

Minutes of the Healthwatch Northumberland Board meeting held on 17 June 2025 at Adapt NE, Burn Lane, Hexham

Present: Peter Standfield (PS) Chair, Liz Prudhoe (LP) Adapt NE, Denise Robson (DR) Patient Advice and Liaison Service, Jim Brown (JB) Public Health NCC, Caroline Rogan (CR) Northumberland CVA, Mike Allport (MA) Independent Member, Gillian Robinson (GR) Independent Member, Alison Killen (AK) Independent Member, Hugh McKendrick (HM) Independent Member, Sharon Jacques (SJ) Independent Member, Angela Merrie (AM) Independent Member

In attendance: Derry Nugent (DN) Project Coordinator, Lorna Beech (LB) Engagement and Volunteering Officer, Laura Haugh (LH) Digital Marketing and Content Creator

Apologies: Debra Blakey (DB) Carers Northumberland, Sue Taylor (ST) Independent Member

Minutes recorded by: Laura Haugh

1. Introductions, apologies and declarations of interest	Action
1.1 PS opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. 1.2 Apologies noted above. 1.3 PS reminded the board of his involvement with Abbeyfield Northumbria, which provides residential care and sheltered accommodation for older people on a not-for-profit basis in Newcastle and Northumberland. No other interests were declared pertinent to items at this meeting.	
2. Minutes of last meeting The minutes of 11 March 2025 were agreed as a true record.	
3. Action points All action points marked as complete except item 7.11 which is still in progress.	

4. Matters arising There were no matters arising from the minutes.	
5. Questions from the public No questions had been received from the public.	
6. Presentation: Volunteering LB gave a presentation about the new volunteering platform, Assemble and the Volunteer Passport initiative for Northumberland. This is a pilot project funded by NENC Integrated Care Board delivered in partnership by Thriving Together and Northumbria Healthcare Trust. Benefits: • For us – easier to recruit volunteers, co-ordinate their activities and report on their impact • For volunteers – easier to sign up to volunteering opportunities and keep a digital record of their volunteer journey – a Volunteer Passport. The platform is fully funded, has secure privacy and safety, and there are no contractual obligations. LB showed a demo video about Assemble and all of its features. Feedback from volunteers has been positive. Questions and comments • How long is the pilot? Thriving Together is already starting to roll out the platform to other organisations. • Is the DBS check transferrable to other organisations? Yes, if the volunteering role requires the same level of DBS. • Is Assemble linked to UCAS? LB said it is not currently, but she will ask Assemble. • How accessible is the platform and can we customise it, for example for people with learning disabilities? We can	

customise our own adverts, news etc. for better accessibility. LB can help people access the platform or add them on their behalf. • Where is the data going? Thriving Together will be reporting back to NCC. • How will people know to apply on Assemble? It will be advertised widely, but the platform will be an additional tool, people can still contact HWN in all of the usual ways whether online or not. • Is there a notes section? Yes, notes can be added to the vetting page. • Does Assemble manage expense claims? Yes, but mileage currently has to be calculated manually. • There was a discussion about DBS checks and similar volunteer systems. NCVA is looking at free travel for volunteers. • LB will feed back comments to Assemble.	LB to feed back comments and questions to Assemble.
7. Operational, risk and financial update DN asked for questions on the circulated paper. 7.1 Adapt Chief Executive – the Adapt Board has appointed a new Chief Executive who will take up the post in September. 7.2 Annual meeting – this year’s annual meeting will be held at Hexham Mart on Friday 12 September, 4pm–6pm. MP Joe Morris has been invited to speak and there will be a presentation about Adult Social Care Direct Payments. Members expressed concern about access to Direct Payments for people who did not feel confident in the administration processes. 7.3 JB said he was pleased to see reference to Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) but asked for a correction to the wording ‘most or least deprived’	DN to amend wording relating to IMD.

7.4 Risk register – JB suggested adding more detail to risk 5 regarding the impact of changes to relationships at the ICB. The Board wants to understand what relationships will be in place to enable flow of information from communities. DN will take this discussion forward with the local HW network. 7.5 Annual report – due by 30 June.	DN to amend Risk Register. DN will take this discussion forward with the local HW network.
8. Operational Plan 2025/26 The Operational Plan for the next year is driven by the annual survey results. We will continue with core work, tweaking venues etc. Enter & View is now included in core work. DN shared a table of potential projects from the HW NENC network. We will seek to lead on the dentistry project which will be more about communicating information rather than making changes to the system. Members discussed a project to engage with staff in the NHS. DN will circulate an update from Christopher Akers-Belcher and Paul Jones. AK noted that the funding for the PPS project seems low for the amount of work involved. DN will feed this back. There will be a presentation about this work at the September meeting. Members agreed the Operational Plan 2025/26 and were pleased to see the themes discussed at the January Planning Day reflected in the projects.	DN will circulate an update from Christopher Akers-Belcher and Paul Jones. DN to feed back Board comments about funding for PPS project.
9. Board partner organisation updates a. Carers Northumberland DB sent an update which was shared with the meeting papers. Key points included: Results of the Young Carers Survey – 81 young carers responded to questions about education, money, school and wellbeing. Almost 70% of young carers had struggled to complete homework or join in with after school activities. 30%	

said they did not get enough sleep. A copy of the report was shared with the meeting papers.

- Welfare Reforms – Carers Northumberland has been involved in round table meetings with Ian Lavery MP and David Smith MP to discuss with local VCSE organisations the potential effects of proposed changes to welfare. Also had the opportunity to put concerns to Steven Timms MP, Minister of State for Social Security and Disability.
- Carer breaks – signed up to become a referrer on Carefree which offers short breaks to carers across the country.
- Alnwick Garden passes – carers can borrow a pass for free entry for 1 adult and up to 4 children to Alnwick Garden or Alnwick Garden with Lilidorei. These can be booked up to September 2025.

b. North of Tyne Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

- 10,972 issues were raised with PALS in 2024-2025, across the North of Tyne area, which compares to 9278 from the previous year. This represents an 18% increase.
- Top concerns continue to be communication, care and treatment, and appointments.
- PALS have been working hard with the Trusts to reduce the average time to resolve a concern. AS a result of this, the average time to close a concern has reduced from 11.5 days in 2023-24, to 8.7 days in 2023-24.
- Freephone remains the most popular means of contact to the PALS service and emails are the second most popular means of contact; however, the PALS online form has increased by 127% during 2024-25 from the previous year.
- PALS new telephone system went live in April 2025.
- The PALS Officer recently appointed for Hexham decided not to take the role, so the service is interviewing again on Friday 20 June for another PALS Officer.
- Janette Frank has now retired, and Gemma Wilson has been appointed to the permanent role of Assistant Service Manager.

c. Northumberland CVA • Sam Allen from the ICB has taken the time to communicate with VCSE about infrastructure and networks. There will be interviews with her on 25 June for further discussion. • Mind the Gap – Health and Wellbeing Network sessions run with a person with lived experience or an actor to show how the system doesn't work for everyone. Three sessions have taken place so far (Cramlington, Berwick and Wooler) with more to come in Alnwick, Hexham, Ashington and Morpeth. • Free training is available to volunteering organisations including safeguarding, unconscious bias, health and safety, menopause awareness and more. Get in touch for more details. d. Public Health • JB gave a summary of the recent portfolio changes since the election. There is a new cabinet member for ASC and Public Health and a new Chair of Overview Scrutiny Committee. Health and Wellbeing Board Chair remains the same. • ICB changes are biggest issue currently and how funding will be affected. • JB will make a connection between HWN and the Long Term Conditions Group.	
10. Governance issues update 10.1 Policy Review The Board formally approved the policies which were recently reviewed by the Policy Review Group. DN will send out an invite for the next round. 10.2 Review of Healthwatch Chair role PS told members he will step down as Chair at the end of June. DN invited any members interested in the role to submit an expression of interest. A Deputy Chair will also be appointed.	
11. Any other business	

MA mentioned the audiology focus group where he met with Chris Wright from Newcastle Hospitals. He discussed the large volume of people coming into the service and waits of over 12 months for a hearing test. Members noted that the audiology report was very good. Next steps are to wait and continue to monitor the recovery plan.	
12. Close	

Date of next meeting – 23 September 2025

Dates of meetings for 2025/26

23 September 2025

16 December 2025

17 March 2026