



# What you told us

Trends in feedback January to June 2023

## Introduction

Healthwatch Northumberland is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We are a listening organisation working across Northumberland, interested in what people like about services and what can be improved.

We act on what people are saying, sharing their views with those who have the power to make change happen. We also help people find the information they need about services in their area and record this as 'signposting'.

## Feedback

Between January and June 2023, we received detailed feedback from 226 individuals from talking to people at face-to-face events, telephone calls, emails, our website, social media and other sources. We also heard from an additional 705 young people in specific pieces of work including our 'How are you feeling?' young people's campaign and the Autistic Young People and Mental Health Services project. We also heard from another 230 people of all ages when we spoke to people about the closure of Lloyds pharmacy in Manor Walks, Cramlington. This feedback is available in separate reports available on our [website](#) or get in touch to ask for a paper copy.

The feedback we have had over the past six months has been mainly around three services:

**1. GP Services** - Accessing GPs and arranging appointments were the main areas we heard about, although issues around prescriptions also featured strongly (27% of all feedback received from January to June 2023).

**2. Hospitals** - Dissatisfaction with the service at hospitals - both inpatients and outpatients (16% of all feedback received in January to June 2023).

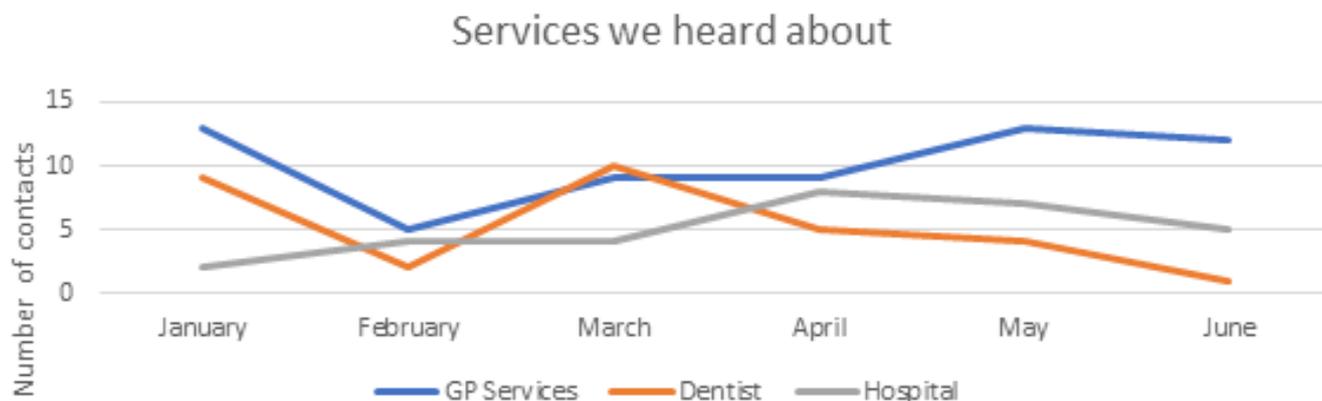
**3. Dentists** - Accessing NHS dentists (14% of all feedback received during January to June 2023).

Together, these three areas make up over half the feedback we received in this period (57%).

Almost a quarter of the feedback responses we received for GP services were about three GP practices, all in the southeast of the county. The feedback was almost exclusively negative for these practices. Where relevant the respondents were advised to contact the Practice Manager to make a complaint. The practices have also been listed in our monthly reports, but this feedback would have been spaced out over the six months so may not have alerted the individual practices to issues.

'Hospitals' covered all departments and there were no specific departments that featured strongly in feedback over this period, although Wansbeck General Hospital and the Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital were mentioned the most.

Two of these three services saw a downturn in the number of contacts we received in February but increased again in March (see Fig. 1, below). There is no obvious reason why, other than February being a short month so we had fewer opportunities to gather feedback.



**Fig. 1. Trends in number of contacts we heard about regularly**

We have continued to raise the issue of access to dentists with the NHS Commissioner. We also provided written evidence to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Health and Social Care who referenced it in its [report on dentistry](#), published 14 July 2023.

### Feedback

“Healthwatch Northumberland helped me to get a referral to Occupational Therapy through the Social Prescribing Service. This will help me with my amputation and how I cope with the physical side of my amputation and my mental health. My mental health has suffered since having my amputation four years ago. There are lots of options out there which I was unaware of. But now I am so happy I am going to receive the help I have not had. Thank you Healthwatch Northumberland team.”

Tynedale resident

## Geographical variation

We heard regularly from all parts of the county with most responses being from North Northumberland, closely followed Ashington and Blyth. The breakdown of where we have heard from is shown in Fig. 2, overleaf.

For North Northumberland, the issues to do with GPs were largely related to poor communication, for example, changing a prescription without telling the patient, not liaising effectively with other services, and the website not being up to date. Unsurprisingly, given the number of concerns we have received about the closure and lack of NHS dentists in Berwick-upon-Tweed, access to an NHS dentist was the predominant reason North Northumberland residents contacted us. With regards to issues raised about hospitals by North Northumberland residents, the most common concerns were around the quality of care. In these cases, we directed the person to the Care Quality Commission.

For Ashington and Blyth residents, the top issue was accessing GPs, with difficulties getting an appointment by telephone and online systems/digital exclusion being the main concerns. The second most common issue was to do with hospitals. The main concerns were around access, including long waiting times, distance to travel and being discharged too soon, which resulted in another long wait to be seen again. The third most common issue for those living in Ashington and Blyth was to do

with accessing dentists and getting an appointment. In Tynedale, residents' main concerns were GP services, with communication between GPs and pharmacies being the issue we heard about most - unlike the rest of the county who have issues with getting an appointment. Hospital services were the second biggest concern with issues around poor communication being the most reported.

In contrast to other areas in the county, pharmacies were the third biggest cause for concern for people in Tynedale, with issues around failure to deliver medication on time and repeat prescriptions being the common factor. Concerns about this service are much higher in this district than elsewhere in the county.

For Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley residents the main area of concern was around GPs, with poor service being the issue we heard about most, but also issues about ordering prescriptions. Difficulties finding an NHS dentist and/or getting an appointment were the second biggest area of concern for these residents and poor service from hospitals the third most common concern. However, the sample size is small for this area.

Those living in the Castle Morpeth area reported that accessing an NHS dentist and getting an appointment was their main concern. Due to the small sample size we can't accurately identify a second and third biggest area of concern.

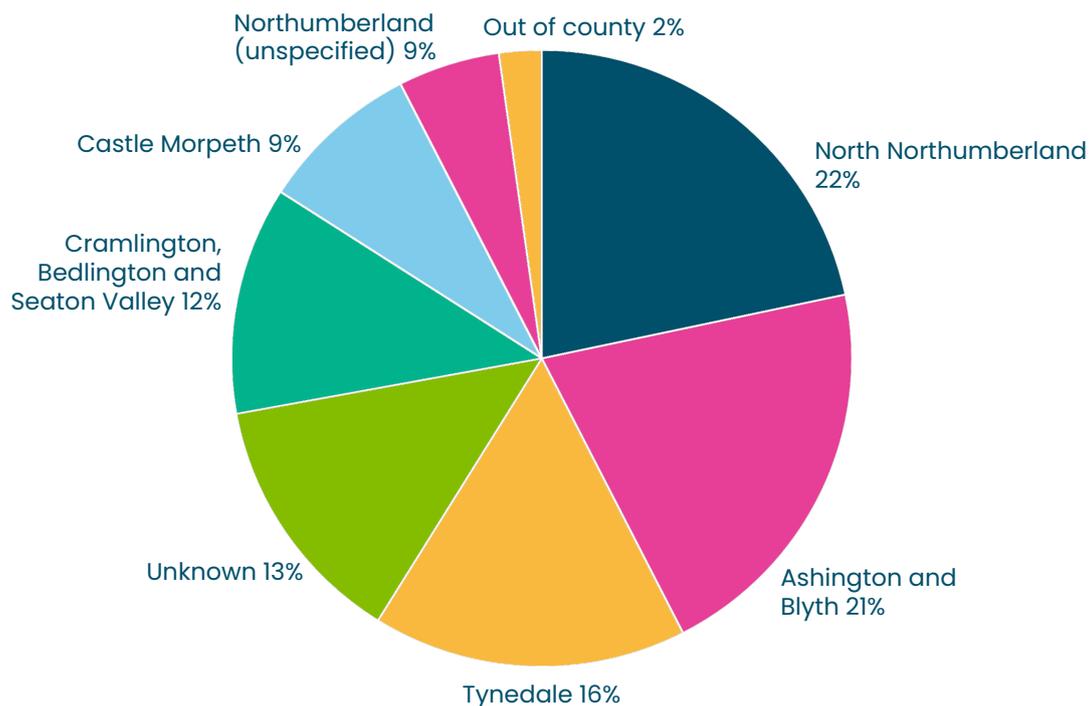


Fig. 2. Where we heard from people across the county

## Feedback

A caller wanted to make a complaint about his GP practice as his prescription has been changed. He was not informed about the change until he went to the pharmacy and the item was not included - he was told it had been removed by the GP.

The caller felt this was poor communication by the practice. He has had a similar complaint in the past and received an apology on that occasion.

He emailed the practice and we agreed it would be appropriate to allow the practice the five working days to acknowledge receipt, as outlined in its complaints policy. The practice then has a target to reply within 40 days. We discussed this was a clinical decision which he accepts. If he does not get an acknowledgement he will let us know. We also signposted him to Independent Complaints Advocacy."

North Northumberland resident

## Trends

Despite these findings, the trends in comments have been for the proportion of positive sentiments to remain the same over the half-year, albeit with a slump in March and April, and the proportion of negative comments to decrease over the six months, after spiking upwards in March (see Fig. 3, below).

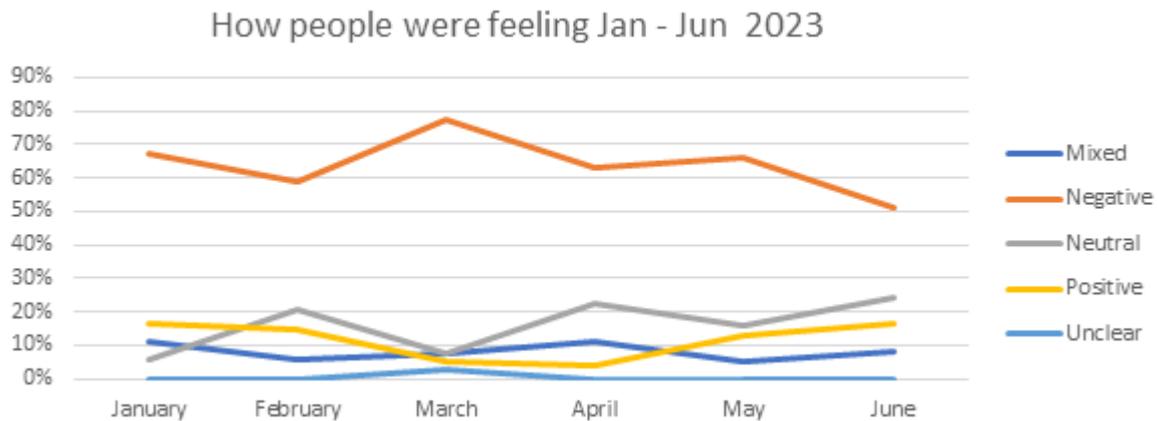


Fig. 3. Trends of proportions of sentiments shared, January to June 2023

This would suggest that people were feeling more positive about the provision of health and social care services as the year progressed, despite the consistency of concerns around GPs access and difficulties finding a dentist who is willing to treat NHS patients.

This is a continuation of the trend identified in our last six-monthly report, and the proportion of positive sentiments has risen slightly over the course of a year (July 2022 to June 2023) despite a dip in the middle of the 12-month period, and the proportion of negative sentiments has dropped over the same period, as shown in Fig.4, below.

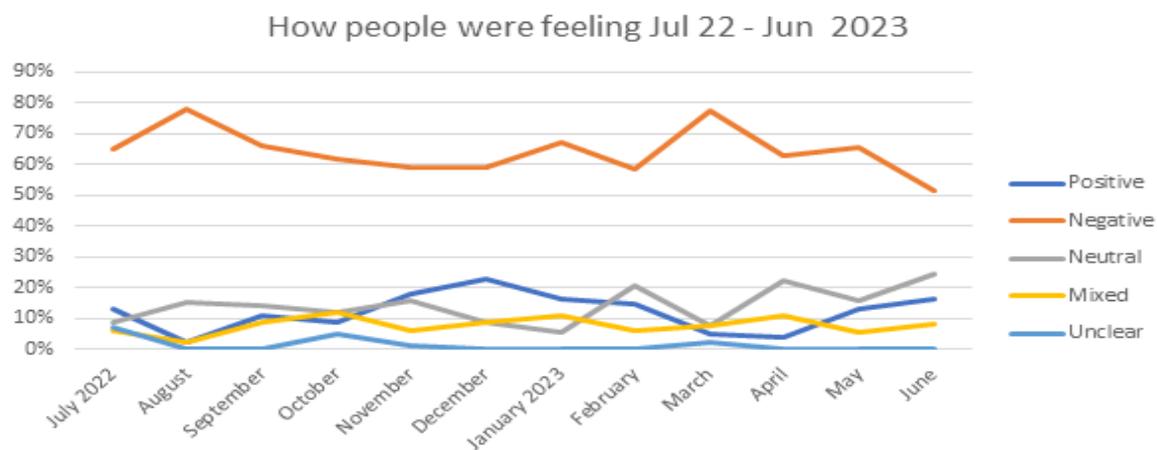


Fig. 4 – Trends of proportions of sentiments shared, July 2022 – June 2023

## Demographics

Figures 5 to 8 give the demographic breakdown of our respondents over the past six months. The data shows that our 'typical' respondent is still a white, non-disabled woman in her later years.

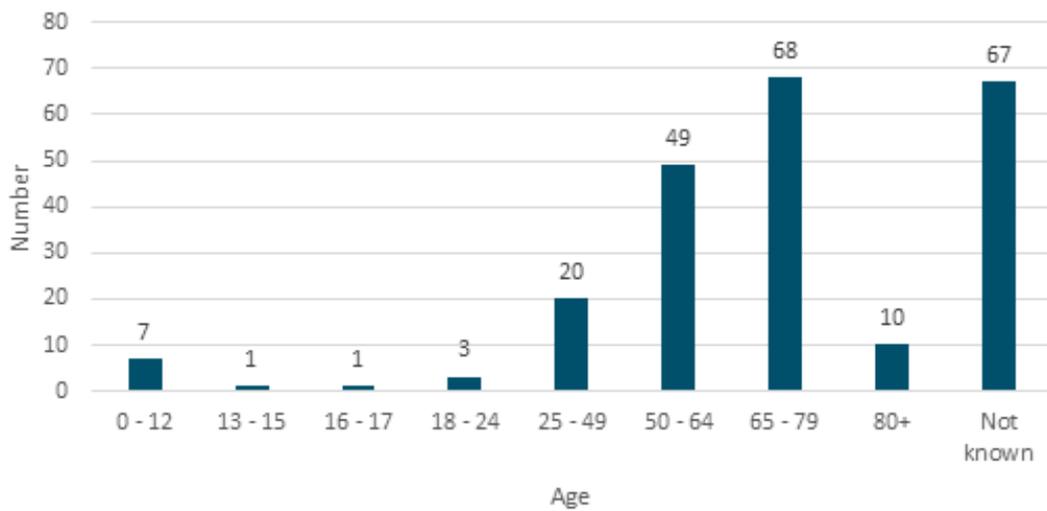


Fig. 5. Breakdown of respondents' ages, January to June 2023

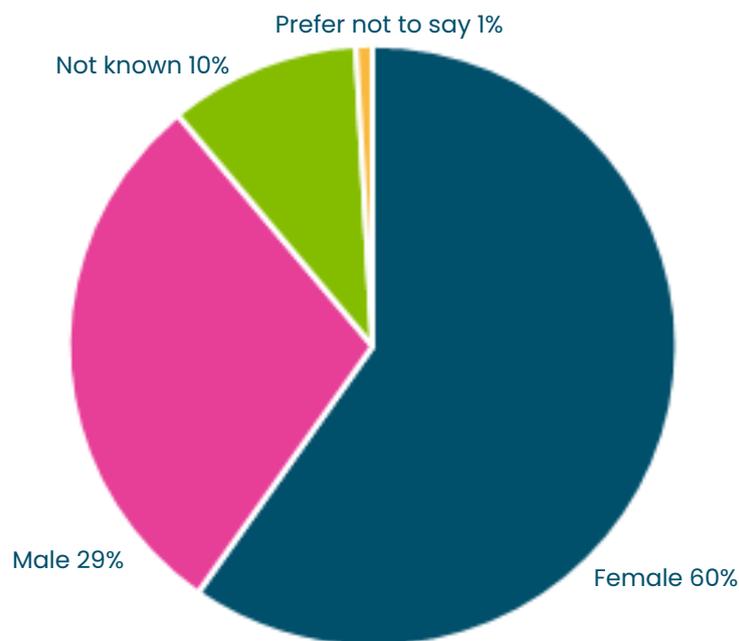


Fig. 6. Breakdown of respondents' sex, January to June 2023

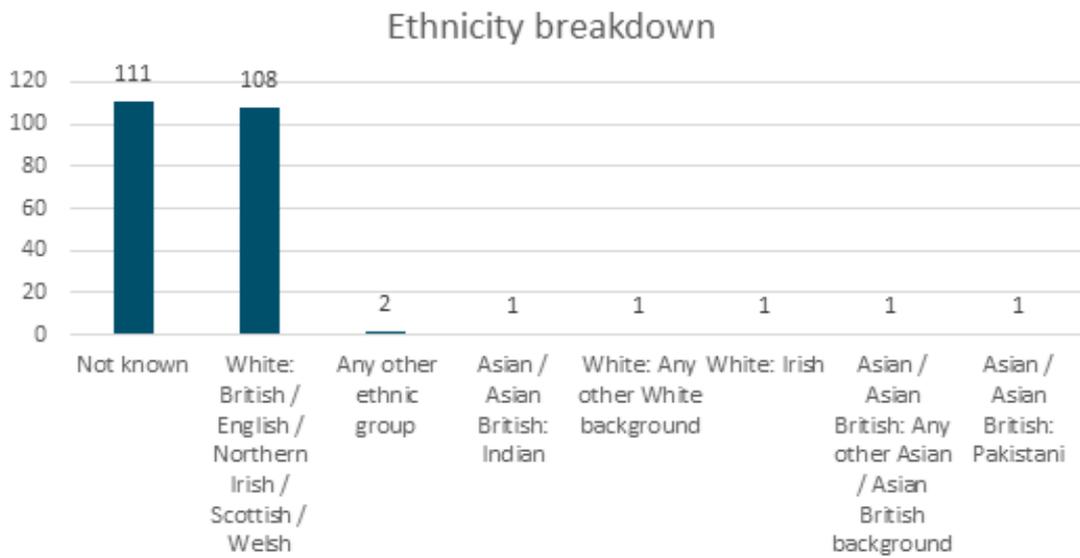


Fig. 7. Breakdown of respondents’ ethnicity, January to June 23

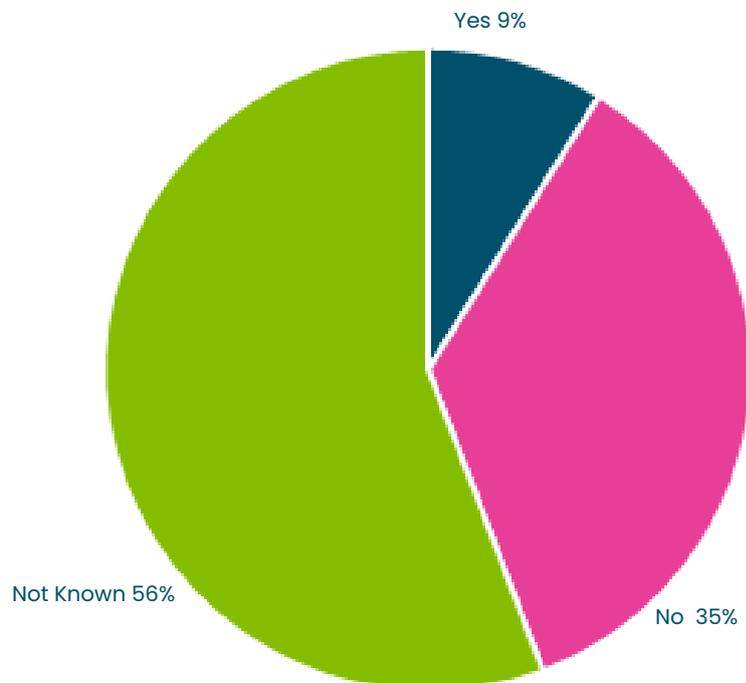


Fig. 8. Proportion of respondents who had a disability, January to June 2023

## Feedback

Someone contacted us about issues with availability and accessibility of outpatient appointments at their local hospital. They are a carer for both parents and have had to arrange few different outpatient appointments. These are always exclusively early morning appointments on the same day of week, and they are only ever given one choice. Their father has dementia, and the caller struggles to get him and mum ready in the morning for early appointments. The caller is unclear why the appointments are so limited and only on specific days but wanted to raise concerns. We referred them to PALS.”

Tynedale resident

## Information and Signposting Service

A member of the public asked for information on social activities for their elderly mum who has mobility and sight issues. We gave them a copy of the Blue Book of dementia support and activities. We also signposted them to the Briardale House programme of activities, Vision Northumberland’s local support groups, local seated exercise classes at The Isabella Centre, Age UK, and Northumberland libraries (Blyth coffee morning). We also informed them about the social prescribing service at their GP surgery.

Ashington and Blyth resident

## Insights

We are reaching all parts of the county, although we are hearing less from people in the Castle Morpeth area.

People’s perception of the NHS appears to be improving, judging from the trends in positive and negative comments.

GP access, poor service at hospitals and seeing an NHS dentist are the most common themes across the county, although there appears to be an issue with GPs, pharmacies and prescriptions in Tynedale.

In terms of demographics, we are hearing from disabled people at a higher rate than the county’s own demographic distribution. Our targeted work, such as the ‘How are you feeling?’ young people’s campaign, has enabled us to hear from young people, of all genders, under the age of 25 years old. However, we still need to work on reaching a higher proportion of men over the age of 25.

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