



# Ageing Well in Northumberland

## **Director of Public Health Report 2023**



**Northumberland**  
County Council

[www.northumberland.gov.uk](http://www.northumberland.gov.uk)

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# Forewords



**As I come towards the end of my first year as Director of Public Health for Northumberland, I am humbled to be able to share my first annual report which is focused on ageing well.**

Here in Northumberland, we have a higher proportion of the population over the age of 65 compared to our North East neighbours and the national average. Northumberland is a beautiful place to live, work, socialise and grow old. It is indeed a land of great opportunities. I am troubled when people focus solely on the difficulties of having an ageing population as it becomes all about the cost to health and social care and before we know it our older population are a drain on society and a problem to solve rather than an asset to behold.

Our health and social care services are indeed vital for medical care and when our residents do not have the ability to function independently any longer. Services are a necessity, and we

must focus on equity in access to them across our rural County to ensure fairness. I could have focused this entire report on prevention of disease and ill health, and the challenging inequalities which build right from the beginning of life and into mid-life, which cause the avoidable gap we have in healthy life expectancy across our least and most affluent localities. However, there is much work underway in Northumberland to look at the best start in life and creating the conditions to build a good life through the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Northumberland Inequalities Plan. Instead, I specially wanted to shine a light on how to maintain positive health and wellbeing in later years and how, as local stakeholders working into and with our communities, we can encourage social, emotional, and physical connectedness. Research shows us time and time again that as humans we are social beings and to thrive, we need a sense of self worth and belonging. Preventing decline is not only about treatment and ill health care services. To enable independence and adding life to years not only years to life requires us to look at how people live their lives within the context of their communities (homes and neighbourhoods) and the active role our older population can play.

I would like to commend this report to you as a guide to what is already working well here in Northumberland and what more we can do to amplify the work at scale. We need a long term

sustainable commitment to ensure our older population are seen as a significant contributor to life here in Northumberland. We have a moment in time to retain people's independence and ensure we can keep people independent with a good sense of wellbeing and adding value to our County. This resilience building through and in community life is an evidence-based way to ensure the essential health and care services we all have an equitable right to access at the time of need are not overloaded with our forecasted ageing profile. Shifting the balance towards connected communities and people's ability to function well and feel content ensures a more positive perspective to embrace our ageing demographic.

*"You don't stop laughing when you grow old, you grow old when you stop laughing."*

George Bernard Shaw

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gill O'Neill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized.

**Gill O'Neill**

*Executive Director of Public Health,  
Stronger Communities, and Inequalities*



### **Councillor Veronica Jones**

**Northumberland County Councillor Veronica Jones, Cabinet Member for Improving Public Health and Wellbeing, said:**

*"Northumberland has an older population compared with most other areas of England and our population projections suggest that older age groups are likely to grow significantly over the coming years.*

*"Supporting our residents to age well and live happy and healthy lives is a priority for us. And closing the gap in health inequalities is a key part of this challenge.*

*"We know that these inequalities in healthy ageing are strongly determined by the social and economic circumstances that people experience from birth and throughout their life course.*

*"This report explores what is already happening in Northumberland and helps us to see what good work we can build on to support our residents to live long and healthy lives."*



### **Councillor Wendy Pattison**

**Northumberland County Councillor, Portfolio Holder for Caring for Adults, said:**

*"Having an aging population in Northumberland, particularly if not matched by health improvements, will have an impact on the NHS and social care.*

*"The work that is being done to help people remain active and healthy in later life is key to supporting the proportion of life spent in good health and, by working together, reduce the demands on healthcare and social services.*

*"Healthy ageing is a continuous process to optimise opportunities to maintain and to improve our physical and mental health, independence, and quality of life throughout the course of our lives.*

*"I am delighted to see the great work that is showcased in this report and fully support the recommendations made."*



### **Neil Bradley (Executive Director of Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing)**

**Northumberland County Council's Executive Director of Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing, Neil Bradley, said:**

*"It is vital that we work together across the public sector and linked organisations to give everyone in Northumberland the chance to have as long and fulfilling a life as possible.*

*There is already excellent work being done across the County and in our communities by all who have people's health and wellbeing as a shared goal. This report sets out some of the key issues and challenges that we need to continue to work to address to do that moving forward and is a really helpful overview of where we are at in that journey."*



# 1. Introduction

**One thing we all have in common is that we are growing older each day. As we travel through life we meet new experiences, opportunities and challenges, and this is just as true in our later years.**

There are many positive aspects to ageing. Many older people describe a greater sense of purpose, hope, resilience, and wellbeing in older age. Our diverse life experiences and skills, and perspectives mean we have much to contribute during our later lives. However, our society tends to look at ageing through a negative lens. Ageing is often portrayed as an inevitable process of physical and mental decline. We sometimes associate older age with vulnerability, dependency and a cost or burden to society. This negative view of deficits can sometimes obscure the immense value and contribution that our older populations bring to society.

Whilst it is true that our physical bodies naturally decline in older age, we know that with supportive policies, environments, and services, we can age well and live a full and satisfied life in the situation we find ourselves.

Whilst a more positive view on ageing is long overdue, we should also recognise that there are significant variations in our experiences of ageing. For some, older age can present major difficulties and challenges. Increasingly many older people are living for many years with

multiple health conditions that need to be managed and there can be great challenges within relationships and dealing with losses. Sadly, we also witness sharp social inequalities in health in older age groups, which are shaped by advantages or disadvantages throughout our lives. There is regrettably an 18-year gap in life expectancy between the most and least deprived wards in Northumberland, and moreover, people in the most deprived areas live a greater proportion of their lives in poor health.

To address such unfair inequalities, we are committed to working closely with all our partners and stakeholders across Northumberland and have begun using the evidence based 'Marmot Principles' to shape our approach and develop a Northumberland Inequalities Plan.

The ageing process varies hugely between different individuals for a variety of reasons and there is not a simple one-size-fits-all approach for healthy ageing that suits every person. However, we know that as we age it is important for us to stay connected, feel included, stay healthy, work together, value experience, build on strengths and keep safe.

As well as making our people and communities stronger and more resilient, our local health and social care systems will benefit if we promote ageing well. A focus on prevention and enabling people to stay healthier for longer will be of critical importance as we transition to an older population over the next 10-15 years. This is a key part of reducing pressure on our already stretched services.





The past decades have seen people living longer, but for many people, these additional years are not being lived in good health. We have successfully added years to life, now we must work together to add life to those years.

## Ageing well in Northumberland

This report will focus primarily on ageing well in the later part of our lives. There is no clear definition on when older age begins, but for the purpose of this report we will take this as approximately 55 years old and above. Although we will focus on these later years, we recognise that health and wellbeing in later years is strongly shaped by our opportunities, experiences, behaviours, as well as our social, economic and environmental conditions during earlier life.

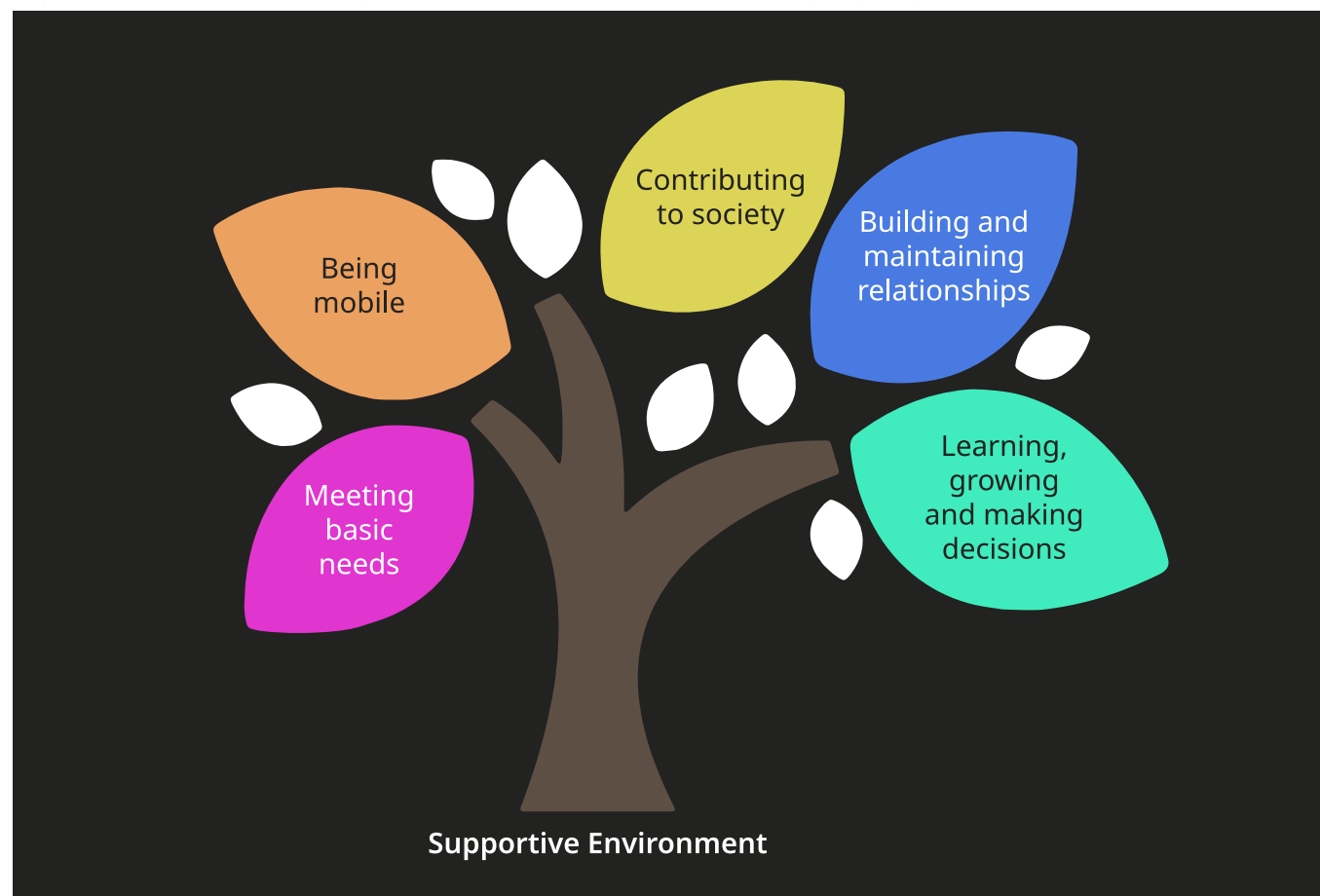
Promoting ageing well is a global challenge and we have much to learn from other places both within our country and internationally. The Chief Medical Officer Report for England in 2023 is themed 'Health in an Ageing Society' and highlights key issues and best practice from around the country. World Health Organization's (WHO) Decade of Healthy Ageing is running from 2021-2030 and is a concerted effort by governments, agencies, academia and communities to improve health and wellbeing of older people around the world.



A recognised framework for thinking holistically about healthy ageing is the WHO 5 functions of healthy ageing. These functions focus on the capabilities that enable people to be and do what they have reason to value in older age. The five functions are:

- Meeting basic needs
- Learning, growing, and making decisions
- Being mobile
- Building and maintaining relationships
- Contributing to society

Figure 1: World Health Organisation five functions of healthy ageing:



We have structured the core chapters of this report around these 5 functions and have included within them some of the key contributing factors. Fundamentally these key areas are the foundation for physical, mental, and social wellbeing as we age.

We want to work together with our communities and partners to improve the quality of life of older adults, promoting their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing while enabling them to live independently and with dignity as they age. In Northumberland we are committed to taking a strengths-based approach which builds on the assets and resources that people already have and empowers them to take greater control over their lives.

In Northumberland, we are proud to have an established Ageing Well Network, which connects together a very wide range of organisations that support older adults in different ways and in different places. There are so many great initiatives happening across the county that support ageing well, and although there isn't space to mention them all here, we know that these are highly valued by our residents. This report includes local examples of how we work together with agencies and communities to support ageing well.

If we can work together to promote these 5 core functions, and address inequalities across them, Northumberland can be a place where our people have a greater opportunity to age well.

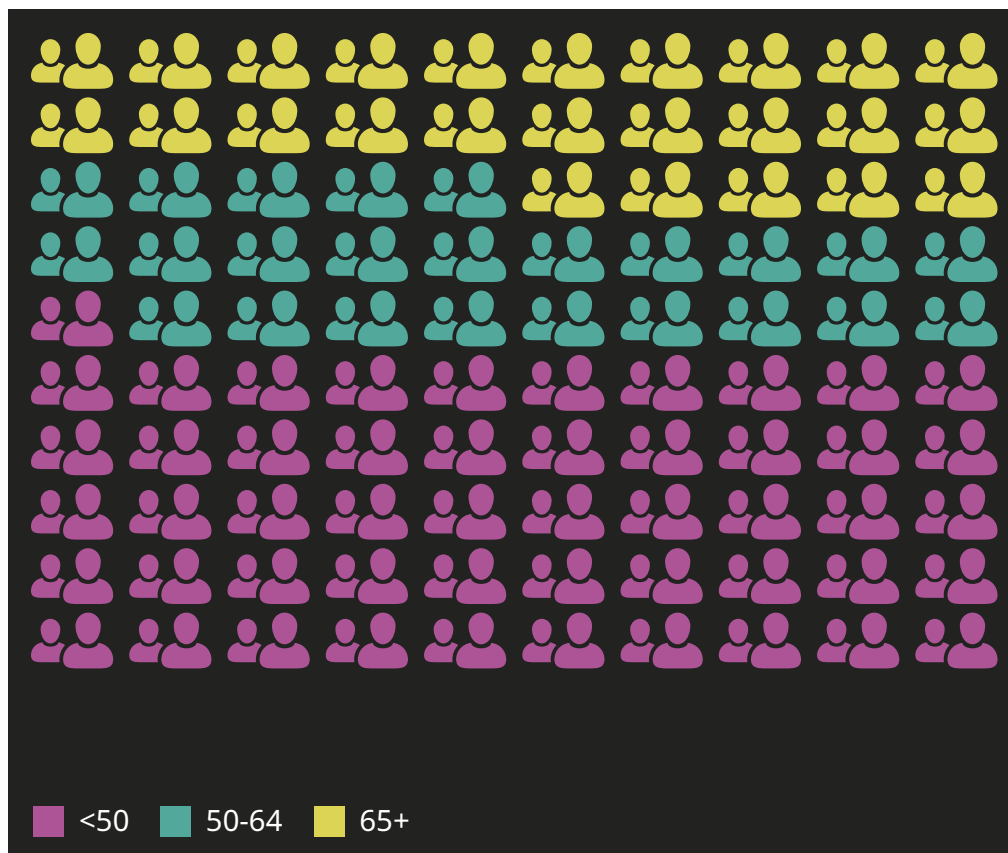
## 2. Ageing in Northumberland

This chapter describes our age profile in Northumberland and highlights some of the overarching indicators of health and wellbeing for our local population.

### Age profile of Northumberland

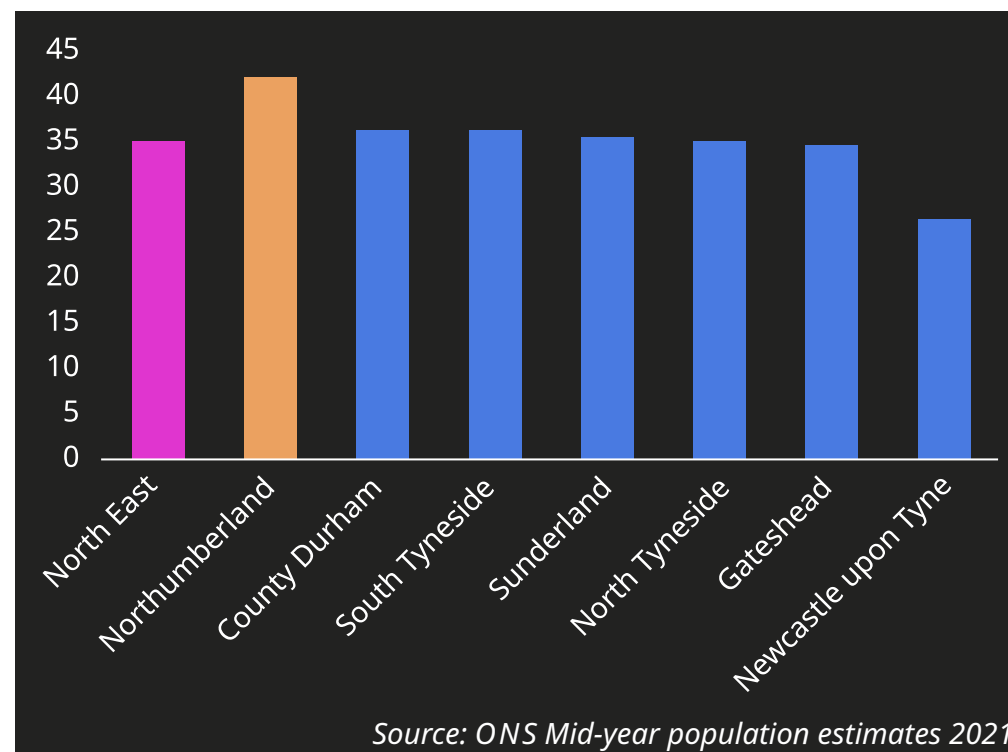
In Northumberland almost half of our population are aged 50 or over (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Age groups in Northumberland



Northumberland has an older population compared with most other areas of England, and has the oldest age profile in the North East region. In Northumberland, 41% of the population are 55 or over, which compares to an average of 31% in England and 34% in the North East (Figure 3).

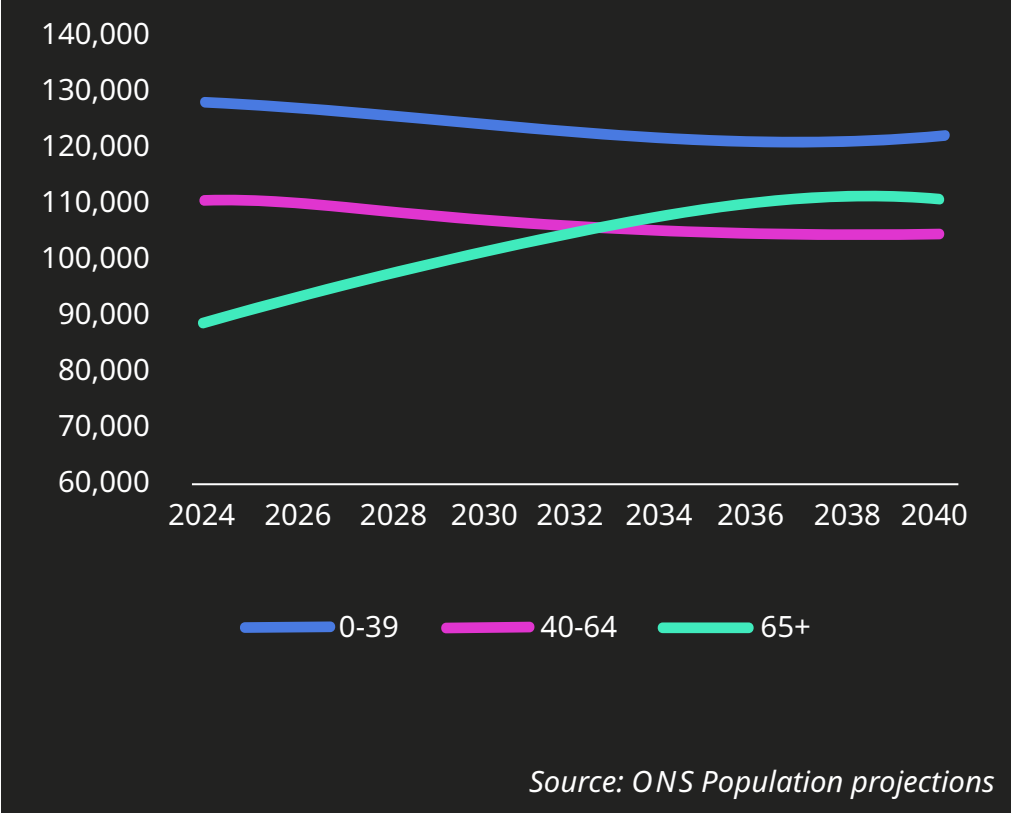
Figure 3: Proportion of population 55+ in North East local authority areas





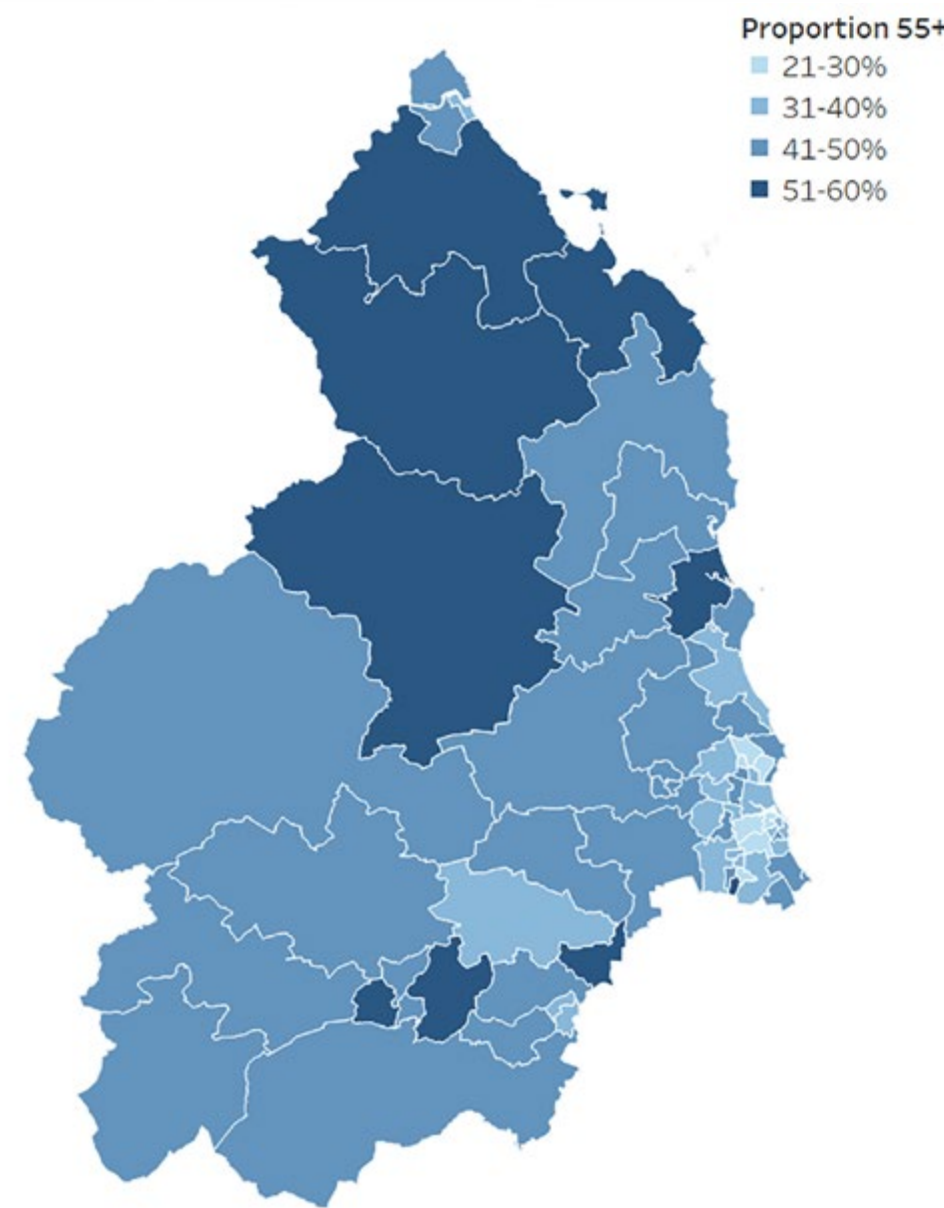
Population projections suggest that older age groups are likely to grow significantly over the next two decades. The 65+ age group is expected to increase by around 20,000 people, whilst we expect to see reductions in the 0-39 and 40-64 age groups (Figure 4). Therefore, our population in Northumberland is set to become progressively older until 2040.

Figure 4: Projected population sizes of age categories in Northumberland 2024-40



Average age varies across geographical areas of Northumberland. More rural areas in the north and west of the county tend to have an older age profile, and the more urban areas in the south east tend to have a younger age profile (Figure 5).

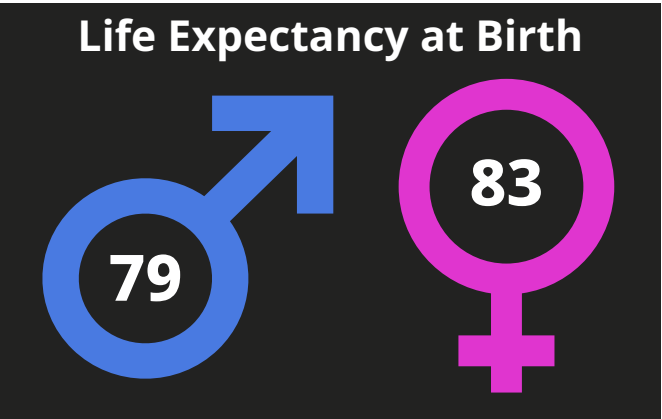
Figure 5: Map of age distribution (% aged 55+) across Northumberland



Source: ONS Mid-2020 Population Estimates by Ward

## Health and wellbeing in older ages

Life expectancy of our population has dramatically increased over the last hundred years. In the 1930s the average length of life was around 60 years, while today males and females in Northumberland on average live to 79 and 83 respectively. This is similar to average life expectancies for males and females in England.



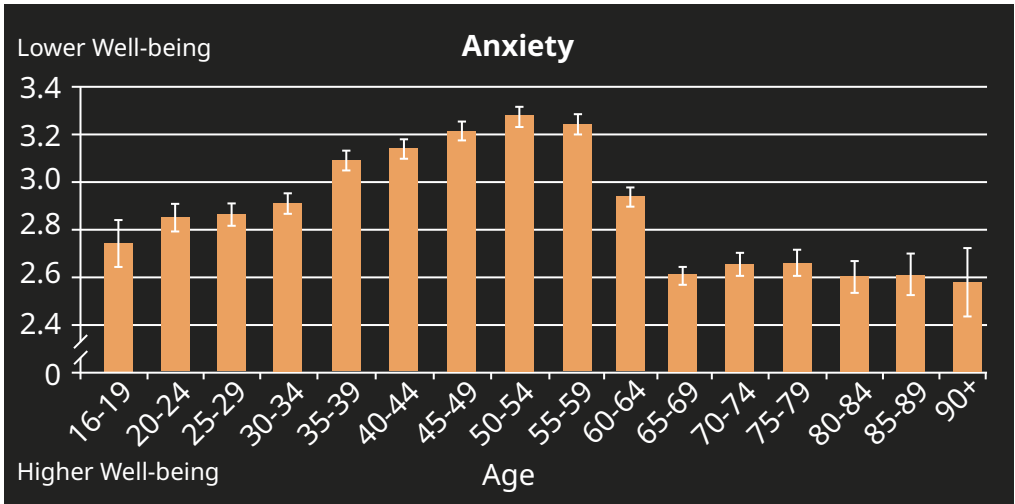
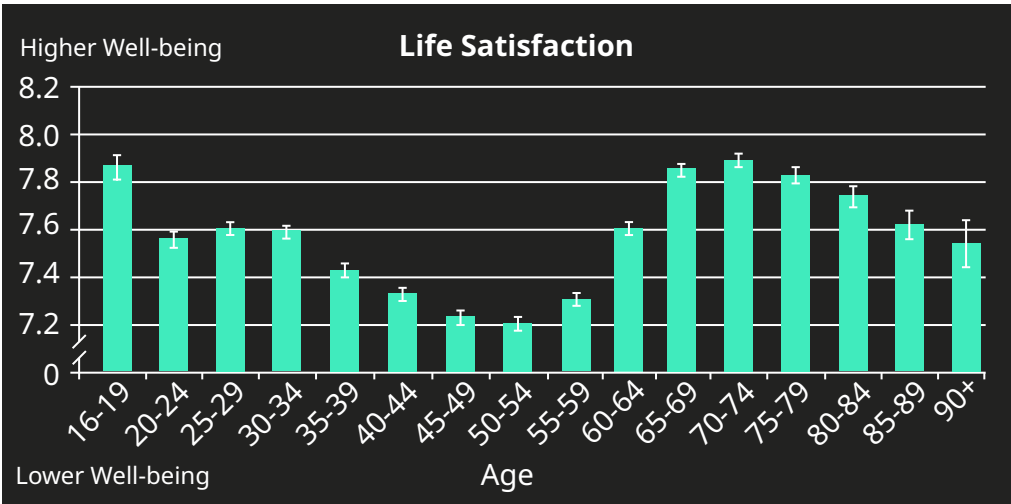
Whilst living longer is an important indicator of population health, it doesn't capture the quality of life that people experience.

Healthy life expectancy shows the average age that people can expect to live in a state of good health (rather than poor health). This is a useful indicator for understanding how healthily our population is ageing. In Northumberland, on average males live 61 years in good health and females live 62 years in good health.

The national Annual Population Survey has found that older age groups tend to have greater personal wellbeing. Figure 6 shows that life satisfaction is higher among older age groups compared to middle age groups, and anxiety is lower among older age groups.



Figure 6: Life satisfaction and anxiety scores by age in England (Source: ONS Annual Population Survey 2016)



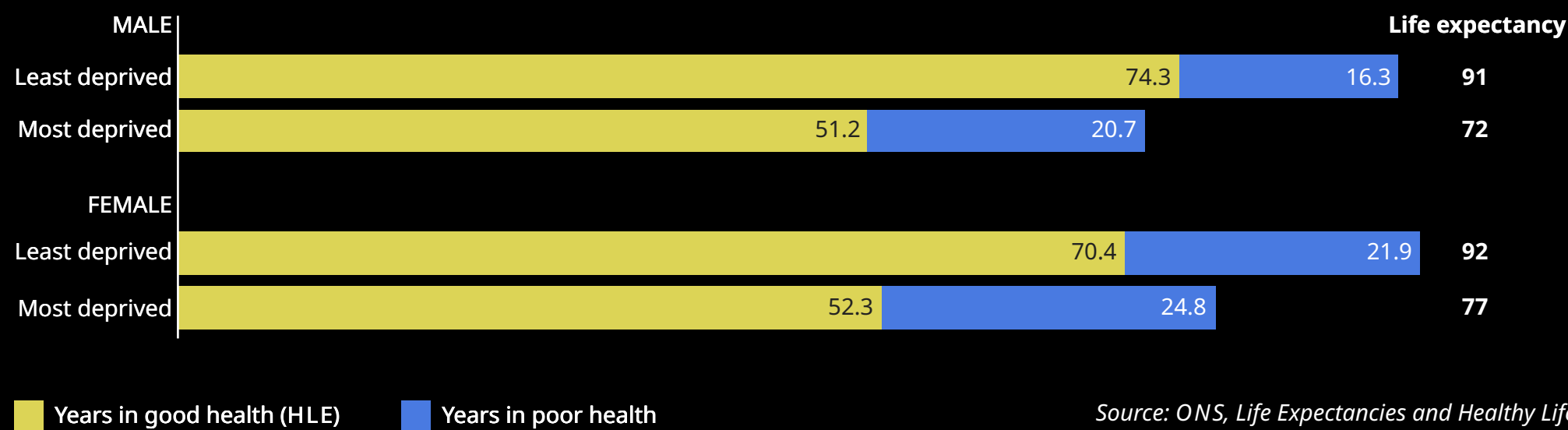
# Inequalities in ageing

Although overall Healthy Life Expectancy in Northumberland is similar to national averages, there are significant inequalities between some of our communities. Figure 7 shows Healthy Life Expectancy and Life Expectancy at birth for males and females living in the most and least deprived areas of Northumberland. It shows that people living in the most deprived areas generally live shorter lives and spend a greater proportion of their lives in poor health. Healthy life expectancy for the most deprived areas for males is 51 years old compared to 74 years old in the least deprived areas.

We know that these inequalities in healthy ageing are strongly determined by the social and economic circumstances that people experience from birth and throughout the life course. Disadvantage tends to accumulate and compound through life and result in the wide inequalities in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy we observe in later life.



Figure 7: Average Life Expectancy and Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) for males and females in the most and least deprived areas (MSOAs) in Northumberland



Source: ONS, Life Expectancies and Healthy Life Expectancies at birth by sex and area (MSOA)



# 3. Meeting basic needs

**Meeting our basic needs includes living in suitable housing, having enough money to live on, eating a healthy and nutritious diet, having adequate clothing, and access to health and social care services when needed. These things are a foundation for ensuring an adequate standard of living and a platform for enabling all the other functions highlighted in this report. The ability to meet our basic needs is a combination of our own capacity, the environment in which we live and the interaction between the two.**

For some people, disabilities or health conditions in older ages may limit ability to perform basic activities of daily living such as bathing, showering, dressing, eating, getting in and out of bed or chairs, using the toilet, or getting around the home. However, with appropriate levels of support and care, many people can continue to function and have the ability to live independently in their own communities for longer.

## Good housing

Most older people are happy where they live. They need either no help or 'just that little bit of help' to stay living independently in their ordinary homes. Enabling older people to age well at home needs to be our guiding principle.<sup>1</sup>

*The right size of house needs to be built. They are nearly all top of the range houses. We need more flats and smaller houses for people who want to downsize as they get older.*

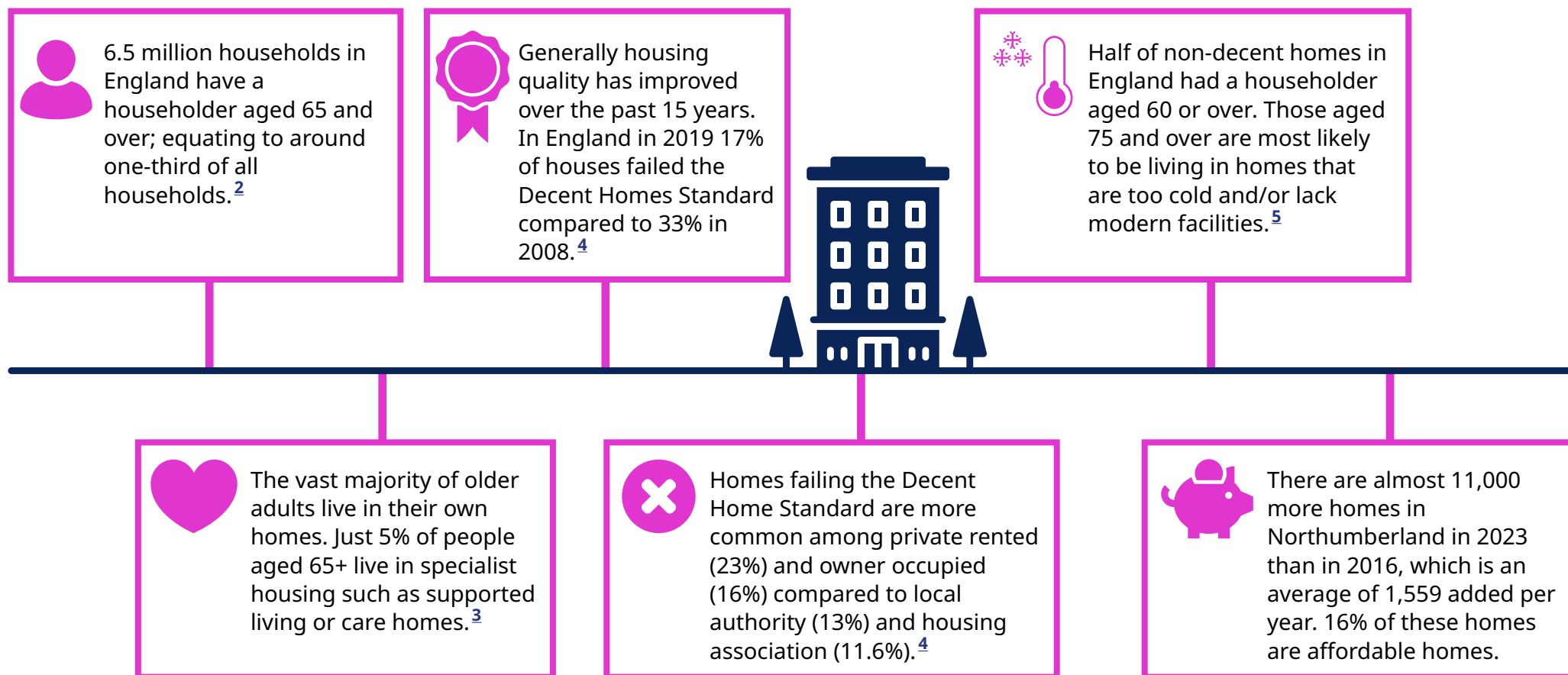
(65+ Cramlington resident, Cramlington Community Conversation)



The simple aspiration of most older people is to live in safe, warm, well-maintained homes that support wellbeing. Well-designed homes can reduce stress and improve mood, and having a private and quiet space enables older individuals to rest and engage in leisure activities. The quality of homes is particularly important to older people as they typically spend more time at home than younger adults.

Adequate heating, insulation, and ventilation help regulate indoor temperatures, reducing the risk of hypothermia or heat-related illnesses. This is especially important for older adults who may have reduced tolerance to temperature extremes.

Whilst many older people are able to move around their homes unaided, for some people this can be a challenge. In these situations, safety and accessibility features can be crucial for preventing accidents and injuries among older adults. Handrails, non-slip flooring, and wider doorways can reduce the risk of falls, which are a leading cause of injury in older adults.



## What is available to support good quality housing for our older population?

There are many agencies and initiatives that offer support for housing that older people may access. Some examples of initiatives include:

- The Northumberland Local Plan which was adopted in March 2022 supports initiatives to improve health and wellbeing through the built environment. All planning applications must complete a Healthy Planning Checklist and larger developments require a Health Impact Assessment (HIA). These HIAs should consider the impacts on older people.
- In our Local Plan, it specifies that major schemes need to include a proportion of homes that are accessible and adaptable. We also promote 'lifetime neighbourhoods' that consider the needs of people across their lives, including during older age.
- Northumberland County Council has an Extra Care and Supported Living Strategy which aims to deliver homes to meet the needs of older adults and provide an alternative to residential and nursing care. Developments will need to be consistent with the council's Local Plan and the council works closely with developers to ensure they address local needs.
- A dedicated housing occupational therapist works with teams delivering improvement works to the Council's housing stock to ensure needs of tenants are considered.

- The Joint Equipment Loans Service (JELs) provides equipment to people who live in Northumberland, or who are registered with a Northumberland GP, to help them maintain their independence in the community and to continue to live safely in their own home. Referrals come from Health and Social Care professionals following an assessment by a professional such as a district nurse, community nurse, occupational therapist, physiotherapist or paediatrician.
- The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme improves energy efficiency of homes of people on low incomes, at risk of poverty, or vulnerable to the effects of living in a cold home. In Northumberland over 320 homes have been improved through the scheme.
- Energy Advice for Rural Northumberland (EARN) supports energy consumers in hard-to-reach rural Northumberland who are disadvantaged through remoteness. They offer advice ranging from installing simple measures to improve the energy efficiency of homes, paying less for energy, accessing financial help, adopting more energy-efficient habits and applying for grants to make improvements to houses.
- Warming homes is a multiagency professional group that has developed information resources for professionals to support residents to warm their homes.

### **What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through housing?**

- Ultimately, we would like to find ways to support older people to live longer in their homes rather than seek out supported living, or care homes.
- Many homes become harder to live in as people age, but people shouldn't have to change homes just because they're getting older. New homes can be designed to be flexible enough to meet people's needs throughout stages of their lives.
- The Joint Equipment and Loans service (JELs) is currently piloting the use of SMS messaging to support client contact for equipment delivery and retrieval.
- We would like to see more opportunity for affordable housing for our residents across our county.

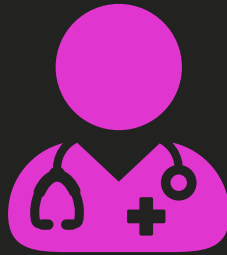


### **Healthy diet and nutrition**

Eating a healthy, balanced and nutrient rich diet remains important throughout our lives. As we get older our bodies absorb less of certain nutrients including vitamin B12, calcium, and vitamin D, which are needed to maintain good bone and muscle health and support our immune systems. A healthy diet also boosts our energy levels and can lift our mood, which can help us stay active and engaged in our daily activities and social interactions. A diet high in fibre is good for our digestive system and can alleviate constipation.

Older people are more vulnerable to poor nutrition which can reduce quality of life and increases the risk of frailty in older adults. Identifying and addressing poor nutrition is important to enable people to maintain a healthy and independent life and reduce the need for both health and social care.





6

It has been estimated that poor nutrition contributes to

**65%**  
more GP  
visits,

**82%**  
more  
hospital  
admissions,

**30%**  
longer  
hospital  
stays.



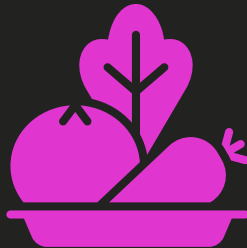
4

In Northumberland

**2/3** of adults do not meet the 5 a day fruit and vegetable consumption recommendations.

In the most deprived areas

**3/4** of the adult population do not meet these recommendations.



Older adults tend to eat a healthier diet than younger age groups.

**Almost half of people aged 75-84 in England meet the 5 a day fruit and vegetable consumption recommendation**

compared to around a quarter of people aged 16-34. (Figure 8)



7

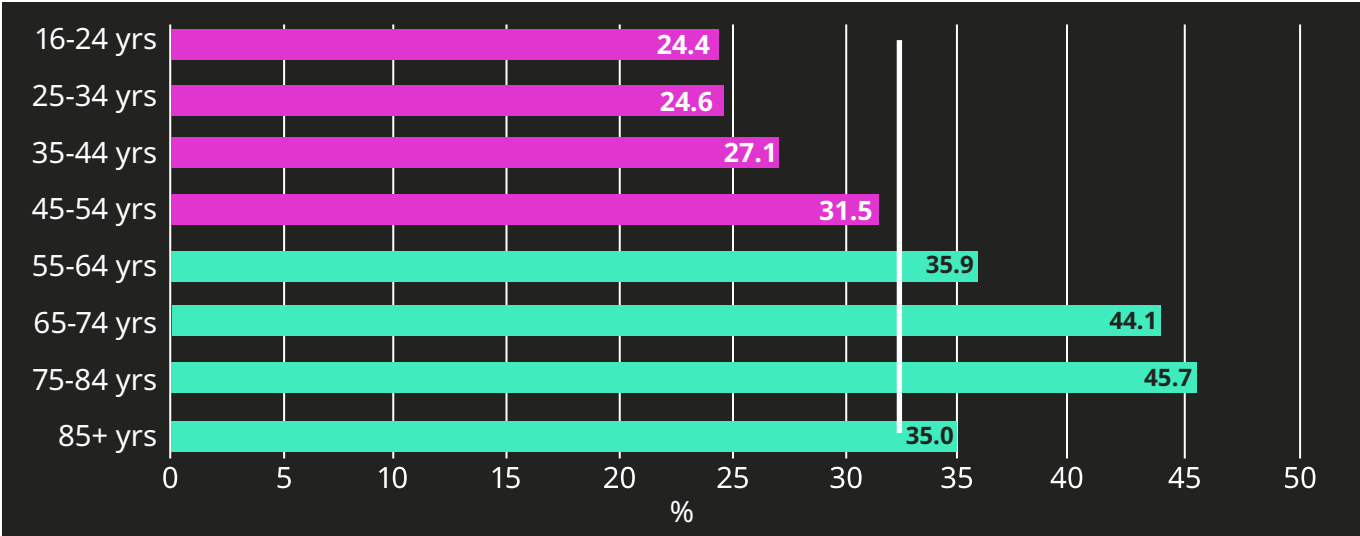
Low-income households can struggle to afford healthy diets, as healthier foods tend to be more expensive. A 2022 national survey by the Food Foundation found that

**14%** of households had experienced food insecurity in the past month, and

**50%** of households on Universal Credit had experienced food insecurity in the past 6 months.

This may mean skipping meals, being unable to eat when hungry, and not eating for a whole day.

Figure 8: percentage of adults meeting the 5-a-day fruit and vegetable consumption recommendation by age 2021-22




Maintaining a healthy body weight is important for overall health. Being overweight or obese can exacerbate a range of age-related health conditions, accelerate decline of physical function and onset of some disabilities. At the same time, underweight and malnutrition affects older adults, particularly with the onset of frailty, disability or illnesses.

4

In Northumberland nearly **2/3 of adults are overweight or obese** and the prevalence is higher among older age groups and in more deprived areas.

9

It's estimated that **10% people aged 65 or above are malnourished or at risk of malnutrition.**

8

Surveys have found that **older people are just as motivated as younger people to lose weight,** but they are only half as likely to be attempting to lose weight. Some of the specific barriers have been suggested as lower mobility, and lack of advice from professionals.

## What is available to support healthy diet and nutrition for our older population?

- Northumberland Council and Northumbria Healthcare Trust have signed Healthy Weight Declarations, which include a series of pledges and practical measures to support residents to achieve healthy weight.
- Nourish Northumberland is a countywide food partnership that aims to ensure food choices for everyone regardless of where they live or how much they earn. It unites food initiatives and food providers to work together with communities to find locally based solutions that are sustainable.
- Northumberland County Council's Health Trainer Service can support all adults, including those over 55, with advice on healthy eating. They have a range of in-person and telephone clinics.
- NHS Digital offer an online access to weight management service for those living with obesity, who have a Body Mass Index (BMI)  $\geq 30$  and diagnosed diabetes or hypertension (or both). The BMI threshold is  $\geq 27.5$  for those with Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. With three levels of support and a choice of providers, it is designed to offer a personalised level of intervention to support people to manage their weight and improve their longer-term health outcomes.

- Northumbria Healthcare Trust delivers a specialist weight management service. A team of specialist dietitians, physical activity leads, and clinical psychologists work with you to hear your weight, eating and activity story within the context of your life. They help you to develop your own plan focussing on areas that are important to you and identify what works for you and what might be stopping you from making progress. The service is available for people registered with a Northumberland GP, with a BMI  $\geq 35$  (32.5 for Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds), aged 18+ who aren't pregnant, and without a current or previous bariatric procedure in place.

## What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through diet and nutrition?

- Greater public awareness of our changing nutritional needs as we grow older.
- Training for delivering brief weight advice could offer an opportunity to improve older people's motivation to achieve a healthy weight.







## Financial wellbeing

Personal finances have a strong bearing on our health and wellbeing. Having insufficient money or financial insecurity can be a source of significant stress or anxiety. As elsewhere, the recent cost of living crisis has put additional pressure on people in our communities in Northumberland.

Not having enough money is a barrier to living a healthy life and a significant cause of health inequalities. The calculation of Minimum Income for Healthy Living (MIHL) includes the level of income needed to meet basic needs including good nutrition, physical activity, housing, social interactions, and transport. As people grow older their needs for these things often increase at a time when their incomes decrease because of retirement and/or loss of a partner which can lead to reduced income.

Our financial position in older age is generally shaped by our circumstances earlier in life. For example, having a private pension is linked to employment history including level of earnings and time in employment.

Most people reaching older age have limited opportunity to increase income or add to savings, but there may be ways to improve their financial situation through state benefits such as Pension Credit, Housing Benefit and Attendance Allowance. However, some older adults may not know what they are entitled to, may be put off by the claims process or be hesitant to ask for help. Caring for family members can also come at great cost to carers and many are forced to give up work to care.



10

In 2021/22 **18%** of pensioners in the UK had incomes, after housing costs, of less than **60% median household income.**



4

In Northumberland, it is estimated that **11.5%** of people aged 60 and above (11,000 older people) are living in poverty. This compares to 14% nationally.



Department for Work and Pensions estimated that **£1.7 billion** in Pension Credit was not claimed across Britain in 2022.

Financial scams and fear of scams disproportionately affect older adults which may be linked to vulnerability, social isolation and lower familiarity with technology.<sup>11</sup>

*“Every day I encounter older people who have been scammed, suffered identity theft or are stressed by the pressure they feel from scam callers, rogue traders. Some have lost life-changing amounts of money. More just ‘live in fear’ of what they see as the perils of online shopping, banking, or of answering the phone”.*

(Scams awareness and prevention officer, Age UK)



### What are we doing to support financial wellbeing?

- Northumberland has recently established a Financial Well-being Network of organisations including Transforming Communities Together, Northumberland Community Bank, Stronger Communities, Thriving Together, Citizen's Advice Bureau and Northumberland Communities Together. Following the Government's

Financial Well-being Strategy 2020-2030, the Financial Well-being Network will focus on three of the five themes, initially. The five themes are:

- Getting a meaningful financial education
- Saving regularly
- Managing credit
- Accessing debt advice
- Making good decisions
- The Financial Wellbeing Network considers all ages but is aware of specific issues related to older people including the uptake of pension credits across the county.

- Northumberland County Council benefit calculator is free to use and helps people find out what benefits they can claim.
- Northumberland Community Bank (NCB) aims to benefit more people in Northumberland by offering a sustainable source of lending for individuals and micro businesses together with a safe home for savings. Unlike high street lenders, Northumberland Community Bank may offer loans for smaller amounts starting at £300 which means customers don't have to borrow more than they need. By generating deposits from members, a fund is created allowing lending to local people, including those vulnerable to high interest lenders such as Pay Day and Door Stop lenders and Loan Sharks.

## Case Study: Barclays community banks



Barclays Bank is delivering a network of community banks across Northumberland as the traditional image of 'high street banking' evolves to meet the changing needs of society and the more flexible ways in which communities can physically interact with a bank.

Across Northumberland, Barclays now have services in locations such as Ponteland Leisure Centre, Morpeth Leisure Centre, and Prudhoe and Haltwhistle library buildings.

From these community sites, Barclays support local customers who still wish to have a face-to-face service and do not feel confident enough to take up online banking options. For those customers, Barclays

Digital Eagles based on site will provide support to those who would like to adapt to new ways of banking and learn more about how to do so safely to meet their own needs.

The collaboration between Barclays and Northumberland County Council will continue to evolve during 2024.

## What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through improving financial wellbeing?

- Understanding pensions and the impacts of decisions around early retirement and cashing-in might help people make informed decisions. Identification of and clear signposting to support agencies who can provide retirement and pensions advice may assist in decision making.
- Both Barclays Bank and Newcastle Building Society are providing services in locations across the county to help increase access for people to banking services which often help older people who are less likely to use on-line banking. Mindful of the expansive geography of Northumberland, the Barclays Digital Eagles programme plans to work with the Mobile Library Service to take their message of support, learning and financial enablement out to our more rural communities.
- Age UK delivers group and one-to-one scams advice and sometimes post-scam counselling. They provide support literature and various items of practical support including 'No cold callers' window stickers and landline telephone call-screening devices.
- Voluntary groups, community organisations and others from our communities have come together to establish a network of warm spaces. This includes, but is not limited to, community centres, church halls, libraries and community hubs. Warm Spaces are places where people can come together in a warm, safe, welcoming place and maybe enjoy a hot drink, a sit down and have a chat with others.



## Staying healthy for longer

Whilst most people aspire to live long and healthy lives, as we age we experience increased risk of long term conditions such as cardiovascular disease (which includes blockages of the arteries to the heart causing heart attacks and angina, as well as stroke), dementia, cancer, and problems with our joints. The good news is all these conditions are preventable or can be delayed, or the risk can be reduced considerably, particularly by things we do during the middle of our lives aged 40-60 years. <sup>12</sup>, <sup>13</sup>

The risk of these conditions can be reduced by not smoking, eating a healthy diet, taking plenty of exercise (including strengthening our muscles), not drinking too much alcohol, and keeping a healthy weight. But we know these things are challenging so we need approaches

that work for everyone, particularly people at higher risk or who face greater challenges, such as people living in some of our more deprived areas, and people from some ethnic groups.

As we get older, we are also at higher risk from some infectious diseases such as flu and COVID-19, or of developing pneumonia or shingles. Vaccination is extremely effective in reducing these risks. Screening programmes for some cancers (bowel, cervical and breast cancer) and abdominal aortic aneurysm are very important for detecting early signs of these conditions, enabling earlier treatment and better outcomes.



Data on prevention by age group:



4

In Northumberland in 2022,  
**9.6% of adults were smokers,**  
this is significantly less than the national  
average, and the lowest level in the North East.

However, higher rates of smoking remain among some  
groups such as those with lower socioeconomic status,  
people with mental health conditions and some age  
groups. Nationally 14% of people 50-59 years of age,  
and 12% of people 60-69 years of age are smokers.



15

The proportion of people in  
England in 2021 who  
participated in any  
moderate-intensity  
sports or exercise on at  
least one day in the past  
four weeks appears to  
**decrease with  
age from 45-54  
years.**



4

In Northumberland in 2021-22, it is estimated that  
**30% of adults do not meet  
the Chief Medical Officer  
physical activity guidelines**  
and 23% people do not achieve 30min  
activity per week. These are similar to national  
trends. There are also clear inequalities in physical  
activity levels, with those living in more deprived  
areas tending to do less physical activity.



4

In 2021-22,  
**63% of adults in  
Northumberland  
were overweight  
or obese.**

National trends, which are similar to  
Northumberland show that the  
**overweight and obesity are  
highest in those in age groups  
between 55 to 84 years old,**  
which is close to 70%.



4

In Northumberland in 2021-22,  
alcohol related admissions  
to hospital are  
**higher than  
national averages.**

Northumberland had a rate  
(directly standardised) of  
1041/100k compared to  
810/100k in England.



15

Alcohol use and harm is also  
higher in some older age  
groups compared to younger  
age groups. In England  
people aged 45-64  
years of age are  
**more than  
twice as likely  
to drink at levels of  
increased or harmful risk**  
compared to people aged 16-34.

## What are we doing to support prevention?

- **Making Every Contact Count (MECC)** is an approach to behaviour change that uses the millions of day-to-day interactions that organisations and individuals have with other people to support them in making positive changes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Health improvement specialists and health trainers in the Public Health team provide training to frontline staff across the system, including in community organisations and groups, to deliver MECC. Northumberland has over 100 MECC trainers and over 1000 people in the county have been trained in MECC.
- **NHS Health Checks** are free check-ups every 5 years for people aged 40 to 74 who do not have any pre-existing health conditions. It can tell if they are at higher risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, or stroke, and to provide support to reduce the risk of these conditions and dementia. NHS Health Checks are available from your GP surgery.
- **The Northumberland County Council Health Trainer Service** provides one-to-one and group support to individuals who want to make healthier lifestyle behaviour changes, as well as support to new and existing community groups, health advocates in local businesses, and community health champions, and delivery of education and skills programmes, campaigns, and health walks. The team has also just started a programme of targeted NHS Health

Checks into community settings and workplaces.

- **The Northumberland Stop Smoking Service** runs programmes across Northumberland to support smokers to stop smoking. Our stop smoking practitioners provide professional advice on treatments and e-cigarettes alongside behavioural support to help people quit. The service offers free nicotine replacement therapy via a voucher redemption scheme at local pharmacies. Support sessions are flexible and offer the choice of individual one-to-one sessions or telephone consultations. Advice and support are also available on the Northumberland Stop Smoking website.

- **Social prescribing** links workers, health and wellbeing coaches and care coordinators based in local surgeries give people time, focusing on what matters to them. They connect people to community groups and services for practical and emotional support, often for traditionally non-medical issues such as benefits advice or reducing social isolation. Health and wellbeing coaches work with people to build their knowledge, skills and confidence to manage their health conditions. Care coordinators help to coordinate care and support and help people to navigate the often-complex health and care systems.

## Case Study: The benefits of stopping smoking



Bob [not his real name] was referred to Northumberland Stop Smoking service for initial assessment in May 2023. He has several long-term conditions including diabetes, which he described as poorly controlled. Due to his diabetes, he had blocked arteries in his leg and ulcers on his feet, which were proving difficult to heal. These were the reasons he wanted to quit smoking. Bob was quite a heavy smoker but was unsure how much he was smoking because he rolled his own and used a smoking pipe. Initially Bob cut down on his cigarettes, and then for few weeks he was only smoking 1 or 2 roll-ups during the evening. Bob was given Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) medication in the form of a mouth spray and used this alongside an 18mg vape to support his quit attempt. Bob has now been smoke-free for 14 weeks and continues to stay motivated. Since quitting smoking Bob has noted his breathing has improved, and his ulcers are beginning to heal. He is now waiting for an appointment at the Freeman Hospital to see if they can operate on the blocked artery in his leg.

## What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through prevention?

- Some of the most important things that can be done to prevent diseases are by government or society. Recent announcements on raising the age of sale of tobacco by one year every year from 2027 onwards and increasing funding for preventing and stopping smoking are very welcome. Similar system-wide approaches are needed for helping people to have a healthy weight, for example by introducing more restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy foods, and to reduce alcohol harm.
- We are only able to focus on improving our health if we are happy and feel in control of our lives. The first step is to create the conditions for good employment, healthy and affordable housing, enough money to live, and feeling safe in our own communities. We have some of the levers for this locally, though not all.
- Strengthen communities so that they have more control over decisions and resources in their local area and can build trust and mutual support. We can then work with people in communities, voluntary and community groups and organisations, and frontline staff in statutory services to have those brief conversations about why and how to improve health and wellbeing, and where to get support if needed ('Making Every Contact Count').
- Some of the biggest challenges are to reduce the inequalities in uptake of vaccinations, screening, and NHS Health Checks in Northumberland. This requires partners to work together and with communities to identify opportunities to increase uptake among people less likely to take up these offers.

## Health and social care when needed

We know that the risks of illness, health conditions and disability generally increase with age. Increases in life expectancies mean that many older adults are managing at least one long term condition or disability.

The annual GP patient survey 2023 asked patients about their long-term conditions. It found that:



**60% of adults in Northumberland report having at least one longstanding physical or mental health condition, disability or illness.**  
This is higher than the national average of 53%.

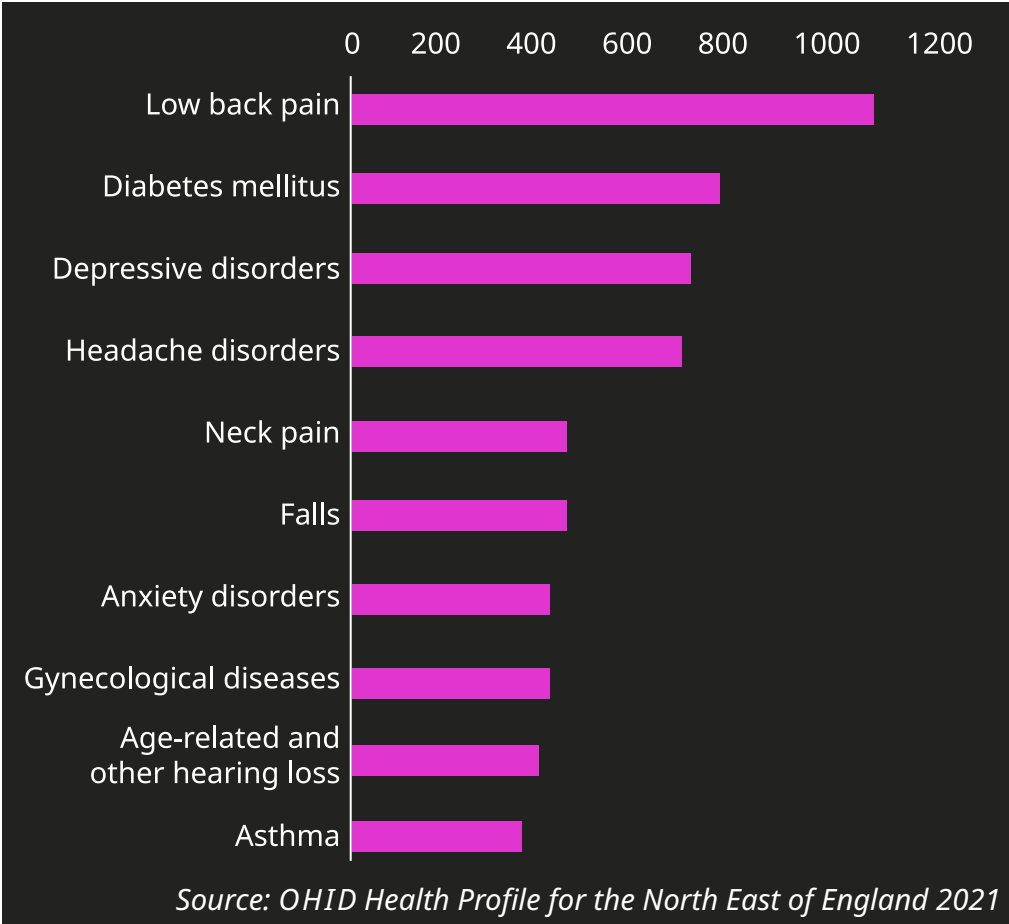


**13% of adults in Northumberland report having a long-term mental health problem, which is similar to the national average of 12%.**



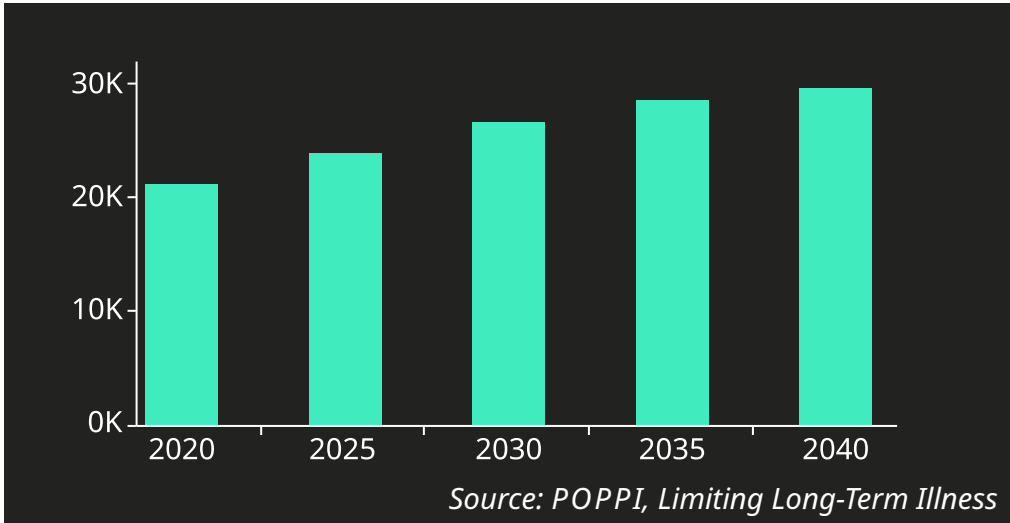
There are a wide range of long-term conditions. Years lived with disability (YLD) is a measure of disease that combines the prevalence of each disease with a rating of the severity of its symptoms, to give an overall measure of the loss of quality of life. Figure 9 identifies the most common causes of ill health in 2019 in Northumberland.

Figure 9: Years lived with disability by condition in Northumberland per 100,000 people Source: OHID Health Profile for the North East of England 2021



The number of people living with long-term conditions and disability is projected to rise over coming years, primarily because of the shift to an older population structure ([see Figure 10](#)).

Figure 10: Projected number of people 65+ living with a limiting long-term illness from 2020 to 2024 in Northumberland

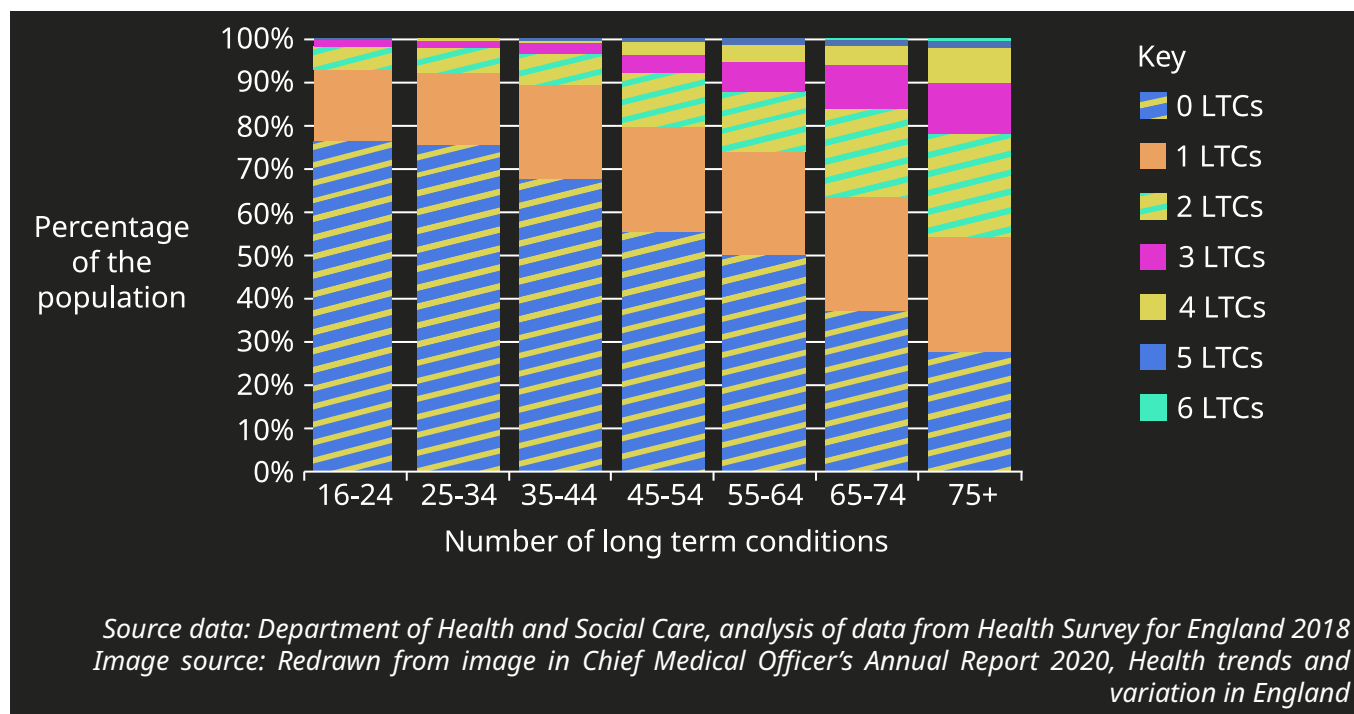


Many older people are also living with multiple long-term conditions (multimorbidity). These conditions can interact, meaning that people who could have maintained independence and quality of life with one of these diseases struggles to do so with the combination. Figure 11 shows that the number of conditions managed generally increases with age.





Figure 11: percentage of the population with 0-6 long term conditions by age in England (2018)



Living with long term conditions and disability can present significant challenges and difficulties for individuals. However, with the right type and level of support or management, people can have a better quality of life than they otherwise would experience.

### Health care when needed

Primary and secondary healthcare pathways support people to receive diagnosis, receive appropriate treatment and management of their long-term conditions. Health services play a vital role, but we recognise that in most cases, condition management is primarily done by the individual with support from their social networks, whether family, friends, or community networks.

Access to healthcare services for older adults is vital for maintaining and improving their health, well-being, and overall quality of life. It allows for the prevention, early detection, and management of health issues. The rural nature of Northumberland means there can be more challenges for people to travel to services, especially more specialist services that tend to be in urban population centres.

Across Northumberland, we have 36 GP practices operating across 61 sites. Each of the GP practices is part of a Primary Care Network (PCNs) of which there are 7 across Northumberland. The PCNs build on existing primary care services and enable greater provision of proactive, personalised,

coordinated and more integrated health and social care for people close to home.

Northumberland is part of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB) which includes an integrated approach to better health and wellbeing across our population. NENC ICB works across the area to breakdown organisational boundaries to ensure patients can access healthcare at the right time, in the right place. As part of this approach, there is a significant focus on reducing inequalities in how patients across the area access and receive healthcare.

- Recently, NENC ICB has announced £35 million funding to improve health in the region's most deprived areas.

Northumberland's main acute provider is Northumbria Healthcare Foundation Trust which has a number of locations across the county to access treatment including:

- Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital
- Wansbeck General Hospital
- Hexham General Hospital
- Alnwick Infirmary
- Berwick Infirmary
- Rothbury Community Hospital
- Haltwhistle War Memorial Hospital

Northumberland patients also have access to tertiary services from NHS Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals Foundation Trust.

Northumberland is served by community pharmacies, which are a key part of our healthcare provision and are often first point of contact for patients requiring advice and treatment. This includes a “Think Pharmacy First” scheme, which supports pharmacies to offer additional care to patients for minor ailments including supply of treatment.

### **Social care when needed**

Our adult social care system helps people stay independent, safe and well so they may live as best as possible in the situation they are in. This includes supporting people who are frail, have disabilities, mental and physical health conditions, as well as the people who care for them.

- In Northumberland 7,844 residents currently have an adult social care case worker (September 2023).

### **Prevention**

We have a range of well-established services in Northumberland focused on helping people to stay healthy and independent, including reablement services, supported living and extra care, occupational therapy, home improvements and adaptations, assistive technology and aides and equipment.

A key element of our approach is the link to community assets provided by the voluntary and community sector and Northumberland Communities Together (NCT). These partners play a critical role in helping us to fill the middle ground of support in relation to lower-level needs and trying to ensure that they do not develop into acute needs.

### **Accessing social care**

Onecall is the single point of access for referrals to a wide range of community health and social care services in Northumberland. This includes adult social care advice and needs assessments, requests for equipment at home, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, out-of-hours Community Nursing and the Council’s Telecare service.

### **Assessments and care planning**

Northumberland Adult Services are working towards a strengths-based approach to the assessment of people’s needs. Our assessments ensure that all aspects of an individual’s care are understood and are the starting point for discussion with people about the options available to them. In addition to this, we work closely with the Integrated Care Board in Northumberland to offer personal health budgets for clients where appropriate.

In health and social care, an advocate is someone who is trained to help people understand their rights, express their views and wishes, and ensure people’s voice are heard. In Northumberland we have an advocacy service provided by a third-party provider, and we refer appropriately for Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA), Independent Mental Health Advocate (IMHA) and Care Act advocacy.

Care planning and support for most users and their families is provided by locally based teams made up of care managers and social workers. Our social care assessment and care plan is a comprehensive combined document, developed together with our client and advocate where appropriate, which is completed within 28 days from the point of referral.

## **Case Study: Short Term Support Service**

The Short Term Support Service (STSS) is an integrated health and social care service providing care and rehabilitation in people’s homes for patients in Northumberland following an accident or period of illness. The aim is to help people live independently and safely. The service focuses on things which are important to the service user with an emphasis on trying to help them regain skills and confidence. The service can provide a rehabilitation programme led by a physiotherapist or occupational therapist; help with tasks such as washing, dressing or meal preparation; and equipment to help them live safely and independently at home.



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## 4. Being mobile

**Keeping moving is vital for our physical and mental wellbeing and maintaining our connections with others. It enables us to remain independent, preserve our sense of control and autonomy, and enhance the overall quality of our lives. With sufficient mobility we can continue working, engage in hobbies, travel and spend more time with our loved ones.**

Mobility includes any movement whether powered by our human bodies or using vehicles. It encompasses basic physical movements such as getting up from a chair, moving around homes, climbing stairs, as well as travelling around neighbourhoods and beyond by foot, bicycle, mobility aide, public transport or car. Being mobile is a critical part of healthy ageing and loss of movement is strongly associated with poorer health outcomes in older adults.<sup>1</sup>



### Keeping physically active

Regular physical activity throughout our lives has an important bearing on our health as we age. There is compelling evidence that regular physical activity prevents a broad range of health conditions such as heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions, obesity and mental health conditions. Physical activity also promotes positive physical, mental and social functioning, and can help boost mental wellbeing, reduce social isolation, and promote independence.<sup>2</sup>

The Chief Medical Officer recommends that adults, (including older adults) do 150min moderate physical activity per week. Some physical activity is better than none: even light activity brings some health benefits compared to being sedentary, while more daily physical activity provides greater health and social benefits (Figure 12).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 12: Chief Medical Officer Physical Activity Guidelines for adults



Older adults should break up prolonged periods of being sedentary with light activity when physically possible, or at least with standing, as this has distinct health benefits for older people.



Physical activity is also important in managing or coping with long term physical and mental health conditions.

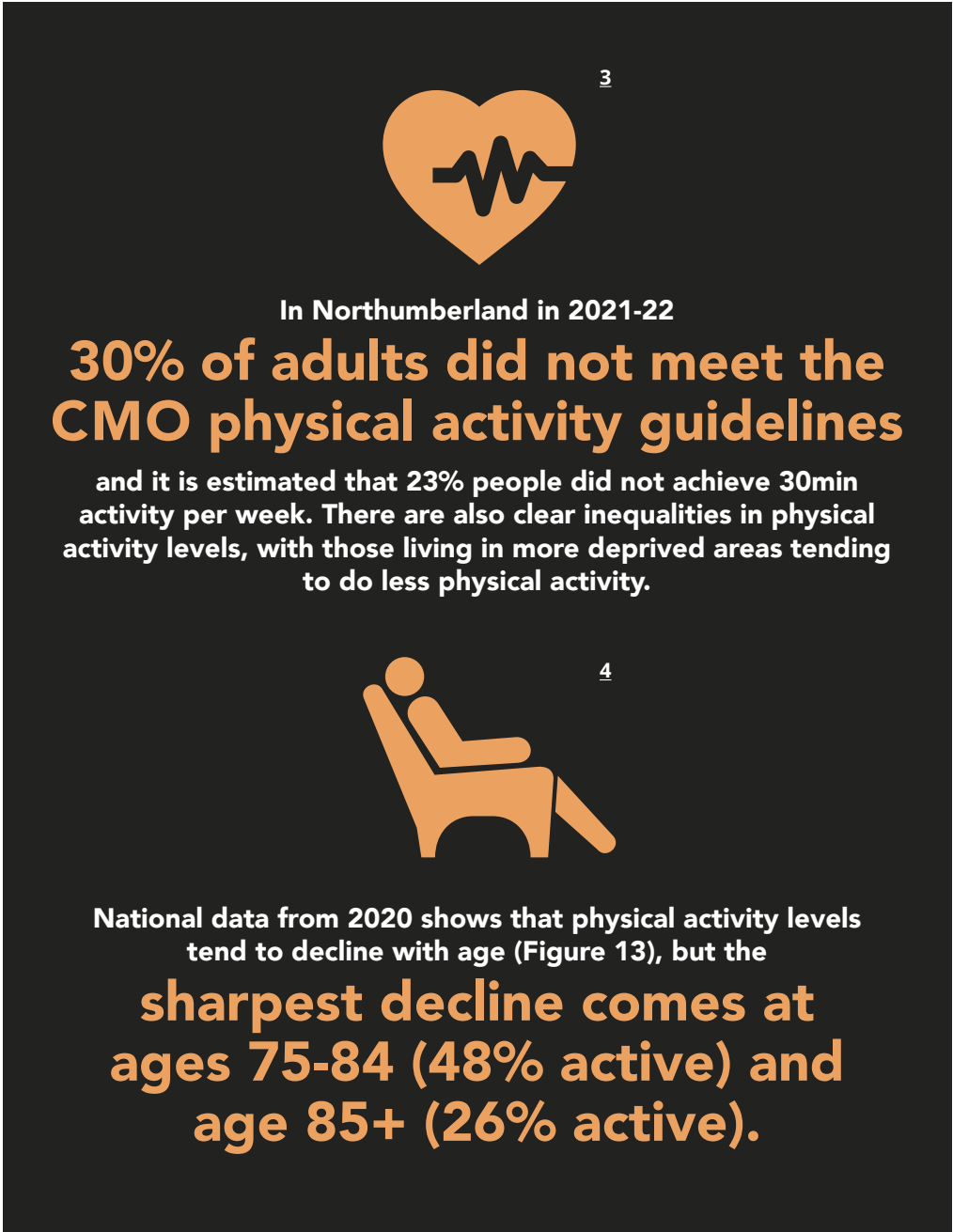
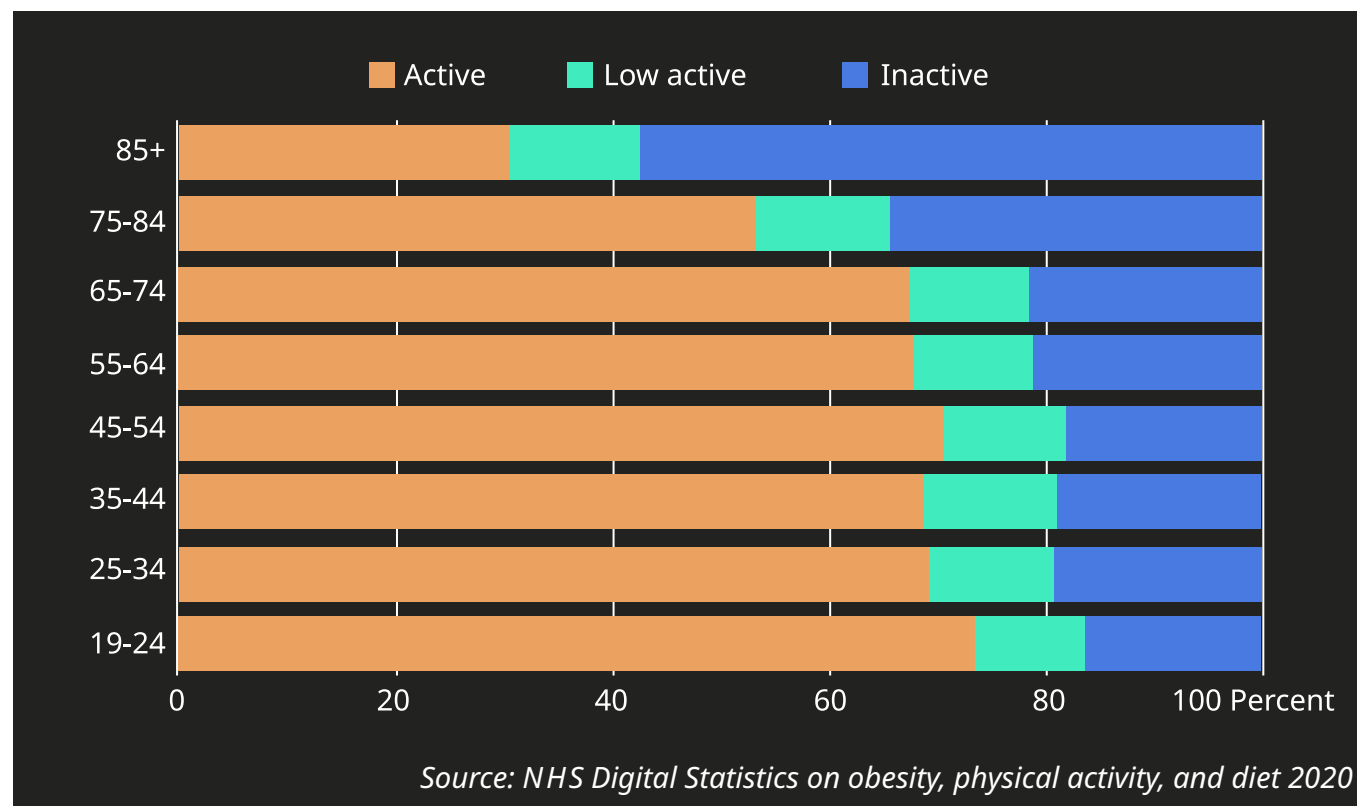


Figure 13: Physical activity levels by age group



### What are we doing to support people to stay active?

A wide range of approaches to increase physical activity levels in our older population are needed to promote ageing well. In Northumberland there are many initiatives to increase physical activity among older adults including:

- Northumberland has a wealth of outdoor spaces for walking, cycling, and other activities including our parks, coast, beaches, forests, and hills. Conversations with our communities have revealed how much these are valued by them.
- Stepping into Spring events, supported by health improvement staff in the Northumberland County Council Public Health team, showcase local groups, activities, opportunities to volunteer and support from services for older adults. The events are generally organised by town and parish councils, development trusts or by community groups.

- Active Northumberland has its AgeWell programme which targets activities towards those aged 55+. These generally include gentle exercise sessions and health walks.
- Age UK produces a directory of exercise classes held in community venues around the county.
- Northumberland County Council health trainers provide group work and one to one support for anyone living in Northumberland aged over 16 years and can support increasing physical activity. The service is free, and a substantial proportion of clients are over 55.
- The Northumbria Healthcare Trust Active Hospital programme encourages patients and staff to be physically active. The programme trains health professionals to be more aware and confident in promoting physical activity and increase the number of quality conversations and signposting that happen with patients about their physical activity. The programme has focussed on embedding this into clinical pathways including pre-operative, Parkinson's, oncology, and diabetes.
- "We Are Undeatable" is a national campaign supporting people with a range of long-term health conditions. Their purpose is to support and encourage finding ways to be active that work for you and your health condition.

## What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through physical activity?

- A recent Health Equity Audit of our leisure services indicated that more could be done to increase awareness of activities for older adults. It also highlighted that carers could be better supported at leisure centres when bringing older adults for activities.
- There is opportunity to address barriers to physical activity in older adults such as being 'too old to exercise', or that physical activity is risky with health conditions.
- There are many opportunities within local communities to support people to be active. A priority is understanding the assets we have, strengthening and building on them to provide local and sustainable opportunities. Physical activity groups also help people become more socially connected. Health trainers, social prescribing link workers and support planners can help introduce people to these opportunities.

## Maintaining strength and balance

As we age, many of us begin to lose muscle strength, which can limit our physical abilities, and increases risk of frailty, falls and fractures. Muscle mass typically decreases by around 3-8% per decade after age 30, and the decline tends to accelerate after age 60.<sup>5</sup> However, this loss of strength is not inevitable. Regular strength training or resistance exercises can help support muscle strength through older age.

Scientific evidence supports the recommendation that all adults should undertake activities which increase or maintain muscle strength at least twice a week. Weight bearing activities such as resistance exercises, stair climbing, wheeling a wheelchair, carrying heavy shopping, gardening, and yoga can help develop and maintain muscle strength.<sup>2</sup>

Our balance can also be affected as we age and can be caused by some types of medication or health condition. Balance problems are one of the main reasons that older people fall, which can lead to serious injuries. Maintaining good balance and other measures to prevent falls can help us stay independent and carry out daily activities.

*"We see a lot of older people who have poor mobility lose muscle strength and balance. Many older people are not aware of how much exercise and what type of exercise they should be including in their day."*

(Anne, Age UK, Northumberland)



When adjusting for age, Northumberland has a

**higher rate of hospital admissions for falls (2,797/100,000)**

compared with England (2,100/100,000) and the North East region (2,531/100,000).

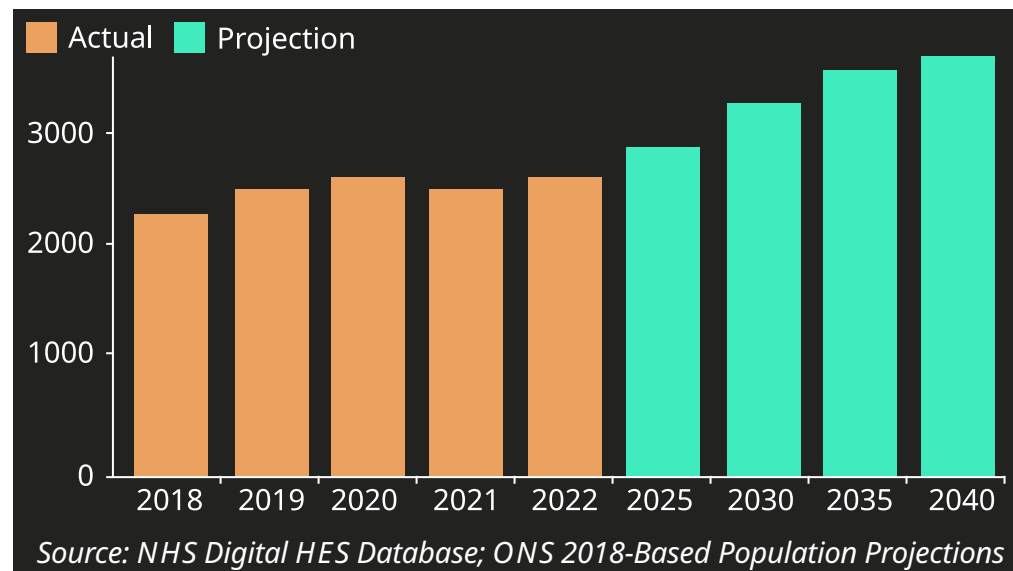


Based on current trends, it is projected that the **incidence of falls**

**will increase over the next 2 decades**

in line with our ageing population (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Actual and projected rate of falls in Northumberland per 100,000 population 2018-2040 (HES + population projection)



Injuries from falls can have devastating consequences for the individual affected. They can lead to a loss of confidence, restricted mobility, and it is estimated that 1 in 3 people with a hip fracture dies within a year.<sup>6</sup>

Many falls can be prevented using interventions that are evidence based and effective including programmes of muscle strengthening and balance training, risk assessments and medication reviews.<sup>6</sup>

### What are we doing to support people to maintain strength and balance and avoid falls?

- Some community groups in Northumberland support people with strength and balance, such as chair based exercises ([See Comrades in Chairs case study](#))
- Northumbria Healthcare Trust runs two gait and balance groups at Wansbeck General Hospital, which is led by physiotherapists. The groups run for 10 weeks and include assessments at the beginning and end of the programme. Patients also receive an educational component which includes a home exercise programme from the 'get up and go' booklet produced by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.

## Case Study: Comrades in chairs group in Blyth



Established in 2015, Comrades in Chairs is a community group aimed at people aged 50+ that meets weekly at the Comrades Club in Blyth. At the meetings the group do chair-based exercises led by a trained instructor from Age UK, which help improve strength and balance. Guest tutors also lead belly dancing and yoga sessions. The group has a holistic approach and compliments physical activities with social activities, education and advice, and support for each other. One of the group members shared about their experience: "The reason I come is companionship and exercise because I am in a wheelchair. Exercise helps me a lot. We are a Club that are here for each other. We know when someone is down and we help pick each other up and we have a laugh... I absolutely love it. This group is one in a million, so please come and join us!"



## What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through strength and balance and falls prevention?

- Northumbria Healthcare Trust is planning to introduce further gait and balance groups at Hexham General Hospital next year.
- Some community-based falls prevention exercise groups stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic. These have not yet re-started, but Northumbria Healthcare Trust is exploring options to reintroduce these community opportunities.

## Access to transport

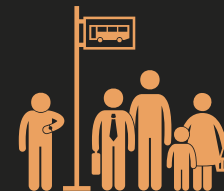
Transport options play a key role for people in older ages to travel to and access opportunities for health, education, employment, social activities, leisure, and keeping in contact with friends and family. For some people, lack of transportation can increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness.

Walking and cycling for local short journeys can be a great way to incorporate more physical activity into daily routines and this can lead to significant benefits for health and wellbeing. We know that having good quality infrastructure to support active travel is key to encouraging and enabling more journeys to be made by walking and cycling.

For those who drive, stopping driving due to age related health conditions can be a major life event and can be accompanied by feelings of loss of independence and social isolation.<sup>7</sup>

*"I drive currently but I know there will come a time when I need to stop and be less independent – I know if I had an accident, I would feel so bad."*

(Kathy, Northumberland resident)

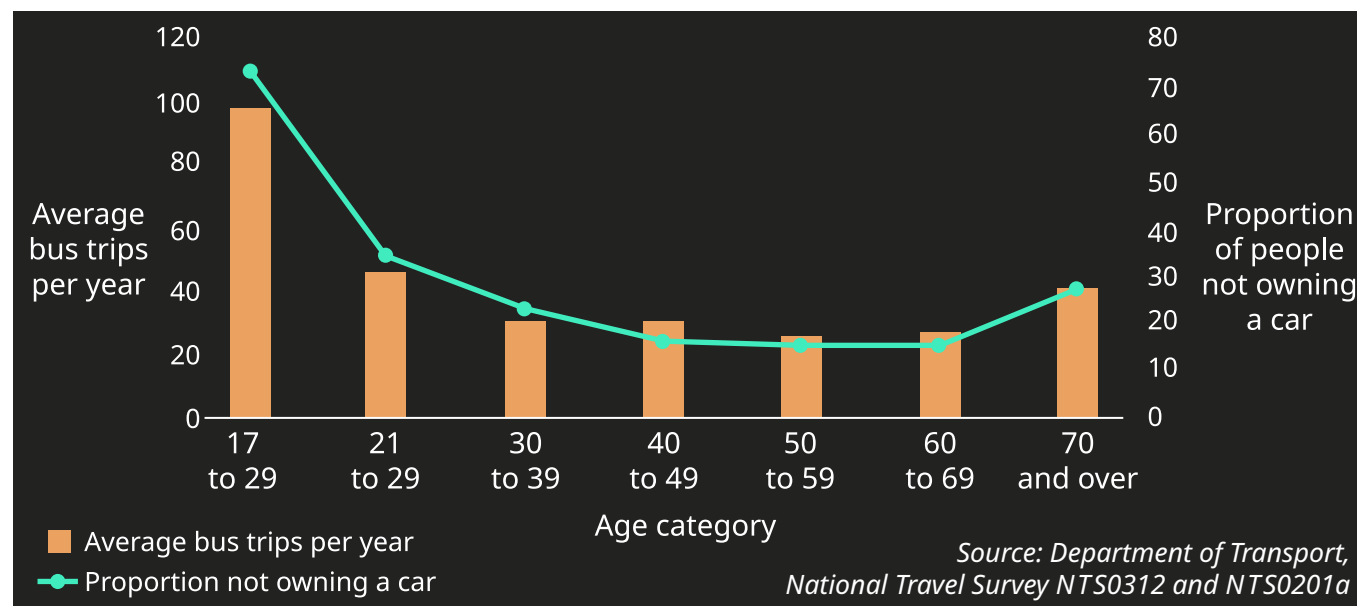


Data from the 2022 National Travel Survey shows that among the oldest age group (70+) in England,

**the proportion of people without a car increases, and bus usage also increases**

(see Figure 15). This highlights that travel behaviours change for older age groups.

Figure 15: Average bus trips per year and proportion of non-car ownership by age category 2022





In the North East region, the percentage of pensioners holding a free bus pass

**has fallen from 82% before the COVID-19 pandemic to 71% in 2022.**

**This compares to 65% uptake in England.**

Many older adults depend on public transport to get around, particularly for opportunities that are beyond reasonable walking distance.



*"I spend a long time waiting early for buses in case they don't come on time. I've missed appointments in the past when the bus hasn't turned up. It's difficult to deal with this as well as managing my illnesses."*

(Cramlington 65+ resident, Cramlington community conversation)

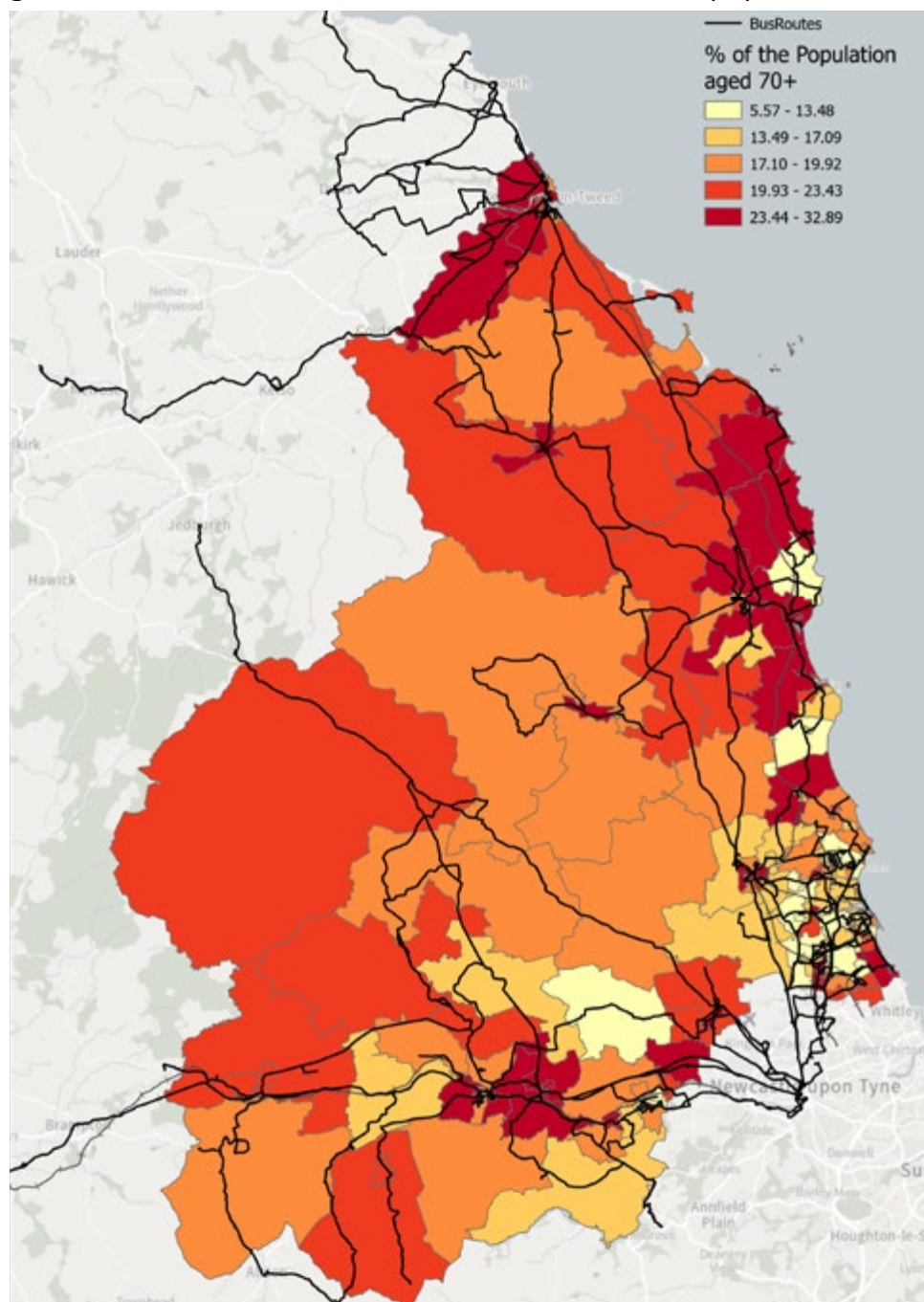


### What are we doing to support older people with transport?

In Northumberland there are public transport options by bus and train that serve our communities. However, the rurality across large parts of the county means there are areas with poorer local access to public transport options. Routes also tend to radiate into Northumberland from the large population centre in Tyneside meaning that some towns and villages have better connectivity than others. Figure 16 is a map showing the percentage of the population aged 70+ in areas across Northumberland, with the bus routes overlaid. It can be seen that areas with older populations in the centre and west of the County have more limited bus access.

The North East Bus Service Improvement Plan includes regional approaches to improve the quality and reliability of bus services. The Northumberland Line is a new rail link between Ashington and Newcastle that is due to open in 2024.

Figure 16: Bus routes in Northumberland and % of the population 70+



We have several community transport organisations in the county who support people to travel to various opportunities. A recent Transport Health Needs Assessment of public and community transport has mapped the coverage of these across the county and assessed gaps in provision. Some examples of community transport schemes are:

- Bell View Charity provides wheelchair accessible community transport to members and trips include going to the doctors, opticians, hairdressers, podiatry and community groups.
- Adapt NE runs a Getabout scheme where they advise people on how to make journeys by public transport if possible.
- Watbus is a community transport charity that has a fleet of vehicles for use by voluntary organisations, community groups and individuals. They run a shuttle service for residents of Newbiggin every Tuesday and Friday enabling residents to access local amenities. Community groups use the service to collect members from their houses and drop them at community venues.

#### What opportunities are there to improve transport?

- Community transport providers are facing funding and workforce pressures that mean they can be unable to meet growing demand for their services. Closer collaboration between public transport, community providers and communities themselves may help to develop solutions that work for communities and individuals.
- Increase awareness of schemes that support travel to health care appointments including the Healthcare Travel Costs Scheme. People receiving benefits may be able to claim a refund of reasonable travel costs if referred to hospital or other NHS premises for specialist NHS treatment or diagnostic tests by a doctor, dentist or another primary care health professional.
- Increasing connectivity will be a combination of improving transport links and ensuring opportunities and services are close to where people live.
- The Northumberland Local Plan includes policies that ensure new development proposals are accessible by public transport, walking or cycling where feasible. This aims to reduce dependence on private cars.



## Age friendly places

The way we plan and design our homes, neighbourhoods and environments can enable people to make the most of their lives as they age and live independently.

The wider neighbourhoods in which people live influence our health and wellbeing. They provide opportunities to meet, socialise and interact which is important to support the mental health of older people and reduce social isolation. They also influence our physical activity levels and travel patterns.<sup>9</sup>

Buildings and open spaces shape opportunities and barriers to ageing well. Older people tend to spend more time in their own local neighbourhoods, and access to local facilities is all the more important to support their health and wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

Walking levels among older adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are generally higher than the general population, and having places to go such as cafés, shops and restaurants increases the likelihood of walking among these groups. However, older people often feel excluded from the pedestrian environment because of poor design.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the things in the built environment that support older adults to travel through and spend time in their local neighbourhood spaces are:

- Clear signage, wayfinding and information.
- Good quality paths and pavements that are conducive to walking or wheeling, and reduce the risk of trips or falls. Not too much street clutter.

- Places to stop and rest such as indoor public venues or outdoor benches.
- Ensuring public places feel safe and secure, including adequate lighting and being overlooked by other people.
- Publicly accessible toilets – without these some older people may be more reluctant to be out and about for long.
- Places to shelter in rainy or hot weather, such as indoor public spaces and bus shelters.
- Disabled access to shops, cafés and other public spaces.
- Accessible open spaces such as parks, gardens, lakes, coast, woods, and nature reserves.

*“Sometimes I spend a long time travelling somewhere only to find its not wheelchair accessible.”*

(Elaine, Northumberland resident)

*“Older people are concerned about the lack of safe walking routes close to homes to get to services on foot meaning they use cars for short journeys they could otherwise walk.”*

(Participant, Ageing Well workshop)



## Case Study: Improving public toilets across Northumberland

Northumberland County Council are running a 3-year programme to improve the standard of all the 54 public toilets in the county that they are responsible for. At a time when many councils are closing toilets, Northumberland are investing in them. A key element of this programme involves incorporating extra facilities for people with additional needs or disability including adult size changing bench and hoist system. Alnwick public toilets have recently reopened after a £125,000 refurbishment. This programme will make a huge difference for people with a range of disabilities and their carers and make neighbourhoods more age and disability friendly.





The Community Life Survey 2020/21 found that **older adults are generally more satisfied with their local area** and feel a greater sense of belonging than younger adults (See Figures 17 and 18).



The English Housing Survey found that **people living in more deprived areas were more likely to say they experienced problems in their area.**

20% of people in deprived areas thought crime was a serious problem, while this was 7% of people not living in a deprived area.

Figure 17: Percentage satisfied with local area by age group 2019-21

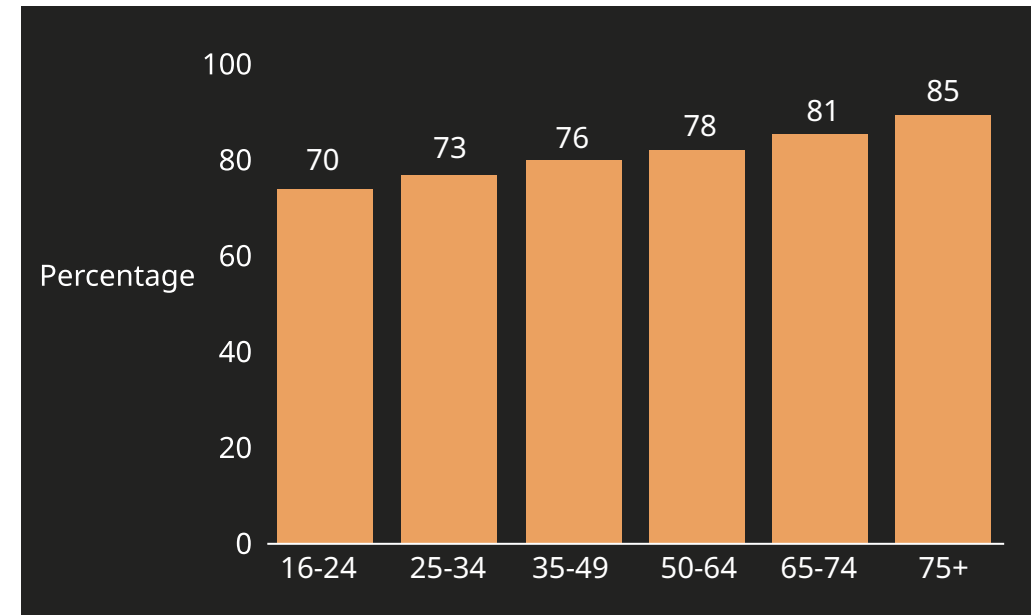
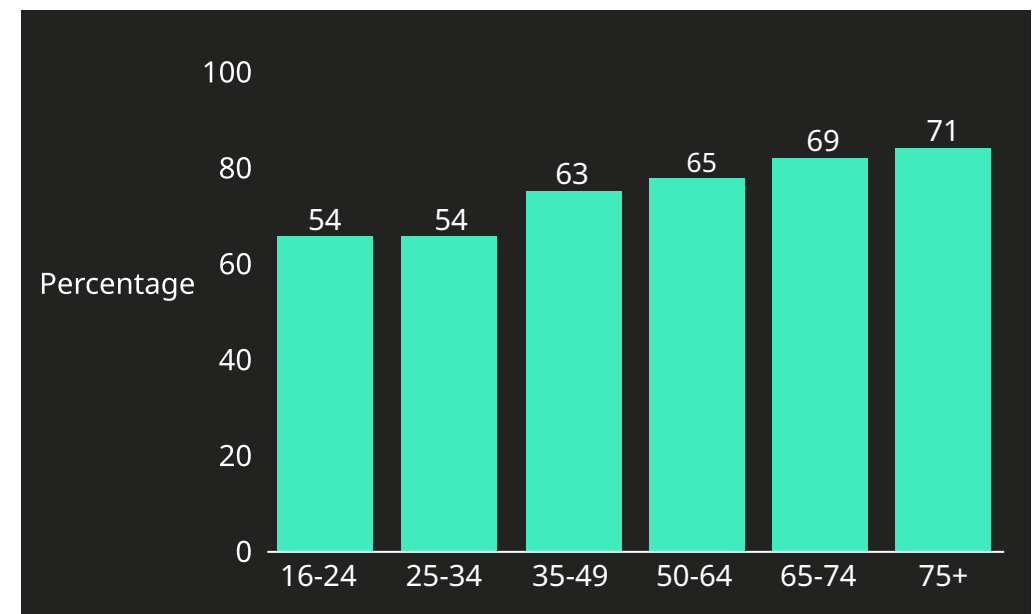


Figure 18: Feeling of belonging to neighbourhood by age group 2020-21



## What are we doing to promote places that are age-friendly in Northumberland?

Northumberland is a particularly large county and includes diverse places and environments, each with distinct benefits and challenges to the people ageing well within them. It is an attractive place to live with a rich environment, including its countryside, coast, and castles. It has increasingly become a place people choose to move to in retirement, from other areas in the country.

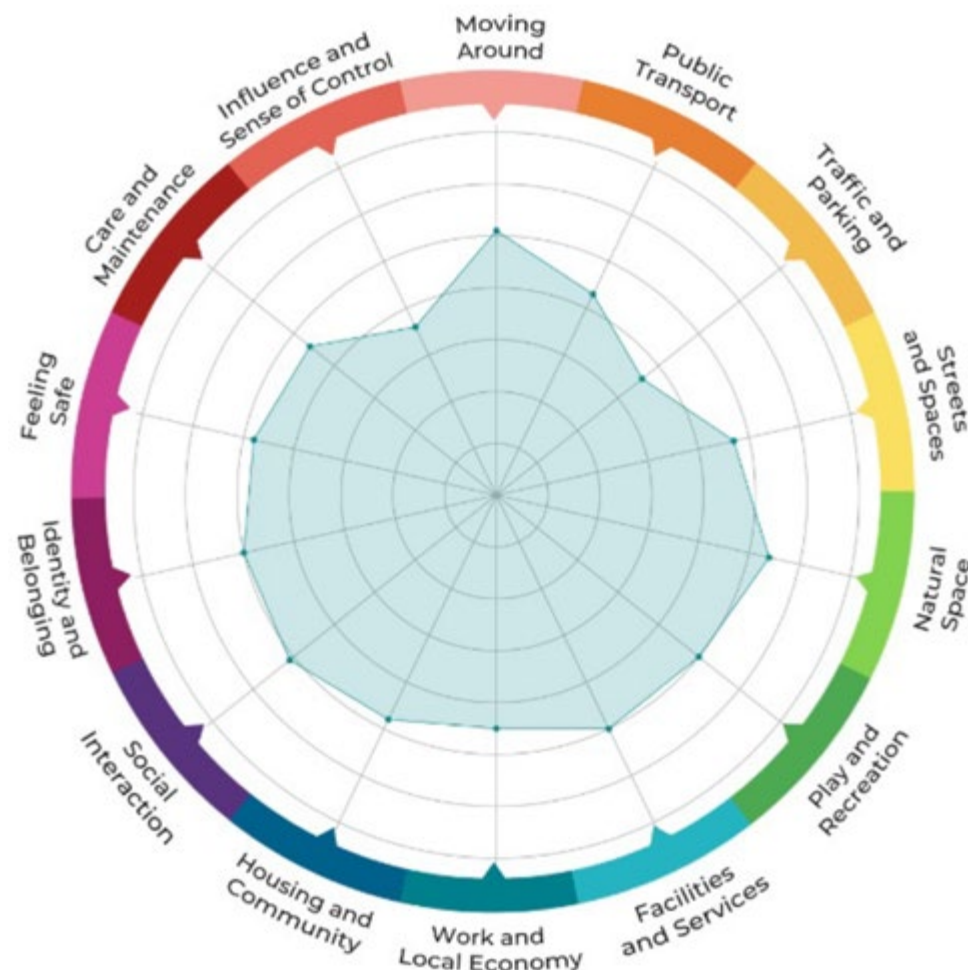
The Council's planning and public health professionals are increasingly working collaboratively. This has included introducing Health Impact Assessments (and Healthy Planning Checklists) that are submitted by developers as part of planning applications. These help to evaluate the health impacts of new developments and identify actions to reduce negative health impacts and promote positive impacts.

The Council has a new Local Plan in place, which is the statutory development plan for the County. The Plan includes several policies for new development relevant to ageing well. These include:

- Requiring a proportion of homes to meet 'accessible and adaptable' standards
- Supporting the delivery of homes for older people.
- Supporting well designed places that facilitate mobility.
- Ensuring new development is connected to ICT infrastructure (increasingly, healthcare will be delivered to people in their homes, which means that a good data connectivity will be important.)
- Ensuring new housing development is served by adequate healthcare infrastructure (mostly in respect of GP surgery capacity). For large scale housing developments, developers often make contributions to improve healthcare infrastructure.

In Northumberland we have begun using the Place Standard Tool,<sup>12</sup> which is a tool for assessing both the physical and social aspects of places and the quality of the environment for people who live or spend time there. The tool is a way for us to understand residents' views on their experience of places across our county and give them a voice to influence future plans and actions. To date we have had community conversations in Cramlington (Figure 19), Bedlington, and Hirst.

Figure 19: Place standard tool displaying the average views of 532 respondents in Cramlington



## What opportunities are there to promote age friendly places?

- Moving forward the Council will be developing a Countywide Design Code which will provide a framework for high quality places.
- We need to engage with older people as we develop built environments, to ensure the environment enables them to be mobile and active.
- We can improve perceptions of safety in neighbourhoods through Designing out Crime approaches.
- The Northumberland Local Plan encourages a sustainable pattern of development that includes provision of housing, employment, education, healthcare and retail particularly within main towns and service centres. This will reduce the need for transport and promote sustainable travel around neighbourhoods such as walking, cycling and wheeling.
- We are planning to have more community conversations using the place standard tool and exploring opportunities to use it more widely to ensure residents voices are heard.

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# 5. Building and maintaining relationships

Feeling close to other people and valued for who we are is an important aspect of wellbeing and this is just as important as we age. Being part of communities and social networks can be a source of support and provide a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives.

## Social participation

Loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact. Social isolation is a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while others can feel lonely without being socially isolated.

Loneliness can affect every area of our everyday lives, and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of social connections for people of all ages and backgrounds. We know that those more likely to experience loneliness before the pandemic were also less resilient during it and continue to feel the impact today. We know that some residents are still feeling fearful of coming out of their homes or actively engaging in local activities and opportunities. Loneliness is not just in rural areas: we are seeing an increase of this within our urban areas too.

Older adults are at increased risk from loneliness and social isolation because they are more likely to face issues such as living alone, loss of family or friends, long term conditions, and sensory loss.



1

The Active Lives Survey 2019-20 found that in Northumberland

**23% of adults said they feel lonely often, always or some of the time.**

This is similar to the national average.



It is estimated that in Northumberland

**30% of people aged over 65 are living alone based on the Census 2021.**

This is lower than the national average and the lowest level in the North East.



1

The 2021-22 Adult Social Care Survey found that

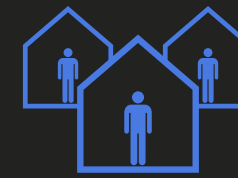
**45% of social care users aged 65 or over in Northumberland had as much social contact as they would like.**



1

The 2021-22 Adult Social Care Survey also found that

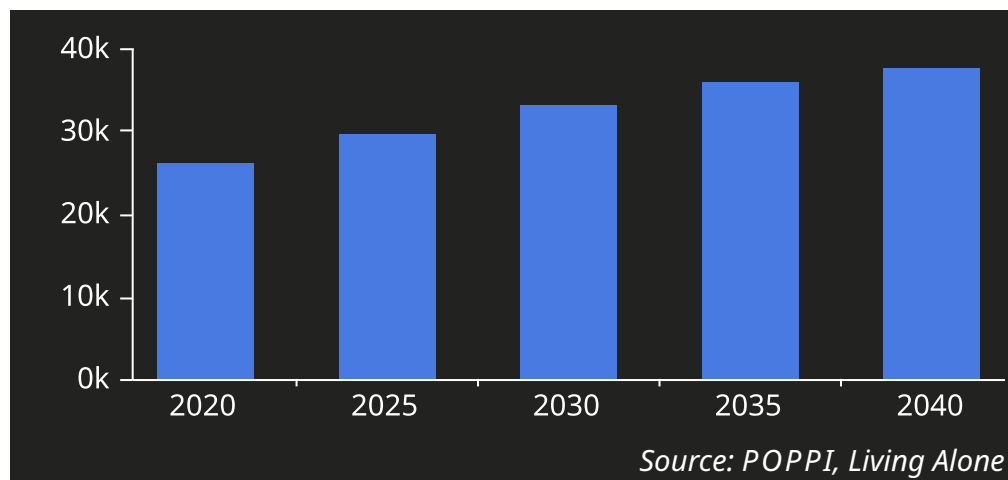
**41% of carers (aged 65+) had as much social contact as they want with people they like.**



In Northumberland, the population of people 65+ living alone is projected to grow **by 45% by 2040.**

(Figure 20)

Figure 20: Projected number of people 65+ living alone in Northumberland 2020-2040



There are significant risks from loneliness and social isolation with effects on health being comparable to that of other well-established risk factors such as smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.<sup>1</sup>

*"Since COVID-19, many older adults have had a huge reduction in their roles, routines, social activities and community activities. I have heard many patients across both of wards that they do not do what they use to do, that they do not participate in social activities and have not been getting the social interaction that cognitively stimulates them."*

(Annie, Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne, and wear NHS Foundation Trust)



## What are we doing to support people to stay connected with others?

It is increasingly recognised that community activities and social opportunities are an important way to promote healthy ageing:

- In Northumberland there are a wide range of community groups, clubs, community hubs, leisure centres, libraries, and networks that people can join.
- Social prescribers work with GP practice patients to find social groups or activities that can support their health and wellbeing.
- Northumberland Frontline is a community directory for people to find local services and groups.
- Northumberland social care services are trained to spot the early signs of social isolation.
- Community Hubs allow us to support communities to bring together local groups, organisations and partners including our libraries and customer services, offering place-based support that is easy to access.
- Ageing Well Allies is a programme to train people who have regular contact with older people. It provides knowledge of the key health Improvement messages and helps people feel more confident in signposting older people and others to a range of health and social care and community services for appropriate advice, information and support.
- Faith groups in Northumberland are an important source of support for many older people in our communities. They help to address spiritual needs, provide a sense of purpose and belonging, and support people emotionally and practically.

## Case Study: Haltwhistle friendship group

Age UK Northumberland in partnership with Northumberland Communities Together have launched a weekly friendship group in Haltwhistle Hub every Wednesday 1pm - 3pm. Haltwhistle has been identified as an area with higher than average levels of poverty. It has an ageing population and has also been identified as an area having higher than average levels of cancer and mental health issues. Northumberland Communities Together are providing refreshments to ensure fair access, offering a hot drink and a warm space to all thereby reducing loneliness and isolation, bringing social cohesion. The group will also offer information and signposting to services and mutual support.



## Case Study: Knock and Check

A local Royal Mail Service in Ponteland in partnership with Be On Hand have developed a pilot known as Knock and Check. The Royal Mail delivery team directly contact residents who may be vulnerable or isolated to check on their wellbeing whilst delivering their mail and connect them to support should the need arise.



The team have direct access to the Northumberland Communities Together referral pathways and local support services.



## What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through social participation?

- Building on learning from Northumberland County Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the storms we witnessed across the County in November 2021, we are committed to collaboration between our communities, partner agencies and the voluntary sector to support the residents of Northumberland.
- Organisations that provide information and advice are working together to better coordinate information and advice services so that people can more quickly and easily find the information they need.



## Strengthening relationships

Strong relationships can enhance our emotional and psychological wellbeing. Engaging in social interactions help keep the mind active and can provide emotional resilience and a sense of security. In contrast, unhealthy relationships can lead to stress, anxiety and depression which can be detrimental to older people's health and wellbeing.

Some of the main ways we build and develop relationships are:

- In our homes
- With our neighbours
- In our communities
- At our workplaces
- Through volunteering, activities, clubs or groups

It is crucial for us to enjoy supportive relationships and be able to notice and cope with negative relationships.

### Bereavement

Losing someone important to us can be characterised by grief and a range of emotions we go through as we adjust to the loss. Losing someone close to us can be emotionally devastating, whether a partner, family member, friend or pet.<sup>2</sup>

*"I'm still very lonely even though my husband died 11 years ago and I go to a very dark place sometimes – calling my best friend helps me at those times."*

(Kathy, Northumberland resident)

- Northumberland Age UK Bereavement Support Service can provide structured counselling, self-help information, emotional support groups, mindfulness sessions and practical advice and signposting.



## Sexual health and intimate relationships


Sex and intimate relationships continue to be an important part of ageing well, however perceptions that older generations are not as sexually active are commonplace in our culture. Whilst most users of sexual health services are in younger age groups, it is important that older adults are not overlooked and that they are included in health promotion and testing services. Older people should be offered advice on good sexual health or have opportunities to discuss concerns or feelings about sex, intimacy and sexuality.

Online dating sites have offered individuals the opportunity to meet new people and experience more sexual encounters than ever before. We are not only living longer but are also having more sex during old age than any earlier generation.<sup>3</sup>

However, as we age, our bodies change and this can affect our sexual lives: our thoughts, desires, ability, and needs. Disability, long-term conditions and some medications can also influence sexual function. Advice for people navigating these changes can help support sexual health and intimate relationships.<sup>4</sup>



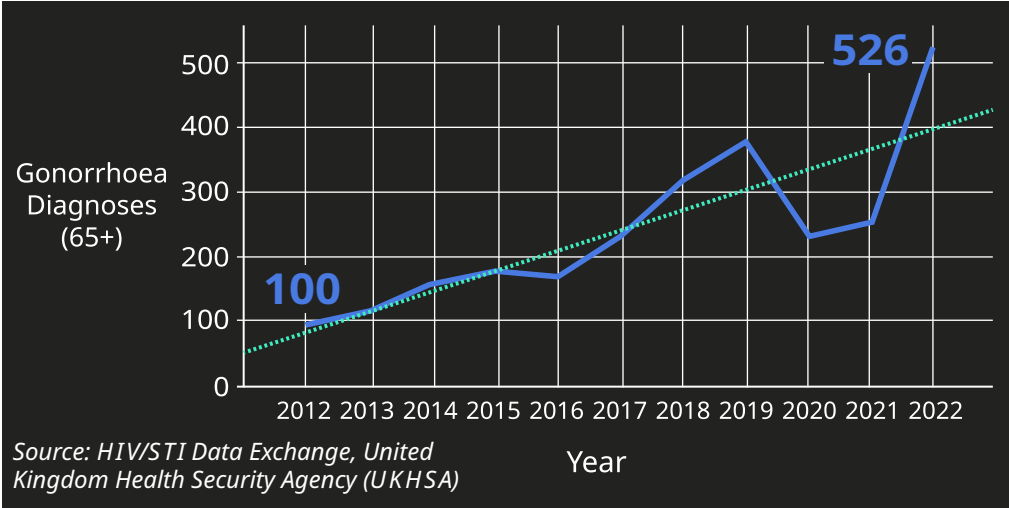
Older age groups can be more vulnerable to late diagnosis of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It has been suggested that lack of sex education offered to over 50s when they were at school means they may not be aware of STI symptoms or their dangers.<sup>3</sup>



The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing found that **77% of men and 54% of women aged between 50-90 were still sexually active.**


2/3 rated sex as a vital part of their relationships (Age UK).

Figure 21: Gonorrhoea diagnoses in England in 65+ age group 2012-2022



For all age groups, including older age groups, **diagnoses of some STIs (chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis) have been increasing across England.**

Although lower levels were seen during the COVID pandemic, recent data has shown a continuation of pre-pandemic trends. For example, in England, people aged 65+ have seen a rise from 100 Gonorrhoea diagnoses in 2012 to 526 diagnoses in 2022. (Figure 21)



In most age groups, **Northumberland has lower rates of STIs compared to England.**

However in older age groups (45-65 and 65+) rates are higher than England. (Figure 22)

Figure 22: Rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) per 100,000 in Northumberland and England

Age Group	Northumberland Rate Per 100,000	England Rate Per 100,000
<15	29	52
15-19	2105	2832
20-24	3035	3540
25-34	1014	1182
35-44	307	363
45-64	104	89
65+	18	7

Source: HIV/STI Data Exchange, United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

## What opportunities are there to better support sexual health and intimate relationships?

- Whilst the Northumberland Integrated Sexual Health Service does not currently have targeted initiatives at present for adults aged 55+ in Northumberland, a Health Equity Audit is currently underway which will consider access and experience of older adults of the service. This may lead to specific work to raise awareness of sexual health and services for older residents.
- Age, Sex, and You<sup>4</sup> is a national website dedicated to providing the older generation with advice on sex and intimacy.



## Domestic safety

The World Health Organization define elder abuse as “a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person.” This constitutes a violation of human rights and may include physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and respect.<sup>6</sup>

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced a statutory definition of domestic abuse in UK law for the first time. This sets out that a person’s behaviour towards another is defined as domestic abuse if both people are aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and the behaviour is abusive.

Evidence suggests domestic abuse affects hundreds of thousands of older people in the UK every year, although is very under-reported. Reports since the COVID-19 lockdowns have drawn attention to how the situation for many older victims has deteriorated due to the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

Any form of abuse or neglect is unacceptable and never justifiable, no matter what reason may be given for it. It is especially important that older people are aware of this, and they know what support is available.



8

**Nationally, 14%  
of adults 60-74  
reported having suffered  
domestic abuse**

**at least once since the age of 16.  
(Crime Survey for England and  
Wales 2023)**



**In 2022/23, 72 referrals  
were made to  
Northumberland’s Adult  
Services for victims aged 66+.**

**This is a 166% increase (+45 referrals)  
from the previous year. 62.5% of the  
referrals were female.**



**11% of total referrals  
in 2022/23 were within the age  
of 71-80, and 9.7% above the  
age of 80.**

## Case Study: Financial and emotional abuse by family members



Vera (not her real name) is an elderly resident of Northumberland living alone in her own home. Her husband recently passed away and he used to take care of their finances. Her brother and sister-in-law occasionally did her shopping, but it was discovered that they were emotionally and financially abusing Vera and she felt extremely disempowered. Care managers from Adult Social Care service visited Vera, built a trusting relationship, helped her understand her legal rights and supported her to make her own decisions. The matter was referred to the police, who arrested her abusive brother, and she was supported to change her will via her solicitor. The first contact with adult social care was pivotal as the care manager sensed that something was not right with the situation.



### What are we doing to support older adults who may be victims of domestic abuse?

- In early 2021 Northumberland Council received White Ribbon accreditation to cement its commitment to ending domestic abuse and sexual violence in the county. White Ribbon is a charity that works to encourage everyone, and especially men and boys, to make the White Ribbon Promise to never commit, excuse or remain silent about violence against women and girls.
- Domestic abuse is a priority for Northumberland Children and Adult Safeguarding Partnership (NCASP) and Domestic Abuse Partnership Board. We currently have a multiagency Domestic Abuse and Older People working group.
- Northumberland Domestic Abuse Service (NDAS) is running a pilot for 12 months which is employing an Older Persons Domestic Abuse Practitioner to work across Northumberland. The pilot has a focus on joining up health and domestic abuse services to ensure victims and survivors receive the support they need, and that support reaches rural and isolated communities.

### What opportunities are there to further support victims of domestic abuse?

- Raising awareness of support and services available for our older population in Northumberland.
- Deliver training for staff so that they can identify, risk assess and refer on appropriately.
- Improve the data set we have for monitoring domestic abuse among older people to understand the level of need and demand to inform the refresh of the Domestic Abuse Strategy.

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## 6. Learning, growing and making decisions

**Continuing to personally grow and develop throughout our lives is a key enabler for our wellbeing and doing the things we value. As we age, we can continue to learn, apply knowledge, engage in problem solving, and be able to make choices.**

Whilst some cognitive abilities tend to deteriorate, and the speed of our mental processing may slow down. Social and emotional growth may continue to develop with age.<sup>1</sup> Being able to control our lives, including managing changes to our bodies, limitations and personal affairs is crucial to well-being. Evidence suggests that a sense of control is protective against development of frailty in older ages and that it promotes coping and adaptive behaviours, enabling people to make the most of resources available to them.<sup>2</sup>



## Learning and skills development

Engaging in mental or social activities and learning new skills may help relieve stress, improve mood and build our brain's ability to cope with health conditions. Learning new things exercises the brain, can boost confidence and give a sense of achievement. Learning can happen in a variety of ways including on our own, or in groups. This doesn't have to be a formal setting or involve getting a qualification, it could be as simple as picking up a book, doing a crossword or researching something we are curious about.



**There are  
30 libraries**  
in Northumberland  
and over 200 villages

visited by mobile  
libraries on a regular  
basis. (Figure 23)



In Northumberland,  
**16,745 library  
members are  
over 60 years  
old,**

which is around 1/3 of  
all library members.



Among those enrolling in  
Northumberland Skills  
courses for 2023-24,

**66% are  
categorised  
as low income  
and qualify for free  
training.**



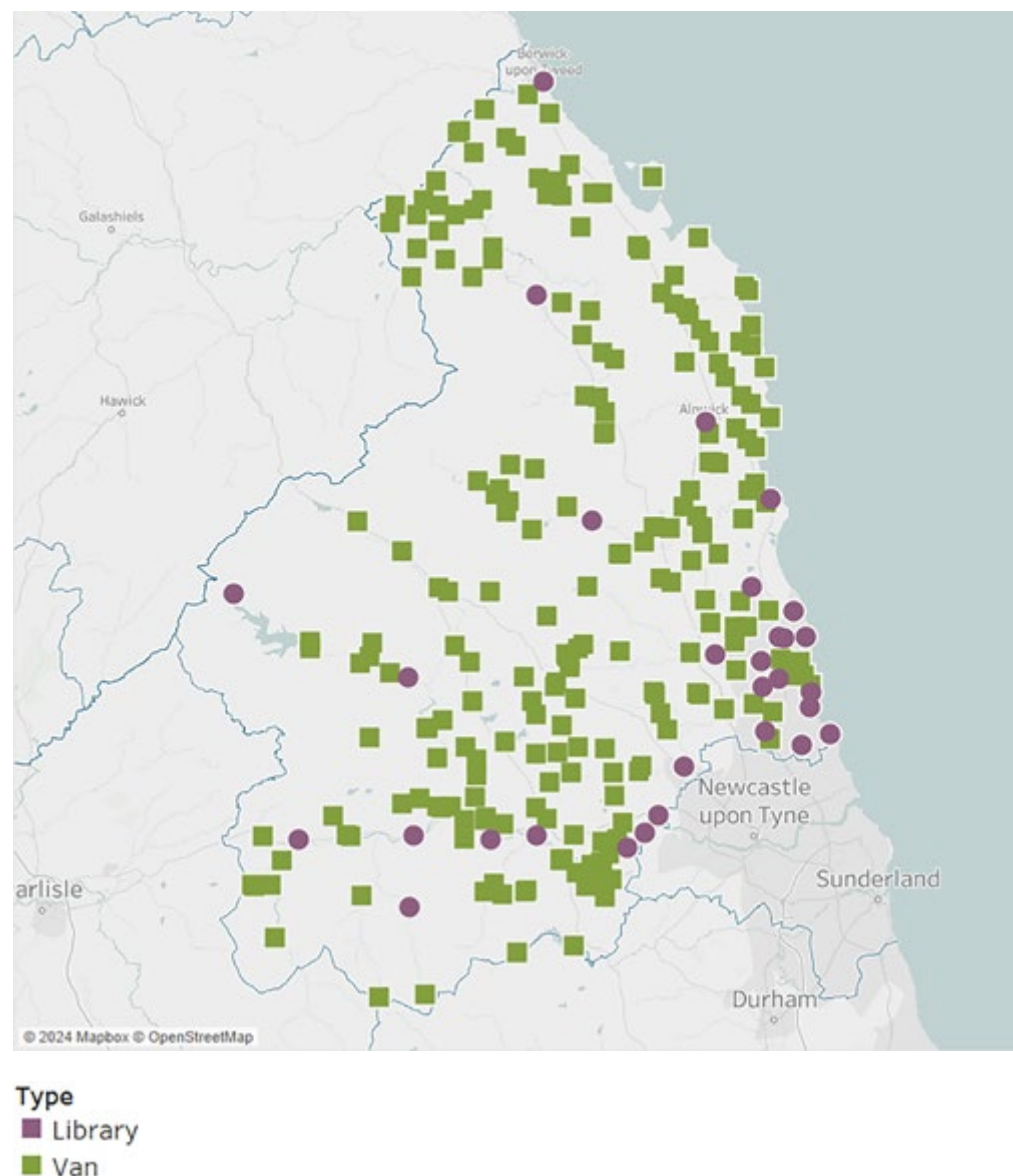
In 2022-23, Northumberland skills had  
**1,659 people aged 19+ enrolled in  
skill development activities.**

**39% of these were aged 55 or over.**

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a large drop in participation, with current uptake of people 55+ being at 48% of pre-pandemic levels.



Figure 23: Library locations and mobile library stopping points across Northumberland



*"I myself am over 55. I really don't want to be thought of as past it! I believe life is for living and I'm enjoying my mature years just as much as the rest of my life. I do feel there is always something to learn and am always looking for interesting things to get involved in, but I am lucky I can afford to spend on this. Not everyone is in that position."*

(Alison, Northumberland resident)



### How are older people supported to learn in Northumberland?

In Northumberland, we have opportunities for our residents to keep learning.

- Our libraries are important hubs for learning across the county. People can access reading material in a variety of formats including physical formats such as large print and audio as well as digital eBooks and eAudiobooks;
- Many different interest groups meet in our libraries such as creative writing, local history or genealogy groups that draw directly on the resources and inspiration available to them but also those who make use of our free safe environment to meet like-minded people to knit or craft together, play board games and paint.
- Events such as author talks, book launches, theatrical performances and talks about local history and places are organised through libraries. Some can be joined remotely by people unable to attend the events.
- Volunteers deliver library materials to individuals who cannot visit the library themselves. Over time, relationships established benefit both volunteers and recipients of service.



- University of the Third Age (U3A) is a UK network of learning groups run by and for members. They have an online programme to connect people with other learners, provide lessons and resources, and offer free workshops and events. Across Northumberland there 12 local groups registered with U3A.
- Northumberland Skills has 11 campuses across the county where people can learn new skills. The most popular courses for 55+ age groups are sewing skills, Spanish, painting and drawing, English and maths skills and administering medication.

### What opportunities are there to promote ageing well through learning?

- Increased awareness of what is available for older adults through libraries across the county.
- Greater involvement by communities to shape their local library services to meet their needs.
- Aim to return participation in Northumberland Skills to pre-covid levels, particularly engaging our older population.
- Further collaboration between Northumberland Skills and other adult education providers to ensure coverage of opportunities across the county.

## Information and advice

Being able to find and access good quality information and advice is important for us to make use of services, entitlements and make informed decisions.

There can be particular difficulties for older people in accessing information and advice, including limitations in mobility, social contacts and digital skills. Services should be accessible through a range of access points and in different ways. Written information on printed materials or on websites may be sufficient for many people, but those with the greatest needs may require face-to-face or telephone advice.

The greatest need for both information and advice is often at times of personal, medical or financial change or crisis, which is often when people are least able to seek the support they need.<sup>3</sup>

*"For us we have a strong community, but others don't know what's available or where to go for support."*

(Ibby, 55+ Northumberland resident)

Having strong local knowledge is essential for successfully targeting potential beneficiaries and harder-to-reach groups and knowing the opportunities available in local areas.



Northumberland County Council Contact Centre receive approximately

**22,000 enquiries per month, and an additional 4,000 enquiries**

at Information Centres across the county.



Northumberland Council receive

**over 1000 contacts per month related to older persons bus passes.**

A survey of people accessing Information Centres in 2022 found that

**56% of people were aged over 65**



In 2022-23 Northumberland Citizens Advice assisted over

**29,000 people per year** and helped them deal with **about 60,000** different problems.



## How are older people supported to find and access information and advice in Northumberland?

A very wide range of people, community groups, and organisations offer information and advice that supports older adults and their wellbeing. Some examples of support are:

- Frontline is an online information and referral service that helps anyone in Northumberland signpost or refer people to services or support. It has more than 250 registered services and recent activity has been approximately 300 referrals made per month and 900 signposts.
- Northumberland County Council has 6 face-to-face Customer Information Centres in Northumberland located in Berwick, Alnwick, Ashington, Blyth, Cramlington, Hexham.
- Northumberland Citizens Advice provides free, confidential, impartial, and independent advice and information on a wide range of subjects. They can work with you to sort out any debt worries and claim all the benefits you may be entitled to. They can help with housing and employment problems or deal with queries about consumer or tax issues. They can advise on legal matters, answer questions about immigration, and family and personal matters.
- Community connectors such as Social Prescribing Link Workers and Support Planners help people link to community support or services relevant to people's needs.
- Libraries are a first point of contact for information during all their opening hours (including evenings and Saturdays) and staff can facilitate contact with the right colleagues and partners for those who need it.

## Digital inclusion

Digital inclusion is about working with our communities to address issues of opportunity, access, knowledge and skill in relation to using technology and, in particular, the internet.<sup>4</sup> Older age groups are particularly vulnerable to exclusion from digital resources that can support their health and wellbeing.

There is a wealth of resource online that can support ageing well and improve older people's quality of life. These include online health care appointments, shopping, banking, social networks, hobbies, interests, and entertainment. However, limited digital skills can be a barrier for people making use of these resources. The COVID-19 lockdowns brought into sharp focus the benefits of using digital technologies to connect with family, friends and support agencies.



5

Internet usage tends to be lower in older age groups

**67% of people aged 65+ use the internet daily**

compared to almost 100% in younger age groups. (Figure 24)



Older adults also tend to

**use the internet for a narrower range of activities.**



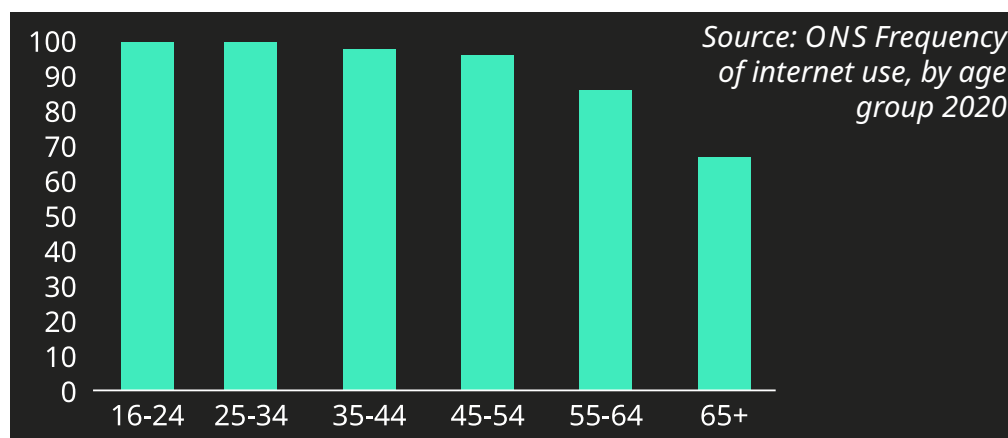
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According to the Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2021,

**8% of people in the North East region were offline and 32% had very low digital engagement.**

This compared to 5% offline and 28% with very low digital engagement in England.

Figure 24: Proportion of age groups using the internet daily



Research by Age UK in England found that the three most common reasons for people aged 65 and over not using the internet were:

- A lack of skills.
- A lack of trust in the internet.
- A lack of access to good enough equipment and/or broadband access.<sup>7</sup>

Costs of broadband and digital devices, and poor connectivity been highlighted as a barrier among older adults in Northumberland.

There are people who are not interested in using the internet for various reasons and this needs to be respected, but there are also many who could be enabled to make the most of the resources available online with sufficient training and support.

*"There is so much information and many services that are only available online. Many older people I work with don't have access to IT and don't have experience of using it."*

(Rob, Northumberland Community and Voluntary Action)

*"Some older people don't know that there are easily available, trustworthy sources of support or education. So many older people are afraid of the threats of online scams or making mistakes that they feel unable to participate fully in using technologies which could, in reality, make their lives easier, safer, or better...."*

(Chris, Age UK Northumberland)

### How are older people supported with digital inclusion in Northumberland?

- Northumberland County Council Library Service hosts 'Techy Tea Parties' to encourage older residents to come and engage in digital activities and most libraries also offer one-to-one support to improve confidence and promote digital inclusion.
- Northumberland Skills offers free courses in Digital Skills at venues across the county.
- Northumberland Community & Voluntary Action (NCVA) offers one to one support or drop-in sessions to older adults across a spectrum of digital skills.
- Community Action Northumberland (CAN) is supporting communities via the Village Halls Network to promote Digital Inclusion.
- Bellview, Belford & Glendale Gateway Trust is recruiting a Digital Inclusion Officer to work in community and individual setting with residents.

## What opportunities are there to address digital inclusion?

- Developing a coordinated digital inclusion strategy across a spectrum of stakeholders.
- Promotion of social tariffs that enable those on lower incomes to benefit from online presence at a lower cost.
- Introducing digital device banks that loan equipment to those on lower incomes. Libraries have existing management systems that could be used for device loans.
- Holding digital inclusion events in community venues such as village halls and involving existing groups.
- Running activities that will attract older residents such as family history that will then encourage developing online skills.
- Recruiting community volunteers to provide regular support – many retired people are digitally confident and could pass on skills to their peers. There is also opportunity for intergenerational work, young people sharing their skills with older members of the community.



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- <sup>3</sup> Age UK. *Information and Advice for Older People: Evidence Review*.
- <sup>4</sup> Mental Health Foundation. Tackling digital exclusion in older people. [Online] 2021. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/tackling-digital-exclusion-older-people>.
- <sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics. *Frequency of internet use by age group and disability status*. 2020.
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# 7. Contributing to society

**Engaging in meaningful activities that contribute to society, whether through employment or on a voluntary basis can promote our physical, mental, and social wellbeing. It can help us keep connected with others, keep our minds engaged and stimulated, and increase self-esteem. Being employed, volunteering and caring for others are important ways that adults positively contribute to society in later years.**



## Employment

We know that being in good quality employment for longer brings benefits to older people and the economy. It helps people stay socially connected with others, maintains independence, improves finances in retirement, has a positive impact on physical and mental health. Having a job can provide a sense of purpose and fulfilment and increase self-esteem when many other circumstances in an older workers life might be changing.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, low pay and high demands create chronic stress on the body which can manifest in physical and mental health conditions. Long term unemployment or economic inactivity can also cause depression and anxiety and lowers self-esteem.

Mental health conditions and musculoskeletal disorders are the most common illnesses associated with unemployment and economic inactivity. Without specialist support, those out of work and with health conditions are more likely to become long-term unemployed or economically inactive and see their health further deteriorate. This limits the pool of labour available to local employers and can adversely impact local economies.

*"When I took ill with a long-term condition and could no longer work, I wondered what on earth am I going to do now?"*

(Graham – Northumberland resident)



Although there are many vacancies across Northumberland, common barriers to employment for older adults include transport to jobs, lack of digital skills, age related bias, lack of inclusive work practices, and disincentives from defined benefits pensions.

Employers tend to benefit from employing older adults, who bring a wealth of skills and experience and often stay in their jobs longer, which reduces staff turnover and recruitment costs. Having multi-generational workforces can also be more effective than teams made up of a narrower age group.

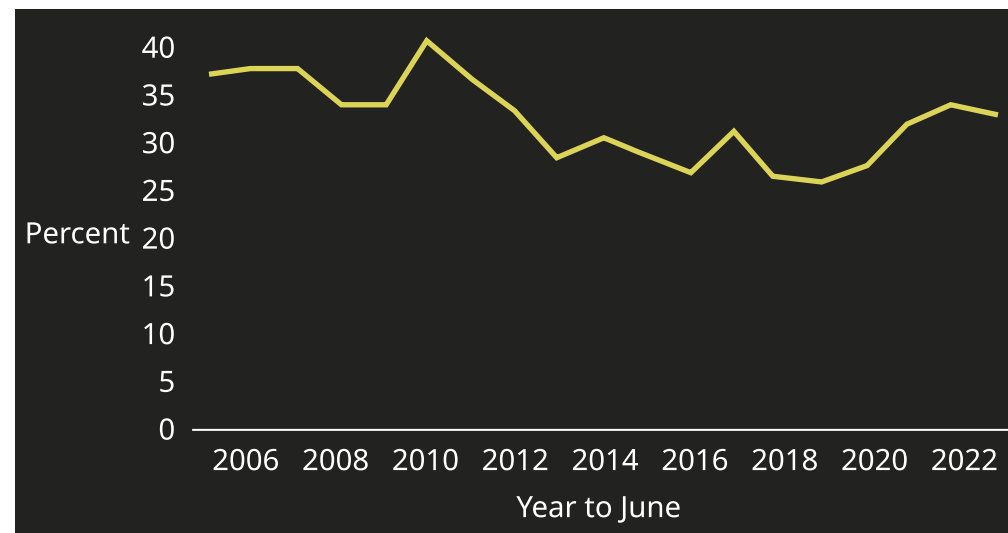
Attracting and retaining older, experienced workers and having a more inclusive workplace needs to be a key priority for Northumberland and its employers as a lack of workforce availability could stifle future prosperity.





Recent trends indicate that **economic inactivity has increased post-Covid particularly among people who are 50+ leaving the labour market** (Figure 25). The most common reasons for this appear to be an increase in long-term conditions and those taking early retirement.

Figure 25: Economic inactivity in people aged 50-64 in Northumberland 2006-2022



People with lower levels of education, the long term unemployed and women **are less likely to re-enter work at older ages after becoming unemployed.**

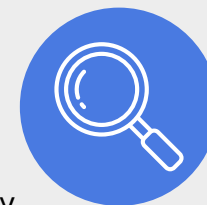
### What is currently being done in Northumberland to support employment for older adults?

In Northumberland there are several initiatives to support people who are long-term unemployed to overcome barriers in to work. Many of these services are not specifically aimed at over 55s, but many service users will be in this age group. These include:

- **The Midlife MOT** is for people 45-65 years old, to help them prepare for working in older life. It is a national digital resource to help people with their work, health and money.
- **The Restart Scheme** is a national service commissioned by the DWP and delivered in Northumberland by Reed in Partnership. The service provides employment services to help people who have been unemployed long term to get back into work.
- **Better Working Futures** is a national service commissioned by the DWP and delivered in Northumberland by Reed in Partnership. The service supports people who are long term unemployed with the additional barrier of poor health to develop skills and overcome barriers to work.

- **Solid Foundations** is a not-for-profit partnership funded by the North of Tyne Combined Authority which provides personal support to help address the wider barriers which are preventing people from finding work.
- **Return to Work Carers Project** funded by the North of Tyne Combined Authority and delivered by Northumberland Carers provides a range of employability support to carers.
- **Bernicia Working Homes** service which provides employability support to their tenants living in social housing.
- **Individual Placement Support**, run by Cumbria, Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust has a range of services and pilots aimed at supporting service users with mental health issues into work. This includes supporting the individual and the employer.
- **Work Smart Live Well Team** is a collection of services who provide careers and health guidance, advice and support and is available every Tuesday morning at Cramlington Hub.
- **Accreditation Schemes** such as the National Disability Confident Scheme North East Better Health at Work Award and North of Tyne Combined Authority Good Work Pledge are aimed at improving the quality of work by improving workplace practices.

## Case Study: The Bridge Project



The Bridge Project provided one to one bespoke support for adults who were long term unemployed and economically inactive. A similar scheme is currently running under the name 'Solid Foundations'.

*"One to one support from the Bridge Project helped me overcome the barrier of my age, to believe in myself, and that I am still capable of training and being employed. After giving me the right support, tools and skills to believe in myself, and learning together what I would be interested in being employed as, my Bridge Worker followed on by showing me what is available out there and encouraged me to attend training programmes to gain qualifications and attend workshops through the project to gain my confidence. These various opportunities led me to the decisions of what line of work I was interested in, which eventually led me into volunteering and then becoming employed as a family support peer link worker. Many thanks to my Bridge Project Worker for supporting me in my employment journey and showing that a lady in her fifties is not on the scrap heap as I once believed."*



## What opportunities are there to improve employment among older people?

- There is a need for a better understanding of the views of those who are unemployed or economically inactive about their conditions and how they act as a barrier to work, and the support they need to overcome them.
- Employers should consider recruitment practices to ensure they do not disadvantage older workers such as eliminating ageist language in job adverts, job descriptions and qualification or experience criteria.
- Increase opportunities for good work which include inclusive working practices, part time/job share options and flexible locations to improve recruitment and retention of older people in the work force.
- Support community involvement and volunteering, which can be a stepping stone into future work opportunities and using community assets is an effective way to support others into work.
- Employment services could have advisors who have specialist expertise in supporting older workers.
- Closer collaboration between health and employment agencies to develop and commission new approaches that meet the needs of those who are out of work with long-term-conditions.

## Volunteering

Volunteering is unpaid work that we choose to do for people outside of our household and for the wider community. Volunteering can take many forms and creates opportunities for us to contribute to society, reduce the risk of social isolation, and promote wellbeing. There are formal volunteering opportunities, but it can simply mean seeing and responding to needs around us in our communities at the grassroots.

Research suggests that giving and acts of kindness can improve wellbeing by creating positive feelings and sense of reward, giving a feeling of purpose and self-worth, a sense of control, and helping connect with other people.<sup>2, 3</sup> Volunteering can have a positive impact on physical and mental health and can lead to lower rates of depression and anxiety, particularly for older adults.<sup>4</sup>

*"Giving to others makes you feel better and lifts your spirits – it's better than any medicine."*

(Kathy – Northumberland resident)

A recent national survey by National Council for Voluntary Organisations found that:



**A national trend of decline in formal volunteer participation from 11% in 2019 to 6% in 2023.**



**'Making a difference'** is reported as the **most important** aspect of volunteering.



<sup>5</sup> Older adults are generally **more satisfied** with their **experience of volunteering** (66% aged 55+ were very satisfied compared to 30% of 18-24 age group).

**Volunteering remotely is now commonplace. Almost a third of volunteers (31%) say they volunteer online or over the phone and is now one of the most common ways in which people volunteer.**

## What is currently being done in Northumberland to support volunteering among older adults?

- Thriving Together has a website that helps sign post people to local and national volunteering websites.
- There are many local community organisations who link people to volunteering opportunities and support their volunteers. These include North Northumberland Voluntary Forum, Prudhoe Community Partnership, Citizens Advice, Team Hexham Volunteer Hub, CVA Blyth Valley, Community Action Northumberland, Northumberland Community Voluntary Action (NCVA), Solid Foundations, and Northumberland County Council (staff).

## What opportunities are there to promote volunteering?

- Better sharing of information across the county. For example, a communication campaign, providing a spotlight on the different opportunities.
- Digital inclusion may help more older adults connect to volunteering and employment opportunities in their communities.
- A volunteer passport that allows individuals to switch easily between multiple volunteering opportunities, Thriving Together are working on a pilot project to provide a digital skills passport as a solution.
- Taster days with volunteering opportunity as an introduction so people can assess the suitability of an opportunity.
- Employers providing volunteering leave and encouraging employees to link with local schemes.
- Working with communities to identify the needs in their communities and supporting them to take action.

## Case Study: Heart of Blyth

Heart of Blyth is a demonstrator project taking an asset-based approach to strengthen communities by bringing together residents who don't usually connect to encourage them to get involved or take action in their area. The Heart of Blyth Residents Panel helps shape the project and makes decisions on the award of microgrants to support groups. The Heart of Blyth Coordinator finds out what residents are passionate about and what they would like to do in their area and provides advice and connects residents to support to help turn their ideas into action. With the support of the Heart of Blyth many older residents from over 30 groups and organisations such as the Magic Memories Café, Newsham Over 60s, St Wilfreds Knit and Natter, Over 50s Forum, the High Street Over 50s group, and Age UK have come together to connect residents to opportunities in their area.





## Caring responsibilities

Carers play a vital role in supporting older adults in our communities. Without them, the health and care system would simply not be able to function and thousands of people with care needs would be left without support.

The physical, emotional, and psychological demands of caring can be demanding, stressful and can limit carers employment, education, and social opportunities. It is important that carers have the coping skills, resources and wider support to enable them to play this vital role.

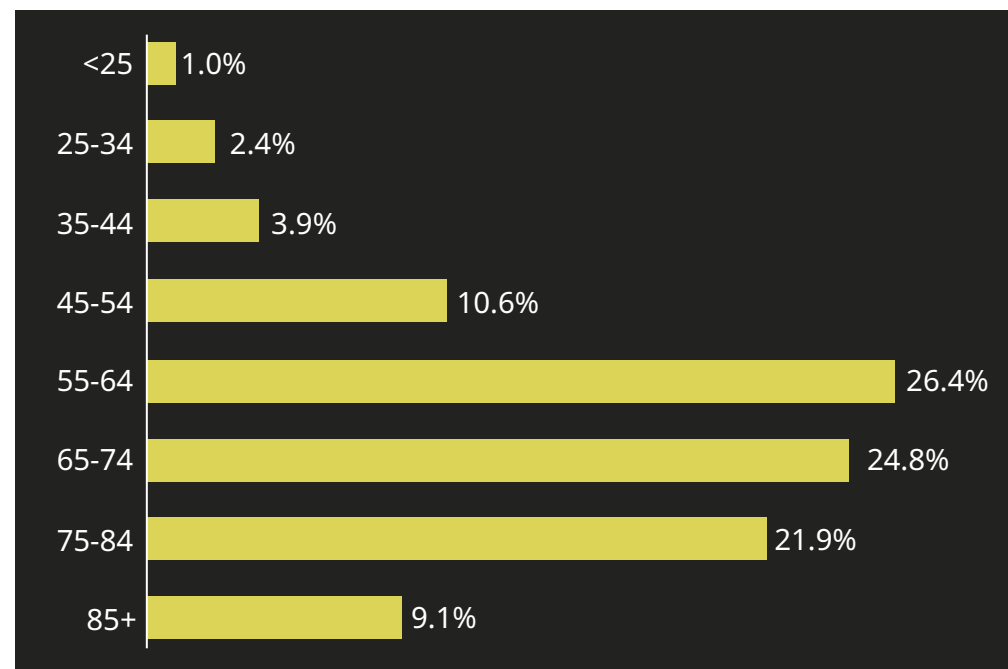
*"We regularly support carers suffering from stress and burnout because of lack of support, knowledge or competence in what they were having to cope with... Carers are desperate for respite from their caring responsibilities - be that longer term respite for a week or two so they can take a much needed holiday; or on a daily basis so they can have an hour or two for themselves."*

(Community organisation, Northumberland)



Many carers are in older age categories. For those registered with Northumberland Adult Social Care, more than 80% of carers are over 55 years old. (Figure 26)

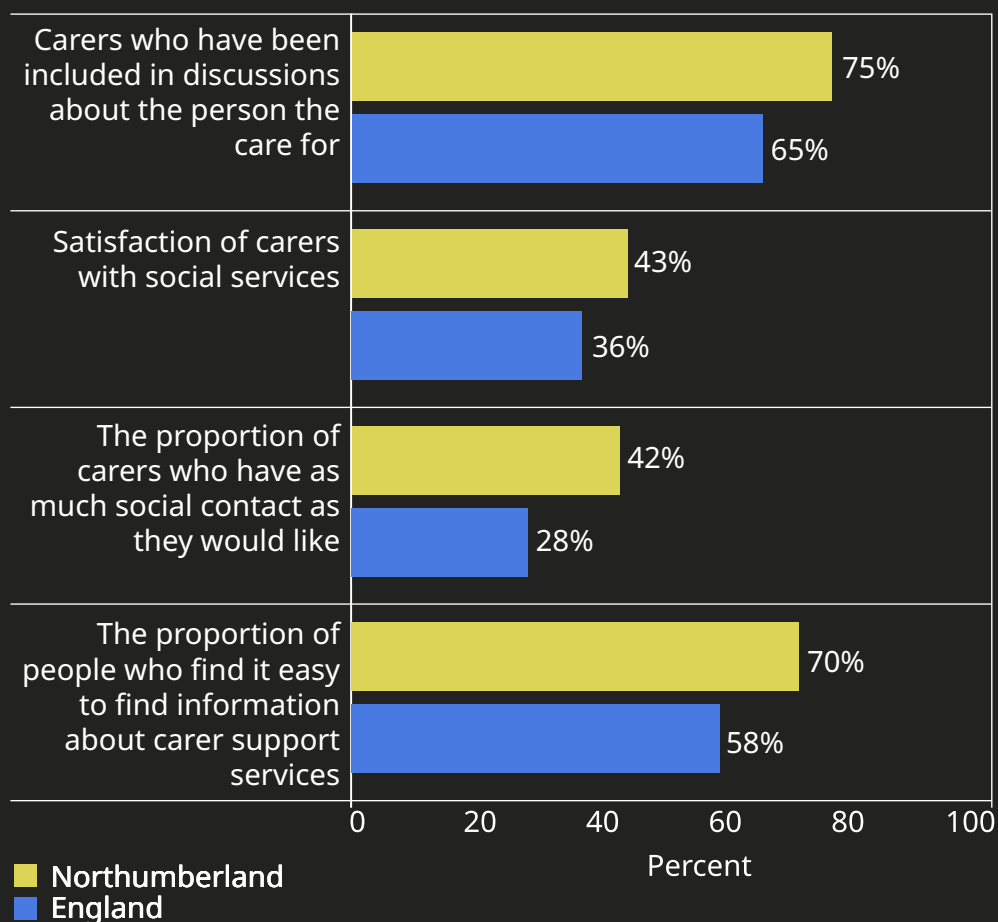
Figure 26: Carers in Northumberland by age category





A national survey of carers in England takes place every two years and the last one was conducted in 2021/22. **The survey is a good indicator of how carers feel about health and social care services locally.** Findings from the latest 2021/22 survey are summarised in Figure 27:

Figure 27: Results the survey of adult carers in England (SACE) 2021/22. Northumberland compared to national averages



## What do we do to support carers in Northumberland?

- In Northumberland, carers are offered a carer assessment, which is a discussion between the carer and a social worker to establish the current and potential future need for support and to determine how sustainable their situation is. This focuses on all possible solutions including support from family, the community, housing services, social security benefits, and education.
- In Northumberland we have a Carers Partnership Board who owns and drives the 'Commitment to Carers Strategy'. This forum provides an opportunity to inform joint working, with the aim of achieving the best possible outcomes for carers and the people they support. Carers are represented on this Board.
- Northumberland County Council also funds Carers Northumberland to support carers across the county which includes access to a variety of support groups and other agencies.
- Adult Social Care works closely with Northumberland Communities Together to support carers across Northumberland to access advice, services, support and grants. This compliments the work of Carers Northumberland and Escape who are commissioned to support carers.

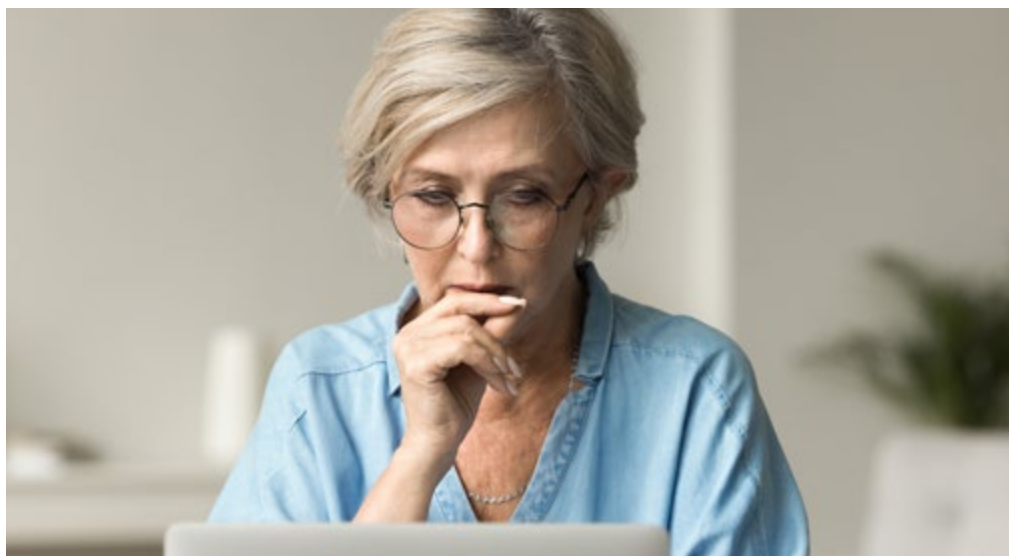
## What further opportunities are there to support carers?

- Northumberland Communities Together has recently secured funding to trial 'Mobilise', which is an online service that harnesses the collective knowledge, wisdom and expertise of unpaid carers' and empowers them to thrive. The trial will last for one year from November 2023 and we are hoping that this service will enhance the health and wellbeing of carers across Northumberland 24/7.

## Challenging age discrimination and stigma

Ageism, also known as age-discrimination is being treated unfairly because of age and can be experienced by many older people in relationships, communities, and in wider society such as consumer services, workplaces and public services. Ageism is associated with earlier death, poorer physical and mental health, and slower recovery from disability in older age.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, ageist attitudes are pervasive in society and remain a serious threat to ageing well. We want to work with our partners to combat ageism wherever we see it in Northumberland.



*"Age discrimination can lead to older people reducing what they do, either because they feel that certain behaviours are not appropriate for older people or because of lack of confidence or a safe space to experiment."*

(Sarah, Theatre Sans Frontières, Northumberland)

6



A national survey by the Centre for Ageing Better found that

**55% people agreed that the UK society is ageist as opposed to 13% who do not.**

7



The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing found that among people aged 50 or above,

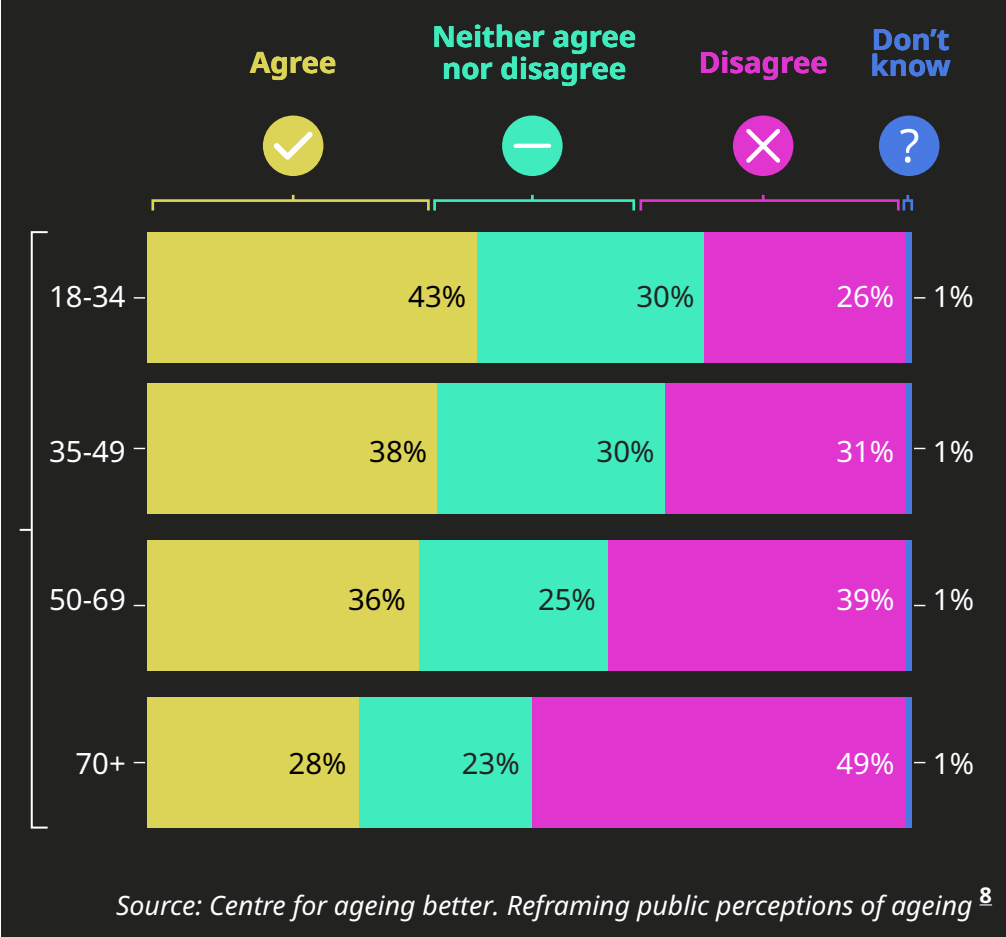
**25% reported perceived age discrimination.**



According to the Centre for Ageing Better, **more than 1/3 of 50–69-year-olds feel at a disadvantage when applying for jobs.**

The way people currently talk about ageing and older age can be in a negative way. Sometimes older people can be reduced to stereotypes, patronised or treated as a burden. Small changes to the ways that we speak and write about ageing and older age, if applied consistently, may have a big impact. A survey by the Centre for Ageing Better found that as people get older, they tend to disagree more with the view that older age is characterised by frailty, vulnerability and dependency (Figure 28).<sup>8</sup>

Figure 28: ‘Older age is characterised by frailty, vulnerability, and dependency.’



Age is a protected characteristic and laws are in place to protect people from age discrimination including the Equality Act 2010, Human Rights Act 1998, as well as the Public Sector Equality Duty 2010.

The abuse and neglect of older people remains a largely hidden issue, which leaves hundreds of thousands of older people experiencing, or at risk of, avoidable harm.

<sup>9</sup>

Age UK reported that  
**63% of adult safeguarding concerns  
are for people aged 65  
or older.**

Older adults should be able to live safely, free from neglect or abuse. Adult safeguarding describes the way that individuals and organisations work together to prevent and protect adults from these harms. For older people getting this right is vitally important, as those aged 65 and over are at greatest risk of abuse and neglect.<sup>9</sup>

What do we do to address age discrimination in Northumberland?

- In Northumberland we have a well-established Safeguarding Adults Board (SAB), which has recently integrated with the Children’s Partnership to create the Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership (NCASP). This promotes a ‘think family’, life course approach to safeguarding, which considers the needs of the individual in the context of their relationships and their environment whilst also recognising diversity and personal preferences.
- Equalities Impact Assessments are used within Northumberland County Council to ensure that policies, programmes and practices are fair and meet the needs of people in protected groups such as older age.



## Case Study: Creative theatre for older adults



Theatre Sans Frontières (TSF) drama workshops for older people (in Hexham and Bellingham) create opportunities for older people to play, experiment and explore together. It is a safe space where older people can gain new skills that allow them to be big in body and voice, try out different ways of moving, responding and improvise without fear of judgement or censorship. Drama encourages older people to step out of their comfort zone in a supportive environment. In this way they may gain greater self-confidence and a sense of empowerment and agency. The physical nature of the activity also serves to support older people's balance, mobility and posture, so they can move with greater confidence and sense of purpose. The play that was created this year by a group of older people in Hexham and toured to local villages, also gave greater visibility and voice to older people. It showed that creativity does not diminish with ageing. Positive images of older people's creativity can be vital to support their (and their audiences) continued engagement in society.

### What opportunities are there to address age discrimination in Northumberland?

- Continue to challenge negative stereotypes of older people across all areas of society.
- Northumberland County Council is developing an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) that considers Equality, Carbon, and Inequality impacts of policies, strategies, plans, programmes and projects. Considering disproportionate impacts on older adults will be integral to the new assessment, alongside other groups.

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- <sup>8</sup> Centre for Ageing Better. *Reframing public perceptions of ageing*. 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> Age UK. *Adult Safeguarding: Policy position paper*. 2018.

## 8. Summary and recommendations



**Northumberland is changing. Over the coming decade, we expect to see a year-by-year shift towards a much older population. We must be prepared to face this transition and be ready to adapt to the changing needs. Now more than ever we must have a resolute focus on boosting older people's health and wellbeing and preventing ill health. This will mean enabling people to live healthier and more fulfilled lives, valuing their important contributions to society, and challenging harmful ageist attitudes. It will also mean working closely with our communities and building on existing strengths and assets to support older residents to age well.**

In this report we have deliberately put people and their wellbeing in the centre, rather than build it around traditional service and organisational structures. It focussed on things that help people function well, have a sense of wellbeing, and as far as possible maintain independence in older age. The topics we have raised aren't new or particularly complicated; but if we work strongly with our communities to proactively address these issues, we help build a healthier, more productive county, and set a pace for other similar areas to follow.

Throughout the report we have seen that inequalities become particularly visible in older age. We saw that people living in the most deprived areas of Northumberland on average

die younger, and also live less of their lives in a good state of health compared to the least deprived areas. There are also inequalities linked to geography, personal characteristics, and life circumstances. Whatever we do to support ageing well, we must look at it through a lens of reducing inequalities, prioritising resources to support the most disadvantaged people and building on community assets and resilience by taking a strengths-based approach.

Over the past year, we have been introducing an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to support our wider work addressing inequalities across the county. The approach asks three key screening questions:

- What can communities do for themselves?
- What do communities need some help with?
- What can't communities do (even with help from outside agencies) that agencies/institutions can do?

Using these questions will help us target support in ways that empower communities and builds on the strengths and assets that they have. We will apply this approach to supporting ageing well in Northumberland.

## Recommendations

The recommendations of the report for those of us working together to promote ageing well across the county are:

1. Promote a **strengths-based narrative** on ageing well, with a focus on promoting our human functions of mobility, relationship building, personal growth, and seeing the great contribution we can make in our later years.

2. Consider ways to **embed ageing well in all our areas of work**, taking a 'whole systems' approach. This could include ensuring that the needs of older adults are considered in all policies, strategies, plans, programmes and projects using tools such as Integrated Impact Assessments.
3. Continue to **support and promote the Ageing Well Network**, which brings together over 200 organisations to share best practice and support one another.
4. Continue to **monitor available data** related to healthy ageing, such as those highlighted throughout this report.
5. Identify opportunities to **hear the voices of older residents** in our diverse communities. People's experiences and wisdom will help guide the way services need to adapt to meet people's changing needs, support their independence and allow them to continue to participate in their communities. Voices may be heard through methods such as residents' surveys and the place standard tool.
6. We must **continue to pursue our approach of Asset Based Community Development**. There are solid foundations to build on in Northumberland. The report has highlighted many brilliant initiatives already going on across the county, and this only touches on the huge amount of ongoing work. Professional and voluntary stakeholders are already starting to work together more closely to empower communities to identify and address their needs.

7. Three areas of this report stand out as requiring a stronger focus:

- Ensure that **ageist attitudes and behaviours are challenged and stamped out** across our institutions and communities. We should be no more tolerant of this than other types of discrimination such as racism, sexism and homophobia.
- More could be done to **increase awareness of the need for older adults to maintain strength and balance**, which is crucial for staying mobile and reducing their risk of falls.
- Older age groups are particularly prone to social isolation and addressing this will be a key part of enabling ageing well. Our county is particularly rural, which means we must **work with our communities to combat social isolation**. This will include promoting digital inclusion and improving transport connectivity to people, places, opportunities and services.

# Acknowledgements

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