



Speaking up for better care

Healthwatch County Durham
Annual Report 2025/26

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Acting Chief Executive
Chris McCann

“

“The NHS plays a vital role in our lives, and we know it faces real challenges. Listening to people’s thoughts about their care is one of the best ways to improve services. Every comment, concern, and compliment helps health and care professionals see what works and what needs to change, so care can be safer and better for everyone.

“We want to say a heartfelt thanks to all the local people who have taken the time to share their experiences, and to the health and social care professionals who have listened and acted on that feedback. Your commitment has helped make a real difference for our community.”

A message from our chair

My opening remarks usually reflect my pride in the work of Healthwatch County Durham, and this year is no exception. It remains a privilege to Chair the Healthwatch County Durham Board, and to work with such a dedicated team of staff and volunteers.

This year has been one of change, with a new host organisation, a move of offices, and changes to the staff team, followed by the national announcement that Healthwatch organisations are to be 'disbanded'. As an organisation we are grateful for the support that has been extended to HWCD, which has had an inspiring effect on the staff and volunteers.

Despite that challenging national news – as you will see from this report – once again the voice of patients, service users and carers has not only been raised by our team across organisations, but appreciated and listened to by those who deliver services to our communities.

This year's report continues to demonstrate the effectiveness of the team and volunteers across a wide spectrum of initiatives and areas of concern. In addition, HWCD have worked with our regional network to ensure the ICB listens to the public voice across the North East and North Cumbria.

I would take this opportunity to pay tribute to the volunteers, staff and Board for their continued commitment this past year and I hope that 2026 will bring much more certainty to our work on your behalf.



Chair – Christopher Cunnington-Shore
MBE



“The Board remain committed to working at the highest level with organisations in County Durham, to ensure that your voice continues to be heard by service providers and commissioners.”

About us

Healthwatch County Durham is your local, independent 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

A world where we can all get the health and care we need.

Our mission

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

Our values are:

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.

Impact – We focus on making a real difference in people's lives. We're ambitious, accountable, and committed to helping others take responsibility to make change happen.

Our year in numbers

In 2025/2026 we supported more than **1341** people to have their say and get information about their care. We employed **5 (FTE 4)** staff and our work was supported by **25** volunteers.

Reaching out:



1190 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

We signposted **151** people to the relevant services to help them access support or to make a complaint.



Championing your voice:

We published **16** reports about the improvements people would like to see in health and social care services.

These included reports about miscarriage care, knowledge and experience of the Pharmacy First service, our Enter & View reports from care homes, and our newly introduced 'You Told Us' reports.



Statutory funding:

We are funded by Durham County Council. In 2025/26 we received **£228,950** which is approximately 22% more than last year.

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 County Durham. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We established our new base at Crook Business Centre, right in the centre of our county, with better accessibility and more reach into our communities.



We concluded our work around Pharmacy First – raising awareness of the new initiatives with the public and making recommendations to service providers around potential improvements.



Summer

We introduced a new 'You Told Us....' report, to share intelligence gathered from the public and keep you up to date with what issues we are looking at in our area.



We started a new Enter & View programme, focused on care homes – we selected a range of homes across the county, with a mix of ratings, and including both generic and specialist care.

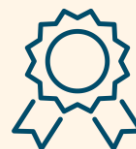


Autumn

We worked with partners to create a directory of services for the Chester-le-Street area, bringing together information to support people's mental health & wellbeing.



We were nominated as finalists in the Northern Echo County Durham Together Awards, making the final top three in the Health & Wellbeing category.



Winter

We held a workshop, bringing together service providers and LGBTQ+ individuals, so providers could hear directly about the specific challenges faced in accessing health and care.



We took part in a consultation about plans to set up an 'Online NHS trust.' Feedback from our team, Board and volunteers will influence developments with the public best interest in mind.



Working together for change

We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in County Durham are heard at Integrated Care System (ICS) level, and they influence decisions made about services across North East & North Cumbria.

This year, we've worked with the 13 other Healthwatch across North East & North Cumbria to achieve the following:

Listening to sensitive issues:



We supported engagement to inform future palliative and end of life care planning across the region.

As well as promoting the regional survey, we focused on engaging people who are least likely to share their views. Conversations about death and end of life care can be especially difficult for people facing multiple disadvantage.

By providing a safe space to talk, we ensured that their insights would be included in future strategic planning.

Mental health rehabilitation:



Along with Tees Valley Healthwatch, we listened to experiences to inform potential changes in mental health rehabilitation services in the Tees, Esk & Wear Valleys area.

Rather than focus on numbers and statistics, we gathered real experiences of people's journey through crisis, inpatient, discharge and community support. These stories have shown where TEWV need to make investment and improvements to focus on quality and consistency of care.

Improving Primary Care awareness:



We worked to help the public understand the different options within Primary Care – we tested out communications about pharmacy services, to make sure they were clear and helpful; we went out into communities to talk about Modern General Practice Access, promoting and explaining changes such as the NHS App, Pharmacy First and Extended Access.

Our insight highlighted where communications needed to be clearer and more consistent, and accessible to everyone.

You can read more about our work across the region in our 'Raising Voices Together' report on our website.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using public feedback to shape services and improve care over time. Here are some examples of our work in County Durham this year:



Supporting carers to share their experiences

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

We heard from a local carer that there was a lack of carer's support in the Esh Winning area. In response, we arranged to meet with some local carers to discuss how we could support them. We agreed to facilitate a support group, led by the needs of the carers themselves, and supported by Durham County Carers Support. After our initial planning meeting in January 2026 the first session took place in March and will meet bi-monthly, offering an informal, friendly space to share experiences, listen to guest speakers and access support.



Getting services to act on public feedback

By listening to local people, services help improve care for everyone.

We worked with Patient Access Partners at County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust to improve the hospital appointment-booking system, provide clearer communication to patients, and offer better support so they can make more informed decisions about where and when they receive their care.



Improving care through mutual understanding

Changes in care can be confusing and worrying. Clear communication helps people understand those changes.

We gathered patients' experiences of medication changes. We used these insights to develop clear guidance for patients, explaining the reasons their medicines may be adjusted. We also produced a companion document for healthcare professionals, highlighting the challenges patients reported and outlining key considerations to help improve people's experiences of medication changes.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Real life experiences help to highlight issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

The priorities that we work on throughout the year are guided by people's feedback.

People's experiences of care help us understand what's working and what isn't – this intelligence is passed on to service providers and commissioners to help them make improvements.

Two of the main areas we have worked on over the last year are covered on the next two pages.



Reviewing the changes to community mental health care

Following on from our 2023 interim report, we reviewed progress in making improvements to mental health support across the county.

What did we do

We launched a survey and spoke with individuals about their experiences to get a true understanding of how the Community Mental Health Transformation had changed community mental health care.

We also engaged with services and providers to get a full picture of how the transformation was affecting the whole county.

We gave the provider the opportunity to feed information and updates about progress as the transformation is still an evolving process.

Key things we heard from Service Users:

85% felt all or some of their needs were met (down 1% since the first evaluation)

46% stated their needs were listened to (down 9.27% since the first evaluation)

43% were satisfied or very satisfied with the support being offered

Service providers reported many service users still experience long waits, repeated referrals and fragmented care. Nonetheless, they also demonstrated a stronger awareness of local services and improved collaboration, supported by initiatives such as huddles, the Gateway, and Wellbeing Link Worker networks. However, the divide between primary and secondary care remains, particularly for those with moderate to complex needs. Service providers felt that while the transformation has established a solid foundation, achieving truly person-centred, integrated care will require greater consistency, simplification, and ongoing collaboration across all sectors.

What difference did this make?

We sent our findings and recommendations to Tees, Esk & Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust, who have agreed to revisit and re-evaluate the programme as a whole to ensure they are embedding best practice and identify where additional improvements can be made.

Improving support for people suffering a miscarriage

Although miscarriage is common, many people told us they went through the experience without the care, information or compassion they needed.

We listened to the experiences of 71 local people affected by miscarriage between May 2024 – April 2025. Nearly everyone reported lasting emotional effects including grief, guilt, trauma and anxiety about future pregnancies. Many described feeling isolated or dismissed.

Key things we heard:



74%

of the people we spoke to did not feel supported by health professionals.

People told us:

There was no follow-up contact

There were no mental health checks

Leaflets were provided instead of verbal advice and guidance

Partners were not offered support



“There was no support. I was just told there was no baby and sent on my way.”

What difference did this make?

Our recommendations to County Durham & Darlington NHS Foundation Trust (CDDFT) have contributed to a range of improvements in bereavement care, including:

- The re-development of bereavement training with a stronger focus on the lived experiences of families affected by pregnancy loss.
- The Specialist Midwife for Bereavement Care role has been further developed, enhancing support, guidance and signposting.
- Bespoke discharge packs have been developed to provide information on physical and emotional recovery. Information includes guidance relating to postnatal well-being and support services.

In response to our findings, CDDFT has committed to reviewing patient journeys and care environments, including consideration of a multidisciplinary walkthrough of maternity and gynaecology services from the perspective of a family experiencing pregnancy loss. This would identify opportunities to improve privacy, dignity and emotional wellbeing for families affected.

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of County Durham. 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:

- Being involved with the Deaf Wellbeing Network, and the d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing working group.
- Holding regular drop-in sessions at community venues across the county, targeting places where people might be less likely to reach out to us, including areas facing financial difficulties and our rural communities.
- Visiting specialist care homes as part of our Enter & View programme, to make sure we heard the views of people with learning disabilities living in care homes.
- Maintaining links with specific groups such as veterans, LGBT communities and mental health support groups.



Improving understanding of 'Right to Choose' for people with ADHD

We saw an increase in confusion around Right to Choose for ADHD assessments and treatment.

People told us they were struggling to navigate the Right to Choose system for ADHD assessment and diagnosis as well as ongoing care. We couldn't find a simple and clear document which was user friendly to share with the public, so we created our own.

What difference did this make?

With the help of volunteers with lived experience, a document was created to inform the public of their rights, how to access a Right to Choose provider and information about shared care agreements.

We have shared this document on our website, on our social media and with various support groups and service providers to reach the people who it may benefit.

Improving awareness and understanding of the needs of veterans

With over 5% of the County Durham population being veterans, we wanted to ensure we can support our ex-service personnel effectively.

The whole team received Veteran's Awareness training from East Durham Veterans Trust in November 2025. Some volunteers have also received training.

We have a dedicated Veteran's lead within the team who regularly attends Veteran support groups to hear about their health & care experiences.

We have begun a process of mapping the veterans in care homes across the county, and talking to staff about meeting their needs – signposting to available support and guidance, and highlighting best practice.

What difference did this make?

We can now ensure that the voice of veterans is included in our public engagement, and we hear from people who may not usually reach out.

Some homes have already agreed to access relevant training, and will be looking at ways to enhance their individualised support.

We will follow up on developments later in 2026 to see how much veteran support has improved.

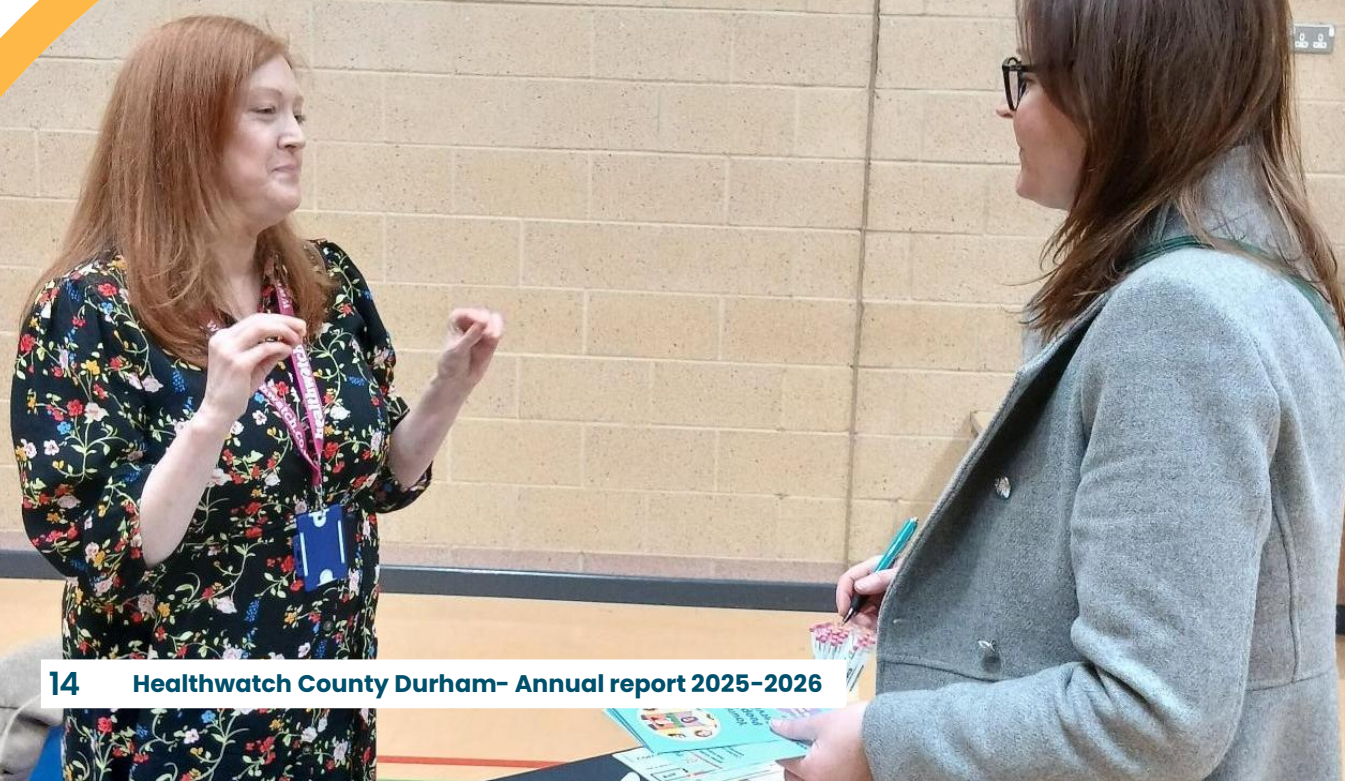
Information and signposting

We offer a free advice and signposting service to the public – we can signpost to relevant services, advise where to find information about available support, and help resolve issues with providers.

This year 151 people have reached out to us for advice, support or help finding services. These conversations also help us to understand where, and how, your care can be made better.

This year, we've helped people by:

- Providing public health & care information to support people in looking after their own health.
- Signposting to relevant services, to help people access the support and care they need.
- Supporting people to understand health & care systems and processes, and how to raise concerns and complaints.



Supporting Access to Primary Care for Vulnerable Individuals

'Tom' was homeless and had been deducted from his GP practice.

Tom was struggling with his mental health. He contacted us as he didn't know what to do to get a GP appointment or how he would go about registering with a new surgery.

We contacted his previous surgery who confirmed he had been deducted several months ago, and letters were sent to inform him of this. We advised he wouldn't have received these letters due to having no fixed abode.

We contacted the Special Allocation Scheme on Tom's behalf, explained the situation and agreed that they telephone or text Tom with the details he needed to register with themselves and how the system would work.



"Thank you. You have really helped. I appreciate it. I feel more at ease now. It's been really good advice and helped a lot." (Signposting client)

Facilitating cancer patients access to the right support

David contacted us for support for his brother who had dental issues whilst undergoing treatment for head and neck cancer.

David raised concerns that his brother was receiving no support for the dental problems caused by his cancer treatment. He explained that, following the loss of his partner and an accident at work, his brother was also struggling financially and could not afford dentures.

Healthwatch County Durham referred the patient to the Macmillan Head and Neck Nurse Specialist and the Macmillan Joining the Dots service, who reviewed his financial situation and secured additional support. This enabled him to access the dental treatment and new dentures he needed, as well as reach a stable financial position that allowed him to retire. As a result, his mental health improved significantly, and he was finally able to eat properly again.

"Thank you for your prompt reply in relation to the above..... thank you for your assistance and guidance so far in this matter – it is much appreciated."



Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given 2194 hours – 292 working days – to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working well and what needs improving in our area.

This year, our volunteers:

- Visited care homes across our region, speaking to residents, families and staff as part of our Enter & View programme.
- Gathered people's experiences of care and supported local communities to share their views.
- Improved public awareness of Healthwatch by reviewing what information is displayed in GP practices and hospitals.



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.



Amelia

Amelia is one of our most recent recruits. With over two years in retail and four years as a yard manager and riding instructor, she brings excellent communication skills and a natural ability to connect with people of all ages and backgrounds. Her volunteering with 'ReachOut', supporting children after school to build character strengths, developed leadership, emotional resilience and adaptability. Combining that experience with her undergraduate studies in psychology, Amelia has hit the ground running with us by contacting care homes across the county to start conversations about how they understand and support the care of veterans.

Julie has volunteered with Healthwatch County Durham for over three years now and came to us having worked as a Holistic therapist in a County Durham Hospice. Julie has been integral as an Enter & View representative, starting by reviewing GP surgeries who had taken part in an earlier programme. Julie has taken part in 'behind the scenes visits' at UHND and also been very active recently in updating HWCD information in local GP surgeries. Julie brings a caring, compassionate vibe which has proven valuable in encouraging people to share their experiences in her work with Healthwatch County Durham.



Julie

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 improving services.



www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk



0300 1800025



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Enter and View

2025 – 2026 Enter and View visits

Enter and View visits allow Healthwatch County Durham to see health and social care services in action and hear directly from the people who use them.

We use the feedback people share with us to help decide which local services to visit, focusing on what matters most to patients, residents and their families.

This year we carried out 7 visits, which were all to Care Homes. We selected the homes based on covering a range of geographical areas, a mixture of CQC ratings, and so that we spoke to residents with learning disabilities, dementia and the general care home population.

The sites we visited were Acorn Grange, Beaconsfield Court, Brandon Lodge, Dr Ashdown’s Stockton Lodge, Hawthorn House, Kensington Hall and Unity House.

We spoke to residents, families / carers and staff to hear what they thought worked well and what needed to be improved.

Our reports and recommendations for each home can be found on our website.

*Front cover picture shows a visit to Hampton Court from Tiny Tom – equine therapy pony.

2024 – 2025 Outcomes

We reviewed how Community Mental Health Units had responded to our recommendations during last year’s programme of Enter and View visits. These are some examples of where changes have been made.

What you told us	Improvements made
Some people struggled to get through on the telephone	An additional phone line has been installed
Some people didn’t know if they had a care plan, so weren’t able to have control or choice about their support	All staff have had in-house training on care planning; this includes working collaboratively with service users
Some people were left on a waiting list without knowing how long it would be or offered any other support whilst waiting	Service Users are referred to a Gateway before accessing services. They will be made aware of the approx. waiting list times and of other services who can offer support.

Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Durham County Council under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to enable us to do our work.

Our income and expenditure:

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£228,950	Expenditure on pay (inc pension & NI)	*
Additional income	£17,095	Non-pay expenditure	*
		Office and management fee	*
Total income	£246,045	Total Expenditure	*

* At the time of publication, final expenditure figures are not yet available. These will be made public when finalised.

Additional income is broken down into:

Integrated Care Board funding:

Healthwatch across North East & North Cumbria receive funding from our Integrated Care Board (ICB) to support collaborative work at regional level, which this year was made up of:

Purpose of ICS funding	Amount
Central Area Co-Ordinator Role **	£12,445
Core funding for participation in the regional network	£4000
Winter Pressures Pharmacy public engagement	£350
PCARP public engagement	£300

**These funds pay for additional staffing hours and expenses, so that the Area Co-Ordinator role is not funded from the core HWCD budget.

Finance and future priorities

Over the next year, we will continue to listen to and understand the experiences of people across our community. We will make sure that we reach out to under-represented groups and those people less likely to come forward. Your views and experiences will be shared with decision-makers and providers to improve services for everyone.

We will also work together with our regional Healthwatch Network partners to ensure that the voice of the public is represented at all levels of the Integrated Care System, and used to improve services across our region.

Our work for the next year will include:

1. Primary Care – we will be reviewing standards of privacy, comfort and information available at GP waiting rooms.
2. Adult Social Care – working to improve the public understanding of Adult Social Care; what services are included and where to access them.
3. Patient Safety – we want to ensure that new initiatives such as Martha’s Rule and Jess’s Rule are promoted by services, and understood by the public.
4. Patient Transport – we will gather evidence of the challenges faced by some individuals when booking transport, and call for improvements in the system.
5. Enter & View – we will continue to visit care homes across our county, looking at examples of best practice and highlighting where improvements could be made.



I have used you twice and both times have been fantastic. You have been great at taking the pressure off and helping me. I recommend you to everyone. (Service User)

Statutory statements

Healthwatch County Durham

Unit 3, Crook Business Centre, New Rd, Crook, Co. Durham, DL15 8QX

During the 2025 – 26 year, the Healthwatch County Durham contract was hosted by People First Advocacy, People First Conference Centre, Milbourne Street, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA2 5XB
Registered Charity No. 1184112

Healthwatch County Durham 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 7 members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities. Throughout 2025/26, the Board met formally 6 times and arranged additional meetings to discuss matters arising throughout the year.

Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community. We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities by analysing public feedback gathered through individual contact and local engagement.

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 2025/26, we have been available by phone and email, through social media and via a 'Contact Us' form on our website. We also attended a wide range 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, it is sent to stakeholders and newsletter subscribers, and the link is shared on our social media channels. We provide printed copies on request.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

We had 0 providers who did not respond to requests for information or recommendations.

Some providers requested extended deadlines for responses, or responded late.

There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee.

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 Durham County Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committees; we attend the Safeguarding Assurance Group and sit on Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategic Partnership Groups.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in North East and North Cumbria. As part of a network of 14 Local Healthwatch, we share information and service user feedback with the Integrated Care Board.

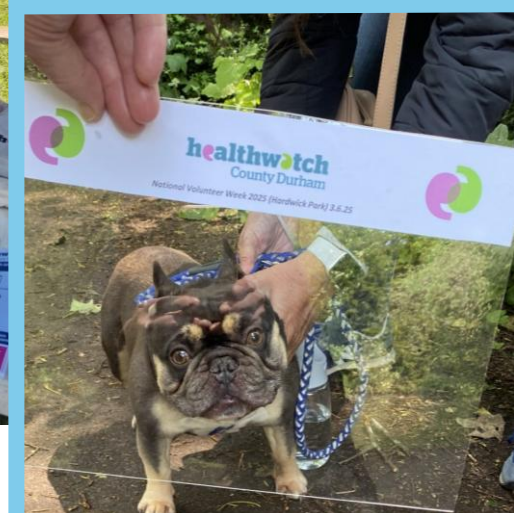
We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level, and contribute local intelligence to national research projects.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch County Durham is represented on the County Durham Health and Wellbeing Board by Chris Cunnington-Shore, Chair of the Healthwatch County Durham Board. During 2024/25, our representative has effectively carried out this role by attending Health and Wellbeing Board meetings, providing an annual update on the work of Healthwatch County Durham and responding to items under consideration by the Board.


Healthwatch County Durham is represented at the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board by Christopher Akers-Belcher (Regional Co-Ordinator for the Healthwatch Network), and at sub-regional level within the network by Gail McGee (Central Area Co-Ordinator)

A snapshot of the year



Healthwatch County Durham
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