

Date: 27/03/24

Dear Natasha,

RE: Stockton-on-Tees Public Health Response to 2024 Healthwatch Stockton Report: 'Views & Experiences of People Accessing Drug & Alcohol Services'

Firstly, we would like to thank Healthwatch for seeking the views of local people who access a range of drug and alcohol services across Stockton-on-Tees. As commissioners of some of these services, we welcome their feedback, and always endeavour to learn from local experiences to help us improve the support available.

Indeed, over the years several changes have been made to our commissioned services in response to feedback from our communities. For example, increasing opening hours and providing drop-in appointments.

In 2021, national government developed a ten-year plan to improve substance use services. Additional funding has been made available in Stockton-on-Tees to take this work forward, as well as to support service users into employment, and increase support for alcohol detox. The government has set out a clear set of approaches to put in place, which aim to support more people to access treatment, and to have a better experience when they do access treatment. This has helped us to make several improvements to our local services over recent years.

Deciding what to try, and which approaches to take forward were shaped in local planning sessions. Local plans were developed in workshops with contributions from more than 30 services and people with lived experience of addiction and recovery. Coming together again in January 2024, we all looked at the progress that has been made so far, identified areas for improvement and planned next steps.

Some examples of progress over the last two years include:

- Exceeding national targets for increasing numbers of adults accessing treatment for non-opiate drugs and for alcohol.
- Exceeding national targets for increasing numbers of young people accessing support.
- Exceeding national targets for providing 'continuity of care' for prison leavers, improving access to treatment and support when leaving prison.
- An increase in the number of placements at residential rehabs.
- The introduction of a co-ordinator to help people prepare for rehab placements.
- An increase in specialist staff in substance use services to better support our most complex clients.
- An increase in support from the specialist family and carers service.
- A new Nurse role to work with homeless people using substances, providing improved wound care, identification of other health needs, and supported access to other health services.
- A new 'engagement team' to encourage people to get help and support (85% of people who are referred now engage in treatment).
- A new 'walk-in' service on 4 days of the week has reduced waiting times dramatically to less than a day (waiting times are 27 days in some other parts of the country).
- Improved 'dual diagnosis' offer, to enhance support for those experiencing poor mental wellbeing and substance use together.
- New specialist bereavement support for people affected by a drug-related or alcohol-related death.

- Increasing availability of Naloxone (an injection/nasal spray which can reverse the effects of an Opioid overdose), and needle exchange services.

Next steps (2024-25) include:

- Increased availability of 'out-of-hours' treatment and recovery support.
- Rapid access to talking therapies/counselling for people in treatment for drug or alcohol use.
- Improved care pathways with the NHS (North Tees Hospital and GP Practices) to help prevent overdoses, improve support following an overdose, and make it easier for patients to access support for drug or alcohol use.
- Increased outreach work, to better reach communities across the borough of Stockton-on-Tees.
- Enhanced support for young adults aged 16-24, non-opiate users, and young people affected by parental or household substance use.

We are proud to work with our communities in the development of our services. However, we also acknowledge that we cannot change past experiences, we can only learn from them and strive to improve. We will work harder to keep our communities and partners informed of the improvements that we make to our commissioned services.

We understand that many of the challenges mentioned in this report are not only felt at a local level, but they are also felt regionally and nationally. We meet regularly with services and commissioners from across the region to share learning and to problem solve. We are very proud to know that our local services perform well, when compared both regionally and nationally.

In Stockton-on-Tees we are fortunate to have dedicated teams who bring compassion, expertise and lived experience of addiction and recovery to their work. As is demonstrated above, these teams are effective in tackling stigma and improving the lives of people experiencing drug or alcohol use.

It is hoped that the above provides readers with reassurance that our services are responsive to local need and local feedback. We look forward to working together in response to the recommendations within this report.

Yours Mandy Mackinnon,
Strategic Health & Wellbeing Manager,
Public Health Stockton-on-Tees.