



# On equal terms

**Then and now**

Healthwatch County Durham Annual Report 2020-21

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# Message from our Chair

'Unprecedented' has been an often-used word this past twelve months, but that's really how it has been for all of us. Who could have predicted how responsive services would have to be to manage the extraordinary circumstances we have faced?

None of us have escaped the impact of the last year and for those who have lost a loved one, we extend our sincere condolences to you. To those who have been working under extreme pressure, we extend you our admiration and gratitude.

Some changes meant we could not see our loved ones or our GP face-to-face, but the speed of developments to safeguard us and services, was remarkable.

The volunteers and staff at Healthwatch County Durham have continued working to make sure that we keep in touch with your experiences of health and care services and continue to answer your enquiries. We have been making new links with some of the seldom heard groups in the county so we can gather their views too.



**"Paraphrasing Sir Tom Moore 'Next year will be a better year' and we will endeavour to continue to remain the 'people's champion' acting on your behalf to ensure service providers recognise the independent voice that we bring."**

## Looking ahead

We have also been thinking ahead and planning, in terms of what is important to you. Our public vote has taken place and we will be building our work programme around those key areas. How we engage and meet in future will be really important and we will be looking to introduce new technology to make sure we can continue to provide you with a responsive, yet modern service.

As always, my thanks to the people of County Durham who share their experiences, our staff team, volunteers and Board who have continued to work on your behalf this year. We hope to have our usual annual event this year and plan to work with other agencies so that the event will be even more interactive. We look forward to seeing you there.



Chris Cunnington-Shore  
Chair of Healthwatch County Durham

# About us

## Here to make health and care better

We are the independent champion for people who use health and care services in County Durham. We're here to find out what matters to people and help make sure your views shape the support you need, by sharing these views with those who have the power to make change happen.

## Helping you to find the information you need

We help people find the information they need about services in their area. This has been vital during the pandemic with the ever-changing environment and restrictions, limiting people's access to health and care services.

### Our goals



#### 1 Supporting you to have your say

We want more people to get the information they need to take control of their health and care, make informed decisions and shape the services that support them.



#### 2 Providing a high quality service

We want everyone who shares an experience or seeks advice from us to get a high quality service and to understand the difference their views make.



#### 3 Ensuring your views help improve health & care

We want more services to use your views to shape the health and care support you need today and in the future.



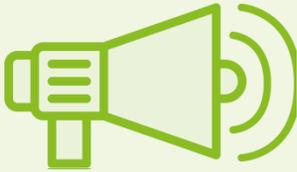
**"Local Healthwatch have done fantastic work throughout the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is more work ahead to ensure that everyone's views are heard. COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities and to tackle these unfair health differences we will need those in power to listen, to hear the experiences of those facing inequality and understand the steps that could improve people's lives."**

Sir Robert Francis QC, Chair of Healthwatch England

# Highlights from our year

Find out about our resources and how we have engaged and supported people in 2020-21.

## Reaching out



We heard from

**779 people**

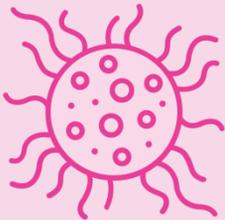
this year about their experiences of health and social care.

We provided advice and information to

**246 people**

this year.

## Responding to the pandemic



We engaged with and supported

**47 people**

with COVID-19 related issues/concerns this year.

**28**

of these related to patients having trouble accessing dental services for emergency or non-emergency treatment.

## Making a difference to care



We published

**4 reports**

about the improvements people would like to see to health and care services. From this, we made 17 recommendations for improvements.

We are working with stakeholders to use these recommendations to improve services and will be monitoring progress.

## Health and care that works for you



**24 volunteers**

helped us to carry out our work. In total, they contributed 1843 hours of volunteering, which is the equivalent of around 245 days.

**We employ 7 staff**

which is the full time equivalent of 4.5, this is the same as the previous year.

We received

**£180,600 in funding**

from our local authority in 2020-21, which is 8.6% less than the previous year.



# Theme one: Accessing services



## Then: accessing services

**Thanks to 257 people sharing their experiences of using health and care services, Healthwatch County Durham was able to use their insight to make an impact. It made it easier for everyone to find the information they need on GP websites or telephone answer machine messages. They told us what worked well and what could be better about using a range of services, and these are some of the things we discovered:**

The pandemic has changed the way we access GPs, placing even more pressure on phone-lines and a bigger reliance on technology at home. Telephone answer machine messages and websites need to provide clear and consistent messages that people can understand and act on.

Communication with patients could be improved, with health service providers making it clear why appointments or services are being cancelled and what will happen next.

More people are happy for services to be delivered remotely either online or via the telephone, but the option of face-to-face appointments should still be available.

People **had not accessed services** because:

- 56 had their appointment postponed due to the pandemic
- 38 thought their problem could wait until services were back to normal
- 30 didn't want to bother services as they were busy with COVID-19
- 27 were worried about catching COVID-19



## Now:

**Thanks to the feedback from 257 people about using services during the pandemic, we have been able to share their views with County Durham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and service providers.**

The CCG was very positive about our report and gave feedback about the steps they were taking. They recognised the need for clear and consistent messages and in response have suggested wording for practice telephone systems. The CCG will also be providing funding to GP practices to improve websites and telephone systems. It is using our findings to make sure the money is used for the things that are most important.

The CCG said –“Improving access through digital technology has been identified as a national priority which the Primary Care Strategy intends to develop. Work will continue to support this agenda across County Durham while we recognise that face to face consultations will remain an important element of service provision”

Healthwatch County Durham is doing some focussed work with seldom heard groups about their experiences of using services and will be refreshing the report to include their views and any new recommendations.



**“The GP answer machine message was too fast to catch the email address I needed.”**

**“Video call may have helped as it may have assisted with lip reading.”**

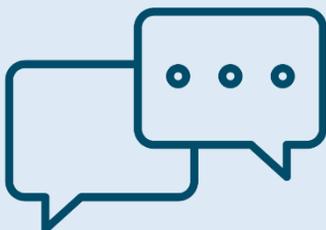
**“Good not to have to visit surgery when unwell. Telephone consultation sufficient.”**

Healthwatch County Durham was worried about the number of people who told us they had not used services during lockdown. We are hopeful that the information messages being issued by the NHS along with the successful vaccination programme, will give confidence to the public to start using services again. The North-East & North Cumbria are receiving a share of £160m funding to tackle waiting lists, along with more support to implement and try new ways to increase the number of elective operations they deliver. Healthwatch will be continuing to monitor how things are progressing in County Durham.



**“The report provides the Clinical Commissioning Group with an excellent and valuable insight into people’s experiences of using health and social care services during the COVID-19 lockdown.”**

### Share your views with us



If you have a query about a health or care service or need help with where you can go to access further support, get in touch. Don't struggle alone. Healthwatch is here for you.

 [www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk)

 **0800 304 7039**

 [healthwatchcountydurham@pcp.uk.net](mailto:healthwatchcountydurham@pcp.uk.net)



## Theme two: Then and now Accessing your local pharmacy



### Then: accessing your local pharmacy

**Healthwatch County Durham recognised that making the most of the services pharmacies can offer is an important part of helping people to get information and advice.**

We first carried out a survey in 2017 about the views of people using pharmacy and dispensing doctor services across the county. As a result of our recommendations the Local Pharmaceutical Committee worked with Durham County Council, the Clinical Commissioning Groups and Healthwatch County Durham to plan and deliver the publicity campaign for pharmacy that focused on 'self-care'.

**In 2020 when we repeated the survey to see if progress had been made, 260 people shared their views and experiences. They told us:**

The 3 things that pharmacies do well are making sure prescriptions are correct and available on time; knowledgeable staff give advice and information; good and friendly customer care is provided.

Other services that people would like to access from pharmacies include a range of health checks, for example, blood pressure, blood tests, cholesterol checks. Some people said they would like pharmacists to be able to prescribe certain medicines, resulting in fewer visits to the GP surgery.

Pharmacy services could be improved by using text messaging when medicine is ready to collect and be more environmentally friendly by reducing paper copies.

Over **80%** of people knew of the publicity campaign to encourage more use of community pharmacies as the first port of call for advice and treatment and almost **68%** of these said they were now more likely to contact/visit a pharmacy for advice.

Our report also showed that there has been an improvement in the uptake of the services available:

- Awareness of Flu Services has **increased by almost 13%**, with more people having their annual jab
- Awareness of Sexual Health Services has **increased by 7.5%**, with more people using the service
- Use of the disposing of old medicines service has **increased by almost 9%**
- Use of Smoking Cessation Services has **increased by 7.5%**"

**"Comments from the respondents do indicate that, for whatever reason, awareness has increased which is very positive. It may have increased still further since March; pharmacies have remained open throughout the pandemic, providing services for their regular patients but also, more than likely to a wider cohort who have been unable to access services elsewhere."**

Greg Burke, Chief Officer,  
County Durham & Darlington Local Pharmaceutical Committee



## Now: accessing your local pharmacy

Funding was available in 2020 to run a second publicity campaign but that has been put on hold due to the pandemic. We hope to work with our partners again to further identify what pharmacies are doing well and what could be improved.

Pharmacies featured in our report into "Accessing services during the COVID-19 pandemic" in 2020, being one of the most used services along with GPs. They were seen as providing a safe venue where people could access advice and medication. They reacted to the pandemic by changing their systems to keep patients safe.



**"The NHS 111 service was particularly quick in calling me back and offering advice and support. The Pharmacist said he would call me back to check on my progress and he did - twice - at the time he said he would. Could not fault the new tele-triage system. Glad that Pharmacists are part of the new ways of working."**

Pharmacy customer



**To find out more take a look at our reports:**

**[Pharmacy Services Report: September 2020](#)**

**[People's Experiences of COVID-19 Lockdown Report October 2020](#)**



## Responding to COVID-19

**Healthwatch County Durham plays an important role in helping people to get the information they need, especially through the pandemic. The insight we collect is shared with both Healthwatch England and local partners to make sure services are operating as best as possible during the pandemic.**

### **This year we helped people by:**

- Finding them the right support, advice and information using our signposting service.
- Using our volunteers to find out what was happening locally and sharing what they were telling us. Lending some volunteers IT equipment so they could continue to communicate with us.
- Using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and our e-bulletins to regularly share lots of useful information from reliable sources throughout the pandemic. Providing up-to-date national and local advice and information about COVID-19. **Last year, we shared 206 messages of advice relating to the pandemic across our social media platforms.**
- Supporting the community by organising a collection for the local foodbank, involving staff, the Board, volunteers and local people. Some of the team using free time to volunteer with a local befriending scheme.
- Carrying out surveys which gathered information about peoples experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Top four areas that people have contacted us about:



31% on GP services



19% on Dentistry



8% on Mental Health



19% on COVID-19 Vaccines

## Access to dental care



We have seen a rise in the number of queries about accessing NHS dental services.

Many people have reported that their local practices are not taking on new patients and they can't access routine or emergency treatment. For some people, existing problems are getting worse and there are concerns about the cost of treatment.

Recently a local dentist retired and many of his patients have been in touch to say that they can't find another practice willing to take on new patients. We received reports that practices are offering private treatment in place of the NHS.

We have shared our findings with Healthwatch England to enable them to highlight the problem nationally and are continuing to monitor patient's experiences locally.



### Contact us to get the information you need

If you have a query about a health and care service, or need help with where you can go to access further support, get in touch. Don't struggle alone. Healthwatch is here for you.



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0800 3047039



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# Volunteers

**At Healthwatch County Durham we are supported by 24 volunteers to help us find out what people think about services**

## **This year our volunteers:**

- Quickly adapted to be able to carry on volunteering and keep in touch through online meetings. They took the opportunity to have more training, including GDPR, Safeguarding and Scam Awareness sessions, as well as completing "Everything in Place" training from a local hospice.
- Attended monthly online volunteer meetings to feedback experiences of local people on the roll out of the vaccine and changes to services. They helped people have their say from home by sending out and circulating surveys on the vaccination programme.
- Were involved in our Access to GP Services work through researching the experiences of people getting advice, information and appointments at their GP Practices since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in County Durham.
- Took part in a focus group on 'Clinical research' (Healthwatch County Durham and Healthwatch Darlington) working with NHS England to undertake some research and contributed to 'Macmillan Joining the Dots' County Durham.



### Keeping in touch and engaged

At first some volunteers found the I.T. set-up difficult, but it was rewarding and worthwhile being able to meet online. They were able to relay experiences on the roll-out of the vaccine and changes to services, through monthly meetings. They helped people to have their say from home including completing surveys about the vaccination programme.

**“Online involvement through Zoom gave me a break from the misery of being isolated on my own. After getting support with set-up, I could keep up-to-date with Healthwatch County Durham progress”** -Mary (Board member)



### GP access work

Volunteers were involved in developing a survey. They checked how easy it was to access information and appointments at GP practices, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**“Some telephone messages were informing the caller of Christmas opening hours, so clearly were not up to date”** -Anne

**“There are weblinks to the NHS 111 site but not to COVID-19 pages”** -Tony



### Expanding knowledge

During discussions, our volunteers said they wanted to have a better understanding on issues related to “life planning”.

A ten-week training course provided by St Cuthbert’s Hospice was arranged. However, because of the lockdown the training had to be moved online. The volunteers were still eager to attend and adapted quickly to the changes, successfully completing the training using the online Zoom platform.



### Volunteer with us

Are you feeling inspired? We are always on the lookout for new volunteers. If you are interested in volunteering, please get in touch with Claire, our Volunteer Coordinator:



**07756 654223**



**[claire.sisterson@pcp.uk.net](mailto:claire.sisterson@pcp.uk.net)**

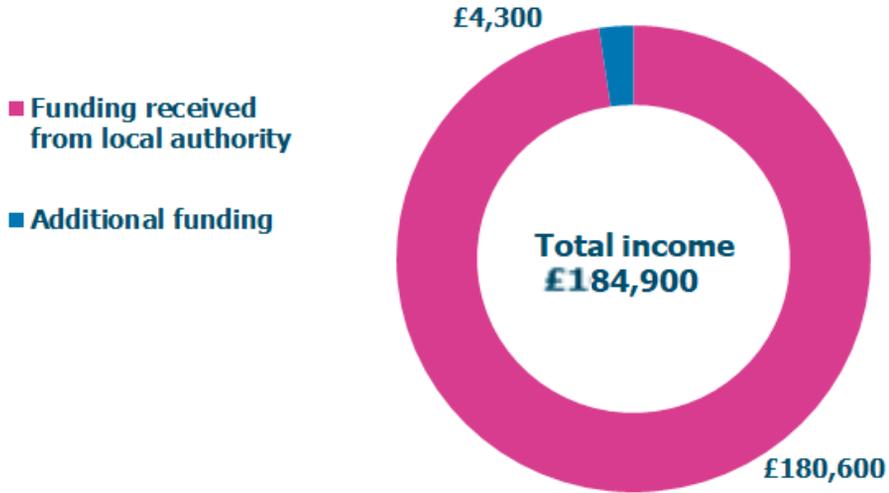


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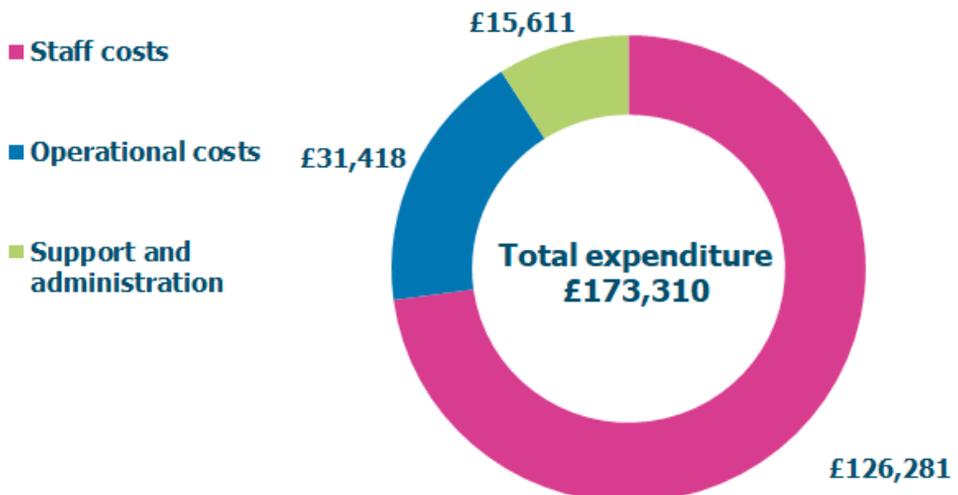
# Finances

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

## Income



## Expenditure



# Next steps & thank you

## Top three priorities for 2021-22 from our workplan

1. Gathering the views of children and young people on how their mental health needs are supported, finding out about their experiences and identifying what they need to help them manage their mental health.
2. Finding out about the experiences of people receiving care in their home since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hearing what has worked well for people and what could have been better, including how isolated people have been during lockdown.
3. Working with service providers and organisations to gather the views about the diagnosis and treatment for cancer and other life-threatening conditions during the pandemic and beyond. To understand the barriers to accessing care and what needs to be done moving forward.

## Next steps

- The major priority for Healthwatch County Durham will be to think about how we are going to engage with the public. We will develop our digital programme, but make sure those who do not use the internet can still have their say. We will be working with local, regional and national partners to reach out into our communities, finding the best way to communicate with people and hear their views.
- We want to make sure that commissioners and service providers consider and respond to the recommendations we made in reports this year.
- We are committed to equality and diversity and will continue to find ways to reach out to seldom heard communities to gather their experience of health and care services and to use the information to inform commissioners and service providers.

 **"As always, my thanks to the people of County Durham, who we are here to support, our staff, volunteers and Board who have continued to work on your behalf this year. We look forward to the opportunities to get back out into the community to hear about your experiences and we look forward to seeing you at our annual event later this year."**

Chris Cunnington-Shore,  
Chair of Healthwatch County Durham



# Statutory statements

Healthwatch County Durham, Whitfield House, Meadowfield Industrial Estate, Durham, DH7 8XL.

The organisation holding the local Healthwatch contract is the Pioneering Care Partnership (PCP), Carers Way, Newton Aycliffe, DL5 4SF

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 8 members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny to our activities. Our Board makes sure that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community. Through 2020/21 the Healthwatch Board met 9 times and made decisions on matters such as:

- Agreeing to adopt the Healthwatch England Quality Framework in July 2020, to monitor future quality standards for Healthwatch County Durham.
- Agreeing to the recommendations in a report in October 2020 which provided the views of the public about the Healthwatch County Durham work priorities for the coming year.

We make sure of wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities;

- We use the insight from our signposting enquiries to help us with our work plan, looking for any trends or indications that there may be issues we want to address.
- We hold a public vote, so people can help us to decide our work priorities.
- We use information provided by the public when they contact us with their concerns.

## Methods and systems used across the year's work to obtain people's views and experience.

We use a wide range of approaches to make sure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to provide us with insight about their experience of health and care services. During 2020/21 we have been available by phone, email, and webform via our website. We have also attended virtual meetings of community groups and forums, provided our own virtual activities and engaged with the public through social media. We also provided paper copies of our surveys and always offer help to complete them if needed.

We are committed to taking additional steps to make sure we get the views of people from diverse backgrounds who are often not heard by health and care decision makers. An example is making links with a refugee organisation in the county to gather their views about GP services.

We make sure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We publish it, making it available to Healthwatch England, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), NHS England, County Durham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Commissioners for Healthwatch at Durham County Council.

### 2020-21 activities

Project / activity area	Changes made to services/outcomes
Accessing Health Services	Sharing a report with recommendations for commissioners and service providers to help them identify how to improve service delivery
Accessing local pharmacy services	Reviewing results against a previous survey and sharing our recommendations with other agencies and stakeholders, enabling them to consider the outcome of their campaigns
Hearing about Life in a Domestic Abuse Refuge	Sharing of the good practice identified in refuges in the county. Giving feedback and assurance to commissioners
Conducting a COVID-19 vaccination survey and completing a report on our findings	Allowing commissioners and stakeholders to hear the views of the public. Giving the opportunity to use the information gathered as the roll out of the vaccine progresses
Healthwatch volunteer forums	Gathering the views of volunteers to help inform health and care service providers and commissioners

## Responses to recommendations and requests

This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we did not make use of our Enter and View powers. Consequently, no recommendations or other actions resulted from this area of activity.

There were no issues or recommendations escalated by Healthwatch County Durham to Healthwatch England and so there were no resulting special reviews or investigations.

## Health and Wellbeing Board

Healthwatch County Durham is represented on the County Durham Health and Wellbeing Board by Dave Logan, Project Lead. During 2020/21 our representative has effectively carried out this role. Healthwatch County Durham provide annual updates to the committee and have been consulted on various initiatives under consideration by the committee influencing the decisions and actions of partner agencies.

# healthwatch

County Durham

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