

Minutes of the Healthwatch Northumberland Annual General Meeting held on Friday 12 September at Tynedale Function Suite, Hexham

Attendees:

80 people attended including members of the public, representatives of health and social care providers and commissioners and voluntary and community organisations.

Welcome: Angela Merrie, Healthwatch Northumberland Vice Chair

Angela Merrie welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming along. She encouraged attendees to take a look at their information packs, ask questions and complete the evaluation form.

Angela played a pre-recorded video from Healthwatch Northumberland Chair, Hugh McKendrick. Hugh thanked former Chair Peter Standfield and thanked the speakers for their time. He also highlighted some of Healthwatch Northumberland's key work.

Annual meeting: Angela Merrie, Healthwatch Northumberland Vice Chair

Angela thanked the Healthwatch Northumberland team including staff, volunteers and board members. She welcomed the new volunteers and thanked those who have moved on this year. A special thanks went to Mike Allport and Sue Taylor who have served a full six-year term on the board.

The minutes from the 2024 annual meeting were accepted.

Review of the year: Derry Nugent, Project Coordinator

Derry spoke about the Healthwatch Northumberland annual report 2024-25 entitled 'Unlocking the power of people-driven care'.

Highlights included the impact of work about audiology services which resulted in Newcastle Hospitals creating an improvement plan which includes a local RNID hearing clinic in Corbridge and other areas of Northumberland.

Derry highlighted the great work from students at Queen Elizabeth High School about mental health services for young people. One of the students involved in this project has gone on to study medicine at university.

The Adult Social Care Panel made up of people who use adult social care services has continued to provide a voice to feed back and improve training, information and services.

Derry thanked Liz Prudhoe as she retires from her role as Director of Adapt.

Looking ahead to 2026, upcoming projects include Persistent Physical Symptoms, respite care, Pharmacy First, GP digital access, linking in with young people and schools in Blyth, lesser heard communities, dentistry and primary care changes.

Derry invited the audience to 'keep talking to us and we'll make sure you're heard'.

There were no questions about the review of the year.

Guest speakers

Angela Merrie welcomed the speakers – Joe Morris MP, Simon Clark, Debbie Allman and Shirley Proctor.

Joe Morris MP

Joe Morris MP highlighted key points of his perspective of the NHS 10-year plan as Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS). He acknowledged that the challenges faced in different areas are diverse, for example, digital exclusion in rural communities. He invited people to continue to share their insights with him to feed back to the Secretary of State for Health & Social Care.

Simon Clark – Regional Pharmacy Manager for Tesco

Simon Clark spoke about his role as Regional Pharmacy Manager for Tesco and championing and promoting all community pharmacies in the region through his role with the Local Pharmaceutical Committee (LPC). Simon gave an overview of the Pharmacy First scheme and encouraged people to use this service to help free up GP appointments. Through this service, pharmacists can provide treatment for seven clinical conditions, provide urgent medication supplies and contraception. The service has already freed up over 6000 GP appointments across the county.

**Debbie Allman – Northumberland County Council Direct Payments Team
Leader and Shirley Proctor – Care Academy Manager**

Debbie Allman gave an overview of what direct payments are – a cash payment by Northumberland County Council in lieu of health and/or social care needs. Direct payments aim to give people the choice, control and freedom to decide who provides their care. Debbie explained the role of a Personal Assistant and what is involved in the role.

Shirley Proctor explained what the Northumberland Care Academy is – supporting the recruitment, retention, training and development of the local care workforce. To find out more email: careacademy@northumberland.gov.uk or call OneCall on 01670 536 400.

Questions and comments for the speakers

Q. What can the 10-year plan, Pharmacy First and direct payments do to balance out the postcode lottery?

A. Joe – The Government wants to go beyond the 10-year plan to help people live healthier lives. This also includes things like improving bus routes and internet access. I am constantly pushing in Parliament to champion the challenges of rurality.

A. Simon – There are some brilliant pharmacies even in small rural villages. I encourage people to use their pharmacy more and ask them if they can help you. Access to services remains strong.

A. Shirley – We want flexibility and choice for everyone in the county. Direct Payments help to achieve this.

Q. One attendee asked about support mechanisms for a frail elderly person who is a direct payment employer and has had issues with their assistant.

A. Debbie said there is a 24/7 helpline available for support. Northumberland County Council has seven direct payment advisors who can offer support and talk through the benefits/pitfalls of being an employer. If the person receiving the care doesn't have capacity, a family member can act on their behalf.

Q. How many PPGs are there in Northumberland and do they work? Should they be given more importance given the future of Healthwatch?

A. A member of the Healthwatch Northumberland team will contact this person to get more information and discuss further.

Q. What support is available for NHS workers e.g. young people looking to get into nursing?

A. Joe said the aim is for young people to go from good results to good jobs locally. Skills England is working with employers and schools to provide links between young people and the organisations recruiting.

Q. One attendee asked about returning sharps boxes to pharmacies as the rules seem to keep changing.

A. Simon said it is either the council or NHS England who is responsible for disposing of sharps boxes. A pharmacy needs a contract to take sharps boxes and the rules vary depending on the size of box, but the pharmacy should at least be able to tell you where to take them. There are also private companies that can take them but there is a cost for this service.

Q. With Healthwatch being disbanded I am sceptical about the collaboration between Government and the public. How can we support local Healthwatch to raise awareness?

A. Joe said the Government is aware of the need for consistent patient involvement and he will continue to make this point. There are many unknowns but the patient feedback element is key to listening to voices.

Derry emphasised that Healthwatch Northumberland continues to be here to listen to the public and for now it is business as usual.

Q. In regards to digital access, how can we hold each other to account to monitor this?

A. Joe said he accepts concerns around digitisation. Digital services are great for those who can log on and help to free up resources and access for those who can't use them, but he will continue to push for those who face challenges accessing digital services.

Q. One attendee asked about the prescribing of antibiotics through the Pharmacy First scheme.

A. Simon said pharmacists are very well trained and antibiotics will only be prescribed if needed.

Dr Jim Brown spoke about the challenge of the over prescribing of antibiotics.

Close: Angela Merrie, Healthwatch Northumberland Vice Chair

Angela Merrie brought the event to a close and invited people to put any additional questions and feedback forms in the green box to be answered after the event.

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