowel and bladder service, ultimately improving it for those who use it.

Winter

Our research on primary care access has helped local providers introduce a health bus to treat people in the community who wouldn't normally access traditional health care services.

Our collaboration with the GP Alliance has greatly improved the information available to patients across all GP practice websites in the city. Key pages have been updated and new pages aimed at young patients created.

*Please note this is just an example of where we have made a difference during the year, additional examples are shown throughout this report.

Working together for change

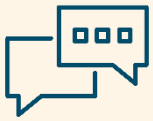
We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in North East and North Cumbria (NENC) are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level, and they influence decisions made about services across this area. Our collaborative approach is recognised nationally as best practice.

This year, some of the work we have collectively achieved includes the following:

Access to dental care:

Over 3,800 people across the region shared their views on the difficulties they face in accessing dental services. The Integrated Care Board has used the findings to focus on key areas including stabilizing services, developing an oral health strategy and making funds available to deliver a new model of dental care via Urgent Dental Access Centres.

The big conversation: Women's Health



We spoke to nearly 4,500 people and held six focus groups with women to find out what matters to them most and their priorities. Our regional Integrated Care Board, which funded the work, will be using the findings to take steps towards the proposals made. These include a new 'Women's Promise' to detail the level of care, dignity and support women can expect, as well as a directory of women's health services.

Improving North East Ambulance Service:

Over 1,700 people shared their valuable feedback as part of the NEAS clinical strategy review. Findings showed areas of strength, including compassionate and professional staff and effective emergency care. Areas for improvement included response times and co-ordination with other service. This work will be ongoing throughout 2025-2026.

We have also created a report with additional information on the outcomes highlighted above, as well as others accomplished by the Healthwatch NENC network. This report can be accessed in the reports section of our website.

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.

Here are some examples of our work in Sunderland this year:

Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life

Hearing personal experiences and their impact on people's lives helps services better understand the issues people face.

Women from the Bangladeshi community now have a better understanding of how best to access their GP surgeries for available services and are now more confident in using the new e-consult systems. After we shared experiences of their struggles of accessing and navigating services available with Primary care representatives, the ladies' concerns were listened to and reasonable adjustments were made available to them.

Getting services to involve the public

By involving local people, services help improve care for dementia patients.

We collaborated with local carers who voiced concerns about the negative impact the products available from the bowel and bladder service was having on their wives with dementia. In response, the service now provides pull-up products after an assessment, helping to preserve dignity and promote independence in continence care.

Improving care over time

Change takes time. We work behind the scenes with services to consistently raise issues and bring about change.

During our regular engagement with a local homelessness support charity, we learned about the challenges faced by some local homeless individuals in accessing mental health support. Based on the feedback we received, the local mental health trust collaborated with the charity's staff to enhance understanding of the various support services available and the procedures for accessing them.

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

Improving the information available locally for those with memory difficulties, dementia and their carers.

We launched a booklet, designed to support people living with memory difficulties and dementia and their carers and families.

After several carer groups expressed their challenges when trying to access relevant information to support them and their loved ones either with memory difficulties or following a dementia diagnosis, we decided to take action.

What did we do?

We facilitated a group of key professionals and local carers to research the information and services available both locally and nationally. Our goal was to co-produce an information booklet. This booklet, available in a range of formats, contains vital information that carers identified as essential for supporting their loved ones with memory difficulties or through the dementia journey, as well as resources to help them in their role as a carer.

Key things we heard:

- Due to the limited information available about local support, carers often miss out on essential resources, leading to feelings of isolation and frustration.
- The scattered nature of information across various platforms made it challenging for carers to find what they needed quickly, especially in critical situations.
- The uncertainty about where to seek help was increasing carers feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed, ultimately affecting their ability to provide care effectively.

Our work highlighted the difficulties carers had when trying to find out about available support locally leaving them overwhelmed and unsure where to turn.

What difference did this make?

Information is now easily accessible across various websites and via partner services, supporting local people to make informed decisions about where to go for support, advice and activities. This is helping to reduce the stress and uncertainty that many have been experiencing. Ultimately, this will lead to improved health and wellbeing for both carers and individuals with dementia.

Listening to your experiences

Improved patient experiences whilst waiting for treatment at the Emergency Department

Carers reported that waits in the Emergency Department were often stressful and overwhelming experiences.

We spoke with several carers about their experiences during visits to the Emergency Department at Sunderland Royal Hospital. Their stories emphasised the need for a quiet space, access to resources and additional awareness training for the staff working in the department.

Key things we heard:

- Long waits in the Emergency Department increased anxiety and discomfort for patients, especially those with dementia, leading to confusion and agitation. Family and carers often feel helpless when their loved ones are distressed.
- A lack of activities in waiting areas heightened frustrations and worry.
- Insufficient changing facilities resulted in the loss of dignity and embarrassment for patients.
- Some staff lacked an understanding of dementia, potentially leading to the unintentional misunderstanding or the patient's needs being overlooked.

> "The new waiting area is absolutely wonderful, it's really good to know the facilities are now available for those who need it."

We've worked with the hospital trust who have introduced a dedicated waiting area that is available for patients who need a quiet space away from the main waiting areas and a range of facilities to make peoples wait more comfortable.

What difference did this make?

Local people with dementia and their carers can now access a quiet space in the Emergency Department for a more comfortable wait. An activity cupboard will help occupy patients, and incontinence products ensure comfort. Dedicated toilet facilities allow carers and staff to assist patients without added stress. Enhanced dementia training for the department's staff improves understanding of patients' and carers' needs.

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of Sunderland. That's why, over the past year, we've worked hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Every member of the community should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

This year, we have reached different communities by:

- Listening to the voices of people who are less heard, by visiting community venues where they feel safe and supported.
- Visiting groups and activities being delivered across the most deprived areas of our city, to listen to people's feedback on services and support them through our information and signposting service.
- Sharing feedback from the general public with local service providers and commissioners, through our reports and attendance at strategic meetings.

Hearing from all communities

Enhancing awareness of the NHS complaints system within the Bangladeshi community

We organised visits from complaints services staff to provide an overview of the system.

Members of the local Bangladeshi community expressed that they often hesitate to make complaints about services because they believe it won't lead to any change or they are unsure how to navigate the complaint process within the NHS.

What difference did this make?

Attendees received essential information about the complaints process, including how to submit a complaint and the benefits of doing so. Participants now feel more confident about navigating the process and are more likely to consider using it in the future to advocate for service improvements.

Empowering refugees, asylum seekers and students to navigate essential health and care services.

Local refugees, asylum seekers and international students often feel confused about how to navigate local health and care services, as these differ from the services in their home countries.

To address this issue, we collaborated with local universities and community groups that support these individuals. Our goal is to ensure they have access to the essential information they need to know where and when to seek help and advice.

What difference did this make?

Making resources accessible to a diverse population has helped to empower individuals who once felt intimidated by the local healthcare system and in turn given them greater confidence when seeking medical advice and accessing services. This has encouraged more registrations with GP practices and helped to support other local NHS service providers by ensuring everyone can navigate the healthcare system effectively.

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 1432 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.

Information and signposting

Brighter future for local family

Our signposting has made a difference for a local dad and his family.

Mr. K is a single parent of two boys with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. They live in a small house that doesn't meet their needs and was negatively affecting Mr. K's mental health.

We recognised that Mr. K could benefit from some support from the Sunderland GP Alliance social prescribing service and supported him to make a referral.

Weeks later, Mr. K reported feeling much better, as the Social Prescriber was assisting him in finding a more suitable home and quitting smoking. Now, he and his boys are looking forward to a brighter future.

> "Thank you Healthwatch Sunderland, the support you have given me to access a Social Prescriber this has helped me and my boys so much."

Navigating healthcare challenges

Mr. J felt that his wife's treatment was being delayed due to communication challenges.

Mr. J called us to discuss his wife's colitis diagnosis and her difficulty accessing the necessary treatment from her GP. He expressed feeling overwhelmed when trying to navigate the issues surrounding her medication and asked for our assistance.

After speaking with the GP practice, we identified that the problem was a prescribing issue between the hospital and the GP practice. We reassured him that the issue was being addressed and the following day, the matter was successfully resolved, and Mrs. J received the medication she had been waiting for and started her treatment immediately.

> "Thank you for listening. You have been great, if it wasn't for your help, we would still be going around in circles, and my wife would still be without medication."

Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given over 600 hours to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in our community.

This year, our volunteers:

- Visited communities to promote our work
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views
- Taken part in service reviews and consultations to share their views and shape service delivery
- Represented Healthwatch Sunderland at key strategic meetings.

Showcasing volunteer impact

At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think to helping raise awareness, our volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.

"I originally wanted to volunteer at Healthwatch to gain work's experience as it links to the work I hope to pursue in the future - medicine."

Jewel joined us as part of a weeks work's experience, she now volunteers with Youthwatch.

"Over the last 2 years, I have honed multiple skills from communication, compassion, good observation and confidence. All have helped me improve my character and made me more assertive. I am deeply grateful for all the opportunities and experiences."

Jewel

"Several years ago, I was a carer and through this role found the need to access Health and Social Care services. As a result, I have taken a keen interest in this area and felt that I wanted to give something back through volunteering."

Pauline joined our team after her experiences as a carer.

"Volunteering has given me a range of new experiences and insights, alongside working with a very friendly and supportive group of staff and volunteers."

Pauline

Be part of the change.

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and find out how you can be part of the change.

www.healthwatchsunderland.com

0191 5147145

healthwatchsunderland@pcp.uk.net

Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Sunderland City 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	£171,989	Expenditure on pay	£132,568
Additional income	£16,250	Non-pay expenditure	£2,861
		Office and management fee	£45,399
Total income	**£188,239**	**Total expenditure**	**£180,828**

Additional income is broken down into:

- £5,000 received from North East Ambulance Service for joint work on a project.
- £4,250 received from the local ICS for joint work on various projects.
- £2,000 received from Sunderland Local Authority to support evaluation work and research into Safeguarding.
- £5,000 received from local ICB for research into primary care access.

Integrated Care System (ICS) funding:

Healthwatch across 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
Core funding	**£3,500**
Women's health	**£350**
NHS 10-year plan	**£400**

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 and care 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. Urgent and emergency care – Navigating available services.
2. Sexual health education for young people.
3. Focused engagement (including families, homelessness and refugees/asylum seekers).

Statutory statements

Healthwatch Sunderland, The Co-op Centre, Hendon, Sunderland, SR2 8AH

The organisation holding the Healthwatch Sunderland contract is the Pioneering Care Partnership (PCP). PCP is a multi-award-winning health and wellbeing charity operating across the North East. For further information please visit www.pcp.uk.net. Registered Charity No, 1067888 Company Registered in England No. 3491237 Registered address: Pioneering Care Centre, Carer's Way, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, DL5 4SF © Pioneering Care Centre.

Healthwatch Sunderland 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 Advisory Board consists of 8 members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities.

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

Throughout 2024/25, the Advisory Board meets regularly, including 4 meetings held in public and made decisions on matters such as adult safeguarding, information for dementia patients, and accessing GP appointments. We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities. The Advisory Board also held face-to-face board development sessions and informal virtual sessions to aid development and communication. 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 distribute it via our e-newsletter and social media platforms. It is also available in hard copy on request.

Statutory statements

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 Sunderland Safeguarding Adults Executive Board, South Tyneside & Sunderland Foundation Trust Patient Experience Group, Sunderland Place ICB Sub Committee and the Sunderland Health and Wellbeing Board.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in NENC Integrated Care System. For example, local intelligence is collated across each of the four subregional areas and shared at area ICP meetings. At regional level, the Healthwatch Regional Coordinator represents service-user voice from across the region at the NENC ICP Strategy meeting, Quality & Safety Committee, Primary Care Strategy & Delivery sub-committee, Healthy & Fairness Advisory Group, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion meetings and System Quality Group meetings. The network of local Healthwatch has also been commissioned to undertake additional research to ensure local opinions are represented in the ICB's work priorities.

We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Sunderland is represented on the Sunderland Health and Wellbeing Board by Paul Weddle, Vice Chair.

During 2024/25, our representative has effectively carried out this role by working together with key leaders from the local health and care system to improve the health and wellbeing of our population and reduce health inequalities, especially through developing a shared understanding of the health and wellbeing needs of the community, allowing a public voice to be heard from comments received from the local community.

Healthwatch Sunderland is represented on Sunderland Integrated Care Partnerships by Gail McGee, Central Area Co-ordinator for the Healthwatch Network and at the North East & North Cumbria Integrated Care Board by Christopher Akers-Belcher, Regional Co-ordinator for the NENC Healthwatch Network.

Statutory statements

2024 – 2025 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Safeguarding	Increased awareness of safeguarding and how to raise a concern amongst the general population, helping to prevent harm, abuse and neglect from affecting those who may not be able to protect themselves.
I want to see a GP booklet	Local people have an increased awareness of the range of services now available in GP practices and how to access them.
Body Shaming - a young person's perspective	Local practitioners have a greater understanding of how body shaming is impacting on young people's overall health and wellbeing.
Star Awards	Recognising the outstanding work and dedication of our health and care staff and teams, who are appreciated by those they support.
NHS 10-year plan consultation	Local people provided with the opportunity to contribute towards the proposals outlined in the NHS 10-year plan.
Care homes – respite and day care	Local people now have access to information on which of the local care homes offer respite and day care.

healthwatch

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