



Overview Report 2024-2025

Raising Voices Together

This report gives an overview of the diverse work that the Healthwatch NENC network has been involved in throughout the year.

Working together for change

Introduction to the work between the NENC ICB and Healthwatch

Throughout 2024 -2025 The Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Healthwatch have worked together to build robust relationships to improve health and wellbeing for everyone in our communities. This partnership aims to:

- **Enhance Health Services:** By working together, the ICB can better understand and address the health needs of our communities.
- **Promote Wellbeing:** The collaboration focuses on creating opportunities that support improved wellbeing, including mental health, physical health, and social care.
- **Reduce Health Inequalities:** The partnership aims to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, has access to quality health services.
- **Engage the Community:** Healthwatch ensures feedback gathered from the public is escalated appropriately to help the ICB make informed decisions about health and care services.
- **Innovate and Improve:** Together, support the development of new and better ways to deliver health care, making it more efficient and effective.

This partnership is a significant step towards healthier, fairer, and more inclusive communities.



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Our goal is to make sure people's experiences with health and care services are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level and help influence decisions made about health and care services.

A collaborative network of local Healthwatch:



Building a Strong Healthwatch Network

We formed a network of 14 local Healthwatch groups to improve health and care services both regionally and nationally.

Funding from our Integrated Care Board helped us build strong, meaningful relationships within this network, consistently adding value to the design of health and care services.

We have representatives from our network on local and regional strategic boards. These boards have robust reporting structures that support coordinated and effective engagement with our communities.

Our collaborative approach is recognised nationally as best practice.



Claire Riley, OBE
Chief Corporate
Services Officer,
NENC ICB

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Putting People at the Heart of Health and Care

Healthwatch makes sure your voice is heard where it matters most—at every level of the NHS and care system.

We're proud to have a seat at the table in key decision-making groups across our region, including:

- Integrated Care Board (ICB)
- Strategic Integrated Care Partnership
- Quality and Safety Committee
- Primary Care Sub Committee
- Healthy and Fairer Advisory Group
- Patient Voice Group
- System Quality Group
- Equality and Diversity Forums
- Ethics Committee
- Digital Inclusion Steering Group
- All Ages Continuing Care Strategic Transformation Group
- Area ICP Meetings

Our **Regional Co-ordinator** and **Sub-Regional Leads** play a vital role in connecting local Healthwatch teams with system leaders. They:

- Share intelligence and case studies from across the region
- Ensure local voices influence regional decisions
- Help spot trends and emerging issues
- Support consistent, joined-up working across the system

At these meetings, we've raised important issues such as:

- The need for **accessible information standards** to ensure everyone can understand and use health services
- Improving **annual health checks for people with learning disabilities**
- Highlighting gaps in access, communication, and support across different communities

We're independent, trusted, and deeply connected to the people we serve. That means we can:

- Raise concerns early
- Share important health messages clearly
- Help make care better, fairer, and more focused on what people need

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Work carried out during 2024 – 2025:



Integrated Care Strategy

We received over 400 responses during our engagement period.

A review of the feedback showed that children and young people were under-represented.

Impact:

The ICB added a fourth goal: **"Giving children and young people the best start in life."** This goal increases the focus on people of all ages throughout the strategy.

ICB Involvement Strategy



Refreshing the ICB Involvement Strategy

Healthwatch spoke with over 100 people to help update the ICB Involvement Strategy.

Impact:

Based on their feedback, the ICB has updated its principles to include:

- Meaningful involvement
- Removing barriers
- Listening to feedback

We also helped create a shorter, easier-to-read document and a workplan based on these new principles, including ways to measure success.



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Access to dental care



Listening to People's Dental Care Challenges

Over 3,800 people shared their views with us.

We engaged with people across the region to understand the difficulties they face in accessing dental services. We used various methods, including surveys, mystery shopping, general conversations, and one-on-one interviews at Darlington Urgent Dental Access Centre (UDAC).

The ICB has provided the following response

Improving access to dentistry will not be a quick fix but we are working on it, our key focus areas are;

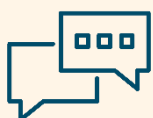
- Stabilising services – additional investment including incentivised access, additional dental out of hours treatment capacity and dental clinical assessment workforce/triage capacity.
- Funding available to deliver a new model of dental care via Urgent Dental Access Centres and provide additional general dental access.
- Working with 'at risk' practices to identify and address financial issues of delivering NHS dental care.
- Working with local dental networks and NHS England North East Workforce Training and Education Directorate to improve recruitment, retention, training and education across the region.
- Developing an oral health strategy to improve oral health and reduce the pressure on dentistry.

We are continuing to work closely with the ICB as new ways of working are developed.



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The big conversation: Women's Health



Listening to Women's Health Needs

We spoke to nearly 4,500 people and held six focus groups with women who face extra health challenges. We wanted to understand what matters most to them and their priorities.

What We Learned:

- Mental health and wellbeing
- Healthy ageing and long-term conditions (like bone, joint, and muscle health)
- Menopause, perimenopause, and hormone replacement therapy
- Screening services (like cervical, breast, bowel, and cancer screenings)
- Menstrual and gynaecological health

Impact:

We're now working with our partners to create a "Woman's Promise." This will help women, health professionals, and others understand and support women's health needs and rights.

Change NHS:



We supported engagement for the NHS 10 Year Strategy, delivering over 17 workshops throughout North East & North Cumbria including people from an ethnic minority, people with a learning disability and/or autism and young people.



Our commitment to working in partnership with Healthwatch and being open and transparent in our interactions will continue. We value greatly the contribution of the partnership across the region. We should all be rightly proud of what we have achieved to date, and I look forward to seeing this work progress as we enter the next phase of the ICB.



Sam Allen, Chief Executive at North East and North Cumbria ICB

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North East Ambulance Service clinical strategy engagement:



Gathering Feedback to Improve NEAS Services

Over 1,700 people shared their valuable feedback. 12 Healthwatch groups in the North East, along with VONNE, engaged with the public and patients as part of the NEAS clinical strategy review. This work will be ongoing throughout 2025-2026.

Key Strengths:

Compassionate and professional staff	Community involvement
Patient Transport Services	Effective emergency care

Areas for Improvement:

Response times	Mental health support
Communication transparency	Resource and staffing limitation
Coordination with other services	

Raising Voices Together:



To showcase the work carried out by the NENC Healthwatch network, all 14 local Healthwatch came together. We shared experiences and learning, highlighting how local engagement has made an impact both regionally and nationally. This gathering helped strengthen relationships, with a commitment to continue collaborative efforts.

Claire Riley, OBE, Chief Corporate Services Officer, emphasized that our efforts have ensured that citizen voices are embedded within the ICB at every level of decision-making. She stressed the importance of involving and engaging with communities in any changes and developments. Claire also highlighted the need for consistent, long-term funding to build on our success and ensure people's voices are heard and acted upon.

Chris McCann, Deputy CEO of Healthwatch England, supported Claire's views on the power of the network. He expressed the ambition for Healthwatch nationally to develop strong systems of work, using NENC Healthwatch as a model for best practice.

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“The effective way that Healthwatch Network has engaged with the North East and North Cumbria ICB is extremely impressive. By working with other Healthwatch across their ICB footprint in establishing strong relationships within their ICB, they have ensured that the voice of the public is heard at every level of decision making in their region.

“They are to be commended on their exemplary approach which means that views of users, families and carers are taken into account by health and social care partners across the North East and North Cumbria ICS.”

Chris McCann, Deputy Chief Executive,
Healthwatch England.”



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Developing Our Shared Values Across Our NENC Network

We know the importance of collaboration, together we created these values by talking, listening, and learning from each other. Everyone has a voice—our team, our partners, and the people we support. These values are important to us because they reflect what we believe in and how we want to work: with kindness, honesty, and a real drive to make things better for everyone.

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.

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What's Next?

Newcastle University asked the Healthwatch NENC network to help with a funding bid to research NHS workforce shortages. These shortages affect staff wellbeing and patient care, especially in underserved areas.

The Healthwatch Network agreed to be a co-applicant for the bid to the National Institute for Health & Social Care Research (NIHR). In 2024, we were thrilled to learn that our bid was successful! We now have a £5 million NIHR Workforce Research Partnership, led by Newcastle University's Medical Education team, to tackle this urgent issue.

Our Focus:

Primary care and maternity services in remote and deprived areas, where staff face intense pressure and fewer resources.

Our Approach:

We are working directly with staff, patients, educators, and policy leaders to co-design solutions that make a real difference.

This Partnership Includes:

- Researchers from Newcastle, Northumbria, Oxford, Birmingham, and York
- NHS leaders and Integrated Care Boards
- Healthwatch and public advisors
- Design experts to turn insights into action

Our Goals:

- Better working conditions
- Reduced staff turnover
- Improved care in underserved areas
- Smarter, more inclusive workforce planning

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Shaping Outcomes Together

These outcomes won't be decided from the top down. Instead, they'll be shaped through ongoing collaboration with those delivering and receiving care.

Partnership Details:

- The Partnership will run for 5 years, and we'll share our learning along the way.
- If you work in primary care, maternity, or workforce planning, or live in an underserved area, contact the Healthwatch Network to get involved.
- Look out for the launch of the Partnership's social media in the coming months.

Special Thanks:

A huge thanks to our amazing co-leads, Professor Gill Vance and Dr. Bryan Burford, whose leadership and commitment have brought this Partnership to life.

Read more about the Partnership launch here: [Multi-million-pound investment tackling healthcare workforce challenge](#)



“Underserved areas are likely to be on the sharp end of challenges to workforce sustainability, and so are priorities for research.”

Professor Gill Vance



Next Steps: Stronger Together

As we move forward, we're committed to strengthening our partnerships with other local Healthwatch teams—because when we raise voices together, we're louder, clearer, and more powerful. By working as one, we can escalate the issues that matter most and push for change that benefits communities across our region.

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