



Beyond the Front Desk

Listening to GP Reception Staff Across North East and Cumbria

July 2026



Beyond the Front Desk

LISTENING TO GP RECEPTION STAFF ACROSS NORTH EAST AND CUMBRIA

On 2 July 2026, the Healthwatch North East and North Cumbria network brought together GP reception staff from across the region to share their experiences of working on the frontline of primary care.

Drawing on established and trusted relationships built over many years with GP practices, communities and system partners, Healthwatch was able to engage reception staff from across North East and North Cumbria and create a supportive environment where people felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly and honestly.

The workshop was delivered by Professor Anthony Montgomery, Professor of Occupational and Organisational Psychology, and facilitated by Healthwatch colleagues from across the NENC network.

Developed in partnership with Workforce Voices and the NIHR Partnership for Workforce Sustainability, the event combined the research expertise of the NIHR team with Healthwatch's experience in engagement, participation and creating trusted spaces where people feel heard.

This workshop forms part of a wider five-year NIHR Partnership for Workforce Sustainability programme, which is exploring how we recruit, retain and support a resilient workforce in underserved communities. Healthwatch was invited to support the programme because of its established relationships with communities, staff and system partners, and its ability to engage people whose voices can often be underrepresented in traditional research activity.

Through trusted relationships, local knowledge and expertise in community inclusion and engagement, the Healthwatch NENC network helps ensure lived experience remains at the heart of this work, connecting staff, patients, communities, researchers and system partners to shape practical solutions for the future.

‘I can’t get past the receptionist.’

Healthwatch frequently hears from patients about difficulties accessing appointments, navigating services and communicating with their GP practice. Comments such as "I can't get past the receptionist" are familiar

across our communities. Behind every appointment request, prescription query, eConsult and telephone call, however, is another perspective that is less often heard.

This workshop provided an opportunity to better understand that perspective, giving voice to staff from practices and organisations across North East and North Cumbria and ensuring the conversation reflected the realities of general practice across the region.

"We're human too."

A phrase shared during the workshop that captured the reality of working on the frontline of general practice. Behind every call, appointment request, prescription query and patient interaction is a member of staff balancing compassion, professionalism and increasing demand.



WHAT WE HEARD

Reception staff described roles that extend far beyond answering phones and booking appointments.

Every day they are expected to:

- Manage high volumes of calls and enquiries
- Support patients to access appointments and services
- Process prescriptions and patient requests
- Help people complete eConsults and online forms
- Respond to vulnerable, distressed and anxious patients
- Navigate multiple digital systems and processes
- Manage conflict and deal with abuse
- Balance patient need, clinical priorities and limited capacity

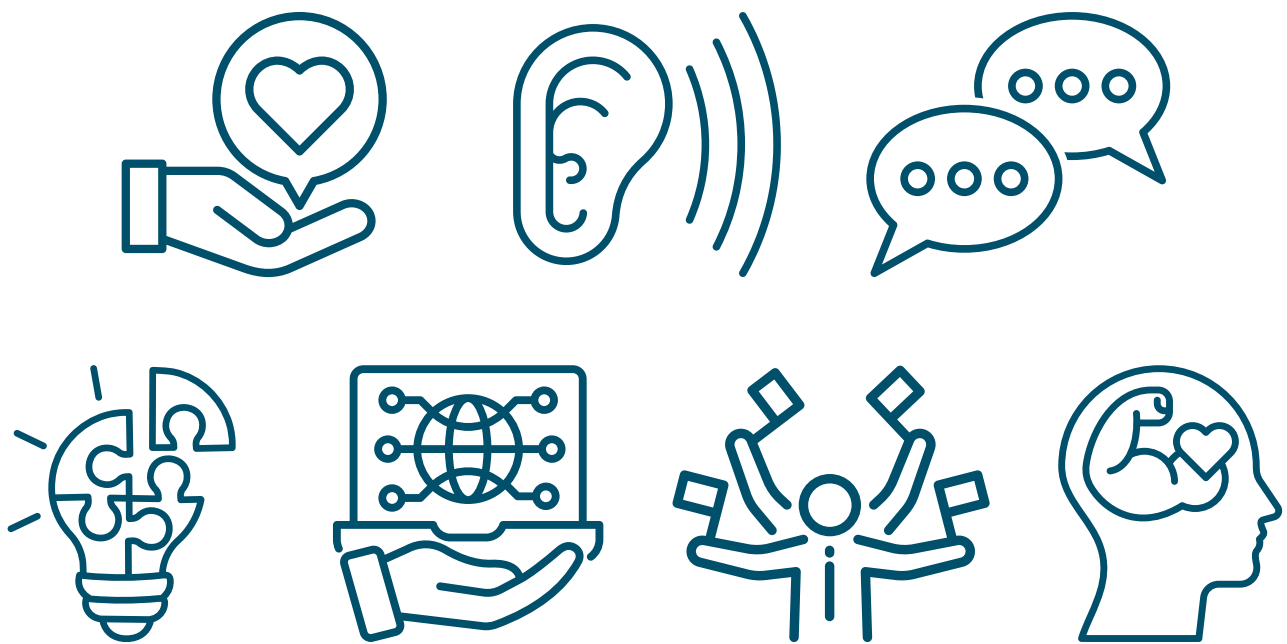
Participants spoke openly about moving from one difficult conversation to the next, often absorbing frustration created by pressures elsewhere in the system.



THE HIDDEN SKILLS BEHIND THE ROLE

The workshop challenged common perceptions about reception work. Participants described the wide range of skills required to do the job effectively, including:

- Empathy and compassion
- Active listening
- Communication and de-escalation
- Problem solving
- Digital confidence
- Multi-tasking
- Emotional resilience



Many felt these skills are often overlooked, despite their importance in helping patients access care and supporting the smooth operation of practices.

At a time of increasing demand and changing ways of working, there was recognition that reception staff are a crucial part of the primary care workforce. If primary care is to be sustainable and fit for the future, investment in these skills and the people behind them will be essential.

DIGITAL ACCESS AND SUPPORTING PATIENTS

The discussion also explored digital access and the growing use of online systems such as eConsult.

Reception staff described spending significant amounts of time helping patients navigate digital processes, supporting those who lack confidence, and finding ways to ensure people are not excluded from accessing care.

The group highlighted the importance of:

- Raising awareness of how eConsult works
- Supporting people to develop confidence using digital systems
- Ensuring appropriate support is available for those who need help accessing online services
- Recognising the additional pressures placed on reception teams when digital support is unavailable

Participants agreed that digital services can support access, but only when patients are given the information and support needed to use them effectively.

These discussions closely align with wider conversations about Neighbourhood Health and the future direction of health and care services, recognising that technology should support people rather than create additional barriers to care.

‘...technology should support people rather than create additional barriers to care.’



RECEPTION STAFF WANT TO BE PART OF THE CONVERSATION

One of the strongest messages from the day was how much reception staff valued being asked for their views.

Many described the workshop as one of the best events they had attended. They spoke positively about having the time and space to reflect on their role, share experiences with peers and contribute to a conversation that recognised the realities of working on the frontline of primary care.

Importantly, participants did not just want to talk about the challenges they face. They were keen to stay involved, contribute ideas and help shape future workforce development.

The positive feedback received after the event reinforced the value of creating dedicated space for frontline staff to share experiences, learn from one another and contribute to wider conversations about primary care.

One participant told us:

"Really loved the session – thank you so much for having me."

6

Many described the workshop as one of the best events they had attended.



RECEPTION STAFF WANT TO BE PART OF THE CONVERSATION

Another attendee reflected:

"It was very interesting and so worth taking part. It raised such important issues and was really good to speak about. I think it should be something everyone should have the opportunity to attend."

Others spoke about the confidence and reassurance they took away from the day:

"I left the event feeling like I had more confidence and that it's not just my workplace that has its challenges. I felt the team truly understood and acknowledged just how challenging and important my role is."

"Thank you for the invite to go to this event. I'm only six months into my role, so I found this very beneficial. I always feel really nervous about group sessions, but I felt comfortable quickly as everyone attending the session and the team leading the event were approachable and easy to speak with."

There was a strong sense throughout the day that the people doing these roles every day have valuable insight that should help inform future thinking about primary care, patient access and workforce support.

"I felt the team truly understood and acknowledged just how challenging and important my role is."

WHY THIS MATTERS

At Healthwatch, we often hear from patients about their experiences of accessing GP services. This workshop provided an opportunity to hear directly from the people supporting patients every day, helping to build a fuller understanding of the challenges facing primary care and where improvements are needed.

The event demonstrated the power of partnership working. Healthwatch's trusted relationships and engagement expertise, combined with the research expertise of Workforce Voices and the NIHR Partnership for Workforce Sustainability, created a unique opportunity for frontline staff to share their experiences and help shape future workforce development.

The workshop showed the strength of the Healthwatch network in reaching frontline staff, creating trusted spaces for discussion and ensuring lived experience informs future thinking, service development and workforce planning.

It also demonstrated the unique role Healthwatch can play in bringing together communities, patients, frontline staff, researchers and system partners.

The success of the workshop was built on trust, collaboration and a shared commitment to ensuring lived experience informs future thinking, service development and workforce planning.

‘The event demonstrated what can be achieved when organisations work together.’



THANK YOU

We would like to thank all of the reception staff and primary care colleagues who attended and contributed so openly and honestly to the discussion.

We would also like to recognise the GP practices and organisations that supported this work by giving staff the time and opportunity to attend. Their commitment to workforce development, staff wellbeing and service improvement helped make these conversations possible.

Practices and organisations represented included:

- Alnwick Medical Group – Northumberland
- Marine Medical Group, Blyth – Northumberland
- Glenpark & Teams Medical Services – Gateshead
- Skerne Medical Group – Stockton-on-Tees
- Grosvenor House Surgery, Carlisle – Cumberland
- South Carlisle Healthcare – Cumberland
- IJ Healthcare – Harraton and Springwell House – Sunderland
- Victoria Road Health Centre – Sunderland
- Clifton Court Medical Practice – Darlington

Attendees travelled from across Northumberland, Gateshead, Newcastle, Stockton-on-Tees, Cumberland, Sunderland and Darlington, bringing a range of perspectives from urban, rural and coastal communities across North East and North Cumbria.

Several organisations chose to send more than one member of staff, demonstrating the value they place on workforce development, peer learning and improving patient experience.

We look forward to continuing to work with practices, reception teams and partners as this programme develops.



LOOKING AHEAD

The workshop highlighted the value of creating space for frontline staff to share their experiences and contribute to conversations about the future of primary care.

The insight gathered has provided a strong foundation for future work around workforce wellbeing, workforce development and patient experience. It also reinforces the importance of ensuring frontline voices help shape emerging Neighbourhood Health models and the ambitions set out within the NHS 10-Year Health Plan.

Healthwatch NENC looks forward to continuing to work alongside Workforce Voices, Professor Anthony Montgomery, research colleagues and the NIHR Partnership for Workforce Sustainability as this programme develops.

Most importantly, participants told us they want to stay involved.

This report is not the end of a conversation, but the beginning of a longer-term commitment to listening, learning and working together to help shape a primary care workforce that is supported, resilient and fit for the future.





healthwatch
North East and North Cumbria