



# Speaking up for better care

Healthwatch Sunderland annual report  
2025-2026

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**Acting Chief Executive**  
Chris McCann  
Healthwatch England

“

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

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

# A message from our chair

This report sets out the priorities we have focused on this last year and the progress we have made with them.

Through regular engagement with a wide range of community groups, we identified families facing challenges as a result of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, often not visible to the system. As a result, a system-wide working group to address these issues is to be introduced.

Having previously undertaken a survey to identify what people understood about when and how to access local social care services, it was clear that many people were not aware. They were also not aware of the range of support available. As a result, we produced a booklet explaining all of this and made it widely available.

We have continued to work in collaboration with the other 13 Healthwatch bodies within our Integrated Care Board (ICB) area, leading to at scale intelligence about key issues. This included researching how people feel about discussing death, dying and the care they would want for themselves or their loved ones. With over 2,000 responses, clear public priorities were identified and will inform how the ICB will implement the new national modern service framework expected later this year.

And finally, I want to thank the Advisory Board, staff team and volunteers for their continued commitment to the work of Healthwatch Sunderland over the last year and their plan to continue this year as well as preparing for the future transfer.



**Chair, Healthwatch  
Sunderland**  
Debbie Burnicle



**“2025–2026 has been a turbulent year for us, with the unexpected Government announcement in June that both Healthwatch nationally and all local bodies will cease. Subject to the law changing, functions are due to transfer to NHS Integrated Care Boards and local Councils by April 2027. Yet despite this difficult environment, I am proud of how the staff, Advisory Board and volunteers continued to focus on making a local difference last year.”**

# A message from our CEO

2025–2026 has been a year of achievement alongside significant uncertainty for Healthwatch Sunderland. Following the Government’s announcement in June to abolish Healthwatch England and local Healthwatch, with functions expected to transfer by April 2027, the sector has entered a period of transition. Despite this, our focus has remained clear: ensuring the voices of people in Sunderland continue to influence and improve health and care services, with a key focus on working hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Over the past year, we have worked closely with Sunderland City Council and system partners to prepare for potential changes, contributing to early discussions and helping shape future arrangements. Throughout this, we have maintained our commitment to delivering meaningful impact for local people.

Pioneering Care Partnership (PCP) is proud to host and lead Healthwatch Sunderland, and our team has worked tirelessly to seek and listen to views. This report demonstrates the strength of the impact Sunderland Healthwatch has. Supporting over 2,400 people to share their experiences or access advice, ensuring local insight continues to drive improvement. One powerful example is our work with families affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, where sustained engagement helped re-establish a system-wide working group, ensuring lived experience informs future services.

I would like to thank our Chair, Debbie Burnicle, for her leadership, alongside our Advisory Board for their guidance and oversight. My sincere thanks also go to our dedicated staff team and our volunteers, who contributed over 600 hours this year, bringing invaluable insight from across our communities.



**Chief Executive, PCP**  
Carol Gaskarth



**“As we look ahead, we will continue to focus on what matters most: listening to people, amplifying their voices and influencing meaningful change. The future structure of Healthwatch may evolve, however the need for a strong, independent voice for local people has never been greater. We remain committed to ensuring that this voice continues to be heard, now and into the future.”**

# About us

Healthwatch Sunderland is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS and social care leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



## Our vision

To bring closer the day when everyone gets the care they need.



## Our mission

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



## Our values are:

**Equity:** We're compassionate and inclusive. We build strong connections and empower the communities we serve.

**Collaboration:** We build internal and external relationships. We communicate clearly and work with partners to amplify our influence.

**Impact:** We're ambitious about creating change for people and communities. We're accountable to those we serve and hold others to account.

**Independence:** Our agenda is driven by the public. We're a purposeful, critical friend to decision-makers.

**Truth:** We work with integrity and honesty, and we speak truth to power.

# Our year in numbers

In 2025–2026 we supported more than 2,419 people to have their say and get information about their care. We employed 4 staff and our work was supported by 20 volunteers.



## Reaching out:

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

1,424 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as how to make a complaint and finding an NHS dentist. Our information and advice website pages were also visited on more than 12,000 occasions.



## Championing your voice:

We published 3 reports about the improvements people would like to see in areas like NHS dentistry, adult social care services, and women's health.

Our most popular report was Health and Care – Where to go for what, highlighting people's struggles in navigating the support available through adult social care.



## Statutory funding:

We're funded by Sunderland City Council. In 2025–2026 we received £180,588.

# A year of making a difference

Over the year we've been out and about in the community listening to your stories, engaging with partners and working to improve care in Sunderland. Here are a few highlights.

## Spring

Our work in connecting local community groups with visits from health and care professionals has empowered individuals to receive the necessary information and have their questions answered.



Cancer services at Sunderland Royal Hospital received a Star Award due to the consistently positive feedback from patients about the kind and caring support they receive from the staff.



## Summer

We collaborated with our local Children's Services to gather feedback on their Family Hubs. Insight is being used to ensure that the services offered accurately represent and continue to support families in Sunderland.



Our booklet, "Support for Memory Difficulties or Dementia," has been accessed hundreds of times online and we've distributed 500 paper copies to help local people find essential Information.



## Autumn

One of our Youthwatch volunteers contributed as young person evaluator and supported the local NHS by sharing their lived experience during the procurement process for a local LGBTQ mental health service.



We consulted with local people on draft communications designed to inform them about the Pharmacy First service. The feedback we gathered helped shape advertisements to better suit the local population.



## Winter

Following feedback we shared on the difficulties faced by families of those with FASD, a cross system working group to address issues has been set up and will involve those with lived experiences.



We assisted patients from three local GP practices in voicing their opinions on a potential merger of the practices. We shared their questions and concerns, ensuring this input was taken into account by the decision-makers.



# Working together for change

We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in North East and North Cumbria are heard at the Integrated Board (ICB) level, and they influence decisions made about services across this area.

This year, some of the work we have collectively achieved includes the following:

## Primary Care Access



Along with 13 other local Healthwatch, we supported the rollout of Modern General Practice Access. As changes were introduced, we helped to raise awareness and learned from over 300 local people what works well and what doesn't. People told us they welcome more choice, including the NHS App, Pharmacy First and Extended Access appointments. Areas that need further work include a focus on clearer communications, more consistent offers, accessible information from day one and non-digital routes that work for everyone.

## Helping people understand winter care and pharmacy options



Working with our local ICB we supported work to understand whether information about winter care and pharmacy services was useful for local people. People told us while some messages were helpful, others were confusing or easy to miss, particularly for those who don't use digital channels. This insight helped the ICB identify effective messages and areas needing clarity, improving the sharing of winter and pharmacy information across the region.

## Listening on sensitive issues



Local Healthwatch supported system-led engagement to inform future palliative and end-of-life care planning across the region. Local Healthwatch engaged with those least likely to share their views on a topic that can be difficult and deeply personal and especially for those facing multiple disadvantages. We were able to do so by utilising existing trusted relationships with these individuals and creating safe and supportive environments to ensure that voices often missed were considered in future planning.

We've also summarised some of our other outcomes achieved this year in the Statutory Statements section at the end of this report.

# Making a difference in the community

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

## Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life



**Helping services better understand the issues people face.**

We assisted the local Hospital Trust to gather insights from family members and carers regarding their experiences of hospital discharge arrangements. The feedback collected has enabled the Trust's "Guiding You Home" team to create an action plan aimed at accelerating hospital discharges by coordinating health and care responses that support patients in returning home whenever possible.

## Getting services to involve the public



**By involving local people, services help improve care for everyone.**

We collaborated with local health and care service providers to ensure that the voices of patients, service users, and carers in Sunderland are being heard during the development and launch of the new Neighbourhood Health initiative. Our involvement is helping shape the system, ensuring that the perspectives of local people are incorporated as the initiative is developed and rolled out across the city.

## Improving care over time



**Change takes time. We work behind the scenes with services to bring about change.**

Following a request from a GP practice to help them identify improvements needed in their service access and appointment bookings, we worked with the patient group to engage with patients face-to-face. The insights gained resulted in well-received changes, including enhanced privacy in the reception area and better communication regarding the various ways patients can contact the practice.

# Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, we've listened to feedback from all areas of our community. People's experiences of care help us know what's working and what isn't, so we can give feedback on services and help them improve.



# Amplifying local families' voices to strengthen and improve services

**Last year, we championed the voices of families affected by Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD), ensuring their experiences were heard.**

After the system-wide working group ended, services overlooked local families' concerns in service provision, with negative impacts on their health and well-being.

## What did we do

We met with key partners across the local health and care system, raised concerns about the ongoing challenges families faced, and—supported by public health colleagues—escalated these issues to decision-makers. They agreed urgent action was needed.

## Key things we heard:

- FASD awareness is low among practitioners and service providers
- Insufficient support is available for people with FASD and their carers
- Public understanding is limited of FASD and its causes
- Unclear post-diagnosis pathways
- Occasional misdiagnosis
- Funding is limited for services to address these issues.

Our work showed that the health and care system wasn't equipped to support families, leading to the widening of health inequalities and leaving many unsure where to turn for help and support.

## What difference did this make?

After a year of sustained engagement, partners formed a new working group. This will include people with lived experience as equal members, ensuring families' voices are heard and services listen to and respond effectively.


# Improved sexual health services after young people speak out

## Children and young people say local sexual health education services need modernising

We spoke with several local youth groups, including those from the LGBTQ+ community, about the sexual health services and education provided in schools. Their feedback emphasised the need for improvements in testing and screening services, as well as making these services more inclusive of different sexual orientations.

### Key things we heard:

- The content used in educational and community settings was not clear enough and needed to be more engaging to allow for anonymous participation in sessions.
- Testing for sexually transmitted infections needs to be more discreet and accessible.
- The visibility and promotion of the service needs improvement, as they are not in the right locations and should be more inclusive.

 “The current messages and information in the presentations used in schools and colleges on sexual health don’t really apply to me as a young gay man.”

We worked alongside staff from the service and local young people to develop a new training package and an action plan to improve promotion and access to the services. Now, young people can access accurate, reliable information that is more inclusive and promoted in prominent places.

### What difference did this make?

Thanks to local young people speaking out, the local sexual health team is delivering sexual health education that is tailored to all young people, regardless of their sexuality. The newly developed sessions aim to encourage them to engage with and contribute to the sessions. We will also continue working with the local team to develop a new website and promotional materials that better support and represent the young people in our community who use the service.

# Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of Sunderland. That's why, over the past year, we've worked hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Every member of the community should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

## This year, we have reached different communities by:

- Listening to the voices of people who are less heard, by visiting community venues where they feel safe and supported.
- Visiting groups and activities being delivered across the most deprived areas of our city, to listen to people's feedback on services and support them through our information and signposting service.
- Sharing feedback from the general public with local service providers and commissioners, through our reports and attendance at strategic meetings.



# Improving understanding of support for carers within the Bangladeshi community

**We coordinated visits from the patient experience team at our local hospital trust to host information sharing sessions.**

Members of the local Bangladeshi community informed us that they were unaware that they could access support while visiting family members in the hospital as carers. We encouraged them to share their experiences with hospital staff and, based on these experiences, to suggest ideas for improvement.

## What difference did this make?

Attendees received important information about the support available, including how to access the Carers Passport and continue their involvement in caring for their loved ones. Participants now feel more confident in asking questions and requesting a passport. Additionally, hospital staff are better informed about areas that still need improvement, thanks to the feedback shared by carers.

## Supporting local families to navigate health services when needed

**Local families from some of the most deprived areas received information about the various NHS services available and how to access them**

Teachers at a local primary school reached out to us after noticing that many families of their pupils often struggle to navigate health services when they need assistance. To address this issue, we visited the school several times to talk with families and provide crucial information on where to seek help. We discussed resources such as Pharmacy First, Extended Access appointments, the Healthier Together app, and guidance on when to use urgent or emergency care.

## What difference did this make?

With the information provided, families feel more confident in accessing healthcare and are able to utilise the services that best meet their needs. This not only helps families obtain the right assistance on their first attempt, but it also supports local NHS services by reducing inappropriate usage.

# Information and signposting

When you're struggling to find an NHS dentist, looking for help about how to make a complaint, or need advice about a good care home for a loved one – we're your first port of call.

**This year 1,424 people contacted us directly for advice, support or help finding services. These conversations also help us to understand where, and how, your care can be made better. Our Information and advice website pages were also visited on more than 12,000 occasions.**

**This year, we've helped people by:**

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Supporting people to look after their health
- Signposting people to additional support services.



# Transport options for medical appointments

## Thanks to Nancy's feedback, information on transport options for medical appointments is now available

During a community engagement event, we spoke with a member of the public who shared that she has visited the hospital for several appointments. After the recent passing of her husband, who used to provide her with transportation, she was now facing significant taxi expenses.

In response, we decided to research alternative transportation options and created an information leaflet. This leaflet outlined available choices, including a 'Dial a Driver' service provided by a local charity, which the lady qualified for. To support others in similar situations, we have made this leaflet accessible to anyone who may need it.



"This information is wonderful, it will help me save so much money whilst still being able to safely get to my appointments on time."

## Improving systems for those with memory issues

### Following the feedback we shared, service providers have recognised that improvements are needed in how appointments are booked.

A woman contacted us about her sister, who was experiencing memory problems that affected her ability to work. After seeing her GP, she was referred to a memory protection clinic; however, she missed appointment messages due to her condition, delaying support and causing distress for the family.

When the family asked for help, they reached out to us. We escalated the situation to our contacts in the service, who arranged an appointment promptly and ensured the family did not need to restart the referral process.

This restored some reassurance for the patient and her family, and the service committed to strengthening the appointment process to reduce the risk of similar issues in the future.



"I'm not sure if this is a regular occurrence, but it seems like a significant gap in provision if this is the standard approach taken to referrals. I would hate it to happen to anyone else in the future."

# Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given over 600 hours to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in our community.

## This year, our volunteers:

- Visited communities to promote our work
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views
- Took part in service reviews and consultations to share their views and shape service delivery
- Carried out visits to local services to help them improve.



# At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think to helping raise awareness, our volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.



**Favour,  
Youthwatch Volunteer**

Favour joined us to enhance her communication skills and knowledge of the health and care sector as an A-Level student at the City of Sunderland College, with aspirations of pursuing a career in medicine.

“Volunteering with Healthwatch has helped boost my self-confidence and connect with people in my community. I’ve had some wonderful opportunities to volunteer and engage with others, which have been incredibly rewarding experiences.”

“After 43 years of working in health and social care, I was proud of the services provided in Sunderland, whilst also recognising there were still things to improve.

I wanted to enable every member of the community to have the chance to share their story and to play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

I also wanted to help local services to address health inequalities by listening to the patient voice.”



**Philip,  
Advisory Board and  
Engagement volunteer**

## Be part of the change.

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and find out how you can be part of the change.



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



(0191) 514 7145



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

# Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Sunderland City Council under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to help us do our work.

## Our income and expenditure:

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£180,588	Expenditure on pay	£120,565
Additional income	£5,150	Non-pay expenditure	£15,340
		Office and management fee	38,391
<b>Total income</b>	<b>£185,738</b>	<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>£174,296</b>

## Additional income is broken down into:

- £4,000 received from Integrated Care Board (ICB) for core work.
- £100 funding received from Sunderland City Council to support their work.
- £250 received from ICB to deliver focus groups on the WorkWell initiative.
- £300 from ICB to do joint work on a project promoting Primary Care Access.
- £350 received from ICB to deliver a workshop on Pharmacy First.
- £150 from NHS Health Innovation to deliver workshops.

# Finance and future priorities

**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 and social care 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. Hospital Discharge
2. Neighbourhood Health
3. Digital tools in health



# Statutory statements

## **Healthwatch Sunderland, The Co-op Centre, Hendon, Sunderland, SR2 8AH**

The organisation holding the Healthwatch Sunderland contract is the Pioneering Care Partnership (PCP). PCP is a multi-award-winning health and well-being charity operating across the North East.

For further information, please visit [www.pcp.uk.net](http://www.pcp.uk.net).

Registered Charity Number 1067888

Company Limited Number 3491237

Registered address: Pioneering Care Centre, Carer's Way, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, DL5 4SF © Pioneering Care Centre.

**Healthwatch Sunderland 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 Advisory Board consists of 9 members who volunteer to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities.

Our Advisory Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2025-2026, the Advisory Board met 4 times and made decisions on matters such as Neighbourhood Health and Hospital Discharge. The Advisory Board also held regular informal virtual sessions to aid development and communication. 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 2025-26, we have been available by phone and email, provided a web form on our website and through social media, and attended 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 and distribute it via our e-newsletter and social media platforms. It is also available in hard copy on request.

# Statutory statements

## Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences shared with us.

For example, in our local authority area, we take information to the Sunderland Safeguarding Adults Executive Board, South Tyneside & Sunderland Foundation Trust Patient Experience Group, Sunderland Place ICB Sub Committee and the Sunderland Health and Well-being Board.

We also take insights and experiences to decision-makers in the NENC Integrated Care Board. For example, local intelligence is collated across each of the four subregional areas and shared at area ICB meetings. At a regional level, the Healthwatch Regional Co-ordinator represents service-user voice from across the region at the NENC ICB Strategy meeting, Quality & Safety Committee, Primary Care Strategy & Delivery Sub-Committee, Healthy & Fairness Advisory Group, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion meetings and System Quality Group meetings. The network of local Healthwatch has also been commissioned to undertake additional research to ensure local opinions are represented in the ICB's work priorities. We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

## Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Sunderland is represented on the Sunderland Health and Well-being Board by Paul Weddle, Vice Chair.

During 2025-26, our representative has effectively carried out this role by working together with key leaders from the local health and care system to improve the health and well-being of our population and reduce health inequalities, especially through developing a shared understanding of the health and well-being needs of the community, allowing a public voice to be heard from comments received from the local community.

Healthwatch Sunderland is represented at the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board by Christopher Akers-Belcher, (Regional Co-ordinator for the NENC Healthwatch Network) and at sub-regional level within the network by Gail McGee (Central area Co-ordinator).

# Statutory statements

## 2025–2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Urgent and Emergency care	Provided members of the public with trusted and up to date information on how and when to access services.
GP patient engagement	Assisted three local GP practices in understanding patient experiences of accessing services in order to improve their offer.
WorkWell service	The ICB now has a clearer understanding of how to shape the WorkWell service to people’s real-life circumstances, especially for those balancing health, work, and caring responsibilities.
Extra Care	The Local Authorities Commissioning team now has a better understanding of what some tenants in 2 Gentoo managed Extra Care schemes think regarding the quality of their care and support, and whether it could be provided differently.
Youthwatch Summer Roadshow	Increased awareness among young people and their families of key health messages, including oral health, mental health and how best to access local services, etc.
Developing NHS Online	Contributed to the development of the new NHS Online by sharing regionally collected patient experience feedback, which will inform national digital health discussions.
Health and Care – navigating services	Supported the local Adult Services team to develop an action plan that aims to improve pathways into information, care and support for local people.
Where to go for what information booklet	Local people have access to information on how to access social care support.

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