

Impact Report 2024/25



Welcome to Sense Ability Matters

Sense Ability Matters, or SAM, is a charity supporting people across South Tyneside and Gateshead who have a sensory impairment, are disabled, or live with a long-term health condition.

As a charity, we exist to serve our community, not to make a profit.

Our members help shape the support we offer, while our Board of Trustees (many of whom have lived experience

of sensory loss or disability) oversee our strategy and make sure we're delivering quality support.

Our staff team delivers our services day to day, supported by dedicated volunteers who give their time to help us reach more people and make a real difference.

Between them, our team brings a wealth of professional expertise and personal understanding.

We're grateful to our funders, whose support makes our work possible and helps us keep our services running for everyone who needs them:



Impact Report 2024/25

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Who we are

Our Vision

Sense Ability Matters' vision is for the region to have a disabled and sensory loss community that is informed, empowered and resilient.



Our mission

- 1** Empower our community by giving them the tools they need to live independently and make positive decisions.
- 2** Help our community overcome adversity by increasing resilience and wellbeing.
- 3** Ensure our community are informed by providing first class information, advice and guidance.
- 4** Influence positive change locally, regionally and nationally for our community through strong stakeholder and relationship management.

“I’m so happy with all the support I have received from SAM. I feel like I have gone from having nothing for all these years to having all this help that I didn’t even know was there.”

Our values

- Supportive**
We respond and adapt to the needs of our community. We respect and value everyone equally and work together to achieve shared goals.
- Trustworthy**
We are accountable, open and honest. We act with integrity and do what it takes to support those in need.
- Caring**
We are friendly and warm. We take time to listen, promote inclusivity, and treat everyone with dignity and respect.
- Professional**
We strive to be the best. We actively seek new ideas and innovation to bring about positive change. We rely on evidence to make our decisions and challenge ourselves to be bold and resourceful, even in the face of adversity.

Our strategic objectives

- **1**
Be the leading service provider for sensory impaired and disabled people
- **Influence change locally, regionally and nationally**
- **Diversify our income generation portfolio**
- **Champion the interests of members, beneficiaries and the sector**

Who we are



Our commitment

At Sense Ability Matters, we strive to be the best for our community.

We're committed to being here for the long term - today, tomorrow and into the future. To make sure we can keep our doors open and our services running, we focus on:

- Building financial stability through diverse income streams
- Raising our profile so more people know about our services and how to access them, donate, or volunteer
- Engaging people with lived experience and people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds so that we learn from the strengths they bring.

We review our progress each year. This report covers what we achieved between April 2024 and March 2025.



“I can’t thank you enough for all the help I have received. You’ve been great to me!”

Chair of Trustees & Chief Executive Statement

2024/25 has been a year of consolidation for us here at SAM.

Following a member vote to extend our charitable objectives to include disabled people and those with long term health conditions.

We secured National Resilience funding from Fight For Sight to support this work and launched our new name and brand in May 2024.

Our relocation to the Civic Centre in Gateshead is now well established and the low vision service continues to thrive there.

In summer 2024 we moved into our new premises in New Green Street, South Shields, and we held a successful open day for beneficiaries, partners, and funders to celebrate. We were delighted to welcome the Mayor of South Tyneside and Deputy Lieutenant to the opening event in September 2024.

Throughout the year, we continued to deliver the best possible service and achieved excellent outcomes across our projects.

99%
Our team consistently met our statutory targets, contacting 99% of people within two working days.

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We were extremely grateful to receive grant funding from The Ballinger Charitable Trust, Screwfix Foundation, The National Lottery Community Fund, Sport England, Sunderland Stadium of Light Foundation, Community Foundation Tyne and Wear, and via New Philanthropy Capital. This included significant unrestricted funding, which gave us the stability to develop new services.

Referrals for assessments under our local authority contracts increased significantly this year with 548 support plans completed, up from 343 in 2023.

Our team consistently met our statutory targets, contacting 99% of people within two working days and assessing 79% of referrals within two weeks.



Sarah French
Chief Executive



Lin Elder-Atterton MVO
Chair

The number of organisations referring people to us has continued to grow as we expand our networks and raise our profile.

We have continued to work with our sight loss sector colleagues across the region and nationally. Through Visionary UK, we have contributed to national working groups for rehabilitation, low vision and cross-sector partnership developments. We attended the Visionary UK conference 2024 to meet colleagues and share best practice among the sector.

To support our future succession planning and governance, we welcomed interest in new Trustee roles. The Board has been inducting two individuals who will hopefully stand for election by our members in 2025.

In November 2024, our members passed a resolution for the Trustees to obtain quotes for the independent examination of our 2025 accounts. We appointed Azets to carry out this work.

As we move into the next financial year, the Trustees will remain agile and responsive to meet the charity's objectives. This will be underpinned by our ambition to innovate and work collaboratively to achieve the best possible outcomes for our beneficiaries.

The Board has worked hard this year to build on five years of progress, stabilising our finances and building appropriate reserves for the future.

Thank you to everyone who has supported us this year. As we look to the future, our focus remains unchanged: delivering excellent support to everyone in our community who needs us.

Lin
Sarah

Our year: At a glance

Here's how many people we supported through each of our services this year.

5,573

We have directly supported 5,573 individuals across our services during 2024/25.



82

people have accessed our intensive rehabilitation service.

572

people have been referred for and received a personal holistic assessment.



2,959

people benefitted from our information, advice and guidance.

224

people received digital support.



47

people attended our Living Well with Sight Loss programme.



£315,262

58 people were helped to access the benefits they were entitled to, a collective annual total of £315,262.

1,334

223 people received 1,334 tele-support calls from our dedicated volunteers.



289

people accessed the Community Voice project.

1,113

people accessed our low vision service.

"We are extremely pleased with all the support we have received, the team have been exceptional."

Lisa's story

“Making the phone call to SAM was one of the best decisions I’ve made.”

When Lisa first contacted Sense Ability Matters, she was feeling overwhelmed and unsure where to turn.

Living with several eye conditions, her sight loss had begun to affect almost every part of her day.

Glare was one of the hardest things to manage. Bright light made it difficult to judge steps and kerbs, and even familiar places felt unsafe. “I couldn’t go out,” she explains. “I couldn’t judge my steps, and even at home I had to think really hard about everything I was doing. I just couldn’t cope.”

Over time, this knocked her confidence. A family friend recommended Sense Ability Matters. “Making that phone call was one of the best decisions I’ve made” Lisa says.

How SAM made a difference
When one of our Enablement Officers visited Lisa at home, the focus was on listening and taking things at her pace. During the assessment, she tried anti-glare glasses for the first time. The impact was immediate. “I couldn’t believe the difference,” she says, “when I was told they were mine to keep, I actually broke down in tears.”

Sense Ability Matters was able to help in other ways too. Our Low Vision service provided hand magnifiers to help with reading and everyday tasks.

Our technology team added an anti-glare app to her phone, reducing strain. And at the same time, our advocacy service helped her through the PIP application process. “I wouldn’t have known where to start. I really don’t know what I would’ve done without that.”

Building confidence and connections
Lisa also began attending our vision impaired exercise classes. “It’s nice to know you’re not alone,” she says. What started as a way to build confidence also led to something unexpected: meeting her new partner.

“Thanks to Sense Ability Matters, I’m learning to cope better. It’s challenging every day but I’ve got my confidence back and I know I’ve got support to turn to.”

“I really don’t know what I would’ve done without that support. It’s nice to know you’re not alone.”

Who we’re here for



Over 10,650 people in South Tyneside and Gateshead live with moderate sight loss and over 1,640 are diagnosed as severely sight impaired (RNIB, 2023).



Latest estimates indicate that in South Tyneside and Gateshead 67,386 people have hearing loss of 25 dB or more. Of those, 7,243 have moderate or severe hearing loss, over 65dB (NHS England, Hearing Loss data Tool).

Our beneficiaries have increasingly complex health needs:

74% of active clients have two or more additional disabilities

66% have more than one eye condition

91% have Arthritis

71% have Diabetes

92% are hard of hearing

85% have limited mobility and/or high frailty

85% have Osteoporosis

75% have had a Stroke

Achievement and Performance



During 2024/25, we supported 5,573 individuals



We make sure people get the right support for them, at the right time. Our services include:

Counselling

Vision impairment counselling delivered by a professional counsellor with lived experience. Individual and group sessions are available, including for friends/family.

Well Connected

A partnership project providing digital, one-to-one and peer support, a tech lending library and cyber security information.

Low Vision Clinic

Low Vision Clinic led by optometrists and rehabilitation specialists, integrating health, social care and community support in one service.

Community Voice

A partnership project, led by people with lived experience, that helps people access activities and services in the community through peer support and volunteering.

Accessibility & Training

Accessibility audits and professional Vision Impairment Awareness and Sighted Guide Training to raise awareness of sight loss and improve accessibility.

Peer support

Our volunteers made over 1,200 tele-befriending calls this year. We also connect people to groups including Men’s Shed, Women’s Weekly, B-Social and Bloke’s Banter.

Our statutory funded work includes:

Personal assessments

Person centred assessments and planning under the Care Act 2014 to agree goals and actions that will have a positive impact.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation and Enablement support – providing independent living skills, orientation and mobility skills and independent travel.

John's story

How SAM's Community Voice project helped John find his place

When we first met John, life in an assisted living care home was a struggle. Being deaf and autistic, he relied on writing to communicate. In a busy shared space where conversations moved quickly, he was often left struggling to be understood.

John couldn't hear what was happening around him, and when his notes weren't understood, frustration built on all sides. Voices raised, tempers flared, and other residents began to avoid these situations. Slowly, John became more isolated in the place meant to feel like home.

How SAM helped

Things began to change once we started spending time in the home. Through our Community Voice programme, we set up a hearing loss group that met every fortnight.

As part of the group, we introduced British Sign Language. It wasn't about learning everything at once, but giving people a shared way to communicate.

John attended every session. Progress was slow, as expected. He sometimes finds it difficult to focus and had spent years relying on writing. But he stuck with it. Over time, he



learned basic signs and began using them outside the group.

The group grew together. Members began to understand each other better. They practised together, learned songs in BSL, and supported one another. The hearing loss group even led to a reminiscence group, where residents shared memories and stories, and John was included.

The change in John has been clear. He is calmer and more settled. When he feels overwhelmed, he can step away. Other residents have found ways to communicate with him, and everyday interactions feel easier.

Importantly, people are seeing John for who he is: friendly and thoughtful, never forgetting a birthday and making sure everyone gets a card. That side of him had always been there; it just needed the right support to be seen.

How we help

Assessment & rehabilitation services

Gateshead Council
(3,138 enquiries)

South Tyneside Council
(3,066 enquiries)

2024/25

6,204
enquiries from
2,164
individuals



Our assessment and rehabilitation services offer specialist support for people with sensory impairment, and we deliver these as statutory provision for the local authorities, under the Care Act.

In Gateshead our assessment and rehabilitation service is for sight impairment only. In South Tyneside our service includes sight impairment as well as deaf and hard of hearing support.

Our rehabilitation and enablement workers provide training on

independent living skills, mobility and orientation, viewing techniques, communications, electronic low vision aids such as video magnifiers and new technology such as audio description, e-readers, accessible mobiles etc.

They also carry out lighting assessments in people's homes and they issue small aids such as white sticks, canes and symbol canes, liquid level indicators, talking clocks and signature guides. Many people struggle with traditional low energy bulbs, so we also provide daylight bulbs.

"You helped me an awful lot with the equipment. It was lovely to have a chat."

Continued...

How we help

Integrated Low Vision Clinic

Gateshead residents only
(NHS ICB)



2024/25

271	480	1,113
low vision clinics were held	low vision assessments were carried out	people were supported through the service

We assess people’s vision and provide aids like magnifiers, telescopes and reading glasses to help them make the most of their remaining sight.

We also look at viewing techniques, lighting, colour contrast and posture, all of which can help people see better day to day.

We offer a review every two years, but people can come back sooner if they feel their sight is getting worse.



“Having the magnifier is a life changer. I was able to read a letter with ease for the first time since my eyes deteriorated.”



Every client who engaged in the Community Voice project said they have felt increased self-esteem and confidence.

British Wireless for the Blind (BWFTB) & RNIB Talking Books

We provide radios, CD players, and other equipment on behalf of BWFTB to eligible people who are registered sight impaired and receive qualifying benefits.

We also help people with their applications for the RNIB Talking Books service.

Community Voice

Community Voice is a project that brings people together to connect, support one another and access activities in their local area. Led by people with lived experience and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, it works through peer support and volunteering.

This year, 656 people engaged with the project – 245 of whom had sensory impairment or dual sensory loss.

123 accessed community activities, 17 found volunteering opportunities, and the partnership established 25 new community activities.

“You have gone above and beyond. Thanks for everything you are doing – it’s really appreciated.”

Continued...

How we help

Counselling

Our counselling service is delivered by a professional counsellor who has lived experience of sight loss. This means clients don't have to spend time explaining what it's like, the counsellor already understands. We provide one to one and group counselling sessions, including friends and family.

Equipment Library

Beneficiaries can call us or visit for specialist advice and information on a wide range specialist equipment. The library contains various pieces of digital and analogue equipment which we lend to people on a short-term basis so that they can try them out at home before deciding whether they would like to buy one (either they can buy it themselves if they can afford to do so, or we can help to find funding).

Living Well with Sight Loss Programme

This course is for people who are newly visually impaired or new to our services. It runs for two weeks with one half-day session per week looking at the various aspects of visual impairment and help that is available. As well as providing lots of information and advice it also provides invaluable peer support.

Telephone Support Service

Operated entirely by volunteers, all of whom have lived experience of sight loss, our Telephone Support Service calls service users whom we are aware are particularly isolated due to other mobility issues or whom we haven't had recent contact.

The support offered includes simply being a friendly voice to talk to, we promote the activities and services offered by Sense Ability Matters and if anyone called shares any concerns then the volunteer team refer them to our sight loss support team.



Training

Our team of experienced professionals provide Visual Impairment Awareness, Sighted Guide and Deaf Awareness training to a wide audience including a number of hospitals, council departments, businesses, charities and care homes.

Volunteers

We have a dedicated team of volunteers who support our work. Volunteers cover many different roles at Sense Ability Matters from reception and telephone befriending, to administration support.

Welfare Rights

We provide advice and support on disability benefits such as DLA/PIP, Attendance Allowance, Employment Support Allowance as well as Universal Credit. Help is provided from completion of the initial application, support when attending assessments all the way through to representation at Tribunal if the application isn't successful.

Well Connected (Digital & Cyber Security Support)

In partnership with ACTS, Age Gateshead and Your Voice Counts, and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, we help people make the most of digital services while staying safe from online fraud and scams. This year we engaged with 677 people and provided 224 intensive support sessions. 100% of participants reported feeling more confident using technology safely.

B-Social Group's story

How SAM's Friday group became a support network

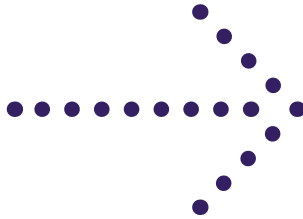
The B-Social group is open to anyone with a sensory impairment, disability or long-term health condition, and meets every Friday to socialise with a cup of tea or coffee and sometimes a game of bingo or a quiz.

A client who participates in our B-Social group approached staff to say that the group's dynamic had changed for the better and that it had become more of a support group. They stated

that participants in the group had become close enough to understand one another's issues, problems, health conditions and concerns.

Participants now feel they can support each other with learning about one another's coping mechanisms such as talking about their problems, looking for solutions to issues, calling each other on the telephone and meeting up to enjoy lunches, walks and going to the theatre.

: "All of this has happened because of the
: Community Voice Project. We would not have
: made friends or become as close as we have if
: it weren't for the project and the staff."



Our future plans

We now serve all adults in South Tyneside and Gateshead who have a sensory impairment, are disabled or live with a long-term health condition.

Working with people with lived experience, we are determined to:

- Leverage further investment to support disability services across South Tyneside and Gateshead, ensuring greater provision for more people
- Enable more people with lived experience to co-create services, improve health pathways and increase access to local services
- Reduce health inequalities and improve outcomes for people living with disability or sensory loss.

The coming year will focus on maintaining our current services and developing the following areas.

To support this we will focus our development on:

- Employability and transition pathway
- Advocacy.

5.5%
As of the end of 2023, only 5.5% of the people we work with are aged between 15 and 44.

Employability and transition pathway

As of the end of 2023, only 5.5% of the people we work with are aged between 15 and 44. We recognise this doesn't reflect the age profile of people with sight loss in our area.

We've secured grant funding to support employability for younger people with sight loss and worked with Children's Services to improve the transition into adult services. Both initiatives have helped more young people access our support.

We want to build on this by engaging more people up to age 45. Working with young people, we'll co-design a tailored programme to provide support when they need it most.

Continued...

Our future plans

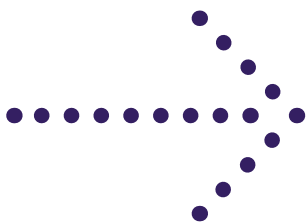
Advocacy

Demand for specialist advocacy support for people with sight loss is increasing, particularly as living costs rise.

We will continue and develop our support for people around:

- employment issues
- blue badges and concessionary pass applications
- benefit applications
- housing issues.

Providing evidence to support applications that show the impact of sight loss on people’s lives.



Service user feedback



We recently surveyed our service users so that they can help shape the future direction of SAM. These are the ideas they suggested:

- ▶ Digital support (using technology, emailing, online safety)
- ▶ More social activities
- ▶ Wider hearing support
- ▶ Signposting to other services and practical support, e.g. tradespeople
- ▶ Transport to activities and shopping, bus trips
- ▶ Support to find employment
- ▶ More publicity.



“I am very happy with the support provided by Sense Ability Matters, and would highly recommend SAM to others.”

Financial Review 2024/25

Financial performance and position

Financial performance in 2024/25 continues to provide stability for SAM moving forwards.

This is largely due to support through cost of living funds grants to support running costs.

Income



Income in 2024/25 was £729,383, representing a decrease of £22,759 to the previous year (£752,142 – 2023/24). This is chiefly because of one-off restricted funds ending in March 2024.

Expenditure



Expenditure in 2024/25 was £695,539 – an increase of £18,308 on the previous year, reflecting our relocation costs from Stonehills to Gateshead Civic Centre and New Green Street.



At 31 March 2025, we held total reserves of:

£473,873
(2024: £440,029)



Principal funding sources

Our main core contracted income has remained stable and we have performed well against this income achieving all the required performance indicators.

Key income streams

- 1 Gateshead Council
- 2 South Tyneside Council
- 3 National Lottery Community Fund
- 4 NHS North East North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
- 5 Fight For Sight / Vision Foundation – National Resilience Fund

This funding enables us to support people who are sight impaired, deaf, hard of hearing, or have dual sensory loss across South Tyneside and Gateshead.

Reserves policy

The Trustees review our reserves annually and recognise that to manage the charity efficiently, we need to hold an appropriate amount of general reserves.

Our policy, guided by the Charity Commission, is that unrestricted funds should be maintained at a level between six and nine months' expenditure. This will ensure that, in the event of a significant drop in funding, we can continue our current activities while we secure additional funds.

We have several restricted funds for identified projects, which have specific budgets and timescales as agreed with funders.

Where the Charity has adequate and stable free reserves, the Board may designate an allocation to spend furthering the Charity's objectives.

Sense Ability Matters

Get in touch

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Find out more: www.weareSAM.org.uk