

## **Minutes of the Healthwatch Northumberland Annual General Meeting held on Wednesday 18 October at East Bedlington Community Centre**

### **Attendees:**

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

### **Welcome: Peter Standfield, Healthwatch Northumberland Chair**

Peter Standfield opened the AGM and welcomed everyone to East Bedlington Community Centre. He explained the agenda for the day and general housekeeping. He said each person had been given a pack with information about Healthwatch Northumberland, a feedback form and a question form. Questions could be posted in the green box and any not answered during the event would be answered at a later date.

### **Annual Meeting: Peter Standfield, Healthwatch Northumberland Chair**

Peter Standfield invited consideration of the minutes from last year's AGM. There were no comments or questions.

Peter thanked current and former board members, staff and volunteers for their contributions. A special thanks went to David Thompson, former Chair, and Margaret Young, former Vice-Chair for their hard work over the last six years. He said there will be a recruitment drive for new board members in the new year. Peter thanked everyone for making him feel so welcome in his new role as Chair and said it was a pleasure to be a part of Healthwatch Northumberland which is held in such high regard.

Peter introduced Derry Nugent, Project Coordinator to give a review of Healthwatch Northumberland's work over the last year.

### **Review of the year: Derry Nugent, Project Coordinator**

Derry Nugent said the national Healthwatch England theme for 2022 was 'Making care better together' and recognising that good care is a partnership between users/patients and providers. Healthwatch Northumberland embodies this well.

Derry said as shown in the Annual Report, every piece of work Healthwatch Northumberland does is with other people – first and foremost the people who are using or experiencing

services, and those providing services including voluntary and community organisations. She said it's challenging in these times for individuals, communities and care organisations to always engage with each other in positive ways. Everyone is busy and we continue to go through much upheaval and change.

Derry said that is why Healthwatch Northumberland tries to acknowledge those difficulties and 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.

Healthwatch Northumberland encourages dialogue and positive engagement by:

- Listening, hearing, taking in what is said – while recognising not every voice has an equal chance to be heard.
- Through building a better understanding of what matters to people and to services.
- Creating empathy by bringing people together and finding ways to do what can be done – pragmatism.

Derry explained the common themes Healthwatch Northumberland has heard about this year:

- Communication and customer care – Derry gave an example of a patient receiving a text message from a GP practice about e-consult and thinking this was the only way to make an appointment. Timely communication is key in these situations. Derry also mentioned a new piece of work with Marine Medical Group to support patients with digital tools.
- Primary care – dentists and pharmacies dealing with workforce and workload pressures.
- Social care – positive moves to make social care a more attractive career and the commissioning of new services but still under great pressure.
- Impact assessments – the impact of changes to services needs to be understood and communicated.

Derry said she is pleased that NHS commissioners took on board Healthwatch Northumberland's concerns about travel assessments and impact assessments are improving in pharmacy commissioning.

Derry said one issue that shows Healthwatch's impact is dentistry. Healthwatch Northumberland's work locally has kept dentistry on the agenda and fed in nationally to stimulate change at a local level. Early signs of change in dentistry are welcome but there is still concern about the lack of practices taking on NHS patients and providing preventative services. Healthwatch Northumberland will be working with Healthwatch colleagues in the North East and North Cumbria to keep this high on the agenda.

Derry said providing information and signposting to services is one of Healthwatch Northumberland's statutory activities and the one which gets less attention but is valued by the public. She gave some examples of ways of successfully engaging with the public including regular engagement events, monthly online forums, telephone and Info@ email. Derry invited people to sign up to the newsletter to hear about upcoming events.

What next? Derry said alongside primary care the major issues Healthwatch Northumberland is working on at the moment are:

- Audiology
- Health Visiting
- Adult Social Care People's Panel
- Isolated by work
- Improving feedback
- Newcastle Hospitals

Derry said she is particularly excited about the People's Panel for Adult Social Care where Healthwatch Northumberland will be working with Age UK and Carers Northumberland to support people who use social care and want to help the council improve their services. Anyone who would like to be involved please get in touch.

Derry said all of this only works if Healthwatch Northumberland hears what is going on. She explained how this year's annual survey changed to an annual conversation (and survey), working with community sector partners to hear from groups who do not usually engage. Not only was the information richer, but it could be used more quickly and was used to set priorities for the year.

Derry said the next step to the Annual Conversations was to create the afternoon's community listening event with senior policy and decision makers in care services who have committed to listen to a range of voices and experiences who feel they are not heard. Derry thanked the groups and individuals taking part.

Derry invited any questions about the review of the year.

### **Questions and comments about the review of the year**

**Q. What is happening with the chemist shake-ups? (Patient gave an example of how his local pharmacy gave him fewer tablets than he was prescribed).**

**A.** Derry Nugent said Healthwatch Northumberland is aware there are immense changes happening in pharmacies across the county and urged people to continue feeding back what is happening in their locality. She said Healthwatch is keeping pharmacy on the agenda, both service and supply issues, and raising it in all the places it needs to be raised. A team member took individual feedback from the gentleman after the session.

**Comment. One attendee said she was hearing from her groups that there is a shortage of pharmacists and also problems getting medication from the manufacturers. Pharmacy takeovers will take time so we need to be kind and understanding.**

**A.** Derry Nugent agreed that although we need to hear the impact these issues are having on service users, we also need to have empathy. Derry said it's all about communication, customer service and pragmatism.

## **Break**

### **Guest speaker – Gill O'Neill, Executive Director for Public Health, Communities and Inequalities**

Peter Standfield introduced Gill O'Neill.

Gill O'Neill said she has worked in the North East for many years and in Northumberland for two years. She explained how her role came about through a need to tackle inequalities.

She said inequalities is a collective responsibility and is about fair access to the building blocks for a good life including a decent income, a quality job, safe affordable warm housing and good quality education and training. By tackling inequalities we aim to reduce the gap in experiences that residents have across health, education, employment and social outcomes.

Gill showed some statistics for life expectancy in the least and most deprived areas of Northumberland compared with the national average. She said the Covid pandemic and the rise in the cost of living has made the gap wider.

Gill explained the Northumberland community centred approach to tackling inequalities focused on five principals and the following three questions:

- What can communities do for themselves?
- What can communities do with a bit of help?
- What can't communities do that needs to be done by agencies/institutions?

Gill explained the People, Policy, Place model.

People – better results from working together than in silos.

Place – Gill explained the Place Standard Tool developed by the Scottish Government which explores 14 elements of what it's like to live in a place. This tool has been used for Berwick, Hexham and Blyth.

Policy – Gill talked about research from Michael Marmot at the Institute of Health Equity and the eight core policy areas to tackle and reduce inequalities.

Gill said the focus is on taking what is strong, not what is wrong, and building on it.

Gill gave an update on progress in 2022/23. Solid foundations have been built and an Inequalities Event was held in July 2023.

Where next? Northumberland County Council's Chief Executive Dr Helen Pattinson is keen to understand at an organisational level how everyone can work together. A Northumberland County Partnership and an Economic Partnership will be formed.

Gill gave some examples of work that has been done to tackle inequalities – best start in life and good and fair employment.

Following on from the presentation there was a short Q&A session where Peter invited questions for Gill.

### **Questions and comments for Gill O'Neill**

**Q. As a disabled person why do I have to fight for flat access and a shed for my mobility scooter? I am sick of falling over with my sticks.**

**A.** Gill said she could not comment on individual cases but would have a chat with the individual after the session to find out more.

**Comment. It is about trying to cascade the right ethos down through all levels to local communities. I have tried to engage with Northumberland County Council about roads and junctions in Ponteland but nobody is interested in coming out to discuss.**

**A.** Gill said there are pockets of people who get it but there are around 8000 staff so it takes a while for it to drip down from leadership at the top.

**Q. Our organisation is running a domestic abuse pilot for older people in rural communities. The inequalities work sounds brilliant but how do we engage at a strategic level?**

**A.** Gill suggested the Domestic Abuse Partnership Forum which feeds into the Safeguarding Board, Graham Syers, the Primary Care Network Directors Forum and Community Partnership. Gill asked the organisation to email her afterwards so she can put them in contact.

**Q. I hadn't seen the inequalities figures for Northumberland and didn't realise how big the gap was between the least and most deprived areas. Have you contacted the parish and town councils to help?**

**A.** Gill said yes connections have been made with some of them but not all and there is more work to be done.

**Q. What can I do about street lights being out and kids congregating?**

**A.** Gill suggested the 'Fix my streets' app which can be used to log a query.

**Comment. Literacy is so integrated with inequality. Information needs to be accessible and many council/government documents are almost illegible.**

A. Gill said this is a working progress. There is a health literacy project in Sunderland and South Tyneside and the aim is to share this across the North East. Northumbria Healthcare is also looking at how to make their website more accessible.

**Close: Peter Standfield, Healthwatch Northumberland Chair**

Peter Standfield brought the Q&A session to a close and invited people to put any additional questions in the green box to be answered after the event.

Peter thanked everyone for attending and explained arrangements for lunch and the afternoon's listening event.