

Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny

Report to Council

1 November 2023

INTERIM SCRUTINY REPORT

As the Chair of the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, I am pleased to present this interim report to the Council. I would like to extend my gratitude to Cllr Veronica Jones, who chaired this Committee before me, for her dedicated service.

Our committee plays a vital role in overseeing various aspects of health and wellbeing within our region, including health services, adult social care, and public health. Over the past two meetings, we have examined several critical topics within our purview. Copies of all the reports and the minutes of our meetings are available on the Council's website: <https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CommitteeId=156>

1. UPDATE ON PRESSURES IN ADULT HOMECARE SERVICES

Our Committee received a comprehensive report outlining the challenges faced by adult homecare services in Northumberland. We explored the steps taken to address these issues and the plans to overcome workforce shortages in this sector.

- **Workforce Shortages:** We were informed about the national problem of workforce shortages in social care, particularly in rural areas, including Northumberland. The report highlighted that around 200-220 people assessed as needing homecare services were unable to access them, with numbers occasionally peaking at 270 in 2022.
- **Initiatives:** The Council had taken various initiatives over the past 18 months to alleviate these shortages, such as increasing carer pay rates and supporting providers with recruitment and upskilling efforts.
- **Future Plans:** Additional funds from the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund (MSIF) 2023/24 would be utilised to attract more individuals to work in homecare.

The Committee shared several thoughts, including the need for a more radical approach to address the workforce crisis and ongoing monitoring of the situation. We emphasised the importance of making the caring profession more attractive by improving salaries, incentives, and working conditions.

2. CONTINGENCY PLANS AND MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR COMMISSIONED ADULT SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

We delved into the contingency plans and management arrangements that the Council would activate in case a social care provider ceased operations. These plans aimed to ensure that service users continued to receive essential care.

- Preferred Contingency Plan: The preferred approach was to transfer service users and staff to an alternative provider. The Council was confident that existing care providers could absorb additional business.
- In-House Consideration: The possibility of bringing services 'in-house' was discussed as a last resort if transferring care packages to a new provider was deemed too risky.
- Financial Risks: Members expressed concerns about financial risks associated with bringing services in-house, including staff transfers.
- Focus on Incentives: The Council had primarily focused on incentives to help with fuel and transport costs and increasing carer pay rates to address workforce issues.

3. NOTIFICATION OF CLOSURE OF 100-HOUR PHARMACY IN CRAMLINGTON

We were informed about the closure of a 100-hour pharmacy in Cramlington and the broader issue of pharmacy closures and reduced hours, not only in Northumberland but also nationally.

- Fast-Moving Issue: The pharmacy closures issue was dynamic, with continuous changes since the initial briefing.
- Impact on Patients: Members discussed the implications for patients, especially those with shift patterns, limited access to transportation, or needing urgent prescription medication. HealthWatch Northumberland regularly attend our meetings and their insight and knowledge is always invaluable to our discussions.
- Task and Finish Group: We agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to examine pharmaceutical services in the county, involving Healthwatch, Public Health, and the Northumberland Integrated Care Board.

4. HM SENIOR CORONER ANDREW HETHERINGTON'S ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee received the Annual Report from HM Senior Coroner Andrew Hetherington, providing an overview of the current situation and notable trends in the coroner service.

- Coroner's Role: We were reminded of the crucial role of the Coroner in investigating unnatural or violent deaths and deaths in custody or state detention.
- Workload: In 2022, there were 2,023 cases referred to the Coroner, with a slight increase in deaths compared to 2019.
- Suicide Trends: There was an increase in suicide conclusions, which may be attributed to changes in the standard of proof from 'beyond reasonable doubt' to 'on the balance of probability.'
- Ongoing Challenges: Various areas of review, including the Lucy Letby Inquiry, Statutory Medical Examiner Scheme, and safety concerns related to the North East Ambulance Services, were discussed.

We expressed our commitment to further scrutinise these issues, recognising the need to understand the impact on patients and carers. Our committee is dedicated to ensuring the well-being of our residents and addressing critical health and social care issues. We will continue to work diligently and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to make informed recommendations and decisions.

COUNCILLOR RICHARD DODD
CHAIR
HEALTH AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE