



North East Ambulance Service: Experiences in Gateshead & Newcastle

Short Project

healthwatch
Gateshead

healthwatch
Newcastle

About Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle

Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle are two of 152 independent not-for-profit Healthwatch services established in England under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

We help children, young people and adults have a say about social care and health services in Gateshead and Newcastle. This includes every part of the community, including people who sometimes struggle to be heard.

We work to ensure that those who plan and run social care and health services listen to the people using their services and use this information to make improvements.

Alongside larger scale research projects, we run short engagement projects focusing on topics of current interest. These projects gather the views of members of the local community over a short engagement period and allow us to quickly share information with decision makers.

Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle would like to thank everyone who gave their time and expertise to assist with this short project.

Author: Healthwatch Newcastle and Healthwatch Gateshead

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1. Introduction

Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle engaged with local residents to understand their experiences and opinions of the North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (NEAS). Following the recent attention around NEAS' services and processes, as well as the latest industrial action, Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle wanted to understand public perceptions of the service. Healthwatch were particularly interested in overall levels of trust amongst the public towards the service.

Operating across Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, County Durham, Darlington and Teesside, NEAS provide scheduled and unscheduled care through response to emergency calls and pre-planned patient transport services. In addition, NEAS also deliver the NHS 111 service across the region. Annually, the service answer in excess of one and a half million 999 calls, almost one million 111 calls, transport almost 300,000 patients to hospital, and complete over half a million patient transport services journeys.

1.1. Background

In February 2023, following two unannounced inspections carried out by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) the previous year, NEAS were rated "Requires Improvement" overall. The CQC highlighted improvements in the areas of safety and effectiveness of the service and drew particular attention to the leadership, which was rated "Inadequate". The CQC recommended the need for immediate improvement of the management of medication, culture, and governance systems within the trust.

Concerns around processes, initially raised by whistle-blowers in 2020 and again in 2021 and 2022, were also discussed in the report. The CQC recognised that improvements had been made, however some actions to ensure that systems and processes were embedded and operating consistently had not been implemented¹. Although, the overall rating provided by the CQC highlighted the need for improvement, areas of good practice were also reported and included care and responsiveness.

In June 2022, it was confirmed that the NHS had agreed to an independent review of NEAS with a focus on patient safety and governance processes². At the time of writing this report, the independent review report had not yet been published.

¹ Care Quality Commission. (2023). North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust Inspection report. Available [Here](#). Last Accessed: 20th February 2023.

² NHS England. (2022). Terms of Reference for an Independent Review into alleged failures of patient safety and governance at the North East Ambulance Service (NEAS). Available [Here](#). Last Accessed: 20th February 2023.

1.2. Methodology

During a two-and-a-half-week engagement period in January – February 2023, residents of Gateshead and Newcastle shared their experiences and opinions of NEAS through an eight-question survey.

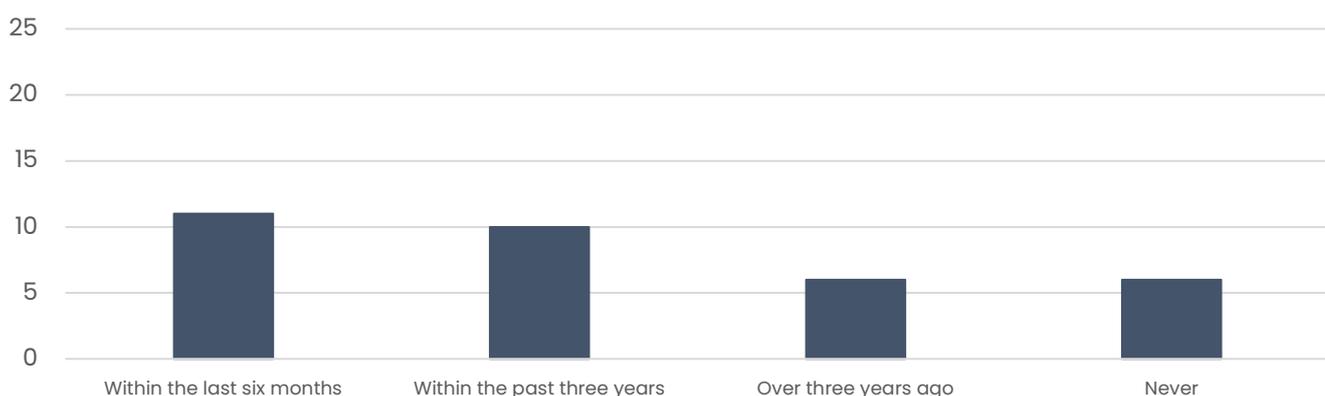
Promoted through the Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle websites and social media channels, the survey was available online, via telephone, and through a printed version. The Engagement Team also heard the views of local people during community outreach work. Thirty-seven responses were received in total.

1.3. Respondent Demographics

Levels of service usage varied across the respondent group. Most often, survey respondents reported that they or someone they knew required an ambulance within the last six months (n=11, 30%). Ten respondents reported that they or someone they knew had used the ambulance service within the past three years, while another six used the service over three years ago. Six of the respondents had never used the ambulance service and were not aware of someone who had.

Four survey respondents did not provide information when asked this question. However, information provided in other questions suggested that they or someone they knew had used the ambulance service at some point.

Figure 1: Approximately, when did you or someone you know last require an ambulance?



Source: Ambulance Survey (33 Responses)

In terms of personal demographics:

- Over half of respondents were aged 55 and above (n= 20, 54%).
- Five respondents reported that they had a disability and a long-term condition; four additional respondents considered themselves to have a long-term condition only.

2. Key Findings

Overall, feedback was largely positive. Almost two-thirds of respondents (n=24, 65%) shared positive comments when asked about their general opinion of the North East Ambulance Service. Seven respondents shared comments of a neutral nature and five respondents provided negative feedback.

Positive feedback highlighted the quality of the service provided and the professional, caring nature of the ambulance staff that they had encountered. The Service was labelled “Essential” by some and others indicated similar sentiments. However, many felt that the service was underfunded and staff levels were insufficient for the need. Respondents felt that the ambulance staff who were in-post were overworked and undervalued.

“
I am grateful they are there. They are overworked and underpaid however still maintain a professional, caring attitude to work.”

“
The service they provide is of such high importance, and they do a wonderful job. But they are not paid enough, so there are not enough of them.”

“
After a recent experience... I have to say the staff could not have done a better job. They were reassuring, competent and thorough.”

Of the six respondents who reported that they had never used the ambulance service, three indicated that their knowledge of NEAS was gained through the media. Interestingly, despite recent negative media attention, these respondents’ perceptions of the service were positive or neutral in nature. One respondent who had never used the ambulance service, highlighted the positive impact the media could have on public perceptions and felt that greater public understanding of the pressures faced by NEAS would lead to greater levels of tolerance.

“
Local tv news reports have led me to believe that it is a waste of time, corrupt & a mess.”

“
From what I hear in the press it takes ages”

“
Personally, I have never had to call an ambulance so in all honesty would say that my own knowledge prior to watching the recent TV programme about the NEAS was sketchy. The programme showed many things about the service, the type of work and pressures on the staff which I did not know about. For instance, the statistics at the end about the volume of calls and the level of suicides etc in the North East were sobering and a complete eye opener. I think getting information like this out and across is helpful, particularly when there seems to be so much negative reporting in some sections of the media about 'failing' services and 'selfish strikers' /public sector workers.”

2.1. What is Trust?

Respondents were asked if they felt that they could trust NEAS. To contextualise these responses, those consulted were asked to explain how they defined “Trust”. An open question was used, the qualitative feedback was then coded to draw out common themes. These themes included:



Reliability, Availability, Responsiveness (n=21)

Feedback tended to focus on reliability in knowing that a service would be available and timely.



Delivering a High Standard of Care & Promoting Patients' Safety (n=14)

Feedback tended to focus on ambulance staff being well trained, knowledgeable professionals who demonstrate professional caring attitudes. People want to feel that their safety is not impacted by budgetary issues.



Integrity and the Alignment of Words & Actions (n=8)

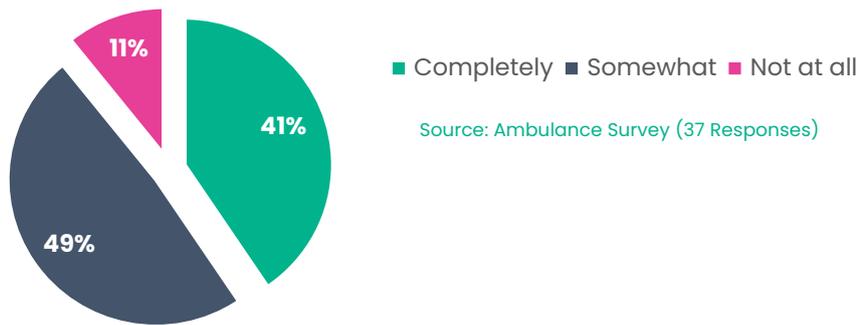
Feedback tended to focus on ambulance staff fulfilling expectations and delivery what they have said they will.

Overall, most of those consulted felt that they could not fully trust NEAS. Just under half of respondents selected “Somewhat” (n=18, 49%) when asked “Do you feel the service provided by the North East Ambulance Service meets this definition?” Four respondents felt that they could “Not at all” trust NEAS. One of these respondents had never used the ambulance service and the other three respondents had used the service within the past two years.

Three of the four respondents who felt that their definition of trust was “Not at all” met by the Ambulance Service, attributed such feelings of mistrust to information they had heard from local news outlets. Words such as “Corrupt”, “Mess”, “Broken”, “Lack of accountability”, “Woke”, and “Waste of time” were used by these respondents.

Fifteen respondents were more positive in their feedback and stated that NEAS “Completely” met their definition.

Figure 2: Do you feel the service provided by the North East Ambulance Service meets this definition?



2.1.1. Reliability, Availability, and Responsiveness

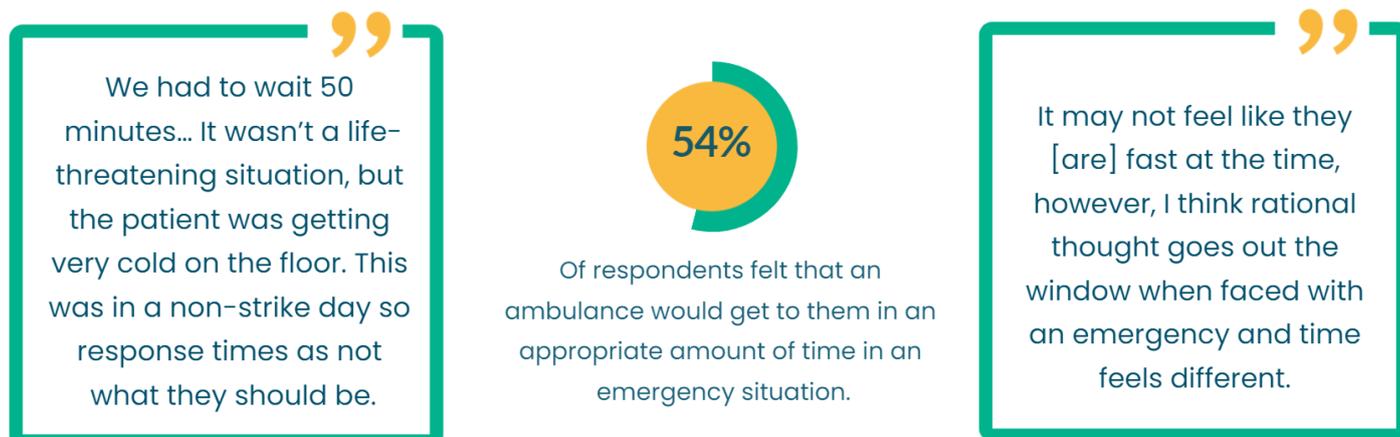
Twenty-one respondents felt that trust involved reliability, availability, and the responsiveness of services. Only four respondents mentioned the recent industrial action and its impact on availability. Three of these respondents were positive about the service, overall.

Twelve of the respondents who included reliability, availability, and responsiveness in their definition of trust felt that the service “Somewhat” met their definition. Six stated that their definition was “Completely” met and three felt that it was “Not at all” met.

The CQC reported that NEAS met the response time targets for category one calls, however, the national targets for category two and three calls had not been met. This suggested that patients did not always have timely access to the service. These findings were based on the Ambulance Standards for response times that came into force in the final quarter of 2017. The four category types aimed to ensure the correct response first time and included:

- **Category 1** incidents which required an immediate response to a life-threatening condition. Standard: 90% of incidents are attended to within 15 minutes.
- **Category 2** incidents that require rapid assessment and / or urgent transport. Standard: 90% of incidents are attended to within 40 minutes.
- **Category 3** incidents that require treatment and transport to an acute setting. Standard: 90% of incidents are attended to within two hours.
- **Category 4** incidents that require transportation to a hospital ward or clinic. Standard: 90% of incidents are attended to within three hours.

Little over half (n=20, 54%) felt that an ambulance would get to them in an appropriate amount of time, when they were specifically asked about the timeliness of an ambulance in an emergency situation.



Experiences shared by some respondents included an elderly patient who waited several hours with a suspected broken leg, a person who witnessed their friend die as they waited for an ambulance, as well as a respondent who reported that the operator asked them to take a badly injured patient to the hospital themselves.

However, stories where NEAS responded in a timely manner were also shared. These included the delivery of timely care in the case of a young child who suffered an allergic reaction, when a heart attack was suspected, and after an elderly patient had a fall.

2.1.2. Delivering a High Standard of Care & Promoting Patients' Safety

The CQC found that NEAS staff had treated patients with compassion and kindness and provided emotional support to the families, as necessary. These findings were echoed by the stories shared by those consulted as part of this short project.

Fourteen respondents identified the delivery of a high standard of care to be an important element of trust. Over half of these respondents (n=8, 57%), felt the ambulance service "Completely" met their definition of trust. Training and the ability to carry out thorough clinical assessments and the lifesaving treatment provided by frontline staff were specifically highlighted as important by some.

Five respondents felt that NEAS "Somewhat" met the definition, one of whom felt that no one could work to the highest standard without adequate resources. One respondent felt that their definition was "Not at all met" and shared negative feedback about the NHS overall.

The survey specifically asked respondents if they felt that patients' safety is at the heart of all actions carried out by the North East Ambulance Service, 81% (n=30) responded positively.



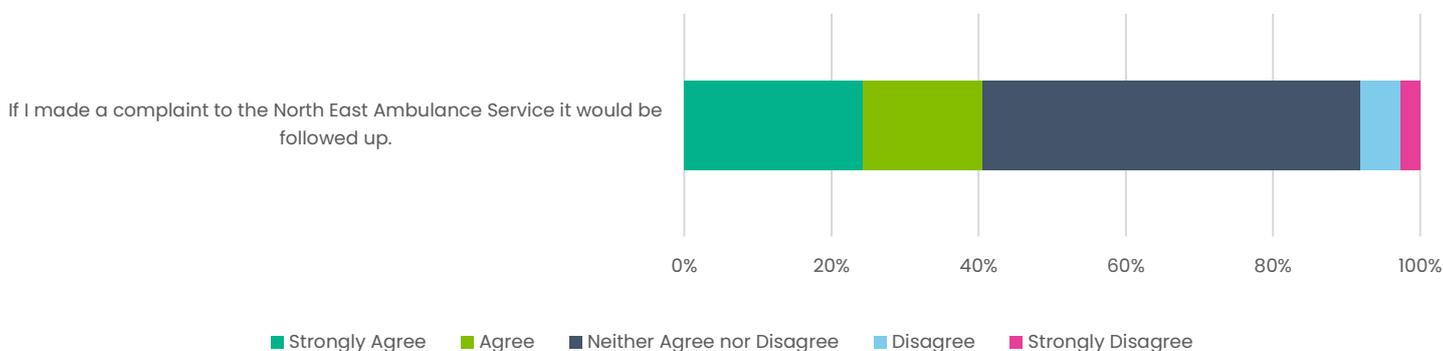
2.1.3. Integrity and the Alignment of Words & Actions

Eight respondents identified integrity and alignment between words and actions as important elements of trust. Where this was the case, one respondent felt that their definition was "Completely" met, five respondents stated "Somewhat", and two respondents felt that their definition was "Not at all" met.

The respondents who answered positively, felt that NEAS staff completed their roles above the expected standard. Whereas the respondents who felt that their definition was "Somewhat" met often highlighted the positive aspects of the service delivered, however, the service's ability to fulfil expectations due to pressures were identified as concerns.

The two respondents who stated "Not at all" were concerned that there was a lack of accountability within the service, recent news stories around whistleblowing were a cause for concern, and one respondent felt that some paramedics continued in their role solely for the money.

Figure 2: If I made a complaint to the North East Ambulance Service it would be followed up.



Source: Ambulance Survey (37 Responses)

Alongside the opportunity to share their opinions through open questions, respondents were also asked to rate their agreeability with the statement “If I made a complaint to the North East Ambulance Service it would be followed up”.

Just over half of the respondents (n=19, 51%) stated that they “Neither Agreed nor Disagreed”. This suggested a clear lack of awareness as to whether a complaint would be followed up. As the CQC found that *“It was easy for people to give feedback and raise concerns... the service treated concerns and complaints seriously and investigated them,”* more work may be needed to improve public opinion within this area.

Where respondents did have a stronger opinion, it tended to be positive with 15 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Only three of those consulted felt that the complaint would not be followed up.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

In January / February 2023 a total of 37 residents of Newcastle and Gateshead shared their experiences and opinions of the North East Ambulance Service with Healthwatch. Overall, feedback was positive. In terms of general perceptions, local people spoke positively about NEAS and shared stories that demonstrated the caring approach taken by ground-level NEAS staff. Despite this, issues faced by NEAS at a leadership level impacted overall levels of trust in the service.

- Overall, 65% (n=24) of respondents shared positive comments when asked about their general opinion of the ambulance service.
- Many felt that the service was underfunded and staff levels did not meet the demand, leaving in-post staff overworked and undervalued.
- In terms of definitions of trust, several common themes were identified and included “Reliability, Availability, and Responsiveness”, “Delivering a High Standard of Care”, “Integrity and the Alignment of Words & Actions”, and “Patients’ Safety”.
 - The analysis suggested that “Reliability, Availability, and Responsiveness” and “Integrity and the Alignment of Words & Actions” required the most development. Over half of respondents who identified these elements of trust selected “Somewhat” when asked if NEAS met the definition.
- Although the recent CQC report rated “Responsiveness” as “Good” overall, it was highlighted that national targets had not been met in all areas. This was echoed by the feedback by the respondent group where just over half (54%) of the respondents felt that an ambulance would get to them in an appropriate amount of time in an emergency situation.

As Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle focus on public experiences of services, the recommendations made as part of this report focus on possible actions to improve overall levels of trust among local people. The actions specifically focus on communications and transparency.

- Work with and within the local community to help raise awareness of the positive work being carried out by NEAS.
- Repeated positive actions can help build and sustain trust. As the majority of the local community do not have regular, repeated interaction with the ambulance service, it is

important to reach these community members and build trust through other methods including community events, the promotion of training, and positive news stories.

- The feedback suggested that timeliness means different things to different people, as without clear understanding about the categorisation of incidents, the public will continue to feel that ambulance response times are too long.
 - Efforts to raise awareness around response times, including what types of incidents are included in each category and why, should be carried out.
 - Although the information is clear on the NEAS website, people would not seek out this information, unnecessarily. The information should be brought to the people.
- Raise public awareness around frontline and behind the scenes ambulance staff. Help the public understand the daily role of ambulance staff, including why ambulance staff show up to work each day.
- As recommendations from the CQC are addressed, clearly communicate this with staff through clear processes and procedures. The information should also be clearly communicated with the local community to help them understand how issues are addressed and to build trust in the overall competency of NEAS.

Limitations

As this was a short project there was a very short engagement window and a response total of 37 was achieved. NEAS serves a population of 2.71 million across the areas covered. Although the feedback provides insight into the views of the local community, a larger cohort of respondents may have highlighted concerns or other areas of good practice that were not captured as part of this process.

The data collection period coincided with a lot of negative press around NEAS and the period in which the data was collected may have impacted the feedback provided by some of the respondents.



Newcastle

Healthwatch Newcastle, MEA House,
Ellison Place, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1
8XS

0808 178 9282

07551 052 751

healthwatchnewcastle.org.uk

info@healthwatchnewcastle.org.uk

@HWNewcastle

healthwatchnewcastle

Healthwatch Newcastle

www.linkedin.com/in/healthwatch-newcastle

Gateshead

Healthwatch Gateshead, MEA House,
Ellison Place, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1
8XS

0800 038 5116

0749 850 3497

healthwatchgateshead.org.uk

info@healthwatchgateshead.co.uk

@HWGateshead

Healthwatch_gateshead

gatesheadhealthwatch

www.linkedin.com/in/healthwatch-gateshead