

# The value of listening

Healthwatch Newcastle  
Annual Report 2023–2024



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**"Over the last year, local Healthwatch have shown what happens when people speak up about their care, and services listen. They are helping the NHS unlock the power of people's views and experiences, especially those facing the most serious health inequalities."**

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive at Healthwatch England



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# Message from our Chair

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**This has been a year of renewal for Healthwatch Newcastle. We have strengthened our engagement activities across the city, putting the experience of Newcastle residents front and centre.**

*We secured a renewed 3-year contract with Newcastle City Council, and took this process as an opportunity to reconsider our working practices in a fast-changing world.*

*Our standards, however, have not changed. We continue to provide a meaningful voice for the diverse communities who use the health and social care services of Newcastle, and to hold these services to account.*

*The Annual Survey told us that general hospital services, social care, mental health services and urgent primary care were highly rated among the public. Meanwhile access to GP, dental services and secondary care waiting times were rated poorly.*

*By increasing our presence in local communities, we have generated opportunities for local people to express their views. This helps us identify issues and trends as they arise, giving a voice to those most in need. We then present this information at the highest level to ensure a focus on tackling disadvantage and inequalities.*

*Collaborating with providers, commissioners and the voluntary sector allows us to ensure that the needs of all our communities are considered when decisions are made. This includes commissioning decisions made by the Integrated Care Board.*

*We also continue to work closely with Healthwatch England, providing local data and opinions to inform country-wide decisions, and making local residents aware of national issues.*

*Finally, as Interim Chair, I would like to say thank you to Feyi Awotona who stepped down earlier in this year after serving as Chair of Healthwatch Newcastle for many years.*

**Dr Terry Bearpark**



**“We are grateful to all the local residents who have supported our fact-finding and research over the last year. From service users who have shared their experiences, to the volunteers who have helped our surveys reach more people, their support is instrumental in driving service change in health and social care.”**

Dr Terry Bearpark, Chair of Healthwatch Newcastle

# About us

## Healthwatch Newcastle is your local health and social care champion.

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

### Our vision

We believe that users' views can improve health and social care services.



### Our mission

To demonstrate how user views can improve services in health and social care, and provide practical services, support and advice.



### Our values are:

- **Listening** to people and making sure their voices are heard.
- **Including** everyone in the conversation – especially those who don't always have their voice heard.
- **Analysing** different people's experiences to learn how to improve care.
- **Acting** on feedback and driving change.
- **Partnering** with care providers, Government, and the voluntary sector – serving as the public's independent advocate.



# Year in review

## Reaching out:

### 418 people

shared their experiences with us through research. This allowed us to produce reports, raise awareness of issues and improve services.

### 1,290 people

engaged with us at 60 outreach sessions and events.

### 165 people

came directly to us for advice and information.



## Making a difference to care:

### We published 6 reports

on the improvements people would like to see to health and social care services:

- Accessing and using GP services in Newcastle
- Getting Vaxed: Understanding user experiences of the Covid 19 vaccination process in Newcastle
- Loneliness in the retirement age population of Newcastle and Gateshead
- Impact of winter pressures and the cost-of-living 2022/23 in Newcastle and Gateshead
- North East Ambulance Services – experiences in Newcastle and Gateshead
- Dentistry in Newcastle and Gateshead



## Health and social care that works for you:

We're lucky to have

### 11 talented volunteers

In 2023 - 24 we received

**£228,667**

From Newcastle City Council,  
which is **£19,487** more than the previous year.


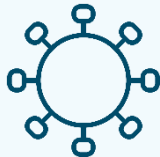






We currently employ

**7 hard-working staff**

who help us carry out our work.



# How we've made a difference this year

Spring	 <p>We informed students at Newcastle University Careers Fair about healthcare, social care and volunteering.</p>	 <p>We asked local people about their Coronavirus vaccination experiences, making accessibility recommendations based on their feedback.</p>
Summer	 <p>Newcastle GP Services invited us to share the findings of our research into Reasonable Adjustments at their Learning Disability Patient/Carer Event.</p>	 <p>We attended local events including Newcastle Neighbourhoods and the EPiC* Family Fun Day in Hodgkin Park, to raise awareness of our services.</p>
Autumn	 <p>Our Lead Officer delivered presentations about social inclusion to Occupational Health students at Northumbria University.</p>	 <p>We led an online talk organised by the Integrated Care Board, in which we asked primary care staff for their insights.</p>
Winter	 <p>We hosted free online forums about menopause awareness, Citizens Advice and blood &amp; transplant research.</p>	 <p>We surveyed the public to learn about their awareness of dental care options in collaboration with the North East and North Cumbria Healthwatch network.</p>

\*Empowering People in Communities

# Your voice heard at a wider level

**We collaborate with other local Healthwatch to ensure the experiences of people in Newcastle influence decisions made about services at the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (ICS) level.**

This year we've worked with Healthwatch across North East and North Cumbria to achieve:

## A collaborative Network of Local Healthwatch



Together, all 14 Local Healthwatch formed a Network which enables us to work together both regionally and area-wide. We appointed co-ordinators to facilitate engagement projects and the gathering of region-wide public feedback. Our board representative also ensures that the public voice is heard at ICS level, influencing decision making across the North East and North Cumbria.

## Understanding the public view of Dentistry services

The Healthwatch Network was commissioned to carry out public engagement about dentistry, to help inform Integrated Care Board (ICB) decisions around improvements to services. We carried out extensive public engagement across the region, including surveys and mystery shopper exercises, gathering 3500 responses. We will be reporting our recommendations to the ICB in 2024-25.



## Making health research more relevant



In February 2024 we were asked to support the ICB and partners in a Be Part Of Research Project. Healthwatch were funded to ask local communities about their level of interest in taking part in NHS and health research, and any barriers they faced. Our feedback will help future research to capture more diverse experiences, and so better reflect our communities.

## Involvement Strategy review

The Integrated Care Board wanted to review their 'Communities and People Involvement and Engagement Framework 2022-23' a year on from publication. Our Network was commissioned to speak to underrepresented groups across the region, gathering valuable insights and making recommendations to the ICB about their public engagement strategy.







# Listening to your experiences

Services can't make the right improvements without hearing your views. That's why, over the last year, we have made listening to feedback from all areas of the community a priority. This allows us to understand the full picture, and feed this back to services and help them improve.



# Dropping in for a chat

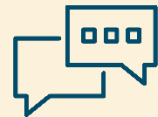
## We're making Healthwatch Newcastle more approachable and accessible by setting up regular drop-in sessions at key community centres.

The goal was to build trust and relationships within communities, allowing us to share information with the public and encouraging them to share their experiences with us.

We surveyed each neighbourhood of Newcastle, assessing the accessibility, footfall and public transport availability of different community locations. This allowed us to map out the most promising locations for networking and outreach.

**12**

new drop-in locations were established, each one a regular point of contact with the local community.



## Where did we go?

- From Throckley in the west to Walkergate in the east, we built relationships with libraries, sports centres, village halls, community hubs and religious venues.
- We also established professional connections by speaking with groups including universities, local research networks, voluntary sector organisations and primary care teams.

## What difference did this make?

- We established points of contact in many local communities, building awareness of our services and making them easier to access via regular drop-ins.
- We provided face-to-face information, directing people to helpful resources and listening to their experiences of health and social care.
- We became a part of local networks, sharing resources and receiving insights in turn.

This approach has allowed Healthwatch Newcastle to reach many more people, creating new opportunities for people's views to be heard.

# Investigating cost-of-living impacts

**While the cost-of-living crisis may have dropped out of the news in summer 2023, Citizens Advice Newcastle reported no decrease in requests for support in the following months. We investigated how people were impacted.**

Healthwatch Newcastle engaged with the local population to understand how the rising cost of living had affected their lives during the winter months, knowing that heating and energy costs were also a concern. 84 people responded, 60 of whom lived in Newcastle and 19 in nearby Gateshead.

This project focused on people's perceptions of their financial situation, and found that people were making changes in many areas, including:

- Social and physical activity.
- Diet and eating habits.
- Use of health services (especially dental treatments and prescriptions).



**"I cannot pay prescription charges so there's no use going to see my GP."**

**"I have stopped travelling to see family due to the cost of transport."**

**"To afford to keep my car and get to work I have no choice but to buy less food and do without dentist appointments, socialising and other necessities."**

Survey respondents from Newcastle and Gateshead

62% of total respondents said that their financial situation had become worse, with 20% saying it had become a lot worse. The resulting financial strain has created significant barriers to maintaining a balanced and healthy lifestyle. This impacted both physical health (more work, less exercise, poorer diet) and mental health (reduced socialising, less travel, stress from making ends meet and the inability to save for the future).

Many underlying causes (and some potential solutions) are nationwide. However, given widespread deprivation and falling life expectancies in the North of England, we believe it is vital to examine local impacts and the role of local services in responding to this crisis.

## Our recommendations included:

- Raise awareness of available services and community activities that provide accessible information, social contact, advice and support.
- Promote NHS services that can assist with cost-of-living impacts, such as prescription prepayment certificates.
- Provide education and training on online services like the NHS app, while promoting non-online equivalents for the digitally excluded.

# Three ways we have made a difference in the community

Throughout our work we gather information about health inequalities by speaking to people whose experiences aren't often heard.

## Working with hospitals to support the public

**Information sharing between hospitals and patients is vital. That's why we formed a new connection with the Equality Manager at the Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (NuTH).**

Through this partnership we established regular Healthwatch drop-in sessions at the Royal Victoria Infirmary and the Freeman Hospital. We continue to work with NuTH to support our projects around hospital discharge, diversity and inclusion, and information accessibility. We are also directly passing on peoples' views to NuTH.



## Collaborating with the NHS 111 helpline

**Service users brought to our attention that they could be receiving better advice upon calling NHS 111 to discuss emergency medication. We worked together to improve this experience for everyone.**

Working with the NHS 111 helpline, we identified concrete improvements that could be made in the advice being provided. As a result, call handlers received refreshed training, and the situation was resolved.



## Improving care over time – reasonable adjustments

**This year Healthwatch Newcastle identified that while primary care providers are aware of reasonable adjustments as a way to help patients with disabilities, there is still work to do.**

These findings also told us that the patients who need reasonable adjustments are not consistently aware of how they work or how to request this help.

We are working to address these shortfalls by collaborating with specific GP services to increase awareness in both patients and providers.





# Hearing from all communities

Over the past year, we have worked hard to hear from everyone within our local area. We consider it important to reach out to the communities we hear from less frequently to gather their feedback and make sure their voice is heard, and that services meet their needs.

**This year we have reached different communities by:**

- Building connections with groups and individuals who are underrepresented.
- Reaching out by visiting venues where communities gather and have discussions.
- Developing stronger relationships with a wider network of local partners.

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## Building connections with Newcastle Central Mosque

**Bilal Jamia Masjid (Newcastle Central Mosque) has been an important part of Newcastle's Muslim community since 1970, used by many who work and study in the city centre.**

We used our engagement team's existing contacts and experience to connect Healthwatch Newcastle with Newcastle Central Mosque.

### What were the outcomes?

- We visited the Mosque, speaking with key members of the community and sharing information about the support offered by Healthwatch.
- Our team established a link with the women's group that meets weekly at the Mosque.

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## Asking Northern Pride – what are the building blocks for a better health and social care system?

**We engaged with members of the LGBTQIA+ community at Northern Pride 2023 on issues surrounding health and social care.**

By teaming up with Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch North Tyneside, we provided helpful resources and ran activities to inspire conversations about healthcare. We also created a rainbow wall where anyone could contribute their views on how to make our current system more equal and diverse.

### We asked, you answered!

Question: what are the building blocks for a better health and social care system?

- "Reduce stigma in all services."
- "Raise cancer awareness to increase early diagnosis."
- "Make the system accessible so everyone can take advantage of it."
- "More centres for women's health."
- "Peoples' voices being heard, rights upheld, access to advocacy."
- "Don't privatise the sexual health service."

The responses we received spoke not only to issues specific to LGBTQIA+ communities, but also a broad range of other healthcare concerns. This may reflect the intersecting nature of health inequalities; LGBTQIA+ people are 8.7% more likely to be disabled (2021 Census), while 4% more report having a limiting longstanding illness (NHS Digital), despite this demographic also being younger overall.





## Advice and information

**If you feel lost and don't know where to turn, Healthwatch is here for you. In times of worry or stress, we can provide confidential support and free information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. 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 we've helped people by:**

- Raising awareness of services in the local area through our online forums.
- Signposting people to information and advice through our website, email & telephone lines.
- Using our connections within the health and social care system to resolve specific issues.
- Increasing our presence within local communities, giving people the chance to share their experiences face-to-face.

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# Helping overcome language barriers

**Healthwatch has the time to listen and act, which allows us to help with communication-related obstacles to health and social care. Here's one example:**

We were approached by Nadia and Hassan\*, a couple living in West Newcastle who were trying to access fertility treatment and who spoke English as an additional language. They had visited their GP but were worried about their care and confused by the communication they had received. They didn't understand why they weren't receiving treatment and felt discriminated against.

## So what did we do?

Once we had listened to Nadia and Hassan's concerns, Healthwatch Newcastle offered to speak to the service provider on their behalf. After clarifying the situation and passing this information back to the couple, we helped them understand the options that were available. This allowed them to identify a way forward, and what they could do if they were still unable to access care or wanted to raise a complaint.

After speaking to us, Nadia and Hassan said they felt that they had finally been listened to and had a better understanding of the healthcare system.

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# Primary care and urgent medication requests

**We often support people who have faced challenges reaching the right care service.**

Charlotte\* (74) contacted Healthwatch England via our website, requesting information and advice after a negative experience seeking emergency antibiotics while her local GP was closed for the weekend. She had been told that the pharmacy couldn't prescribe her emergency antibiotics due to her age, and was directed from pharmacy to walk-in centre and then to Accident & Emergency.

Without a full explanation she felt she had been dismissed due to her age, asked to travel an unreasonable distance on her own, and worried that she had wasted the time of primary care staff. After listening, we were able to give clarity and help her decide what to do next:

## How did we help?

We connected Charlotte with the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), whose role is to resolve cases like hers and reduce the chance of something similar happening again. By taking the time to listen to Charlotte's concerns, we were also able to help her understand what had gone wrong with her primary care experience.

Cases like Charlotte's are important to broader Healthwatch efforts to understand and address primary care inequalities across the UK.

\*These names have been changed.



# Volunteering

**We're supported by amazing volunteers, and thanks to their efforts in the community, we're able to understand what is working and what needs improving.**

**This year our volunteers:**

- Visited communities to promote Healthwatch Newcastle and what we have to offer.
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views.
- Supported Youthwatch activities to better understand the views of 16–25-year-olds.
- Gathered up-to-date information on changes to services, such as whether NHS dental appointments were available at a practice.



**“Stroke awareness is one of my passions. Recognising and responding quickly to a stroke greatly improves survival and recovery rates, so educating people about the symptoms is very important. Volunteering with Healthwatch Newcastle has given me more opportunities to speak publicly on this topic, and I really feel like I’ve had a positive impact.**

**Most recently I spoke to a group of carers about stroke prevention, risk factors, the impact of strokes and supporting stroke survivors. There are over 1.3 million stroke survivors in the UK so it’s a vital topic for many carers!**

**I began volunteering because a friend who was already involved with Healthwatch suggested it – they knew my story and interest in healthcare, so it made a lot of sense! In the years since then I’ve delivered several stroke awareness talks, taken part in a hospital inspection and become more informed about developments in the sector.”**



Rajan Nair –  
Healthwatch  
Newcastle





# Finance and future priorities

To help us carry out our work we receive funding from our local authority under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

## Our income and expenditure

Income		Expenditure	
Newcastle City Council	£228,667	Expenditure on pay	£154,834
ICB	£12,534	Non-pay expenditure	£4,763
		Office and management fees	£41,993
<b>Total income</b>	<b>£241,201</b>	<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>£201,590</b>



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## Next steps

**Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society across the whole of Newcastle, so that those in power hear the views and experiences of underrepresented communities.**

We will also work together with partners to help develop a culture where, at every level, providers strive to listen and learn from service users to make health and social care better.

**Our top priorities for the next year are:**

1. Adult Social Care
2. Ambulance, NHS 111 and emergency services
3. Dementia Care Services
4. Physiotherapy

Healthwatch Newcastle will also continue with Mental Health as a priority from the 2023/24 period, while keeping a watching brief on national issues – Pharmacy, Dentistry and GP access.



# Statutory statements

**Healthwatch Newcastle is administered by Tell Us North CIC**  
**Milburn House, Suite E11, Dean Street, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 1LE**  
**Company Number: 10394966**  
**Email: [info@tellusnorth.org.uk](mailto:info@tellusnorth.org.uk)**

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

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# The way we work

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

The Tell Us North board consists of 5 members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny of our activities across Healthwatch Newcastle and Healthwatch Gateshead. Healthwatch Newcastle also has its own volunteer committee, consisting of 4 members. These groups ensure that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2023/24, the Board met 4 times, while the Healthwatch Newcastle Committee met 6 times, making decisions on matters such as making responses on the local Quality Accounts, defining research projects and identifying underrepresented communities who we could target to hear more from them about their experiences of the health and social care service.

We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities. Our committee meetings and the Annual Joint Meeting between Healthwatch Newcastle and Healthwatch Gateshead are open to the public, and the minutes for each meeting are made available on our website.

## 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 2023/24, we have been available by phone and email, provided a web form on our website and through social media, as well as attending 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, provide copies to partner organisations and make print copies available in public places such as local libraries and community centres.

## Responses to recommendations

This year there were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so there were no resulting reviews or investigations. We undertook no Enter and View Visits.

## Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences that have been shared with us.

We have taken insights and experiences to decision-makers in North East and North Cumbria including the Care Quality Commission, Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Newcastle Adult Social Care and Integrated Care Board (ICB). We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

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# Healthwatch representatives


Healthwatch Newcastle is formally represented by the CEO of Tell Us North CIC or the Chair of the Healthwatch Newcastle Committee on:

- Newcastle Health and Wellbeing Board
- Newcastle Adults Safeguarding Board
- Newcastle City Council Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Newcastle Integrated Care Board (ICB) Sub-Committee



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