



Speaking up for better care

Healthwatch Dorset Annual Report 2025/26

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**Healthwatch Dorset
Manager**
Louise Bate



“Health and care services play a vital role in our lives, and we know they face real challenges. Every comment, concern, and compliment Healthwatch Dorset gathers helps the local health and care system see what works and what needs to change. Our independence means our local communities trust us and it gives us the ability to speak truth to power.

“In light of the government proposals to abolish Healthwatch, we are working hard to urge decision-makers to ensure that there remains a strong independent mechanism for public feedback in the future.”

A message from our Chair

We make sure decision-makers in the NHS and local councils hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care.

We gather your feedback in many ways, through our helpline, social media, surveys and events. We know that improving services means not only listening, but also actively engaging with all communities, especially those whose voices might otherwise remain unheard.

This year, our work provided valuable insight into how 'stop smoking' initiatives can be improved and 'Hospital at Home' services better meet the needs of family carers. Recruiting a diverse range of volunteers, also helps keep our work relevant. We worked with school pupils to gather insights into the experiences of 1st and 2nd generation immigrants using health services and visited Bournemouth Hospital's emergency department and gave feedback that has already led to improvements in signage and access.

Last July, the government announced plans to abolish Healthwatch in 2027 and transfer our functions to local health and care services. In light of this we are working hard to urge decision-makers to ensure that there remains a strong, independent mechanism for public feedback in the future.

Since we came into existence in 2013, we've helped many thousands of people. Our legal duty to listen and make sure your voice shapes the care you receive currently remains unchanged.



**Healthwatch Dorset
Chair**
Viv Aird



"Our independence is essential in building trust with people and communities most at risk of ill-health. It is crucial to our success in ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard by decision-makers.

"Bringing public voice functions in-house risks creating a system where feedback is filtered, inconvenient truths remain ignored, and accountability is diluted. It sends the wrong message at a time when public trust in institutions must be rebuilt, not eroded."

About us

Healthwatch Dorset is your local independent health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



Our vision

For health and care services in the areas covered by Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Councils to achieve the best possible outcomes for local people and to be holistic, tailored to the needs of the individual and delivered with compassion.



Our mission

Ensuring health and care services are informed and shaped by the views and experiences of local people.



Our values

Independent. Our agenda is driven by local people. We're a purposeful, critical friend to decision-makers.

Inclusive. We're compassionate and focused on reducing health inequalities.

Influential. We're ambitious about creating change, and hold commissioners and providers to account.

Credible. We work with integrity and honesty, and we speak truth to power.

Collaborative. We build strong connections and work with partners to amplify influence.

Our year in numbers

In 2025/2026 we supported more than **6,000 people** to have their say and get information about their care. We employed **4 staff (3.2 FTE)** and our work was supported by **71 volunteers**.



Reaching out

1,472 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

4,726 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as accessing a GP, mental health support and finding an NHS dentist.



Championing your voice

We published **4** reports about the improvements people would like to see in areas like Hospital at Home, emergency services and accessible care for diverse communities.

Our most popular report was [*Hospital at Home Service: Understanding the impact on family carers in Dorset.*](#)



Statutory funding

We're funded by Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole (BCP) Council and by Dorset Council.

In 2025/26 we received **£201,928**.

A year of making a difference

Over the year we've been out and about in the community listening to your stories, engaging with partners and working to improve care across Dorset. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We caught up with Joe who featured in our 2024 report, *Voiceless, unheard and socially excluded*. [Joe's story](#) shows how it is vital to provide the right support and treatment at the right time.



Vice Chair of our local board, Margaret, collected over 150 people's experiences of NHS administration and patient communications in Purbeck during Patient Participation Group week.



Summer

Following the announcement of the proposed abolition of Healthwatch, we joined 131 local Healthwatch to oppose Government plans to undermine independent public voice.



We spoke to [Rev. Jonathan Herbert](#) to find out more about his work supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities across Dorset to celebrate GRT History month.



Autumn

We recruited 12 young volunteers at two Bournemouth schools and supported them to develop their own engagement project looking at how 1st/2nd generation immigrants experience the NHS.



To mark the 50th year of Prisons Week in October, we spoke to an inmate at HMP Portland about his experience of [accessing healthcare in prison](#).



Winter

We were out across Dorset talking to men about their experiences of Stop Smoking initiatives. Our project has helped Public Health teams focus funding on the support men asked for.



Our volunteers carried out a visit of Bournemouth Hospital Emergency Department to find out how the new building is impacting patient care.



Working together for change

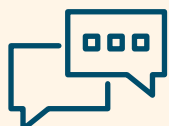
We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch teams, NHS Dorset and voluntary sector partners to ensure people's experiences of care in Dorset are heard and able to influence decisions made about services at ICB level.

This year, we have worked with a range of partners across Dorset to achieve the following:



A collaborative network

We've collaborated with adjacent Healthwatch teams, NHS Dorset, and voluntary sector partners to ensure that people's feedback about care in Dorset is used to help shape decisions about services across the wider Integrated Care Board (ICB) area. A Healthwatch representative works directly with the ICB, helping to ensure that the public's voice is represented across Dorset, Somerset, Swindon, Wiltshire, and Bath & North East Somerset.



A big conversation

Putting local people at the heart of NHS and social care changes.

We spoke to patients in three of our local community hospitals to gather insights for the FutureCare team. FutureCare is a system-wide transformation programme to change and improve urgent and emergency care services for Dorset. We spoke to eight people in Shaftesbury, Swanage and Bridport hospitals and their stories helped bring lived experience to the project.



Building strong relationships to achieve more

We work closely with our local voluntary sector colleagues and, to support our young volunteers, we recently invited The Chatterboxes to run some training sessions and to take part in interviews. The Chatterboxes are a peer led youth disability group in Bournemouth and their input to our school projects has been invaluable.

We've also summarised some of our other outcomes achieved this year in the Statutory Statements section at the end of this report.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time. Here are some examples of our work in Dorset this year.



Creating empathy through lived experiences

Hearing personal experiences and their impact on people's lives helps services better understand the issues people face.

For [Tourette's Awareness Month](#) we spoke to Katie who works at Coastland College, to learn more about her experience of living with Tourette Syndrome and why increasing awareness matters.

"People think the vocal tics are what I'm thinking, that is not true."

Katie explained that tic attacks can be physically exhausting and painful, sometimes lasting for hours and leaving lasting after-effects.



Shaping the future of patient voice

Working with the Kings Fund to influence policy

We joined a King's Fund focus group to share what works well for local Healthwatch, what could improve, and how patient voice can shape future services

The clearest finding in their report, [The future of patient voice](#), is that Healthwatch's independence has been vital and will be integral to building public trust and combatting health inequalities in the future.



Improving care over time

We follow up our previous projects and work behind the scenes with services to consistently raise issues and bring about change.

Following our 2023 report on [urgent care services](#) across Dorset, this year we visited [Royal Bournemouth Hospital Emergency Department](#) to see what impact the new building has had on people's experience of care. People said the department is bright, clean and spacious, but noted long waits, poor communication and unclear signage. The hospital has now improved signage and communication.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, we've listened to feedback from all areas of our community. People's experiences of care help us know what's working and what isn't, so we can give feedback on services and help them improve.



Understanding the impact on family carers of NHS care in people's homes

Last year, we spoke to family carers about Hospital at Home services.

The [Hospital at Home](#) service provides acute, short-term NHS care in people's own homes as an alternative to hospital admission. The model has grown nationally, aiming to reduce pressure on hospitals while supporting patients to recover in familiar surroundings.

What we did

We designed and produced a flyer with a QR code for the Hospital at Home teams to share with carers when visiting patients' homes. We then connected family carers with our trained volunteers who carried out one-to-one telephone interviews. 18 carers took part in these interviews, each taking on average 30 minutes to complete. We also gathered two case studies.

Key things we heard



79%

rated the Hospital at Home service as 'very good' and no-one rated it as 'poor'.

61%

of carers we spoke to usually provide care but only 42% were registered as a carer with their GP or local council.



"She would never have got such good care in hospital. She could rest and sleep without all the ward noise and bright lights."

Many carers reported extra stress or emotional pressure; some were elderly and/or had long term health issues of their own. It would help if the Hospital at Home Team assessed carers' capacity to provide support at home - and knew whether they are living in or visiting to provide the care.

What difference did this make?

Our findings have fed into a local campaign to improve carer identification and increased understanding of Hospital at Home services. We brought Hospital at Home teams and carers support leads together to improve understanding and build a better service.

Experiences of 1st and 2nd generation immigrants accessing NHS care

What do people need to make healthcare more inclusive, easy to access and culturally responsive?

Our young volunteers spoke to 88 local residents from immigrant communities to understand how effectively the NHS communicates with people from diverse backgrounds, and to identify the barriers they face when trying to access care.

Key things we heard



67%

believed NHS Services met their specific needs as first or second generation immigrants.

72%

had never received NHS information in their native language; only 3% had used an interpreter.

48%

reported difficulties accessing NHS services.



“It’s hard to get proper help as communication barriers and difficulty accessing information prevent this.”

Many people rely on younger family members to translate for them, which forces them to share personal medical details and puts pressure on young people - and could potentially lead to inaccuracies in the translated information that the young people pass on to them.

Long wait times were the biggest difficulty which people had experienced. We recommend the NHS improves the information and support it offers to people on waiting lists and makes that information accessible and culturally relevant.

What difference did this make?

Our report has improved communication. We are working with GP surgeries to help them provide clear, multilingual information and support on how the NHS works, how to navigate the system and how to access different services.

We are also facilitating the development of a youth voice group with Bournemouth Central Primary Care Network to build on this project with local schools.

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of the areas covered by BCP and Dorset Councils. That's why, over the past year, we've worked hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Every member of the community should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

This year, we have reached different communities by:

- Engaging with asylum seekers and refugees.
- Speaking to men of working age about Stop Smoking initiatives.
- Speaking to a prison inmate about his experience of accessing healthcare in prison, to mark the 50th year of Prisons Week in October.



Engaging with asylum seekers and refugees

We investigated access to health care for refugees and asylum seekers.

The groups we spoke to told us about critical delays, language challenges, and administrative failures. While clinical staff were viewed positively, systemic issues like year-long specialist waits, dental care gaps, and transport issues threaten patient safety and continuity of care.



“I had a GP appointment, but I couldn’t attend because I was in pain, and I didn’t know how to cancel the appointment because of the language barrier. The receptionist was very angry with me and rude.”

What difference did this make?

The feedback we gathered indicates a need for better translation services and localised care, particularly for those facing complex health needs like oncology. We are working with the NHS to improve patient communication.

Stop Smoking services across Dorset

Our project aimed to better understand the needs, barriers and challenges men face when accessing support to quit smoking.

We spoke to men of working age in manual/unskilled jobs in the areas of Blandford, Shaftesbury, Poole Old Town and Boscombe/Springbourne, as they have the lowest take up of current smoking cessation offers. Our aim was to better understand the needs, barriers and challenges faced when accessing support to quit smoking to ensure that stop smoking services are more inclusive, effective and accessible for all.

What difference did this make?

We were commissioned by Public Health to carry out this project. They are already using our findings to inform the future commissioning of stop smoking services.



“The work Healthwatch Dorset have completed for us has been valuable and informative, helping us understand where smoking services are reaching the right people and gaps where we might not be. This will help to inform our commissioning intentions moving forwards.”

Information and signposting

When you're struggling to find an NHS dentist, looking for help about how to make a complaint, or need advice about a good care home for a loved one – we're your first port of call.

This year 4,726 people have reached out to us for advice, support or help finding services. These conversations also help us to understand where, and how, your care can be made better.

This year, we have helped people by:

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Supporting people to look after their health
- Signposting people to additional support services.



GP surgery referrals to dermatology services

Thanks to Kirsty's feedback, service providers are looking at ways to improve the dermatology referral pathway in Dorset.

Kirsty contacted us after she saw her GP about a skin lesion on her face. Her GP sent photos with a referral to the dermatology service. When she didn't hear back Kirsty went to see a private dermatologist and was booked in for a biopsy which confirmed skin cancer.

"Beyond seeing my GP, no one from NHS has looked at my skin, I've had zero care and I'm actually really upset and will now end up paying for surgery."

We shared Kirsty's feedback with the Wessex Cancer Alliance & NHS Dorset. The Head of Community Dermatology services got in touch with Kirsty and is using her experience to improve their service.

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"I can't tell you what a relief it is just to be heard."

Improving care for people with neurodiversity

Darren told us about his ADHD diagnosis pathway and the difficulties that he has experienced over the last 3 years.

We regularly hear from people with neurodiversity who have faced challenges getting the help they need. Darren was keen to share his story to help raise awareness, so we spoke to him and published the interview as a [website blog](#) and in our eNewsletter.

Darren wants to see a more tailored, personalised and informed approach.

"There needs to be greater awareness and understanding, at the end of the day, how can you change something that you don't understand?"

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"I was pushed from pillar to post, offered crisis numbers, despite this not being a mental health issue, and was left without support. This process has wasted three years and significant NHS resources."

Showcasing volunteer impact

Our **71 volunteers** have given an amazing **790 hours** to support our work this year. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in our community.

This year, our volunteers:

- Visited communities to promote our work
- Collected experiences, ran surveys and carried out interviews in their communities to support people sharing their views.
- Carried out Enter and View visits and PLACE assessments at local services to help them improve.



At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think to helping raise awareness, our volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.



Grace

"Volunteering with Healthwatch Dorset offers me a wide range of projects and opportunities that provide incredible experience for volunteers as well as supporting health care services. The team have ensured my role in this has fit comfortably around my degree by allowing for flexibility around high stress periods and options to work remotely."

Grace is an undergraduate studying psychology at Bournemouth University.

"I have developed real world examples of distributing information, encouraging engagement and analysing data for research that makes a difference, skills valuable to many types of work."

"I volunteered and worked with the Terrence Higgins Trust and through them I learnt about Healthwatch, which was interesting and that suited what I wanted to do."

Gloria is a professional care giver and has worked in dementia and learning disabilities care.

"As a volunteer with Healthwatch Dorset, I have visited Royal Bournemouth Hospital, conducted patient telephone interviews, and have taken part in an Enter and View visit. There is a sense of wanting to give back and make a difference is what I am passionate about."



Gloria

Be part of change

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and find out how you can be part of the change.



healthwatchdorset.co.uk



0300 111 0102



enquiries@healthwatchdorset.co.uk

Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from our local authorities under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to help us do our work.

Our income and expenditure

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from BCP Council and Dorset Council	£201,928	Expenditure on pay	£110,497
Additional income	£10,000	Non-pay expenditure	£19,474
		Office and management fee	£60,580
Total income	£211,928	Total expenditure	£190,551

Additional income

- £10,000 received from Public Health for Smoking Cessations project.

Planned priorities for 2026/27

Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society, especially people in the most deprived areas, so that those in power hear their views and experiences.

We will also work together with partners and our local Integrated Care System to help develop an NHS and social care culture where, at every level, staff strive to listen and learn from patients to make care better.

Our top three priorities next year are:

1. Access to Primary Care with a focus on the impact of new GP contracts.
2. Women's Health Hub - working with Mid Dorset Primary Care Network to better understand what women need from their local health, care and community services.
3. Young people's projects looking at Special Educational Needs (SEND), women's health, young people's hospital experiences, breast cancer awareness and NHS communication.

Statutory statements

Healthwatch Dorset, The Bridge, Chaseside, Bournemouth, BH7 7BX.

Healthwatch Dorset is hosted by Evolving Communities CIC, a community interest company limited by guarantee and registered in England and Wales with company number 08464602. The registered office is at Unit 2, Hampton Park West, Melksham, SN12 6LH.

Healthwatch Dorset uses the Healthwatch Trademark when undertaking our statutory activities as covered by the licence agreement.

The way we work

Involvement of volunteers and lay people in our governance and decision-making

Our Healthwatch Board consists of six members, all volunteers, who provide us with direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities. Our Board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

During 2025/26, the Board met on five occasions. The most important decision made by the Board was to agree what priorities our work plan for the year ahead should focus on. Board members have also been making the case with decision-makers for the continued existence of a strong independent mechanism for public feedback that is accessible, trusted and accountable.

Methods and systems used across the year to obtain people's experiences

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible can provide us with insight into their experience of using services.

During 2025/26, we have been available by phone and email, provided a web form on our website, maintained our social media presence, and attended meetings of community groups and forums.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We will publish it on our website, issue a press release, share information about it on social media and through our regular eNewsletters.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

All providers responded to our requests for information. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so there were no resulting reviews or investigations.

Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences shared with us.

For example, in the two local authority areas we cover, we take information to both Health and Wellbeing Boards and to the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

We also take insights and experiences to decision-makers within the Dorset System. For example, we share information at meetings of the ICB Board and the System Quality Group.

We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Dorset is represented on the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board and the System Quality Group by Margaret Guy, Vice Chair of Healthwatch Dorset, and on the BCP Health and Wellbeing Board by Louise Bate, Manager.

During 2025/26, our representatives have effectively carried out their roles by taking part in meetings and sharing Healthwatch Dorset insights and reports.

Healthwatch Dorset is represented on Dorset ICB Board by Louise Bate, Manager.



“Since its set up in 2013, Healthwatch Dorset has played a vital role in speaking up on behalf of local people, particularly those who face barriers to getting the support, information and care they need.

“Their independence is essential in scrutinising health and social care services and holding providers to account. Proposals to abolish the independent Healthwatch network are really troubling, we need to protect them and build on their success.”



Labour MP for Poole
Neil Duncan-Jordan

Statutory statements

Enter and View


Location	Reason for visit	What you did as a result
Royal Bournemouth Hospital Emergency Department	Follow up on our Urgent Care report 2023 to see the impact of the new building on patient care.	Wrote a report with recommendations – the service following up on these, and patient safety improved.

2025/26 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Hospital at Home: Understanding the impact on family carers in Dorset	Our findings have fed into a local campaign to improve carer identification and increased understanding of Hospital at Home services. We brought Hospital at Home teams and carers support leads together to improve understanding and build a better service.
Navigating the NHS: Voices from immigrant communities in Bournemouth	Our project has helped local GP surgeries provide clear, multilingual information and support on how the NHS works, how to navigate the system and how to access different services. We are also facilitating the development of a youth voice group with Bournemouth Central Primary Care Network to build on this project with local schools.
Men's experience of Stop Smoking initiatives	Public Health teams across Dorset are using our findings to inform the future commissioning of stop smoking services.

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