

# The value of listening

Healthwatch Darlington  
Annual Report 2023–2024



**healthwatch**

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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 is my final Annual Report as Chair of Healthwatch Darlington. Taking on the Chair's role in 2018, it's been a privilege to lead this organisation for the past six years and Healthwatch has faced significant challenges during my tenure.

In 2017, we experienced a severe 50% funding cut from our contract with Darlington Borough Council, resulting in the regrettable downsizing of our staff. Through perseverance, our CEO Michelle Thompson and Operations Manager Diane Lax have been pivotal in rebuilding our team, which now includes 5 staff members alongside our dedicated volunteers.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forced us to adapt our operations drastically, shifting away from traditional office and outreach methods to ensure continued service provision. Gradually, we resumed normality and secured accessible office space at Morton Park this past year.

Our journey has also seen the rise of network collaborations amidst the establishment of the Integrated Care System across North East and North Cumbria. Healthwatch Darlington has played a pivotal role in this regional network under the coordination of Christopher Akers-Belcher from Healthwatch Hartlepool.

Throughout my nearly 50 years of involvement with healthcare, initially as a doctor and GP, and later with Healthwatch and as a Governor of County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, I have witnessed numerous healthcare reforms. Healthwatch has consistently provided an independent voice for patients, free from political agendas, earning widespread respect.

Looking forward, while many Healthwatch organisations, including ours, face financial and staffing challenges, our commitment remains steadfast—to amplify the patient voice, guide users to appropriate services, and advocate on their behalf in pivotal decision-making forums. As I transition from Chair, I trust my successor will lead this charitable organisation into an even brighter future. I will continue to support as a member of the Board of Trustees and Directors.



**"Our journey at Healthwatch Darlington reflects resilience in adversity and a commitment to amplifying the voices of those we serve, ensuring their needs shape the future of healthcare."**

Robert Upshall, Chair Healthwatch Darlington



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# Message from our Chief Executive Officer

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I'm proud to look back on a year where we achieved a lot and adapted to meet our community's needs. Over the past year, we've worked hard to listen to our community, which helped us make important changes in health and social care services. By focusing on the voices of those who usually aren't heard, we've made sure that everyone's experiences help us create better care.

One big area where we made a real difference is in dealing with how the cost-of-living crisis affects people's health. Rising living costs have made it hard for many in our community to afford essential healthcare. We created a detailed report about this problem, showing the challenges people in poorer areas face. We pushed for more support and resources, which in time will lead to better financial help programmes and more affordable care options.

We also worked hard to teach people about diabetes, especially those who are more vulnerable. With the Darlington Borough Council Public Health Team, we started a programme to educate people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities about diabetes.

This programme helped them understand diabetes risks and prevention, leading to healthier lifestyle choices and better control of the condition. These focused efforts show how effective our approach is in solving specific health issues in the community.

We made sure our community's voices are heard at higher levels too. By working with our Healthwatch neighbours in the North East and North Cumbria, we influenced important decisions about local health services. This teamwork has created strong ways to ensure the experiences of people in Darlington are listened to and acted upon.

We've spent a lot of time looking at people's experiences to find patterns and make changes. We published several reports based on what the community told us, covering issues like pharmacy services and dental care. Each report gave us valuable insights into the problems our community faces, helping us advocate for and create policy changes.

In summary, this past year has been one of growth and significant impact for Healthwatch Darlington. By listening to our community, acting on their feedback, and working with other organisations, we've made positive changes in health and social care services.

Our efforts have not only improved individual lives but also strengthened the overall healthcare system in Darlington.



**“By listening to and acting on community feedback, we have led substantial improvements in local health services, demonstrating the power of collective voices in driving positive change.”**

Michelle Thompson B.E.M,  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Healthwatch Darlington



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# About us

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

We make sure NHS 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

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



### Our mission

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



### 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 and community sector – serving as the public's independent advocate.



# Year in review

## Reaching out:

**265 people**

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

**138,188 people**

viewed our online advice and information, often contacting us for further local signposting such as mental or physical health care.



## Making a difference to care:

We published

**6 reports**

about the improvements people would like to see in health and social care services.

Our most popular report was

**Cost of Living Report**

which highlighted the financial impact on people's health and wellbeing.



## Health and social care that works for you:

We're lucky to have

**15**

outstanding volunteers who gave up 465 hours! to make care better for our community.

We're funded by our local authority.

In 2023 - 24 we received

**£76,709**

which is the same as the previous year.





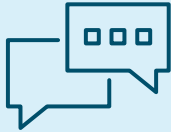



We currently employ

**5 staff** (3.3 staff fulltime equivalent)

who help us carry out our work.



# How we've made a difference this year

Spring	 <p>Our Pharmacy report highlighted significant issues such as medication shortages and pharmacy closures, which impact patient access to medications.</p>	 <p>Captured the lived experiences of individuals receiving adult social care informing service improvements and policy changes.</p>
Summer	 <p>Collecting feedback on dental services highlighted critical areas needing improvement, such as appointment accessibility and patient communication.</p>	 <p>Our Growing Older Planning Ahead insights facilitated better planning and support services in the combined Tees Valley area and Darlington.</p>
Autumn	 <p>The collaboration with Darlington Borough Council Public Health Team resulted in more streamlined and effective diabetes care across Darlington</p>	 <p>The findings in our Vaping Report highlighted the need for targeted health education and intervention strategies, prompting the local authority focus on this emerging public health issue</p>
Winter	 <p>Ensured community voices help shape health policies and programmes for the Integrated Care Board's (ICB) strategy for community and public involvement..</p>	 <p>Our cost of living report led to advocacy efforts and initiatives aimed at reducing barriers, including providing more affordable care options and financial assistance programmes</p>

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# Your voice heard at a wider level

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

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



### **Achievement one: Growing Older, Planning Ahead**

Tees Valley Healthwatch Network worked in partnership with North East Commissioning Support on behalf of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB).

To deliver a local review in response to the national requirement to improve planning processes when families can no longer support their family member to stay at home.

The focus of the project was to improve support for family, carers, and older people with a learning disability (age 40+, considering early onset of chronic health conditions such as dementia,) providing effective recommendations both from a local and Tees Valley perspective.

### **Achievement two: Dentistry**

Through our information and signposting function, people have been telling us about their challenges with NHS dentistry services.

Healthwatch organisations across the North East and North Cumbria (NENC) came together to develop an overview report of the emerging issues to inform the Integrated Care System (ICS) to better understand people's experiences of accessing dental care.

We conducted a mystery shopping exercise, contacting 286 NHS contract holding practices throughout the NENC. Of those practices we spoke to, 1.7% offered an NHS routine care appointment in more than 3 weeks

All the information collated will be used by North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB) for the future planning of Dentistry Services.





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# Your voice heard at a wider level

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

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



### **Achievement three: Integrated Care Board**

As the delivery of health and social care services begin the journey of transformation, local Healthwatch throughout the North East and North Cumbria have come together to develop robust ways of working to ensure the voices of the local people we represent are heard. We have developed a Network Operations Group to collectively drive forward system wide activity and change.

We have a seat at each level of decision making within the Integrated Care System, local, subregional, and NENC wide including the Integrated Care Board, appropriate sub committees, and Integrated Care Partnerships.

We have ensured that Healthwatch are an integral part of the ICS, independently sharing the experiences of people who use services.

### **Achievement four: Be Part of Research**

The Healthwatch Network in North East and North Cumbria worked with the North East and North Cumbria ICB and partners as part of their Be Part Of Research Project (known as REN 3) to understand residents' interest, from particular communities, in participating in NHS and health research.

Local Healthwatch held focus groups in each of their areas to discuss if participants had previously been involved in research, what their preferred channels for accessing healthcare information were, and identify barriers to future research opportunities.

Participants' responses varied, with some showing keen interest in future research engagement and others highlighting barriers like limited awareness or understanding.

Preferred methods for disseminating future research opportunities were both email and face-to-face interactions. All feedback will be used for future planning and engagement





## Gathering your experiences

Services can't make 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.

# Improving diabetes awareness

## Diabetes Awareness and Prevention for Individuals with Mental Health Conditions and Learning Disabilities in Darlington

In collaboration with Darlington Borough Council Public Health Team, we launched a programme to educate individuals with mental health conditions and learning disabilities about diabetes risks. This initiative supported the Diabetes Model of Care by providing grants to community organisations: Café JJ's, Darlington Association on Disability (DAD), and 700 Club. Each organisation implemented unique approaches to diabetes education. The collaboration increased awareness, prevention, and management of diabetes, significantly impacting participants' understanding and lifestyle choices.

A critical outcome of this project was the notable **300%** increase in diabetes awareness and prevention knowledge among both participants and staff.

Staff knowledge and confidence in supporting diabetes prevention saw significant improvements across all organisations involved.



## Effective Diabetes Education for Vulnerable Populations

The programme's success shows that targeted funding and tailored education can effectively empower individuals with mental health conditions and learning disabilities to manage or prevent diabetes. Strengthened local partnerships helped reach a broader audience, enhancing the initiative's impact. This case study highlights the importance of collaboration and customized interventions in public health efforts, particularly for vulnerable populations.

### What difference did this make?

The report led to significant positive changes in diabetes awareness and management in Darlington:

- **Increased Knowledge:** Participants' understanding of diabetes, its risk factors, and prevention improved dramatically, with average knowledge scores rising from 2-4 out of 10 to 8 out of 10 across projects.
- **Improved Health Practices:** Participants adopted healthier lifestyles, including better meal planning, increased exercise, and regular health check-ups, leading to better diabetes management and prevention.
- **Strengthened Partnerships:** Collaboration among local organizations and health teams enhanced resource sharing and support, broadening the reach and impact of diabetes education initiatives.

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# "Planning for the Future: Supporting Darlington's Older Adults with Learning Disabilities"

## Summary:

Imagine reaching an age where you start worrying about who will take care of you or your loved ones when you no longer can. This is the stark reality for many families in Darlington, especially those caring for older people with learning disabilities. Healthwatch Darlington's latest report reveals the struggles and aspirations of these families, shedding light on what needs to change to ensure a secure, happy future for their loved ones.

## Key Findings

- 1. Clear Communication and Pathways:** One of the main recommendations is the establishment of a clear and easily navigable service pathway. Effective communication throughout the planning process is crucial to support workers, carers, and the individuals themselves.
- 2. Local Support:** The ability to remain within their local community, access local services, and maintain regular contact with family and friends is a top priority for both carers and the individuals they care for.
- 3. Phased Transition Plans:** A person-centered approach with phased transitions and early discussions can help in better preparing individuals and their carers for future changes.
- 4. Awareness and Training:** There is a need for dedicated training packages to assist individuals with administrative and household tasks, along with raising awareness of existing services.



"All three groups of cared for, carers, and professionals agreed that 'good' looked like having trained support to help individuals live" an independent life."



## Community Feedback

The report emphasises the importance of listening to the voices of those directly impacted. Feedback from local groups such as the Learning Impairment Network and Darlington Association on Disability has been instrumental in shaping the recommendations.

For instance, training by qualified Special educational needs and disabilities ( SEND ) practitioners and implementing Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) techniques were highlighted as essential for effective intervention and support.

## Next Steps

The insights gained have been shared with key stakeholders, including the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, Darlington Borough Council, and various community and voluntary sector partners. This collaborative approach aims to inform future service planning and delivery, ensuring that the needs of older adults with learning disabilities are met more effectively.



"Many carers did know who to discuss the future with and had started that conversation. Some did not know but were willing to have that discussion, suggesting further clarity around the process is needed."



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# "Struggling to Stay Healthy: How the Cost-of-Living Crisis is Forcing Darlington Residents to Sacrifice Essential Health Care"

In 2023, of the 194 respondents to our survey, 53% indicated they barely manage to cover living expenses, with some running out of money. The rising cost of living has led many to forgo essential health and social care services to save money. This trend is deeply concerning as it poses serious risks to physical and mental health.

## Financial Strain

More than half of our respondents (53%) are barely managing to cover their living expenses, with some even running out of money before the month ends. This financial instability has worsened for 77% of individuals over the past six months, highlighting a growing crisis that's pushing many to the brink of financial ruin.

## Health Decline

The cost-of-living crisis is not just a financial issue; it's a health emergency. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) report a decline in their physical health, while an alarming 69% have experienced a significant deterioration in their mental health. This decline underscores the devastating toll financial stress takes on overall well-being.



"I've had to stop going to the dentist because I can't afford the check-ups or treatment."



## Daily Sacrifices

In an effort to cope with rising costs, 90% of people are resorting to wearing extra clothing to stay warm, and 86% are avoiding turning on the heating. Social lives are shrinking, with 82% cutting back on activities and 79% limiting the use of essential appliances to save money. The crisis is so severe that 69% are reducing their food intake, and 60% are going to bed early just to cut down on energy costs. Disturbingly, 20% have had to use or consider using food banks to survive.

## Healthcare Access

Financial barriers are severely limiting access to healthcare. Almost half (48%) of respondents are avoiding dentist visits due to the cost, and 27% are refraining from purchasing over-the-counter medication. Additionally, 17% are not filling essential prescriptions because they can't afford them. The situation is dire, with 24% avoiding NHS help and 19% cutting down on vital services like physiotherapy or counselling due to the financial burden.



"I avoid booking NHS appointments because the travel costs are too high"



**These stark statistics paint a harrowing picture of the sacrifice's individuals are making, illustrating the profound impact of the cost-of-living crisis on health and everyday life.**

## Cost of living crisis continued:

Since our survey Healthwatch Darlington have continued listening to our community about how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting people living and working in our Borough.

We have ensured people are signposted to our local health and care services for the support they need, and we are in full support of Healthwatch England's action plan which can be found here: [Healthwatch England Cost of Living Action Plan](#)

We recognise the rising cost of living is a national event impacting all communities and not just those in Darlington. We ask those responsible for commissioning local health and care services, and those providing the services continue to be mindful of the potential negative impacts on individual circumstances.



### **Healthwatch Darlington urges local commissioners and providers to:**

#### **Prescriptions:**

GPs should offer people over the counter medications on prescription where they consider patients' ability to pay is affected by significant social vulnerability; (although this has always been an option, NHS policy since 2018 has discouraged this to save money, but this approach should be reconsidered in the context of cost of living challenges);

Primary care staff should make sure patients on lots of medication, as well as repeat or long-term prescriptions, are aware of the annual prescription option.

#### **Travel:**

NHS services should ensure people are aware of access to patient transport services or travel reimbursement schemes. NHS trusts should follow current car parking guidance and actively promote the offer of free parking for Blue Badge holders, people who attend hospitals at least three times a month and parents of sick children staying overnight.

NHS trusts to further consider reducing the costs of parking charges and provide concessions to visitors and carers of people who are gravely ill or have extended stays in hospital.

#### **Dental care:**

NHS dentists should follow NICE guidance to offer dental check-ups based on patient's individual risk factors. This will help free up NHS slots for more people who currently can't find an NHS dentist and are forced to go private.

#### **Remote bookings and appointments:**

Hospital and GP phone numbers should be part of a freephone service, so cost is never a barrier to phoning a health service.

# 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.

## Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life

**It's important for services to see the bigger picture. Hearing personal experiences and the impact on people's lives provides them with a better understanding of the problems.**

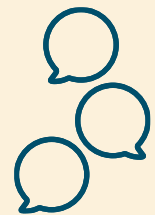
Our "Adults Social Care Lived Experience Report." details individual experiences with adult social care services, emphasizing issues such as access to information and support. We collected stories from a small group of individuals, which were then used to illustrate broader challenges. This effort resulted in improved understanding among decision-makers and led to changes that benefited the community. For instance, there was an enhanced focus on personalised care planning and better communication between service providers and users, ensuring that services were more responsive to the needs of local people.



## Getting services to involve the public

**Services need to understand the benefits of involving local people to help improve care for everyone.**

A notable example is our involvement with the Darlington Community Hub Transformation working group. This multi-agency collaboration was established following the findings of our Community Transformation Mental Health Report, which highlighted the need for better information sharing and service coordination. As a result, local partners committed to co-producing new approaches with the community, raising awareness of available mental health support, and ensuring accessible and holistic care services for those with complex needs



## Improving care over time

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

We are working on several ongoing projects aimed at improving local services such as the "Growing Older, Planning Ahead" report, which focuses on the needs of people with learning disabilities aged 40 and above in the Tees Valley area, including Darlington. This initiative is gradually influencing how services plan for the aging population with specific needs, promoting better long-term planning and support systems.



There's a summary of other outcomes we've achieved this year in the Statutory Statements section at the end of this report.



## Hearing from all communities

Over the past year, we have worked hard to make sure we 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 services meet their needs.

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

- Speaking to the older learning disability community through the "Growing Older, Planning Ahead Report" to ensure their voices and concerns are considered in future health and care planning..
- Our "Cost of Living Report" highlighted the challenges faced by individuals in economically deprived areas, advocating for increased support and resources to address their health and wellbeing. Needs .of reaching people struggling with socio-economic deprivation
- Through our "Learning Disability/Mental Health Diabetes Report," we ensured that the specific health needs and experiences of those with learning disabilities and mental health issues were communicated to the local NHS leaders and Integrated Care System, prompting tailored healthcare responses.



# Darlington Organisations Together (DOT) Network



The Darlington Organisations Together Network (DOT), facilitated by Healthwatch Darlington, meets on a quarterly basis and has made significant strides over the past year, enhancing collaboration among local organisations and improving the health and wellbeing of the Darlington community.

## Strengthened Community Collaboration

DOT has successfully brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including:

- **139 Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Organisations:** These organisations have joined forces to share resources, knowledge, and best practices.
- **38 Individuals:** Engaged community members not connected to any group, contributing their unique perspectives and support.
- **Total Contacts:** Over 280 contacts, fostering a broad network of collaboration and mutual support.

"We really enjoy attending the DOT network, it's friendly, informative and a great way to find out what else is going on in Darlington. Healthwatch Darlington's weekly newsletter also keeps us updated in between meetings and we know we can send them all our news, events and updates for publishing each week for free!"

## Weekly E-Newsletter

To keep our network connected and informed, we have a weekly e-newsletter featuring:

- **Spotlight on Organisations:** Highlighting the work of different member organisations each week, showcasing their achievements and initiatives to the broader community.
- **Events and Information:** Sharing upcoming events, training opportunities, and important information from across the network, ensuring all members stay informed and engaged.
- **Information and Signposting:** Providing detailed information and signposting to the vast array of health, care, and wellbeing resources available within the community serving as a crucial tool for raising awareness and connecting residents with the support they need.



## Looking Ahead:

The achievements of the Darlington Organisations Together Network over the past year are a testament to the power of collaboration and the dedication of our member organisations. Together, we have made a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of Darlington residents.

Healthwatch Darlington is proud to support and facilitate the DOT network, and we look forward to continuing this vital work in the coming year. Healthwatch Darlington remains dedicated to ensuring that DOT continues to thrive and make a positive difference in our community. Thank you to all our partners, volunteers, and community members for your ongoing support and commitment.

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# Vaping in Darlington: Why Young People Are Hooked and What We Can Do About It

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## Summary:

Imagine this: in Darlington, nearly half of the young people you know might be vaping daily, citing reasons like stress relief, peer influence, or simply the taste. Despite being aware of the health risks and its addictive nature, they continue. Recent measures to curb youth vaping, including bans on disposable vapes and restricting flavours, are a step in the right direction, but there's more to the story.

## The Vaping Surge:

Vaping among young people in Darlington is on the rise, even as cigarette smoking declines. Healthwatch Darlington conducted a comprehensive survey of local youths aged 14 to 25 to understand why this trend is growing and what can be done to address it.

## Government and Community Actions:

The government has announced several measures to combat youth vaping, such as banning disposable vapes and introducing plain packaging to make these products less appealing to children. Local efforts by Darlington Borough Council and Durham Constabulary have also targeted businesses illegally selling vapes to minors

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# Vaping in Darlington: continued.....

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## Key Findings:

- **Who Vapes and Why:** Over half of the respondents vape, with reasons ranging from trying to quit smoking, managing stress, to social influences and the appeal of flavours.
  - **Health Perceptions:** Less than half believe vaping is safer than smoking, yet many are worried about its long-term health effects.
  - **Economic Factors:** Most young vapers fund their habit through work, with corner shops being the primary source for purchasing vapes.
  - **Addiction:** A significant portion find it hard to quit vaping due to its addictive nature.
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## Recommendations:

### Education and Awareness:

- Implement educational programmes highlighting the risks of vaping.
- Increase awareness through schools, youth organizations, and community centres.

### Policy Development:

- Advocate for stricter age verification and marketing restrictions.
- Support bans on disposable vapes and flavoured vape products to reduce appeal.

### Community and Parental Engagement:

- Encourage parental and caregiver involvement in discussions about vaping risks.
- Develop peer support initiatives to help young people make informed choices.

### Enforcement and Compliance:

- Monitor and enforce compliance with existing regulations, targeting retailers that sell to minors.
- Conduct mystery shopping to ensure adherence to ID checks.

## Outcomes and Next Steps:

With insights garnered, we are working with Darlington Borough Council Public Health Team, and schools and colleges, about the prevalence and drivers of youth vaping. Targeted interventions and educational campaigns are also proposed to address misconceptions, curb accessibility, and provide support for cessation among youth, safeguarding their health and well-being.



## 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:**

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Helping people access NHS dentistry
- Supporting people to look after their health during the cost-of-living crisis



# Making a Difference Through Listening

**Healthwatch Darlington is dedicated to ensuring that individuals in the community are heard and supported in their healthcare needs.**

**Our mission is to provide a compassionate ear and a helping hand to those navigating the often complex and frustrating health and social care system.**

As part of our statutory duties, we prioritise listening to local residents, gathering their invaluable feedback to influence and improve the delivery of health and social care services.

We serve as a steadfast advocate, amplifying the voices of the community to drive positive change.

By actively listening and responding to the concerns and experiences of individuals, we empower residents to shape the future of healthcare provision in Darlington.

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# A Call for Help: Navigating Desperation and Isolation

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Our team received a call from a lady who was experiencing severe depression. She shared that she had been feeling increasingly desperate as she was being passed from one service to another without receiving the help she needed. Each interaction left her feeling more isolated and unheard, as though she was being passed from pillar to post.

## **Intervention:**

Recognizing her distress, one of our team members took the time to truly listen to her story. We understood that in her vulnerable state, simply having someone to talk to and acknowledge her feelings was crucial. By providing a compassionate and attentive ear, we aimed to offer her some relief and validation.

## **Outcome:**

The next day, we received a phone call from the same lady. She expressed her heartfelt gratitude for the time and attention she received. She explained that just being listened to had made a significant difference in her outlook. The acknowledgment of her struggles and the empathy she felt provided her with a sense of hope and support that had been missing in her previous interactions with various services.

## **Conclusion:**

This case highlights the profound impact that listening and providing emotional support can have on individuals facing mental health challenges. At Healthwatch Darlington, we are committed to ensuring that everyone in our community feels heard, supported, and valued. This experience reinforces the importance of our role in bridging the gap between individuals and the care they need, starting with the simple yet powerful act of listening.

## **Contact Us:**

If you or someone you know is struggling and feels unheard, please reach out to Healthwatch Darlington. We are here to listen and help navigate the health and social care system. Your voice matters to us.



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

 01325 380145/07525 237723

 [info@healthwatchdarlington.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchdarlington.co.uk)



# Volunteering

**We're supported by a team of amazing volunteers who are at the heart of what we do. 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 their local Healthwatch and what we have to offer
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views
- Carried out enter and view visits to local services to help them improve
- Helped in the office with administration and research



*I volunteered with Healthwatch Darlington when they came out with the Vaping Survey, so I joined their Youthwatch because it was a subject I am interested in and feel I could have provided useful information because my friends vape. I can give something back to the local community and I like to know that I am being listened to.*

**Will - Volunteer**



# 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	
Annual grant from Government	£76,709	Expenditure on pay	£104,606
Additional income	£156,572	Acting broker payments to other Healthwatch for projects	£100,646
		Office and management fees	£14, 886
<b>Total income</b>	<b>£233,281</b>	<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>£220,138</b>



## Additional income is broken down by:

- £22,594 received from Darlington Borough Council for work on specific projects.
- £94,445 received from the local ICS for joint work on a projects (see below).
- £39,000 received from local NHS Foundation Trust
- £533 funding received from Healthwatch England for a specific project.

## ICS funding

Healthwatch across the North East and North Cumbria also receives funding from our Integrated Care System (ICS) to support new areas of collaborative work at this level. specific funding including brokerage for Healthwatch Darlington included:

Purpose of ICS funding	Amount
Coordination and engagement Growing Older Project including broker of funds for other Healthwatch partners	£90,000.00
Waiting Well Project	£250.00
Integrated Care System Inclusion Project	£1000.00
ICB Core Funding	£1875.00
ICB Dentist	£520.00
REN – Be Part of Research	£800.00

## 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 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. Women's Health and Sexual Abuse** – Many survivors of sexual abuse face barriers to accessing the healthcare they need, including stigma, lack of trauma-informed care, and insufficient service integration. This project aims to address these issues by ensuring survivors' voices are central to the development and delivery of local healthcare services.
- 2. Mental Health:** We have established a Mental Health Network to facilitate collaboration, communication, and partnership working among key stakeholders involved in mental health services within Darlington. Our aim is to improve the mental health and emotional wellbeing of Darlington residents over the next year, aligning with local and national plans. Good mental health and wellbeing are vital to any community, and it's our collective responsibility to provide necessary support.
- 3. Wheelchair Users:** To engage with wheelchair users in Darlington who have been experiencing prolonged delays in receiving their wheelchairs, identify their issues, and advocate for timely and effective solutions by liaising with relevant stakeholders within the NHS and the local authority.



## Statutory statements

Healthwatch Darlington Limited, c/o Tandem Hub, Morton Park Business Training Centre, Yarm Road, Darlington, DL1 4PJ, 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**

Our Healthwatch Board consists of five members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny of our activities. Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2023/24, the Board met 10 times and made decisions on matters such as employing new staff members and agreeing annual business, project and action plans.

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

## **Responses to recommendations**

We did not have any providers who did not respond to requests for information or recommendations. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to Healthwatch England Committee, so no resulting reviews or investigations.

## **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.

In our local authority area, for example, we take information to: The Health and Wellbeing Board, Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee, Public Health Darlington, Integrated Care Board Place Committee, Voluntary Sector Steering Group, Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Mental Health Trust Urgent Care, Darlington Locality Oversight Group, County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust Board and North East Ambulance Service.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System and we also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

# Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Darlington is represented on the South Integrated Care Partnership by Rebecca Morgan, Project Development Officer, Pioneering Care Partnership,, and the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board by Christopher Akers-Belcher, Chief Executive Office, Healthwatch Hartlepool.

Healthwatch Darlington is represented on the Darlington Health and Wellbeing Board by Chief Executive Officer Michelle Thompson B.E.M. who is also the Vice Chair. During 2023/24 Michelle has effectively carried out this role by her involvement in the following key activities centred around improving the health and wellbeing of the local population and reducing health inequalities.


- 1. Development of the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy:** The board worked on creating a plan to take care of people's health and wellbeing in Darlington from before they're born to the end of their lives. This plan also focused on finding and fixing any unfair differences in health between different groups of people in the area.
- 2. System Leadership and Collaboration:** The board took the lead in getting different health services, public health initiatives, and social care services to work together better. They also had a say in important decisions about how health services are organized and run to make sure everything fits together well.
- 3. Addressing Wider Determinants of Health:** The board understood that things like how much money people have, where they live, and how educated they are can affect their health. They worked on projects and teamed up with others to tackle these issues and make sure everyone has a fair chance at good health.
- 4. Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment:** As part of their responsibilities, the board made sure that people in Darlington had access to the medicines and healthcare products they needed. This helped to make sure everyone in the area could stay healthy.



# healthwatch

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