



Annual Report 2024–2025

**Unlocking the power of
people-driven care**

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“The impact that local Healthwatch have is vitally important. Healthwatch are empowering their communities to share their experiences. They’re changing the health and care landscape and making sure that people’s views are central to making care better and tackling health inequalities.”

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive, Healthwatch England

A message from our chair

This year we set out to hear more from users of health and social care services in Northumberland whose voices we've heard less often in the past.

Thanks to the impressive efforts of our small but dedicated team of staff and volunteers, we were able to increase the number and locations of our regular listening events, hear more from younger people including in schools, and, by exercising our power to Enter and View, explore the experiences of residents living in care homes.

You can read more about all the projects undertaken and how the information has been fed back to commissioners and service providers in this review.

We were particularly delighted to receive over 25% more responses to our Annual Survey than the previous year. Overall, residents perceive the quality of services to be broadly the same as last year, with improvements in some areas and reductions in others.

Regrettably, competing demands on my diary means that I cannot devote the time that the team and agenda deserve over the coming year. I have therefore stepped down as chair as of June 2025. I will continue to contribute to Healthwatch Northumberland as a member of the board and look forward to supporting my successor.

It has been a privilege to serve as chair over the past two years and I am immensely grateful to our staff team, our volunteers and to colleagues across the system for all the support I have received during my term.



"Thanks to the efforts of our small but dedicated team, we were able to hear more from younger people and explore the experiences of residents living in care homes"

**Peter Standfield,
Chair, Healthwatch Northumberland**

A message from the Adapt (NE) chair

I am delighted to introduce Healthwatch Northumberland's 12th Annual Report, covering a year of much change in health and social care.

When we look at what difference we have made as Healthwatch Northumberland, we can confidently say that effective partnership working is what makes the difference.

Healthwatch Northumberland has gained respect from health and care providers and commissioners through its partnership approach to working, having demonstrated our knowledge and understanding of the uniqueness of Northumberland and the particular issues that living and delivering services in such a large rural area brings.

We have an open door for discussion with everyone and always encourage dialogue. Listening to the people who use services and public and voluntary sector organisations ensures we have the voice of local people at the heart of what we do. This was truly demonstrated in our work on the NHS Long-Term Plan and our Enter and View visits to care homes.

While the report outlines progress and achievements in 2024, it also sets out the plans for 2025-26 which will bring more change. There are challenges to face in Northumberland, however, together we can make a difference.



"Listening to the people who use services ensures we have the voice of the people at the heart of what we do"

**Lorraine Hershon,
Chair, Adapt (NE)**

About us

Healthwatch Northumberland is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS and adult 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

The people of Northumberland have their health and social care needs met and their experience of using services heard and understood by those responsible for commissioning and providing services



Our mission

To ensure that the people of Northumberland can give their views and are involved in and can influence decisions made about their health and social care



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

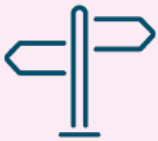
Acting on feedback and driving change

Partnering with care providers, Government, and the voluntary sector – serving as the public's independent advocate

Our year in numbers

We supported more than 2150 people to have their say and get information about their care. We currently employ six staff and our work is supported by 12 volunteers.

Reaching out:



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

People came to us over 10,000 times for clear advice and information on topics such as mental health services and cost of living support through our website, at our in-person events or by telephone or email.

Championing your voice:



We published 22 reports about the improvements people would like to see in areas like health visiting, women's health and care homes.

Our most popular report was on health visiting services which looked at people's awareness of how to access the service and what it offers, whether they were routinely accessing the service, as well as how happy people were with the support provided.

Statutory funding:



We're funded by Northumberland County Council. In 2024/25, we received £200,000, which is the same as last year.

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 Northumberland. Here are a few highlights:

Spring

To ensure we were hearing from all parts of the county, we attended events across rural Northumberland, and were regular visitors to Hexham Livestock Auction Mart.



We presented our work on autistic children and young people's experiences of mental health support to Healthwatch England, ensuring your feedback was heard at national level and used to influence change.



Summer

To help people get the most out of their GP appointment, we produced a handy guide with useful tips, explanations of staff roles at GP surgeries, and different ways to access healthcare.



Our popular 'cost of living support for people in Northumberland' booklet was translated into six other languages, so it could be of use to more communities across the county.



Autumn

As well as supporting mental health events organised by the council, we put together a printed guide to the mental health services and support available to local people.



We worked with Northumberland County Council to gather experiences and help shape the Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment.



Winter

We asked people with Parkinson's to have their say on the NHS 10-Year Plan. The group welcomed the idea of Community Diagnostic Centres but said that an accessible roving van service might be better for those in rural areas.



Our monthly online information sessions continued to be popular with local people. This year we heard about issues including domestic abuse, kidney care, macular degeneration and substance misuse.



Working together for change

We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in Northumberland are heard at the Integrated Care System level, and they influence decisions made about services in the North East and North Cumbria.

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

Listening to people's dental care challenges



Last year we worked with other Local Healthwatch across the region to understand the difficulties people face when accessing dental care. Over 3800 people shared their views.

The Integrated Care Board's new action plan includes stabilising services, additional investment for out-of-hours treatment, the establishment of Urgent Dental Access Centres and working with partners to improve recruitment, retention, and training of staff. We continue to work closely with the Integrated Care Board as new ways of working are developed.



Working together for change

Improving access to healthcare services



We were approached by Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (CNTW) for our insight into health inequality barriers to people accessing its services.

We used our autistic young people report and feedback from our Annual Survey to highlight lack of awareness about services as a key issue, especially for people with English as an additional language.

We asked CNTW to comment on the draft of our mental health resource booklet. The Northumberland and North Tyneside Locality Director gave constructive feedback and help with distribution.

This conversation has strengthened our relationship with the trust and we are developing more regular catch-ups.

The Big Conversation on women's health



The North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board launched the 'Big Conversation' to find out what matters most to women and girls when it comes to their health and accessing services. A survey and focus groups helped us hear from women across Northumberland.

Your feedback has helped shape the women's health strategy. Proposals include a new 'Women's Promise' to detail the level of care, dignity and support women can expect, a directory of women's health services and more options to see a female health professional, get a second opinion or escalate concerns.

Ambulance Services



We worked with North East Ambulance Service (NEAS) and Local Healthwatch to understand people's experiences and expectations of its services including ambulances and paramedics, patient transport, 999 call handling and NHS 111.

As well as a region-wide survey, we gathered more in-depth feedback from individuals and groups in Northumberland about experiences and expectations of services and how they could improve. This feedback was welcomed by NEAS and will inform its clinical strategy.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to health and social care professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time.

Here are some examples of our work in Northumberland this year.

Adult Social Care People's Panel



Now in its second year, the Adult Social Care People's Panel is going strong and shows that service providers and service users working together can make a big difference.

We were particularly pleased that the statutory report of Northumberland County Council's Principal Social Worker acknowledged the difference the panel and Healthwatch Northumberland have made.

What panel members did:

- Advised about improvements needed to public information about adult social care on the council's website, making it easier for the public to find this vital information
- Attended training for social care staff to give their experience of using services and especially on how Carer's Assessments are carried out. This directly acted as a sounding board for Northumberland County Council's Adult Social Care function as it prepared for its Care Quality Commission inspection

We like to think this helped achieve the 'Good' overall rating!

Making a difference in the community

Improving services over time



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

Last year we asked parents and carers about their experience of health visiting services. Thanks to feedback received we were able to give valuable insight to the Growing Healthy 0-19 Service Northumberland.

The service formed an action plan based on our recommendations. This included wider and more specific communication of contact details, service offer, and expected health visiting contacts to parents, carers and professionals. Plus, realignment of the 0-5 service into geographical areas to support a consistent service and access to a named health visitor.

Staff have also been given further training on the Growing Healthy 0-19 Northumberland App to ensure this knowledge is shared with parents and carers at visits.

Regular reviews now take place on local clinic venues to ensure coverage and accessibility across Northumberland.

Listening to local communities



People in Berwick-upon-Tweed tell us they feel forgotten and a long way from where decisions are made.

So we took our Annual Event to the town this year and brought together 25 health, social care and voluntary sector organisations into a lively information market place for local people.

Mental health services and the new hospital are key local concerns. Speakers from the Integrated Care Board, the mental health and acute NHS trusts gave up-to-date information on current services and future plans to an audience of 100 local people.



"The mixture of sectors from which the attendees came was incredible. It was the best networking opportunity I've ever experienced and got to meet so many professionals from services I'd not encountered before." **Manager, local organisation**

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.



Listening to your experiences

Influencing improvements in local care homes

As part of our Enter and View programme we have visited care homes in Northumberland owned and run by HC-One, allowing us to see, hear and feel what life is like for people who live there.

What did we do?

Volunteer teams visited the care homes and spoke with residents and their relatives about their experiences of living in the homes, exploring the topics of care, dignity and personal choice, activities and social contact, communication, safety and happiness. They also observed the general comfort and appearance of the homes and grounds.

Key things we saw or heard:



Friendly and caring interactions between staff and residents

Comfortable living conditions

Residents and relatives were, generally, very happy with the care received in the homes

What difference did this make?

We published a report after each visit, which included our recommendations to the homes and their responses.

The recommendations offered in the reports led to improvements to areas such as care home activities, interior décor, improvements to meals and more information provision, which demonstrates the impact our Enter and View activity can have and the change it can effect.

The full reports, including our recommendations and the homes' responses, can be found on our [website](#).



“Our work in striving to deliver an ever-better service will never be finished, which is why we welcome the suggestions in this report, to continually improve the service we have the privilege to deliver to all who depend on us. We'd like to thank the Healthwatch Northumberland team for their respectful approach to visiting our home.”
Manager, Foxton Court, Morpeth

Listening to your experiences

Hearing what matters: Experiences of audiology services

Following increased concerns from people in Northumberland about audiology (hearing) services we did some work to understand more about the key issues including what was working well, what was not working so well, and what could be improved.

Key things we heard:

Over 60% of users of NHS audiology services who responded to our survey were unhappy with recent changes to services.

We heard repeated concerns around distances to travel to access hearing support, with additional barriers mentioned by those who were older, with disabilities or caring responsibilities, or living in rural areas.

Nearly a third of people told us that waiting times for support at all stages of hearing loss from hearing assessments, hearing aid fittings and repairs were too long and for many, it affected their wellbeing.

We heard people were confused about how and where to access support with hearing loss.

The biggest positive we heard from people was that they were happy with staff at the service and were appreciative of the care, once received, as well as the positive impact that hearing support had.

What difference did this make?

We worked with Newcastle Hospitals, which delivers audiology services in Northumberland, ensuring they were aware of patient feedback. The concerns were also brought to the attention of both the Integrated Care Board and Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which required Newcastle Hospitals to do an improvement plan.

An action plan in line with our recommendations is now being implemented, which includes improved communication with patients about services and the support available, mapping exercises to improve on current clinic locations and review of patient pathways to access support and more proactive follow-on care. The full report can be found on our [website](#).

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of Northumberland. 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:

- Developing relationships with farming communities in West Northumberland
- Ensuring our cost of living information booklet was distributed widely across the county including in local job centres, food banks and to those who may be living in rural poverty through Community Action Northumberland
- Hosting a focus group for unpaid women carers which formed part of a regional women's health report



Hearing from all communities

Listening to fishermen and their families

This year we continued to work with the Fishermen's Mission Seafit Programme, Northumberland County Council's Health Trainers and charities such as Prostate Cancer UK and Liver Trust UK, to bring health and wellbeing support to fishermen and their families at Amble Harbour.

Linking with refugees and asylum seekers

We have very recently started to engage with refugee and asylum seeker communities in Northumberland, particularly in the South East of the county. Next year we will continue to develop links and relationships to ensure they know more about the role of Healthwatch Northumberland and feel confident using our services.

Hearing from the farming community

Over the past year we have attended Hexham Auction Mart monthly to engage with farmers and their families as part of the Supporting Our Farming Communities initiative. This is a joint piece of work led by The Church and Community Partnership (Tynedale) and in partnership with Andy's Man Club, Papyrus Suicide Prevention and Northumberland County Council.

Here to Hear

We continue to get out across the county to different venues and groups to hear people's experiences of health and care services and offering our Information and Signposting Service. We regularly review which venues and areas we go to, ensuring that we can hear from more people. This includes areas or groups we may not hear from as much or who might experience poorer health outcomes or find it harder to access services.

This year we increased our presence in rural areas and in Seaton Valley, introduced new sessions in Hexham, Ashington and Allendale and have been looking at new venues in North Northumberland. We have also visited dementia services to hear more from carers and those cared for. We participated in a series of rural and mental health events as well as attending many other partner events and groups to raise awareness of our work.

"The feedback Local Healthwatch hear in their communities and share with us at Healthwatch England is invaluable, building a picture of what it's like to use health and care services nationwide. Local people's experiences help us understand where we and decision-makers must focus, and highlight issues that might otherwise go unnoticed. We can then make recommendations that will change care for the better, both locally and across the nation."

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive, Healthwatch England



Information and signposting

Whether it's finding a local GP surgery, making a complaint, or choosing a good care home for a loved one – you can count on us. People have reached out to us this year for advice, support or help finding services.

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



Improving hospital care for those with dementia

Gwen* contacted us with concerns about the attitudes she and her relative, an elderly patient with dementia, experienced at a local hospital.

She said there was a lack of information about the ward, and she had to ask for everything including visiting times and where the toilet was. She was upset that staff dismissed her relative's experience of dementia saying extended visiting was not appropriate despite her caring role and Power of Attorney for the patient.

Gwen was happy for us to share her experience, anonymously, with the hospital trust. The trust responded quickly and apologised to Gwen and her family, stressing this is not the experience it would want patients and their families to have.

In addition, the senior nursing team carried out a walkabout to identify areas where physical improvements could be made. The lead for dementia at the hospital trust was asked for advice on changes to the ward environment for patients with dementia and a refresh of appropriate training for the ward team.

Gwen said things improved and that the discharge process was a positive experience, but told us on reflection:



“What happens for patients who are distressed, confused, who have no advocate and haven't the self-esteem and confidence to use their voice?”

GP registration

The registration form for new patients on a local GP practice's website had next of kin as a mandatory field. We heard this was causing problems for refugees and asylum seekers completing these forms online. We contacted the practice which thanked us for raising the issue and told us they would work with the IT company to resolve this.

Reasonable adjustments for screening appointments

Michelle* contacted us because she was worried about making a health screening appointment.

Michelle had experienced a violent assault in the past and was worried about being in a closed environment with a stranger. She had put off getting an appointment for a year even though she has a family history of the disease. She had explained her concerns when she tried booking an appointment, but she said she did not feel listened to.

We spoke to the hospital trust delivering the screening programme. The trust told us it was appropriate for reasonable adjustments to be made to support Michelle to access her appointment.

Michelle accepted an appointment and was able to protect her health.

Increasing understanding of vaccinations

We were contacted by David* who had been informed by his GP surgery he was not eligible for the new RSV vaccine. He was confused about the reasons for this and whether that decision could be challenged.

We provided detailed information about eligibility for the vaccine including the guidance from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation which advises UK health departments on vaccination schedules, recommendations, and safety. Those aged 80 plus are not currently eligible so we also found information about the availability of private vaccinations, should this be something he wished to consider.

Whilst David was unable to access a vaccination on the NHS, he was grateful to us for the further information we provided which helped him understand the eligibility criteria:



"Many thanks for your detailed and informative response to my enquiry regarding the RSV vaccination for those in their 80s. You gave me a more comprehensive understanding of the problem."

Support to live at home

Serena* contacted us about audiology services for her husband.

Both she and her husband Bob* are very elderly and he has limited mobility, breathing problems and memory loss and rarely leaves home. Bob needed to have his hearing and hearing aids checked. Serena does not drive and finds it difficult to get him to appointments. They live over an hour away from The Freeman Hospital where audiology services are based. A local outreach clinic is not currently operating.

Serena also felt she needed help to care for Bob and had approached the council. She was given information about local care companies but was not sure what to do next.

We spoke to the audiology department at The Freeman Hospital and were assured that a home visit would be arranged for Bob.

We also spoke to Northumberland County Council Adult Social Care. Following this a Care Manager contacted Serena and helped her to choose an appropriate care company.

Serena said she really appreciated our help:



“Healthwatch Northumberland has helped us enormously. My husband will now be able to hear and be less isolated, and we are getting the help we need to continue living at home.”

Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given 491 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
- Carried out Enter and View visits to local care homes to help them improve



Showcasing volunteer impact

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.

"I volunteer as I have spare time since my retirement. It helps me keep a connection with my community and give them a voice, hearing from them what is working well and what can be improved on within health and social care.

"I have found that people appreciate the fact that we listen to them and that the information goes to service providers and policymakers to make a difference. It's also rewarding to be able to signpost people to relevant services that can help with life's challenges.

"I feel valued as a volunteer with Healthwatch Northumberland, with lots of support and encouragement from staff and other volunteers." **Stella**

Matthew joined our team whilst studying for his A Level exams. He says "I knew I wanted to apply to university to study biology or something related to medicine.

"I thought volunteering with Healthwatch Northumberland would give me the opportunity to hear about people's experiences of using local services and make a positive difference to people's lives, whilst building my own confidence and people skills that would be invaluable for my future."

As well as joining us at public engagement events, Matthew led a mental health project at his high school, alongside a group of fellow sixth form students.

"I had offers from three universities to study medicine. I'm almost certain that I couldn't have secured these offers without my role in this project - the interviewers really enjoyed hearing about it! I'm thankful to have had the chance to lead the project and I hope the information we've gathered will prove beneficial to the high school students for years to come." **Matthew**



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.

Call 03332 408468 or visit our [website](#) to find out more about volunteering opportunities here at Healthwatch Northumberland.

Finance and future priorities

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

Our income and expenditure

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Local Authority	£200,000	Expenditure on pay	£173,928
Additional income	£30,699	Non-pay expenditure	£24,486
		Office and management fee	£20,000
Total income	£230,699	Total Expenditure	£218,414

Additional income is broken down into:

- £19,471 brought forward from 2023-24
- £11,228 received for project work - see below.

Funding for project work

Healthwatch across the North East and North Cumbria receive funding from our Integrated Care System (ICS) to support new areas of collaborative work at this level. We also received funding from North East Ambulance Service (NEAS) and Northumberland County Council (NCC) for specific projects.

Purpose of funding	Amount
ICS network payment	£3,500
ICS NHS 10-Year Plan	£450
ICS Women's health project	£950
NEAS Clinical strategy project	£5,000
NCC Cost of living guide translations	£1,328

Finance and future priorities

Next steps

We will keep working across the county, reaching out especially to people less listened to, for example, people whose work or lives means they face difficulties in using health and care services.

Thank you to everyone who responded to our Annual Survey and the suggestions for what we should work on next year. It has helped us decide the things we're going to work on which are:

- 1. GP access - we will focus on the impact of digital services**
- 2. Dentistry**
- 3. Adult social care - we will focus on hospital discharge and respite care**

We will remain responsive to emerging issues that people raise with us throughout the year.

Statutory statements

Healthwatch Northumberland, Adapt (NE), Burn Lane, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 3HN

Healthwatch Northumberland 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 Northumberland Board consists of 12 members who work on a voluntary basis or are representatives of organisations with complementary aims. The board provides 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.

In 2024/25, the board met six times and made decisions on matters such as a programme of Enter and View visits to local care homes and our project work programme. The board also decided to use the Healthwatch Northumberland Annual Event/Annual General Meeting to bring the public, community groups and senior decision-makers together in Berwick-upon-Tweed, a community that feels it is not always heard.

We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities by using the feedback people give us about their experiences and a poll in our Annual Survey.

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 2024-25, we have been available by telephone, text and email, through social media and via our webform, as well as at meetings of community groups and forums. We attended 122 community events and held five regular drop-in sessions per month in community locations. Our monthly online sessions covered a range of different health and social care issues.

We ensure that this Annual Report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We publish it on our website, across our social media platforms and produce hard copies available at events and community locations and by post on request.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

We had no 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 Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Primary Care Working Party, Carers Partnership Board, Equalities Steering Group and the Local Area Committees.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System. Healthwatch Northumberland is represented at the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and associated sub committees by Christopher Akers-Belcher, Chief Executive, Healthwatch Hartlepool, and on the Northumberland and North Tyneside Integrated Care Partnerships by Paul Jones, Director, Healthwatch North Tyneside.

Derry Nugent, Project Coordinator, represents Healthwatch Northumberland at the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board Sub Committee - Northumberland. We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Northumberland is represented on the Northumberland Health and Wellbeing Board by Peter Standfield, Chair of the Healthwatch Northumberland Board. During 2024/25 our representative has effectively carried out this role by presenting the Healthwatch Northumberland Annual Report showcasing the impacts achieved, particularly through the Adult Social Care People's Panel and the Women's Health Strategy projects.


The 13 local Healthwatch in the North East and North Cumbria have a formal Operating Protocol to coordinate joint work with the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System. This work is funded by the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System and ensures that the experiences of people in all areas of the North East and North Cumbria are heard at the highest decision-making levels.

Enter and View

Location	Reason for visit	What we did as a result
Acomb Court Care Home	To understand good practice in care home provision	We wrote a report with recommendations – the service followed up on these, and residents' care improved
Ashington Grange Care Home	To understand good practice in care home provision	We wrote a report with recommendations – the service followed up on these, and residents' care improved
Foxton Court Care Home	To understand good practice in care home provision	We wrote a report with recommendations – the service followed up on these, and residents' care improved

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