

Healthwatch Essex Annual Report 2024–2025

Your voice improving
health and care



healthwatch
Essex



Photos below:

- 1 - Carers Voices Officer Tim at a Pride event at The Outhouse.
- 2 - Some of the team at a Women's Health event in Colchester.
- 3 - Some of the team on a wellness walk in Brightlingsea.



Photos above:
 1 - Our Information and Guidance Manager Sharon with her award at the Purple Hearts Awards for trauma informed practice.
 2 - Some of the team at Essex & Herts Air Ambulance.
 3 - Our Project Officer Lily and Carers Voices Officer Mel at a Winter Warmers Event in Laindon.

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A Note From Us...



The year has ended with a great deal of uncertainty across the health and social care sector. The impact of devolution and the fiscal cuts to the Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) have had an immediate effect and will have longer term implications for the sector as they adjust to new ways of working.

Despite a difficult end to the year, there has been so much to celebrate over the past 12 months.

One project I have been particularly impressed with is the 'Expressions of Trauma' exhibition. After a month-long residency at The Minories in Colchester, we were able to support small installations in Jaywick, Romford and Ipswich. The combination of seasoned artists and those who had never expressed themselves in creative formats made for a wonderfully diverse and moving display. Being able to meet and speak to some of the contributors was both inspiring and humbling.

Our Fella's Fair's and Fella's Forum events have gone from strength to strength this year and we have been able to expand outside of the Colchester area to open forums in both Harlow and Braintree. The events we hosted this year enabled us to engage with a much wider audience and reach communities we had not previously engaged with in a fun and informative way.

The Research Team has grown and welcomed not only new staff, but also new Research Ambassadors. This incredible group has worked together to co-write an article, review transcripts and support other academics in the area who have presented to them for feedback and critique. This peer-to-peer model has gained much interest, and I am excited to see this continue to grow and develop and open the world of research to a wider community.

The final area to highlight is the Carers Voice program. This has grown exponentially over the past year and culminated in March with two of our staff and two of our volunteers visiting Portcullis House in London to meet with a local MP and raise awareness of the challenges that unpaid carers are facing.

Sam Glover, Healthwatch Essex CEO



You will have read in our Chief Executive's report about the vital work that the team has been doing and will read about the impact of our work later in the report. The team has continued to grow, enabling Healthwatch Essex (HWE) to undertake a wide range of projects capturing the lived experiences of people using health and social care services. Sharing this information with our colleagues across health and social care helps to identify gaps in provision, improve access for all and helps to ensure that health and social care services meet the needs of our communities. We continue to reach out to and support some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Our Chief Executive has continued to collaborate with our three local Integrated Care Partnerships (ICPs) and worked closely with them to support the implementation of their plans. It has been extremely concerning to hear recently about the devolution of local authorities and the significant savings that the ICBs will have to make. Our teams will continue to support our colleagues in the ICPs who are striving to improve services, expedite access to services, identify gaps in provision and work on the priorities they have identified in each area. The NHS is facing significant issues, and the provision of social care is woefully inadequate, both having a hugely detrimental effect on the people living in our communities.

What's coming out soon – our plans include exploring the Armed Forces community's experiences of accessing health services; developing a Trauma Card resource for young people; continuing to capture the experience of carers; and women's experiences of living with multiple long-term conditions. The Research Team are launching a programme of lunchtime online seminars showcasing researchers' work in a range of different areas relating to women's health. Community asset mapping in Colchester and Tendring will be looking at issues relating to mental health and suicide prevention.

Recognition – Healthwatch Essex is very pleased to have achieved Silver Veterans Accredited Employer and Fostering Friendly Employer status. Healthwatch Essex was invited to attend the Care Quality Commission Conference in December, and our film Cervical Screening as a Trauma Survivor was shortlisted for a Smiley Charity Film Award.

Thank you – huge thanks to our Chief Executive Officer and her team at HWE for the exceptional and vitally important work they do. The Board of Directors is extremely proud of everyone, their commitment and enthusiasm, and the vital work they undertake. Thanks also to our Board of Trustees who continue to support the CEO and her team, sharing their knowledge, skills and expertise and promoting the vital work that Healthwatch Essex does. Thanks also to all our volunteers who make a significant contribution to our work and share their experiences and speak up for some of the more vulnerable people in our communities, acting as their ambassadors to ensure that they are heard.

Amanda Cherry, Chair of the Board of Trustees



About Us

Who we are and what we do

We are an independent voice for the people of Essex, helping to shape and improve health and social care services in the county. We believe that people's views and lived experience of health and care matters, so we're here to make sure your voice is heard and responded to. We also provide an Information and Guidance service to help you access, understand, and navigate the health and care system.

Our Vision

That people's voices and experiences influence all health, wellbeing, and care.

Our Mission

Seeking and listening to people's experiences and voices to create opportunities to shape all health and wellbeing services and policy for Essex.

What we do

Through innovative research and engagement activities – our reports, events, films, and outreach events – we make evidence-based recommendations to the NHS and social care authorities and demonstrate how lived experience can have a positive impact on the redesign and improvement of local services. We have powers in law, as set out in the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and updated in 2022, to encourage people to share their views and lived experience with us.

We also provide an information service to help people navigate the health and social care system via a confidential phone call, text, or email.

Who we work with

We work closely with the health and social care authorities in Essex to help make sure they put patients and the public first. This includes the three Integrated Care Systems, one mental health trust, five acute hospitals, as well as Essex County Council which has responsibility for social care and public health.

We also work with regulators and other commissioners and providers of health, primary care, and community care alongside various voluntary organisations to ensure the voices of Essex residents are heard and taken into consideration when improving local services.

As part of the wider Healthwatch network, we share information with Healthwatch England, which provides a formal link to the Department of Health and Social Care and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Our performance and impact are closely monitored by this network and Essex County Council, which receives our funding each year.



Some of the Information and Guidance team with the Healthwatch Essex van.

What is 'lived experience'?

'Lived experience' describes people's first-hand accounts of their health and care. How people experience health and care services is affected by their own personal circumstances; for example, whether they have a family or whether they are in work. Their 'lived experience' (good or bad) can shape the trust and confidence they have in health and care services.

That's why it's important the system takes the time to find out about the people who use services – to empathise and recognise the impact their service has on the individual and to use this insight to better understand the health and care needs of the local population.

Our governance

We want to make sure that as many people as possible can share their voice and stories with us and so we continue to take steps to involve the public and volunteers in our governance and decisions about our work.

Our Board of Trustees is responsible for the strategic oversight of Healthwatch Essex. They meet regularly to support and guide the organisation in its strategic ambitions.

Our Year at a Glance

Here are some of our highlights from the last 12 months...

April 24

We featured on BBC Essex radio talking about support for carers.

May 24

We held a Fella's Fair in Hullbridge at a family friendly football match.

June 24

As always, June was a busy month of events for us - Chelmsford Pride, our Annual Event and our first comedy night!

July 24

We visited the new Health, Wellbeing and Care Hub at the University of Essex.

August 24

We started working on plans to develop our award-winning initiative, 'Trauma Cards', for young people.

September 24

In September we welcomed two new apprentices studying Digital Marketing to our Communications team.

October 24

Our first 'Expressions of Trauma' exhibition opened at The Minories in Colchester!

November 24

We held our first comedy night in a theatre venue in Halstead, with the addition of lived experience speakers.

December 24

Our Information and Guidance (IAG) team and our Communications team visited Essex & Herts Air Ambulance.

January 25

Our new van went on a trip to Laindon to deliver knitted goods and offer information and support.

February 25

We took our Expressions of Trauma exhibition to Ipswich where our IAG manager, Sharon, won an award.

March 25

We had two exciting trips to London - one to Parliament to discuss carers issues and the other to the O2 for the Charity Film Awards!

Partner Feedback

As part of our ongoing commitment to measure our impact, this year we sought feedback from a selection of key partners that we work with, including other Healthwatch, Integrated Care Boards and voluntary sector organisations.

We asked if they felt we held them to account, whether they used our research findings and if the relationship between our organisations is a positive one. Here are some of their responses:



"HWE is always very responsive to all the questions, including attending the events as speakers or guest attendees."



"As a critical friend it is important that everyone in the health and care system works together to understand how we can improve together. Being held to account is an important part of that work."



"HWE have been an excellent critical friend in our partnership and co-production working."



"We have learnt the immense value of HWE and its links to the local community, finding people with lived experiences to engage in and produce our research."



"I often use the insight gained by HWE to support the work and projects we are involved in."



Listening & Engaging

**Capturing and sharing your
experiences to help improve
health and social care services**

2024–25 in Numbers

Sharing experiences

6

257

ambassadors and network members in our team now who use their lived experience to shape local services. We have ambassadors with experience of mental health, trauma, caring, disabilities and more.

Supporting people

6

1439

people got support from the Healthwatch Essex Information & Guidance Team via our website, phone, text, WhatsApp, live chat, or email.

Connecting online

6

836k

views across our social media channels, 65,114 people visited our website and 111 pieces of feedback provided to us via our online Feedback Centre.

Our Projects

Read about all the ways that sharing your lived experience in our projects this year has helped make a difference, as well as an update on our current projects.



All our reports can be accessed through
healthwatchessex.org.uk/library/.
We can provide alternative formats on request.

Living Beyond Cancer

This project aims to explore the lived experience of individuals living beyond cancer. Whilst the number of people surviving cancer has increased, many continue to face long-term implications from their cancer and/or its treatment. Life after treatment comes with new struggles including fear of recurrence, body image issues, lack of confidence, struggles with identity and difficulty with wellbeing. Despite this continued role that cancer plays in people's lives following treatment, evidence has demonstrated an existing gap in the follow-up care and support provided to people post-treatment. This project therefore aims to explore what long-term implications cancer and/or its treatment has on an individual's life and how they navigate these experiences. It will also identify the support that individuals have received since their final hospital-based treatment.

We are aiming to recruit 15 individuals to take part in an interview for this project. Participants will be invited to take part in one of the following methods: walking/wheeling interview, one-to-one interview, or storyboarding and one-to-one interview.

As part of this project's development, the Lead Researcher Beth, has been connecting with a variety of services and organisations that support people living with and beyond cancer. Some of which include Breast Cancer Now, Helen Rollason and Macmillan Cancer Support. We have had the opportunity to observe some of the great support that these services provide and will be producing a short series of blogs which will be published on our website throughout the project to highlight this.

We are also planning to invite our research participants, and several of the professionals from the services we have connected with, to co-produce the study's recommendations. This will involve running focus groups to discuss some of the themes from the research, and any recommendations which they would like to suggest. They will then be included in the final report which will be shared on our website and with organisations and services across Essex that support people living with and beyond cancer.

Supporting Partnerships

How it's made a difference

Since publishing our report on 'Supporting Partnerships' in July 2024, we have presented our findings at various meetings including a patient experience group at the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust and a network of networks meeting hosted by the Integrated Care Academy. Staff at these meetings commented on how insightful our findings were and how it has encouraged them to think about how they can implement the recommendations into their own practices engaging in co-production. We have also produced a poster to highlight some of the key recommendations from the report. This poster is available for distribution across organisations who use co-production, to encourage them to get more staff involved in co-production activities.



Co-production poster

Research Engagement Network

Mid and South Essex: Research Engagement Network (REN)

In 2023, the NHS Mid and South Essex Integrated Care Board (MSE ICB) were successful in winning funding to facilitate a programme of activities as part of NHS England's Research Engagement Network Development scheme (REN), to improve the number of people from underserved communities to get involved in health and care research. Healthwatch Essex was commissioned by the MSE ICB to oversee these activities and evaluate the success of the REN programme in a summative report.

The REN project was created with the aim to ensure health and care research better reflects the needs and interests of all areas, groups, and communities across the mid and south Essex area. As a result, health and care services could then use this learning to identify research barriers and better address health inequalities in the area.

Increasing research readiness and engagement with diverse communities at a local level, the MSE ICB has developed local partnerships with various voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise organisations, including the National Institute for Health Research.

This has included working with these partner organisations to train 'Community Champions' to listen to the community's knowledge, views and experiences of health and care research, co-designing local activities to improve research participation, and continuing long-term partnerships to ensure the diversity and inclusivity of current and future research opportunities.

Our summative report and key findings will be published by the Mid and South Essex Integrated Care Board to show how the REN programme can function as an evidence-based approach for improving the accessibility and inclusivity of healthcare research for diverse communities.

Research Engagement Network (REN) Programme – Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System

NHS England's Research Engagement Network programme supports Integrated Care Systems (ICS) to run activities that increase the diversity of participants in their research projects. Healthwatch Essex have been working with Suffolk and North East Essex (SNEE) ICS to support their REN programme; designing information resources that inform communities across the system about what research is and how they can get involved.

Our Research Ambassadors have reviewed evaluations of SNEE's previous REN activities and identified potential topics and formats for the information resources. We have also presented our ideas at SNEE's REN meetings (made up of community members, health researchers, and charities) for additional feedback.

We plan to produce six one-page information sheets that will be available via the SNEE ICS and Healthwatch Essex websites in a range of accessible formats. The resources will also be printed

and distributed across communities in Suffolk and North East Essex with the support of SNEE's Research Champions.

We have identified six key topics that the resources will focus on:

- What is health research?
- What are the different types of health research?
- Where can I find out about research opportunities?
- What to expect when you take part in research
- What happens to my contribution?
- How should researchers be supporting me as a participant?

Ongoing Research

Women and Multiple Long-Term Conditions

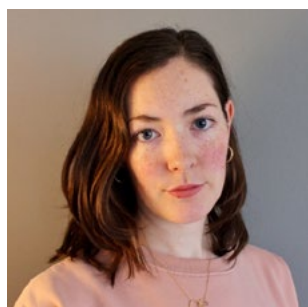
This research project aims to explore women's experiences of living with multiple long-term conditions. This topic was proposed in response to the rising health inequalities between men and women, with women more likely to develop long-term conditions earlier in life and spend an increasing number of years with chronic conditions.

To explore women's experiences, we have been using one-to-one interviews (life history interviews) and optional creative submissions (photovoice, memes, artworks etc.). We plan to interview 20 women. We plan to produce a published report, academic journal article, online blog and training sessions for community organisations who support women. 'Women' includes anyone who identifies as a woman over the age of 18 with two or more long-term conditions.

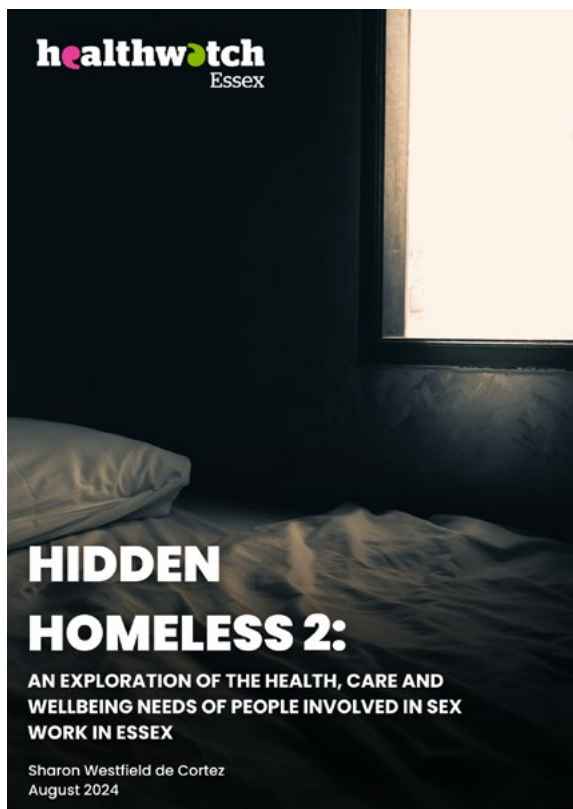
Although research is ongoing, so far we have found that:

- Women who are neurodiverse and living with multiple long-term conditions need greater support.
- Health information is not shared consistently during an inpatient stay.
- The impact of fatigue and conditions like selective mutism are typically underestimated and accommodations not consistently offered.

Seminars – We have been delivering a series of online seminars focusing on Women's Health alongside this project. Topics include pregnancy and postpartum experiences of those with multiple long-term conditions, medication adherence and enhancing wellbeing, the impact of austerity on health inequality, and the findings of this project.



The seminar speakers (L-R) – Dr Stephanie Hanley, Dr Katherine Deane, Dr Amy Greer Murphy, Lorna Orriss-Dib



Hidden

Homeless 2:

An Exploration of the Health, Care and Wellbeing Needs of People Involved in Sex Work

In this second instalment of our Hidden Homeless reports, we explored the health, care and wellbeing of people in Essex who are, or have been, involved in sex work.

Sex work is happening across Essex, despite some people believing that it only exists in big towns and cities. The hidden nature of the topic, and the unwillingness to accept it is happening, makes it difficult for services to provide support.

We interviewed six people from across Essex about their experiences of sex work. Their stories were diverse, but there were some commonalities between their experiences.

- Addiction plays a big role in many of these experiences. Often addiction is encouraged by a perpetrator to create a dependency and to allow them to control the individual. Others use drugs and alcohol themselves to cope with what is happening.
- Finance can be a big motivator for sex work, although not always in the way that might be expected. Some participants do sex work to support their families financially, but others do it for extra disposable income or potentially put their careers at risk to engage in sex work.
- Many of the participants experienced mental health difficulties before and after being involved in sex work. There is a great deal of shame that was expressed in these stories.
- There was also a lot of trauma in their stories, usually through childhood abuse and domestic violence. It is clear that trauma had featured significantly in many of their lives prior to any involvement in sex work.
- Most people had been let down by professional bodies or agencies, whether that be police, mental health professionals, or social care. However, a lot of the participants praised the addiction and homelessness services they engaged with for offering a great deal of support.
- Coercion can come in many forms. Some participants were groomed by their partners. Others felt the pressure from their families to provide for them.

Sex work is happening in many towns and villages and is no longer typified by the red-light district and sex workers out on the street, although that undoubtedly still exists.

Digitalisation and social media have diversified sex work immensely, and whilst some participants shared that there was some degree of choice and control in their decisions and actions, it remains evident that for the majority of those involved in sex work, abuse and exploitation features significantly in their lives, along with vulnerabilities such as domestic abuse, addiction and mental health issues.

Many improvements are needed to support the health, care and wellbeing needs of people involved in sex work in Essex: increased investment into addiction and homelessness services; improved mental health support; stronger multi-agency approaches to safeguarding; greater awareness of the financial support available; and crucially, improvements in how we speak to and engage with people.

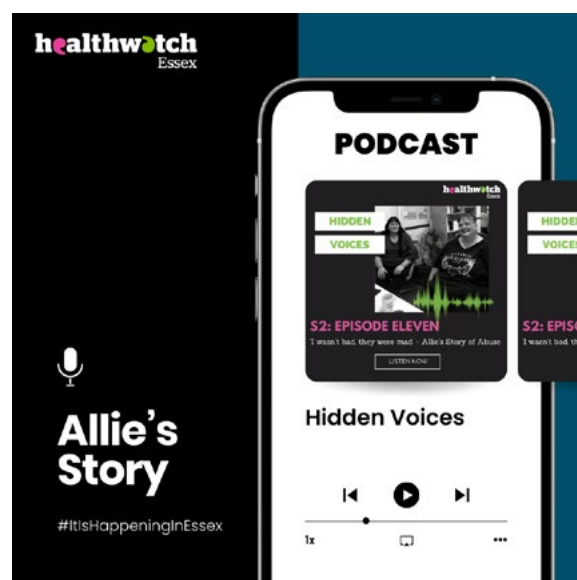
Stigma around sex work still exists. We all need to acknowledge that sex work is happening and reduce this stigma, so that we can fully shape services to meet the needs of those that are, and have been, involved in sex work.

How has this report generated change?

We shared the findings of this project in a full-length report as well as in a short collection of lived experience stories. We relaunched Allie's podcast episode exploring her experiences and shared quotes in a social media campaign.

As a direct result of this report, Essex Frontline has created a Sex Worker tag on their online portal and linked it to the Essex Sexual Health Service. The report and its findings were also presented in a ninety-minute seminar to the Mid & South Essex Primary Care Forum and to the Essex Violence Against Women & Girls Steering Group.

1 – Social media post promoting Allie's podcast
2 and 3 – Social media posts of Rachel and Samuel's stories of sex work.



Hidden Homeless 3:

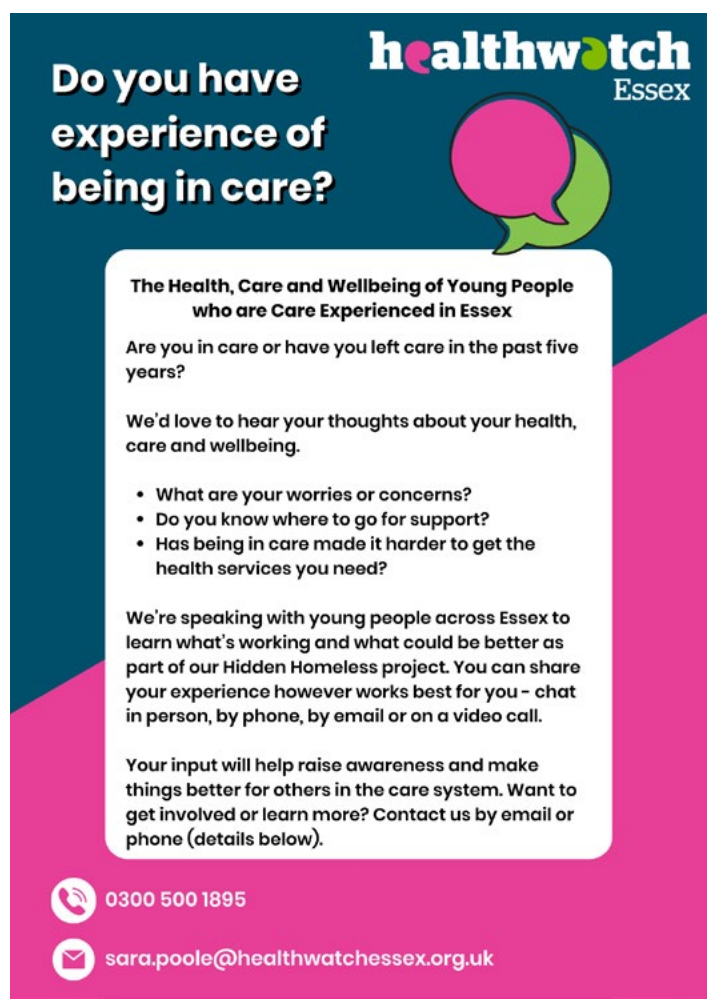
The Health, Care and Wellbeing Needs of Young People who are Care Experienced in Essex

As of the 31st March 2024 there are a total of 1164 Children in Care (CIC). The majority of Children in Care are in fostering placements totalling 69% of placements.

We're looking to explore:

- What are the lived experiences of care experienced young people in Essex before, during and after their involvement in the care system?
- How have looked after young people's experiences of the care system impacted on their healthcare and wellbeing?

This project will generate valuable insights about the lived experiences of care experienced young people in Essex. This project will also increase knowledge, empathy and understanding of those who are care experienced. These insights have the potential to influence and guide services and organisational provision.



The flyer is a vertical rectangle with a dark blue top half and a pink bottom half. In the top right corner, the 'healthwatch Essex' logo is displayed in white and green. Below the logo is a graphic of two overlapping speech bubbles, one pink and one green. On the left side of the top half, the text 'Do you have experience of being in care?' is written in white. In the center, a white rounded rectangle contains the following text: 'The Health, Care and Wellbeing of Young People who are Care Experienced in Essex', 'Are you in care or have you left care in the past five years?', 'We'd love to hear your thoughts about your health, care and wellbeing.', a bulleted list of three questions, 'We're speaking with young people across Essex to learn what's working and what could be better as part of our Hidden Homeless project. You can share your experience however works best for you - chat in person, by phone, by email or on a video call.', and 'Your input will help raise awareness and make things better for others in the care system. Want to get involved or learn more? Contact us by email or phone (details below)'. At the bottom of the flyer, there are two icons: a telephone handset and an envelope, each followed by contact information.

Do you have experience of being in care?

healthwatch Essex

The Health, Care and Wellbeing of Young People who are Care Experienced in Essex


Are you in care or have you left care in the past five years?


We'd love to hear your thoughts about your health, care and wellbeing.

- What are your worries or concerns?
- Do you know where to go for support?
- Has being in care made it harder to get the health services you need?

We're speaking with young people across Essex to learn what's working and what could be better as part of our Hidden Homeless project. You can share your experience however works best for you - chat in person, by phone, by email or on a video call.

Your input will help raise awareness and make things better for others in the care system. Want to get involved or learn more? Contact us by email or phone (details below).

 0300 500 1895

 sara.poole@healthwatchessex.org.uk

Recruitment flyer for the project

This is an ongoing project – it has been promoted across numerous partner organisations including Essex County Council's Children in Care Council, the Leaving and Aftercare Social Care teams, The Children's Society, all three ICB's across the county and the Looked After Children's Nurse service. Young people have chosen to talk to us on a one-to-one basis and a group of young people currently working with the Children's Society Staying Close project have agreed to share their experiences.

What we have been told so far:

- Lack of consistency regarding young people's health needs being met whilst in care: some foster carers were more proactive than others at encouraging the young people to attend GP, dental and optician appointments. Some young people felt they were ignored by foster carers when they asked for an appointment for one of these, whilst others said they attended regular appointments more often in foster care than compared to independent living. This was due to various factors including difficulty in making appointments, having to see a different health professional each time and only being able to discuss one issue per appointment.
- Lack of understanding from health professionals: many of the young people felt that most health professionals they met had no real understanding of what a care leaver may have experienced.
- Difficulties around communication with allocated workers: some of the young people talked about being unable to contact their social worker or personal advisor (PA). One young person said that it took more than a week for him to get hold of his personal advisor and by the time he did, he had already sorted out the issue he had by himself. One young person talked about not knowing that her PA had left the team – no one told her. Key workers also stated that they had issues trying to contact allocated workers and one was unable to locate the duty phone number for one of the leaving and aftercare teams. If professionals are having these issues, then how are young people meant to manage?
- The number of allocated workers for a young person: one young person had eight social workers in two years, whilst another had three personal advisors in a year. How are young people meant to build up a relationship with their allocated worker if they change on such a regular basis?

Something positive:

- Residential care – two young people talked to us positively about their time in residential care. One said he felt it gave him more freedom than foster care. Another said it was easier than trying to fit into someone else's family – 'we were our own misfit family'.
- The Staying Close project from The Children's Society East – it was really nice to see a group of young people sitting together with their key workers in a relaxed and an informal manner and the majority of them happy to talk to me (a stranger!) about their experiences.

Thank you to everyone who has taken part and supported this project so far.

Mould

In 2020, Awaab Ishak died as a result of mould in the flat where he lived – he was two years old. It should never have happened. He had previously been hospitalised (and could have survived had he been immediately taken to a specialist hospital on his last day), social care was aware of his living conditions, and the housing authority have admitted they knew about the problem, and there was nothing stopping them from doing remedial work.

Since 2019, the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 has provided a way for tenants to bring claims against their landlords for damp and mould growth. It's vital that everyone knows this. We hope to use the power of the lived experiences of people across Essex to help ensure this tragedy does not happen again, and that concerns are taken seriously, and robust processes put in place.

We hope to use the power of lived experience of people across Essex to show how effectively Health, Social Care, and Housing are dealing with concerns, reports and problems. We want to see how significant the impact is of living in a home affected by mould, and at the same time we are looking to find areas where best practice and proactive approaches are making a difference.

We will do this through:

- Lived experience survey
- One-to-one interviews
- Thematic analysis
- Professional feedback
- Engage with technology suppliers
- Assess protocols

Key questions:

- Is the system working?
- Are people being listened to?
- Is there a blame culture?
- Are families' wellbeing and support needs being met?
- What are organisations doing right?

We plan to use these insights to create information packs, online toolkits, and webpages for people across Essex about 'know your rights' and 'how to report'.

We will also use insight from areas of best practice to enable health, care, and housing organisations to learn, review and improve, and use the power of local lived experience to stop scepticism and inaction.

Fella's Forums

For the past two years we have run the Fella's Forum in Colchester and this year we were pleased to introduce two new forums in Harlow and Braintree, with over 100 members in total. The Fella's Forum was created following our reports which found that men needed to talk more about their health and wellbeing in a supportive space. Our fellas support each other in a judgment free zone, create a community, and find out about local services available to them. They meet once a month and take part in a variety of activities, including golf, baking, and volunteering. We also invite guest speakers to come and inform the men of new initiatives launching in their area - recently we had Colchester United in the Community showcasing their new mental health football session.

How the forums have made a difference

We asked the men about the impact of attending the Fella's Forum - an outstanding 100% of participants stated they felt less isolated, and their mental health had improved, with 80% mentioning the improvement in their physical health. All of the men surveyed stated they enjoyed the physical activity element of the sessions. 90% of the men are very satisfied with the forum and had formed new friendships.

A key impact has been the creation of a Network of Networks, linking the men to other organisations such as Andy's Man Club, The Essex Shed Network and the Gaming Cove which helps decrease feelings of loneliness for men and extends the impact of the sessions.

Since taking part in the forum, men have met up with each other outside the meetings, offered support on work projects and taken part in other volunteering opportunities.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of some of their journeys, impactful videos were produced for Men's Health Week 2024 in our 'Fella's Voices' series - watch on our YouTube channel.



Fella's Forum playing golf



Fella's Forum during a Walk and Talk session

"I've met lots of gents who I would never have met if I hadn't come along. Created some fab new connections too. The group allows us to chat about what we like. There is a sense of feeling comfortable being there. Also done activities I would never have dreamed of doing before." - Fella's Forum member

"Just hanging out with you guys makes a difference. I'm not on my own all the time. For a few hours I get to forget my problems and just enjoy myself." - Fella's Forum member

Community Asset Mapping

Over the past year, we have continued our work on the latest phase of Community Asset Mapping—an ongoing series of reports commissioned by the North East Essex Health & Wellbeing Alliance. These reports explore the local assets that support health and social care across North East Essex, including people, places, organisations, and community services.

Over the last three years, six reports have been developed in partnership with Community360 and Community Voluntary Services Tendring, focusing on the voluntary sector in Colchester and Tendring as part of the Live Well programme. These reports examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sector and highlighted the critical role of community-based activities in supporting individuals across various stages of life—from Start Well and Feel Well through to Die Well.

This work is now entering a new phase. The focus has shifted toward five priority health conditions identified by the Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board (SNEE ICB): Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Mental Health & Suicide Prevention, Childhood Asthma, Frailty, and Hypertension. The geographical focus remains on Colchester and Tendring, in areas where these conditions are recorded as most prolific.

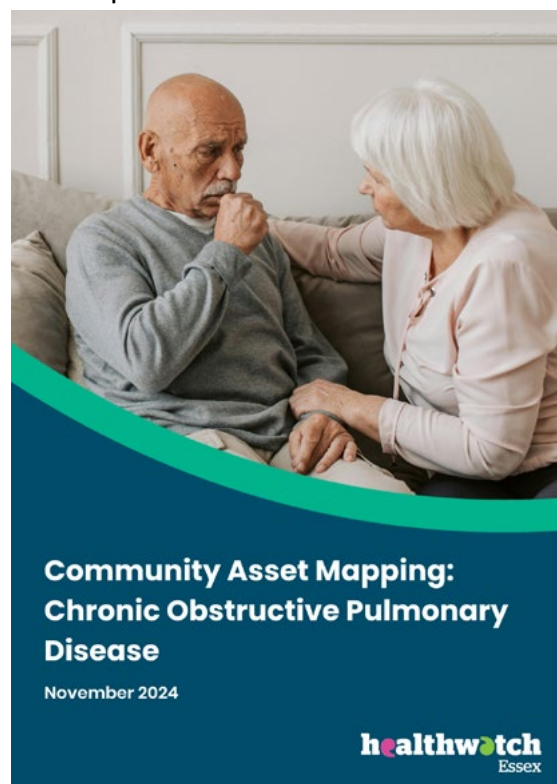
To support this next phase, we have engaged with patients, healthcare professionals, and community sector workers to gather a broad range of perspectives and experiences relating to these conditions.

COPD

The first report in this new series is centred on COPD and focused on the neighbourhoods of Greenstead and St Anne's and St John's in Colchester, and Jaywick and West Clacton in Tendring. Across these areas, we spoke with 40 local residents and 10 healthcare professionals, including pharmacists, respiratory nurses based in GP practices, community respiratory teams who conduct home visits, and hospital-based acute respiratory nurses. We also highlighted the work of two community organisations—Open Road and RAMA—who frequently encounter individuals with severe COPD within their client groups.

From these conversations, several key themes emerged. Many residents expressed frustration about the shift to telephone-based annual reviews at GP practices, which they felt limited the quality of care. There was

COPD report cover



also concern about an increasing number of COPD diagnoses occurring in hospitals, often due to difficulties in securing GP appointments. A notable gap in peer-led support groups was identified, and many individuals described the profound mental health challenges associated with managing a long-term respiratory condition. The report concluded with 16 recommendations, which was submitted to the SNEE ICB in November 2024.

Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

The second report, which is currently in draft form, explores Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in Berechurch and Shrub End in Colchester, and Harwich and Great Bentley in Tendring.

To inform this report, we launched an online survey that attracted over 20 responses, several of which were followed up with in-depth interviews that now feature as case studies in the report. In addition to this, we engaged extensively with professionals from across the healthcare system—including Primary Care Networks (PCNs), Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust (EPUT), and East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust (ESNEFT)—representing primary care, secondary care, crisis response, and acute services. These professionals helped us identify the most frequently observed at-risk groups within the statutory services.



To complement this, we spoke with a number of third-sector community organisations that work closely with these groups. These included Open Road, Next Chapter, CARA, Summit, The Haven Project, Phoenix Futures, Headway Essex, and RAMA. Scott Tatum from Healthwatch Essex also contributed his insight through an interview, particularly reflecting on the impact of the Fella's Forum. Several of its members also spoke with us about their personal experiences of seeking mental health support.

This second report has generated over 30 recommendations and is currently awaiting review and approval by the SNEE ICB.

How have these reports made a difference?

The COPD report was used as evidence to support opening a new respiratory clinic in Clacton. Even though the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention report is yet to be published, it has already made an impact – it identified that men in Harwich are affected by loneliness and isolation, leading to Healthwatch Essex being able to secure funding for a new Fella's Forum in Harwich.

Spotlight on Our Events

The Healthwatch Essex team at the event



An Evening with Healthwatch Essex

Each year we hold an annual event, 'An Evening with Healthwatch Essex', to showcase our work from the previous year and demonstrate the impact of people sharing their lived experiences.

On 6th June 2024 we returned to Hylands House in Chelmsford for a night of stories and networking. Our staff shared the findings, recommendations, and impact of these projects:

- Dan Potts shared the story of the Essex Fella's Forum in Colchester and our men's health initiatives.
- Sharon Westfield-de-Cortez and Chloe Dench spoke about the first installment of the Hidden Homeless series focussing on the health, care and wellbeing needs of prisoners and ex-offenders and the associated awareness campaign.
- Kate Mahoney shared the findings of our Transitions project which explored experiences of being on the gender identity clinic waiting list.
- Lorna Orriss-Dib presented her research on experiences of pregnancy for people with inflammatory bowel disease.
- Halfway through, we had an incredible performance from An Nemias, a storytelling drag queen who donates blood to neonatal babies.
- Sara Poole and Fergus Bird talked about some of their projects for Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB and the changes that have been made as a result of their findings.

We couldn't do what we do at Healthwatch Essex without our ambassadors giving so freely. We finished the night with a video tribute to Denise, one of our Trauma Ambassadors who sadly passed away in 2023 and who is greatly missed by our team.

“There is still a stigma around men openly talking about feelings, but hopefully more events like this and more awareness will help to normalise this.” – Fella’s Fair attendee

Fella’s Fairs

We were commissioned by Mid and South NHS and Braintree District Council to plan, develop and implement Fella’s Fair events. Healthwatch Essex produced three Fella’s Fairs in collaboration with Lost Sock Productions, which were comedy nights called ‘A Healthy Dose of Humour’, in Chelmsford and Halstead. A further Fella’s Fair event was held at Essex County Cricket Ground with 20 partner organisations having stands to engage men in discussions around support for health and wellbeing.

Nearly 800 people attended the events. The events aimed to help organisations reach out to men to offer support and for men to recognise, discuss and seek support for health issues. ‘A Healthy Dose of Humour’ involved lived experience talks/videos alongside comedy performances to get men talking and laughing – humour is a powerful tool in engagement. Within a theatre style setting there is a captive audience to enhance the awareness of support services for men’s health and wellbeing.

What is the impact of the Fella’s Fairs?

The Healthwatch Essex Fella’s Fairs have played a crucial role in raising awareness, fostering community engagement, enhancing collaboration, and improving men’s health and well-being awareness. The introduction of the comedy events to raise awareness of men’s health and wellbeing has been so well received and demonstrates Healthwatch Essex’s innovation. The Telegraph recently reported comedy shows are to be prescribed to NHS patients as part of a trial to help treat people with mental health conditions.

The Fella’s Fair events have positively influenced the communities they serve by promoting conversations, and fostering connections between attendees, local organisations, and healthcare providers. This has resulted in men being more aware of the pathways to seek support for health interventions.

The events created safe, informal spaces where men felt comfortable discussing physical and mental health concerns, particularly around prostate health, mental wellbeing, and preventative care. Having lived experience talks showcased the need for men to talk more and highlighted positive outcomes people had experienced since opening up about their health and wellbeing.



Essex Cricketer Sam Cook with Engagement Manager Scott at Essex County Cricket Ground



The Healthwatch Essex team at the Halstead comedy night

Expressions of Trauma

Since the inception of the Trauma Ambassador Group, members have discussed how they have used creative outlets on their journey with living with trauma. Sometimes this was as a form of therapy, sometimes as a means of distraction, and sometimes as a way of expressing their experiences and feelings non-verbally. These creative outlets took many shapes; painting, music, sculpture, dance, photography, poetry... the list was as diverse as the sources and effects of trauma itself!

The one commonality in these discussions was that none of the individuals considered themselves to be an artist, yet we knew that we had to somehow highlight how important this aspect of life was to those living with trauma. If our ambassadors were using creativity in this way, then many others living with the effects of trauma would also be doing so. A simple social media post asking just that question resulted in well over 100 people from across the county getting in touch to share their experiences and their artworks. Many of these people had never reached out to services before, and certainly not shared their creative works. Yet these pieces told a story, conveyed a depth of emotion, and spoke the truth of their creators. They needed to be shared and understood. Expressions of Trauma, the exhibition, was born.

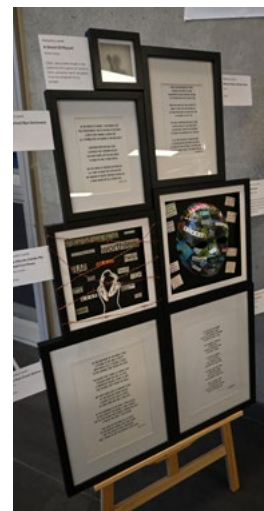
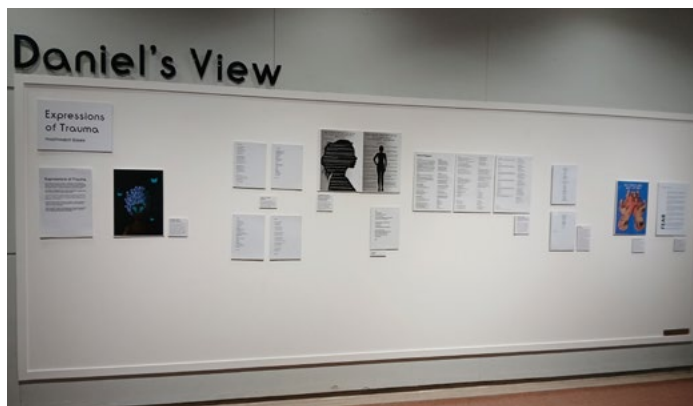
We were lucky to be offered a wonderful space at The Minories gallery in Colchester, and on 10th October opened our doors to the public, showing approximately 130 individual pieces of art, all created by individuals living with the effects of trauma. People travelled from across the county and across the country to visit the four-week run of the exhibition, and we totalled in excess of 2000 visitors in that time.

How have the exhibitions made a difference?

Feedback was overwhelming; some visitors had no particular knowledge of trauma and told us that they felt they had learned something valuable, which had increased their understanding and awareness of trauma. Many reported that the exhibition made them feel more validated and understood, as they too had experienced trauma, and expressed that coming to the exhibition had made them feel part of a community – even if they hadn't met the artists, they felt a connection with them and less alone. Some came and found the strength to reach out for the first time to share their own experiences and ask for avenues of information and support, gaining strength from the artists sharing their own stories through their art.

The exhibitors told us that being part of Expressions of Trauma had not been without nervousness and anticipation for them, but that it had been a hugely empowering experience which had a positive impact on their self-esteem – as one individual commented, 'I have come away from this feeling that little bit taller.' With such inspiring comments, we knew that Expressions of Trauma was so much more than just one amazing exhibition, and since then we have exhibited at The Romford Mercury Mall, Jaywick Martello Tower, and the University of Suffolk.

With each iteration, our contributors have their voices heard and know that they are making a difference to the many others in our communities who are also living with the effects of trauma.





Information & Guidance

**Helping you access the
information you need about
health and care services**

How many people contacted us?

1439 people sought support and information from our Information and Guidance Team online, by text, phone call, email, letter, web chat and WhatsApp between 1st April 2024 and 31st March 2025, as well as many more in person.

What are people calling about?

Frequent lines of enquiry include



GP Complaint



Hospital
Complaint



Hospital
Discharge



Mental Health



Carers Support

Who is contacting us?

1. Self.
2. Relative or friend.
3. Healthcare professional.
4. Other professional.
5. Other.

How did people find out about us?

1. Word of mouth.
2. Online search.
3. Outreach event.
4. Healthwatch England website.
5. Partner Agency.

"I feel really disempowered as a carer especially visiting hospital with my mum, where staff don't listen to me even though I have vital information to share about her. I spoke to the Carers Voice Team on leaving hospital and have kept in touch. They have really helped me consider wider options and I feel better informed and more in control."
- Caller

"...I've just read your email and I can't tell you how much it means to have someone really standing up for me and making my voice heard. Everything you said is exactly how I've been feeling – closed down and let down at every step. I really hope this pushes someone senior to take responsibility and actually help. I'll keep everything crossed and will let you know if I hear anything... Thank you so much for making my voice heard and actually having a heart in all of this..." - Caller

Our Information and Guidance team at our Annual Event



Informing Essex

We've been busier than ever this year, visiting even more places across Essex. We were helped by a new addition to the team... The Healthwatch Essex Van! Our van has allowed us to access more remote locations, offer a private space at events for sensitive conversations and protected us from the elements. If you would like us to visit you in our van next year, get in touch!

Where have we been?

Our team have been out and about throughout the county every month including visiting:

- Hospitals
- Health and Wellbeing Festivals and Fayres
- SEND Roadshows
- Healthier Habit hubs
- Support groups including groups for dementia, carers, cancer, brain injury and more
- Schools, colleges, and universities
- Family centres
- LGBTQ+ groups and Pride events
- Arts venues including Martello Tower and The Minories
- New diagnostic centres and hubs
- Cultural celebrations such as the Rice and Spice Festival
- Ambulance HQ and air ambulance, police, and fire stations
- Town markets
- Conferences
- SOS bus
- Sports events
- And more!

How have we stayed up to date on the latest developments and shared our findings?

Alongside our outreach events, we maintain a regular presence at meetings across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors in every part of the county. We have continued to ensure that the public voice is heard and taken into account throughout the system. We have participated regularly in the Essex County Council Health Overview, Policy and Scrutiny and People and Families Committees, as well as many strategic meetings with our Integrated Care Services (ICS), Boards (ICB) and Alliances, to name just a few.

We have continued to produce the quarterly Spotlight On Services data, featuring the nature of the contacts we receive from across the county, and a quarterly report of the Healthwatch Essex teams' activities, which we share widely both on our website and via direct communication to partners.

We do regular training to keep our skills up to date. This year this has included:

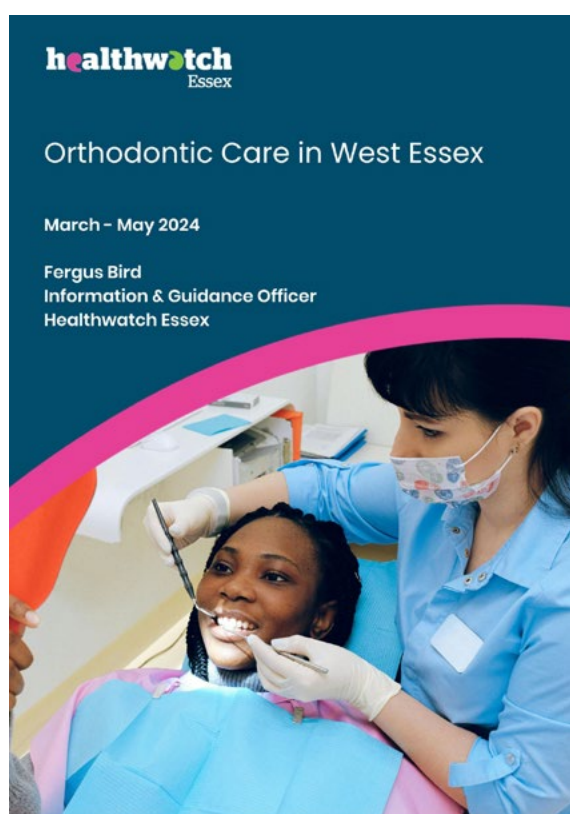
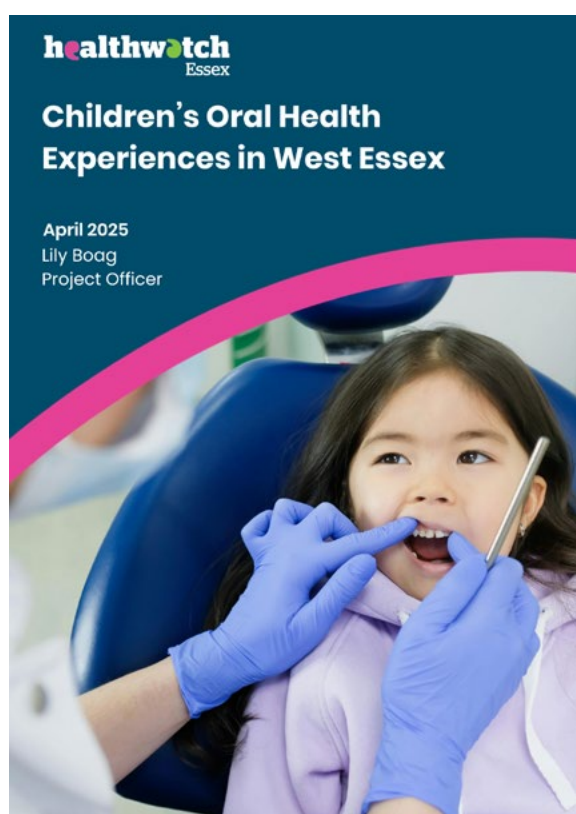
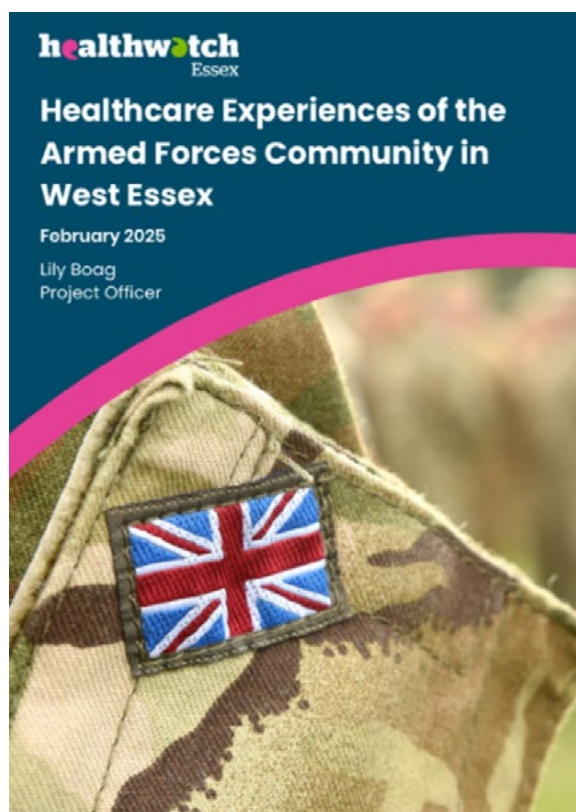
- Safeguarding
- Police Abuse of Position
- Sepsis
- Brain Injury
- And much more!



Our Information and Guidance team at various events.

Reporting from West Essex

Healthwatch Essex was approached by Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board (HWE ICB) to undertake a series of projects focussing on the lived experiences of people in the area in relation to their health, care and wellbeing.



The front covers of the four reports

Armed Forces

Healthwatch Essex was approached by HWE ICB to undertake a project focussing on the healthcare experiences of the Armed Forces Community in West Essex.

The aim of this project was to carry out in-depth engagement with veterans, serving personnel and their families and use the findings to produce a report with recommendations on how to improve current and future NHS service provision. We interviewed a variety of participants from the armed forces community to learn about their lived experiences, alongside professionals from military charities and healthcare services who shared their expertise. These interviews were used to create 12 case studies which informed our findings.

Some of the key recommendations which were made in this report include:

- Implementing the Veteran Friendly GP Accreditation programme and training NHS staff around military culture, physical and mental health challenges, and service-related conditions.
- Engaging with veterans during their transition from military to civilian healthcare, improving GP registration and medical record transfer.
- Strengthening the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant by ensuring priority treatment for service-related conditions.
- Improving mental health services, addressing healthcare gaps, and reducing mental health stigma within the armed forces community.
- Improving healthcare access for military families, supporting caregivers, and promoting family involvement in healthcare delivery.
- Understanding military service experiences, improving verbal communication and interaction with armed forces personnel, and creating accessible and inclusive healthcare environments.

As part of this project, we also held discussions with members of Healthwatch Essex's Veterans Working Group. The group is made up of professionals from various organisations, including the NHS, Essex County Council, and other charities, services and researchers supporting the armed forces community across Essex. The network provides a chance for discussions around current topics and issues, guest speaker presentations and opportunities to share new research and findings. This has included supporting the development of a veteran's tab on the Essex Frontline app to make finding support services easier for the armed forces community.

Overall, the report highlights how responding to the needs of the armed forces community and incorporating their experiences into service design can help to deliver better healthcare outcomes.

How this report will make a difference

The Hertfordshire and West Essex NHS Integrated Care Board will use the recommendations which were made in this report to improve healthcare services for the armed forces community in West Essex. This report has been appointed by the Director of Integrated Specialist Care NHS and Chair of the Hertfordshire Armed Forces Covenant Board Health Subgroup for further work to implement these recommendations.

Children's Oral Health

Tooth decay remains the most common reason for hospital admissions in children aged between five and nine years old. In the year 2023 to 2024, hospital tooth extractions for young people are estimated to have cost the NHS £74.8 million.

Healthwatch Essex was approached by HWE ICB to launch a project on children's oral health experiences. This included creating a survey and carrying out in-depth engagement with parents, families, and carers of children in West Essex.

The aim of this project was to understand why children's oral health remains to be a public health issue, how it impacts our local community, and how to improve current and future NHS dental service provision. A total of 34 participants completed the survey to share their views, with four case studies exploring their lived experiences in more detail.

As part of the project, we engaged with dental practices and public bodies across West Essex, spoke with NHS professionals working in oral health and healthcare prevention, transformation, and disparities, and attended oral health training and child oral health improvement steering groups.

Some of the key recommendations which were made in the report include:

- Improving access to NHS dental care by offering more flexible appointments and improving public awareness of available services.
- Providing clear and consistent information, guidance, and resources to improve communication, education, and tackle misconceptions.
- Fostering a positive relationship with dental care, making oral health learning fun, and encouraging early visits and family involvement.
- Using child-focused dental techniques and creating welcoming practice environments to make dental services more child-friendly.
- Raising awareness around the impact of dental anxiety, dental phobia, and the effects of trauma to improve emotional support.
- Promoting school-based dental health initiatives such as supervised tooth brushing and education on oral health, hygiene, and nutrition.
- Promoting the availability of free and affordable healthcare options.
- Prioritising early intervention and prevention over emergency or restorative treatment and investing in preventative dental care.

How the report will make a difference

The recommendations in this report will be used by the Hertfordshire and West Essex NHS Integrated Care Board to improve NHS dental services in the West Essex area. This includes helping to shape the creation of a child-focussed dental practice scheme to improve the accessibility for dental and oral care for children and young people.

Online GP Services

HWE ICB were keen to look at experiences of, and attitudes towards, contacting GPs online. With the 8am phone call lottery causing high levels of anxiety, the ICB wants to ensure that recommendations and developments in online services are fit for purpose and match people's needs.

150 people across West Essex shared thoughts and experiences with us through our survey, telephone calls, and Microsoft Teams conversations.

We found that:

- The report brought to light that for those people not online, and not likely to go online, access not only needs to be equitable, but needs to be SEEN to be equitable.
- De-mystifying the simplicity, variety, and ease of using online services will have a direct impact.
- There are quick wins such as App downloads for repeat prescriptions if locally based training/education sessions are implemented.

How the report will make a difference

The ICB is now working hard to integrate the report's recommendations and its own programmes to develop online options that will help people who wish to use them, as well as for those who prefer more traditional pathways. The impact of what people shared with us will be ongoing for many years to come.

Orthodontics

HWE ICB have not revisited NHS Orthodontic Services since well before the COVID-19 pandemic, and with two thirds of young people being eligible for treatment, it's really important to get clarity and insight on the effectiveness of the current setup before recommissioning.

We engaged with over 50 people from 15 different postcode areas within West Essex. This was through an online survey and a group discussion held in Harlow.

In the feedback there were lots of very positive aspects, especially concerning the quality of care.

We found some areas where there is room for improvement:

- Patients not being aware of having a choice, so travelling a long way.
- Saturday appointments – over a third of respondents wanted weekend appointments to avoid needing to take time off work to attend appointments.
- No communication on expected referral waiting times.

How the report will make a difference

The ICB has taken this report, and the information, case studies, and recommendations are being fed into the recommissioning process, requirements, and investigations. We fully expect the insight we have provided will have a positive impact on a huge number of West Essex residents.

Carers Voices

Our commissioning by Essex County Council for Carers Voices began early 2024. The aims are to engage with unpaid carers of all ages across Essex including those who have lost their loved one within the past 5 years, gathering their lived experiences and finding out what worked well and not so well to influence improvements to the services.



The team fully understand the pressures that caring responsibilities can bring, and that each caring role can be very different. Many carers simply don't recognise themselves as a carer, as when caring for a loved one whether that be spouse, partner, parents, children, other relatives, friends or neighbours, they feel it is their duty and can be reluctant to ask for help, so therefore are often not supported in their role by society. Over time, this can have a negative effect on the health and wellbeing of the carer and it's only then when they reach crisis point that it becomes apparent. So, we realised we had to raise awareness of what being an unpaid carer actually means:

- Helping someone in their daily life
- Caring for someone who cannot care for themselves
- Keeping someone company if they can't get out much

Time is precious for a carer especially when juggling multiple caring roles, family life and employment. To engage with carers we regularly visited hospitals, GP surgeries, schools, supermarkets, health and wellbeing events, fairs, and Christmas markets, and consequently discovered many who were in fact 'carers' who had not realised it. The addition of a van to our team has proved invaluable for reaching remote areas of the county going to those who cannot come to us. To accommodate all carers sharing their experiences we can do so with a telephone call, video call, in person at their home or in a public place of their choice.

At the end of March 2025 we had engaged with 3400 carers, supporting with signposting and referring to caring organisations relevant to their role. Many carers have offered to share their experience in more detail, and we have raised any issues and recommendations for improvements with Essex County Council, local carers organisations and the Integrated Care Boards. Based on our evidence, we were invited to present at a Domestic Abuse and Carers conference sharing lived experience.

We hold workshops and one-off carers support meetings across the county, have surveys on various topics and a regular newsletter to share our ongoing work. Some of our past topics have been Isolation & Loneliness, Mental Health & Wellbeing, and Carers & Employment. Our survey topics are based on the connections we have made and the most commonly raised issues.

"Sometimes the carer requires more support than the cared for person. Thank you for asking how I am." - Carer

"Thanks to the Carers Voices team for making a difference in my life. It's so hard to navigate the services out there, but Healthwatch Essex were there to help." - Carer



In The Media & Online

How we communicate what we do

We are continuously reviewing the way we share information and connect online so that we can reach as many people in Essex as possible.



Our Reach

Connecting with our community

- X - We had 36,240 impressions on our X posts and 384 likes.
- Facebook - We've built a strong community this year by posting in Facebook groups - this has seen us reach more people than ever, with 357 new followers.
- TikTok - Our video with the drag queen 'An Nemia' about neonatal blood donation went viral, reaching over 300,000 people.
- Instagram - We gained 250 new followers, and our posts were viewed 40,866 times.
- LinkedIn - LinkedIn has widened our professional network this year, with an increase in following of 32%.
- E-newsletter - Our monthly newsletter 'Bitesize' has reached a bigger audience this year, with a 15% growth in subscribers following us to hear our latest updates and news from the wider health sector.
- Media Coverage - We were featured in articles 40 times this year, as well as receiving radio coverage for our Fella's Fairs and Trauma Cards.
- YouTube - We've released many videos on YouTube this year. We now share our podcasts and shorts on there too, allowing us to be watched 13,000 times.
- Podcast - Our followers increased by 25% this year. Our most listened to episode was 'Life as an Adoptee'.

Hidden Voices

Our podcast series, Hidden Voices, captures the less heard stories in health and social care. Our guests share their experiences to raise awareness, help other people in similar situations feel less alone and to influence change.

Like always, we have covered a vast array of topics this year; blood donation for newborn babies, trauma in veterans, caring for children with ARFID and Perthes, functional neurological disorder, chronic regional pain syndrome, adoption, sepsis, financial abuse, apprenticeships, people affected by their loved one's alcohol addiction, brain injury, and how the foodbank is supporting those affected by furniture poverty.



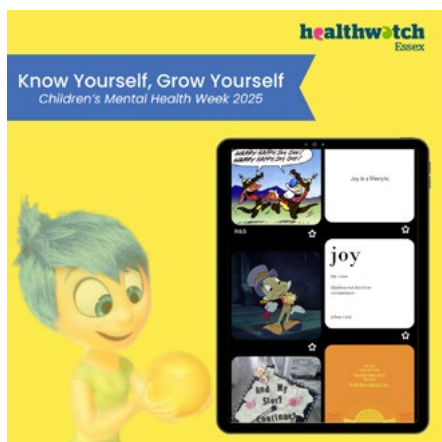
You can listen to the series by scanning the box to the left to be taken to Spotify, or you can now listen to our podcast on our YouTube channel - @healthwatchessex.

Our most listened to episode.



Our Top Stories

Here are some of our top social media campaigns from the last 12 months, co-produced with our ambassadors to amplify their stories and experiences.



Children's Mental Health Week 2025

Every year, our Young Mental Health Ambassadors take over our social media channels for Children's Mental Health Week (CMHW). This year they used the characters from Inside Out to reflect on different emotions in creative ways – music, Pinterest boards, and writing.



16 Days of Activism

Our Trauma Ambassador Group maintained a visible presence throughout the 16 Days Of Activism Campaign. Blogs, poetry and other information was shared to help raise awareness and knowledge of the issue of violence against women and girls.



Lucy's Legacy

Lucy Watts was an avid champion of palliative care for so much of her life – giving a TEDx Talk, speaking to Dr Tedros from the World Health Organization, and appearing in BBC documentaries. Yet she felt badly let down by palliative care services at the end of her life. In our video series, 'Lucy's Legacy', we heard Lucy's mum, Kate, share her reflections on Lucy's life and death. You can watch the full series on our YouTube channel.



Smiley Film Awards

On Thursday 20th March, we took an exciting journey to London for the Smiley Charity Film Awards. The Smiley Awards are 'the world's largest cause-based film campaign', with films voted on by the public and finalists judged by an expert panel. Our film 'Cervical Screening as a Trauma Survivor' was nominated – thank you to everyone who voted for us!

Top to bottom: 1- A social media post for CMHW on the theme of joy. 2 – A social media post for 16 Days of Activism on cyber stalking. 3- A social media post for Lucy's Legacy. 4 – The Charity Film Awards sign.

Our Ambassadors & Networks

Helping more people have their say
through co-production

Quote from former Young Mental Health Ambassador (YMHA), Beau:

"When I joined Healthwatch Essex as a YMHA I wasn't sure what to expect and how I could really help other young people. Renee and the team gave me lots of support and opportunities to contribute and engage to have a positive impact on young people's mental health services."

Being a YMHA has really helped me to learn from the experiences of other young people and made me feel less isolated and alone coping with anxiety issues. It has really helped me to feel valued for my experiences and provides me with a good understanding of how my neurodivergence is actually a super power that can lead positive changes for other young people."



Trauma Ambassador Group

Our Trauma Ambassador Group (TAG) is made up of 33 ambassadors who have lived experience of trauma in various forms and who use their experiences to raise awareness and improve services for others.

TAG Activities and Impact

This year we were delighted to discover that our Trauma Informed Cervical Screening film was a finalist in the Smiley Charity Film Awards. For this project, we worked with Trauma Ambassador Della to raise understanding and awareness of the challenges experienced by women affected by trauma in accessing the screening process. We attended the awards ceremony at the O2 Arena in London, along with other national charities and high-profile figures. This national coverage further elevated the visibility of the campaign and resulted in a renewed wave of interest from agencies across the UK in utilising our film and associated blog.

Our trauma cards have also remained in focus, with consistent demand from individuals and agencies to be supplied with them. Healthwatch England, in recent months, have explored the need for a national pilot of the cards which has further heightened the interest from a multitude of agencies across the UK, as well as individuals living with trauma wishing to access a trauma card themselves. To support the focus of Healthwatch England on the specific needs of trauma survivors, we also delivered a training session to their staff team, with Trauma Ambassadors Kari, Rachel and Della taking a prominent role in sharing their experiences and the impact of trauma, particularly in relation to accessing health, care and wellbeing services.

Many of the Trauma Ambassadors shared their insight and experiences with us throughout the year in blogs; Tina spoke about the challenges of accessing dentistry when living with the effects of trauma, Megan told us about the impact of becoming a family carer at a young age, and Indigo explained about the impact of being misgendered by services as a non-binary individual. Becky wrote about the importance of exercise and movement for people with larger bodies, and Fi told us about the value of dance in health and wellbeing, and the importance of recognising and addressing inequalities in women's healthcare.

Trauma Ambassador Vanessa joined us for a podcast where she shared her story of being an adoptee, and the trauma which has stemmed from this in her life, and Tara's podcast detailed her experience of suffering a Traumatic Brain Injury after being in a road traffic accident caused by a driver under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

We set out to create a trauma resource specific to children and young people, and spent many hours engaging at schools/colleges, youth councils and social groups across the county. This rigorous co-production has resulted in the creation of a product which we are excited to launch and evaluate in the summer of 2025.

Chloe, Sam, Della, and Sharon at the Charity Film Awards

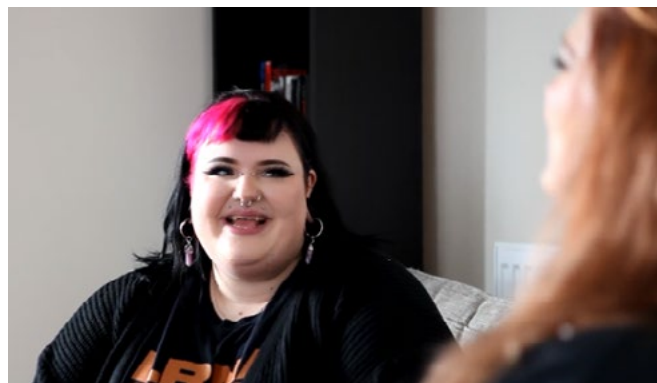


Young Mental Health Ambassadors (YMHA)

The Young Mental Health Ambassador (YMHA) programme was created to recruit, train and support young people with an experience of children's mental health services and enable them to become involved by sharing their views and experiences of mental health. We currently have 20 passionate young people volunteering as Young Mental Health Ambassadors who have been involved in a variety of opportunities.

YMHA Activities and Impact

- Developed a storyboard and featured in the filming itself of a video exploring the transition process between child to adult mental health services. Our YMHA provided feedback that there is some uncertainty regarding what this process involves – therefore, the video was created to explain some of the key questions. This video is now shared by Polaris (the provider of the Progressions service) with young people who may be accessing the Progressions Service for the first time to minimise anxiety and support them to feel empowered and confident accessing this service.
- Helped shape the ECC Self-Care Library for children and young people (CYP) by creating music playlists for each of the themes and submitting TikTok videos, Pinterest posts and YouTube videos which they had found had improved their mood or they found helpful for their wellbeing. This resource library is now live and is somewhere that CYP, families and schools can go to get resources that will support young people's wellbeing.
- Co-producing a survey on Digitally Accessing CYP Mental Health Information and supporting the distribution of the survey with their peers. The responses from the survey led to a report being created and launched including recommendations on how to engage with young people and share important information with them. This has been shared with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) commissioners, Essex County Council, Communications Teams from local ICB's and other CYP charities and organisations to support their communications with children and young people.
- Supported the University of Essex by attending their lessons to share their lived experience of mental health and accessing local MH services for children and young people, with a focus on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) as part of Talking Therapies.
- Reviewed multiple websites including the new Mid and North Essex Mind Sanctuary website and the SET CAMHS page of the NELFT website. They shared feedback on the accessibility, the information that was being shared on it and if they would be likely to use the platforms themselves, which is currently being fed back to Senior Managers to look into what actions can be taken from this.
- Mapped what mental health support is available in Essex and sharing their own lived experiences of accessing these provisions. The feedback that Suffolk and North East Essex (SNEE) ICB received from the young people has been gathered as part of a collection of 'what are the local mental health provisions in NEE' – this work is still being finalised and will be shared with over 85 connections from system partners across NEE to support giving them an understanding of what the local gaps and needs are.
- Took part in a social media takeover of our channels for Children's Mental Health Week.



YMHA Aimee during filming for the progressions service film

Adult Mental Health Ambassadors (AMHA)

We recruited 30 adults with experience of using mental health services in Essex to become involved in co-production, re-design, and research. It could link to experience of addiction, eating disorder, illness, or a passion for supporting loved ones who may be going through or have experienced a mental health issue. Through the online forums, networking and workshop opportunities ambassadors were able to hear directly from professional speakers in order to increase their knowledge, but equally ambassadors were able to challenge those speakers from the perspective of their own lived experience.



AMHA Activities and Impact

- Presentations for Mid Essex Alliance Neighbourhood Forums
- Took part in 3 ECC workshops looking at MH social care and a Strategic Priorities Event.
- A visit to Galleywood Youth Centre.
- Participation in studies around self-harm and trauma, community mental health services, CBT, and independent living for people with disabilities.
- Provided feedback on apps and draft media materials.
- Volunteer support with outreach at Broomfield Hospital and speaking at Fella's Fairs.
- Co-produced films for Men's Health Week

By sharing their experiences, they have brought unique perspectives to service discussions. This influences them personally through improved mental health, new friendship groups, trying new activities, and a sense of satisfaction that they are making a difference. The ambassador group has 'lit a fuse' within the members and a desire to help improve services, whilst helping them forge a rewarding career. We have supported several ambassadors in their careers by providing references and access to interviews, supported with academic studies, been on their podcasts and enabled access to funding.

Carer Experts by Experience

From carers engaged with as part of the Carers Voices project, an ambassador group has been created called Experts by Experience, where carers have chosen to belong and offer their experiences in influencing decision making on services. They offer as much time as they are willing and able to around their caring role. Some past opportunities they have supported are: helping a local hospice update their carers policy and making it more user friendly, creating the Isolation & Loneliness survey, sitting on the panels for local carer organisation provision, and continuing to monitor the progress of the service. We now have 75 carers volunteering their time as Experts by Experience. Two of our ambassadors joined us on a trip to Parliament this year to meet Chris Vince, MP for Harlow, who has an interest in hearing carer's experiences, amplifying carers issues on a national platform. One of the ambassadors has gained confidence to champion the cause for ARFID with other visits to Parliament.



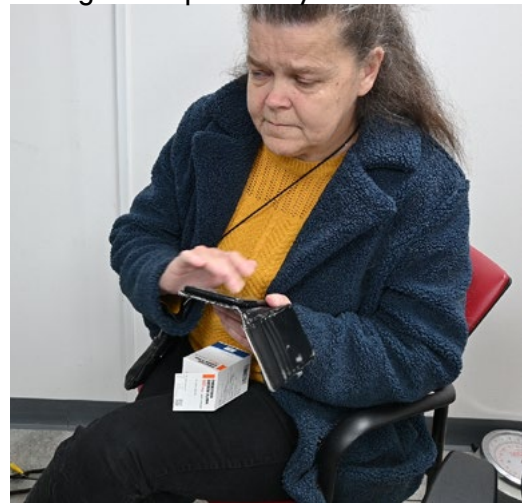
Some of the Experts by Experience with Carers Voices Officer Jane at the 2025 Annual Event.

Collaborate Essex

The Collaborate Essex Disability & Carers Forum was established in 2019 in collaboration with Essex County Council (ECC) and is made up of 10 people with lived experience of either being in a carer role or living with a disability which includes sensory impairments, physical impairments, long term health conditions, learning disability (LD) and autism. The forum is additionally supported by SUMMIT's AB4D members and is attended by ECC senior commissioners and professionals relevant for each topic who can support actions being taken and make changes. Each forum member is very well-networked with other people with lived experience who they collect feedback and experiences from to feed back into the forum.

This forum was created to ensure that people living with a disability or being in a carer role are having their voices heard within health and adult social care. This year, they have discussed a variety of topics including Pharmacies, Disabled Facilities Grants, Accommodation and Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds.

Forum member Sam during filming for the pharmacy films



Collaborate Essex Activities and Impact

The forum members have additionally:

- Co-produced a storyboard and participated in the filming of four short videos to be used within pharmaceutical staff training about the shop floor experience, consultation rooms, interactions with staff and accessibility of medication. These videos have been shared by Community Pharmacy Essex and are being used within staff training to ensure that people living with sensory impairments have a better experience when accessing their local pharmacy.
- Supported ECC with their appreciative enquiry approach to improve how assessments and reviews are experienced in Adult Social Care. They have attended workshops to help ECC gain an honest understanding of personal experiences, reflections, and aspirations for change by discussing what's working, what's not, and what changes the forum would like to see. In June 2025, ECC will be hosting a joint session where professionals and forum members will come together – a 'meeting of minds' – to start developing practical, realistic solutions and tangible actions.
- Participated and fed into the ECC 'Growing Older' workstreams by attending focus groups where they co-produced a set of values that were important to them and their networks. As a result of their participation, these co-produced values now form part of the new ECC internal practice model 'Inclusive Essex.' This means that Adult Social Care Commissioning and operational teams now reflect on these when they commission services, and when supporting local Essex residents.
- Supported ECC by being involved in a pilot to test the accessibility of a new social care database in Essex. The feedback from this has been embedded within the commissioning specification for their new upcoming residents panel, with social care users and carers voices shaping the way they would like a panel to work for them in the future.
- Supported the University of Essex by attending their lessons to share their lived experience of disability and accessing local services. Forum members spoke to trainees on the Doctor of Clinical Psychology course with the aim that the trainees will develop an understanding of what good and bad practice looks like for when they graduate.

Accessible Information Standards (AIS) Working Group

Following feedback from the Collaborate Essex Disability & Carers Forum, Healthwatch Essex formed an Accessible Information Standards Working Group that consists of people with lived experience and professionals all united in the aim of making positive change within accessible information. Throughout the past year, the AIS Working Group has:

- Co-produced an AIS Resource which provides tips and solutions on how to ensure that GPs are adhering to the Accessible Information Standard. The final resource was developed and shared via the Essex Local Medical Committees, The British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry and with all local hospitals within Essex. The resource has been popular and shared widely, beyond the Working Groups networks, highlighting the need by professionals to further their understanding of Accessible Information Standards and to improve patient experience.
- Been invited by Princess Alexandra Hospital (PAH) to attend their compassionate communication workshops. Participation from the group members allowed PAH professionals to hear directly and firsthand from people with lived experience on the importance of accessible communication and how poor communication can affect the overall patient experience.
- PAH has additionally recently launched a new electronic healthcare record system which several volunteers attended workshops for to feed into what this should include. In the workshop, it was discussed that it would be beneficial for all if there was an alert as soon as a member logs on to a patient's record. This alert would ask the professional if they have considered the patient's accessibility needs and includes a list of what these may include. This alert has now been put into place and appears before the patient's record has loaded.
- Attended the 15 Steps programme at Clacton Hospital which is to help staff, service users and others to work together to identify improvements that can be made to enhance the experience. When attending Clacton Hospital's Urgent Treatment Centre (UTC) in September 2024, feedback was collected from members on what could make the centre more accessible and improve patient experience. Although the current UTC is temporary, feedback and suggestions were captured with a particular focus on improvements that could be made to signage. Their recommendations were also noted with the aim to implement them when the permanent unit is built.
- Spoke at the Essex GP Practice Managers Conference in Boreham and delivered several GP Time to Learn sessions across Mid Essex, Basildon and Brentwood, and Rayleigh. These sessions provide invaluable insight into the lived experiences of the group members with sensory impairments, highlighting the accessibility challenges they face when visiting their GP. The Time to Learn sessions additionally include what could improve their patient experience and advice on how to ensure that practices are AIS compliant. These sessions have created greater awareness and understanding among the professionals about the needs of sensory impaired patients.

"Our staff were able to identify the problems that patients may face when coming into the surgery being partially sighted or blind. We are currently looking at marking all of our records of patients who have varying difficulties to ensure these patients are flagged up so that we can contact them to establish what measure we could put in place to assist them in regards to communication from the surgery etc. We thoroughly enjoyed the session and would certainly recommend other practices making contact with you."

- Audley Mills Surgery

Healthwatch Essex Ambassadors

Throughout the last year our Healthwatch Essex Ambassadors have been working hard representing us at a number of key meetings and events such as advisory boards for Colchester and Tendring, Dementia Friendly Communities meetings, All Age Autism and older people's forums, and patient experience meetings at hospitals across Essex. This ensures that we are always kept up to date with the latest social and health care developments throughout the county and are also able to update other organisations and professionals attending those meetings with the work we are currently doing within Healthwatch Essex.

Our team of eight ambassadors have a hugely diverse and valuable range of professions, skills, passions and lived experiences that they all bring when representing Healthwatch Essex, as well as contributing enormously to all of our other ambassador groups. This coming year the plan is to expand our ambassadors within community groups and organisations to allow for greater awareness raising, information sharing, and signposting among the different health and social care sectors.

Hidden Voices Network

The Hidden Voice Network is made up of 27 diverse communities and individuals who represent their communities, which include ethnically diverse communities, faith groups and the LGBTQ+ community. The network members get involved in health and social care decisions and ensure that their communities' voices are being heard throughout these processes. A bi-monthly newsletter is distributed containing community involvement opportunities, funding opportunities and general information.

The network has been utilised to recruit for participants for various projects being facilitated by universities, including a project focused on understanding the mental health care needs of pregnant women and new mothers who face English language barriers, which will be launched next year.

Network members attended a Healthwatch Essex facilitated workshop exploring Secure Data Environments (SDE) where they shared their communities' concerns over their health data being held and how these concerns can be addressed. The information collected from this workshop was fed back in a collective report by the East of England SDE and included a series of recommendations. Some of these recommendations have already been actioned upon including an ongoing plan of communications and piloting a Data Access Register.

In collaboration with the Essex Faith Covenant, we recorded three videos with five people of different faiths for World Mental Health Day 2024. These are freely accessible materials we hope will support communities of different faiths and so far, have been widely shared by Essex Faith Covenant members and faith leaders.



Network member Sidra during filming for World Mental Health Day

Research Ambassador Network

The Research Ambassador Network is for anyone interested in learning more about health and care research and developing their research skills. It is the only research forum in Essex based in the voluntary sector. We champion community-centred research, providing our Research Ambassadors with the skills to develop research projects that are inclusive and accessible, all whilst building connections and supporting one another. The Research Ambassador Network is open to everyone, regardless of professional and educational background. We currently have 46 Research Ambassadors.

Research Ambassador Network Activities and Impact

- Meetings – The Research Ambassador Network has hosted six bi-monthly meetings this year, inviting speakers from local and national organisations to share their research. We've welcomed researchers from King's College London, the University of Suffolk, Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Leeds, and the Carers Trust, among others. These talks have introduced our Research Ambassadors to a range of different topics, including implementation science, health service procurement, and men's experiences of Crohn's Disease. Research Ambassadors have also had the chance to provide feedback on research in development. Our Research Ambassadors provided feedback on the development of patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) activities for Greater Essex's Health Determinants Research Council. On average, ten ambassadors have attended each meeting.
- Research Reflections blog – This blog series encourages Research Ambassadors to share their reflections on a particular project or topic. It also invites contributors to draw on their own experiences to explore why they do the research that they do. This helps Research Ambassadors to develop their skills communicating research to the public. We published 3 Research Reflections blogs by Ambassadors this year on topics including academic publishing, the impact of austerity on people living with disabilities, and the influence of social media on eating disorder recovery.
- Supporting our projects – Research Ambassadors also kindly volunteer to support our projects. This helps to develop their research skills and knowledge of different topics. Ambassadors attend planning meetings, review project documents and support data analysis. 15 Research Ambassadors are currently volunteering to support our projects. Research Ambassador Maria Karpouzou was awarded the Anglia Ruskin University Community Volunteer of the Month in December 2024 for her work supporting our projects. As a Research Ambassador, Maria stated that she has *'gained experience in qualitative analysis, health-related blogging, and assisting with research projects. Balancing volunteering with my studies and work has significantly enhanced my organisational skills'*.
- Training – We aim to ensure that our Research Ambassadors have the skills to support our projects and engage in research more broadly. This year, we offered a training session on Thematic Analysis and are currently developing further resources on creative methods and employability. One of our Research Ambassadors was recruited to a new research role at an NHS Foundation Trust and credited our employability support.
- Accessible and inclusive research – Our Research Ambassadors were commissioned by Suffolk and North Essex Integrated Care Board to develop resources that support the increased involvement of local communities in health research projects.

Want to become an ambassador too? Find out more on our website
<https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/get-involved/>

Our Organisation



A selection of photos from the various Development Days.

Development Days

At Healthwatch Essex, we have lots of opportunities throughout the year to connect with and learn from each other. We have monthly development days where we take turns to organise an activity for the other teams in our organisation. This might be a visit to another charity or organisation that we would closely work with, such as our trip to Abberton Rural Training where we learnt how to construct planters. It might be an opportunity to learn from each other – for instance, this year our Communications Team ran training on the use of AI, including ethical and practical considerations. Sometimes we do fun or creative activities, like Christmas wreath making, as a team building activity.

We also frequently have training sessions from partner organisations or from people with lived experience. Learning from people with lived experience is so much more powerful than a training video and has inspired lots of future workstreams – for example, our training sessions on sepsis and brain injury have both led to podcast episodes exploring those topics. We are excited to see how we grow and develop in the next year.

In The Pipeline 2025–26

We will be working on lots of exciting projects over the upcoming year.

- We're continuing our men's health initiatives with forums in different parts of the county and a mix of Fella's Fair events.
- Our Expressions of Trauma exhibitions will continue to be shown at arts venues across Essex.
- We're exploring the impact of changes to the way ADHD medication is prescribed.
- We'll publish the findings of several of the projects mentioned earlier in this report and ensure that the lived experience fed into us makes a difference.
- We've got some exciting film projects to share with you – make sure you're subscribed on YouTube to stay up to date with our videos.

We'll continue to champion real experiences and help you to access the health and care services you need. We'll work with our health and social care partners to make any transitions in service provision, as a result of changes to integrated care boards or councils, as smooth as possible.

Finance

To help us carry out our work, we receive our funding from the Department of Health and Social Care via Essex County Council, as well as doing commissioned work. Here's how we've spent our money.



Information and Guidance

£290k



Outreach and Engagement

£198k



Commissioning and Research

£200k



Communications

£50k



Governance

£6k

Our total income from April 2024 – March 2025 was approximately £744,000 and expenditure was £766,000. Expenses outweighed income – this is due to spending some money from restricted reserve on a new outreach vehicle. Reserves are made up of any underspend or finance accumulated in previous years.

Each of the figures above includes an appropriate share of company overheads and office running costs.



Thank You!

The body of work that you have just read is a clear demonstration of how hard the staff at Healthwatch Essex work. I am always humbled by their dedication, commitment, and enthusiasm.

But none of this work would be possible without people sharing their views and stories. I would like to offer a heartfelt thank you to everyone who submitted work to one of our exhibitions, who took part in a podcast or video, was involved in any of the research or engagement projects... without your input we simply would not exist.

Thank you to everyone who follows us on social media, signed up to our mailing list or stays engaged with the work we are doing.

Thank you to all our stakeholders for working with, taking our recommendations and input, and really making change happen in our community. Thank you also to everyone who has commissioned us to carry out such interesting and insightful work.

Thank you to our trustees for all the support you offer, for allowing us the space to be innovative and exciting, whilst keeping us safe and holding us to account.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you to all of our volunteers and ambassadors - you keep us relevant, aware, and accountable. You are an inspiration.

Sam Glover, CEO



**Committed
to quality**


We are committed to the quality of our information. Every three years we perform an in depth audit so that we can be certain of this.



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Front cover images:
Left - Arnaud, Jane
and Charlotte in
Parliament.
Right - A visitor
admiring artworks at
the exhibition
in Colchester.

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