



Why independence matters

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Committed
to quality



healthwatch
Brighton and Hove

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This briefing paper highlights examples where having an independent people's voice organisation is essential to improving health and social care.

Introduction

Who are Healthwatch?

Healthwatch is the most recent iteration of government-backed patient and public involvement which dates back to 1974, when [Community Health Councils](#) were first established. Healthwatch was created following learnings into failings at a hospital trust which found that health services had ignored warning signs for years and dismissed patient complaints¹.

The Healthwatch network was created by the [Health and Social Care Act 2012](#) and is made up of 153 Healthwatch organisations, operating in every local authority area of England. Our role is to listen to local people's experiences and views about health and social care services. **Healthwatch Brighton and Hove CIC has been performing this role since 2013, and over that time we have heard from more than 40,000 engagements, written and published 380 reports, helped over 4,000 people through our helpline.**

We have therefore long served as the local independent champion for patients, carers, and communities – particularly those who are vulnerable or face barriers to accessing care. **Our work has been shortlisted seven times for national awards for its innovation and impact.**

Because Healthwatch are independent and not part of the NHS or local authority, people tell us about experiences they might not share directly with a service provider. That trust, built over more than a decade, is what has enabled us to surface insights that commissioned surveys, complaints systems and routine engagement cannot reach. Within Brighton and Hove, we are a recognised system partner with a specific mandate to speak truth to power. We do not simply gather feedback; we translate lived experience into actionable intelligence, hold services to account, and work collaboratively to shape solutions. We bring people's voices into the heart of health and social care planning, development and change:



“[Healthwatch] has greatly supported effective scrutiny, informed decision-making and helped ensure that local people remain at the heart of service improvement and delivery.” Chair, Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee, Brighton and Hove City Council

¹ The Mid Staffordshire care scandal involved severe neglect and “appalling” care at Stafford Hospital between 2005 – 2009, resulting in hundreds of unnecessary deaths. Driven by financial targets, the scandal highlighted a massive failure in regulatory oversight, where warning signs were ignored for years and patient complaints were dismissed. This led to the Francis report which urged a fundamental culture change, putting patients first through duty of candour, improved staff training, and transparent reporting. In response, the report and subsequent government actions introduced several mechanisms, including the creation of Healthwatch.

“Their commitment to ensuring that the voice of people using services is always heard, is invaluable.”
Chair of Sussex Assembly

“Social Care, Safeguarding and Public Health have benefitted from Healthwatch evidence-based reports [which] are an important source of independent evidence gathered from patients and service users and used to support continuous service improvement.” **Director for Health and Social Care, Brighton and Hove City Council**

Government proposals

In July 2025, the Government unexpectedly announced the abolition of Healthwatch, despite praising our work and achievements. Following this decision, [The King's Fund](#), working in partnership with [Healthwatch England](#), published its [independent review of the Healthwatch model](#). Their report warns that moving patient feedback into government (as proposed by the government) or NHS bodies could undermine trust and discourage feedback, and that any replacement should remain independent:



“...people won't raise a concern if the only place they've got to raise it is with the organisation” and also “If what comes next is essentially providers marking their own homework, then we will have very little scrutiny and ability to shift practice.”

Following the report's publication, we have reflected on examples (published on our [website](#) and in annual reports) where our independent community insight has led to, or supported, improvements in health and care services in Brighton and Hove and Sussex. Together, the examples presented here make a straightforward argument: that an independent people's voice organisation is not a nice-to-have. It is what makes the difference between services that improve and services that don't. This supports the key finding of the King's Fund which states:



“Any future model must enhance – not weaken – the system's capacity to hear, understand and respond to people's experiences. It needs to maintain a level of independence from the health and care system to ensure that whatever is put in place can speak truth to power and raise difficult messages where necessary.”

Our question is simply this: without Healthwatch, who will deliver this critical independent role?

Over the last 13 years...

...over 200 volunteers have helped our community contributing over:



1,879 areas for improvement

10,500 health & social care meetings

41,200 people engaged

750 services reviewed

4,095 helpline enquiries



28 Board members



20 staff members



8 national awards and nominations for our work and impact



- 4 x "highly commended"
- 3 x shortlisted

Supporting primary care changes

Over the last 13 years, we have been proactive in providing support to patients, helping them navigate many changes affecting primary care.

In 2022, we spoke up on behalf of patients at New Larchwood Surgery to help overturn a decision to reduce opening hours, resulting in our work being shortlisted for a national award and winning a [commendation](#).



“I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the sterling work you put in on our behalf. Now we have the final findings from you and consequently, the resulting actions from the CCG and GPs at the surgery.”
Anna de Wit, Chair, Coldean Residents’ Association

Some of our other work

- We contributed to national learning on how best to engage and support patients when their surgery closes.
- In response to Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspections of some GP surgeries in Brighton and Hove noting a high number of safeguarding problems, we provided an analysis of the issues and shared it with the city’s Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Brighton and Hove Safeguarding Panel. We escalated the issue to Healthwatch England and the inadequacy of safeguarding processes in general practice was highlighted in national reports.
- We worked with the General Medical Council (GMC) to provide feedback on the standard of services provided by individual doctors. We arranged focus groups with local people to help the GMC improve the ‘revalidation of doctors’.
- Over two projects, we engaged with 2,500 patients at [Woodingdean Medical Practice](#) who had raised concerns with us about poor access. Our engagement supported the Practice to make improvements and provided invaluable advice to the CQC and NHS Sussex.
- As part of a Sussex-wide project, we reviewed 31 local [GP websites](#) highlighting issues with the advice provided to patients about how to access appointments. This insight was shared with NHS Sussex who agreed with our recommendations and committed to working with us and Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) to improve patient understanding and access.

Supporting the city's COVID-19 response

During the pandemic, we strengthened our role as the voice for independent and accurate information and assurance.

- **We were one of the first community organisations to publish consolidated information** and established ourselves as the 'go-to' organisation for accurate and up-to-date information, receiving praise for our role. Around 2,000 people shared their experiences of the vaccination programme with us.
- **We published over 100 bulletins** on COVID-19 and vaccinations, keeping people updated and aware of changes. We attracted praise from Councillors and local MPs, the public, press, and senior city-leaders for the quality and breadth of our updates.
- Between 2021 and 2022, **Healthwatch volunteers answered an amazing 1,460 calls** via the city's [vaccine helpline](#), contributing 536 free hours.



"I found your newsletter of immense benefit. I often refer to the information in your newsletter when working with family/friend carers. Once again, thanks for the amazing work you are doing." **Official, Council**

"On behalf of the CCG I would like to extend my thanks to Healthwatch for the COVID-19 bulletins. I personally found the patient stories very inspiring." **Official, former Clinical Commissioning Group**

Supporting carers – as a result of concerns shared with us, we held a series of [events](#) in 2020 and 2021 on behalf of informal, unpaid carers of care home residents. We provided a space for them to ask questions and gain answers from health and social care representatives. These events ensured that the voices of informal carers and care home residents were heard.

Cancer patients – we responded to concerns about a lack of information about cancer services and care homes during lockdowns by delivering a series of [webinars](#) attended by local experts who answered community questions.

Supporting Sussex wide change

Patient feedback from 600 people was used to help shape the re-commissioning of the Sussex Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service (NEPTS). Patient views informed the service specification, leading to requirements to provide better communication, clearer eligibility, and improved signposting.



This work earned us the [Healthwatch England Impact Award](#) – the first [joint winners](#) with our neighbours in East and West Sussex.

We have maintained our oversight of this service since it collapsed in 2016 under the leadership of Coperforma. We escalated concerns to the city's [Health Overview Scrutiny Committee](#) and fed local insight into a national review which led to improved commissioning and standardised eligibility. We have made sure that decision-makers did not forget past lessons and put patients at the heart and centre of the service redesign and recommissioning.



“The contract currently being tendered reflects ... feedback from system partners..., with Healthwatch in Brighton playing a significant role in service design, development and evaluation of the bids received.... Commissioners for NEPTS have welcomed ... Healthwatch ... into their work when developing the new contract specification. This has taken the form of regular attendance by Healthwatch at NEPTS Task and Finish groups, inviting comment on draft Service Specifications and involving patient representation in the assessment of bids to deliver the new service.”

Praise from NHS Sussex Commissioners at Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

“As someone whose role it is to make sure patient concerns are central to decision-making, I can honestly say that I have never seen a more meticulous, patient-centric contribution.” **Praise for our contribution to the evaluation of bids**

Supporting people through our helpline



"I met a lovely lady at the local community festival who listened to my horrible experience and also provided me lots of useful information. She encouraged me to not let the issue go, but to speak to her colleague [at the Healthwatch Helpline] who eventually helped me to resolve all my issues." **Public feedback**

Reviews of temporary accommodation

Thanks to one person's feedback provided to our helpline, the Council inspected accommodation for people experiencing homelessness.



"The maintenance to the property and each tenant's room is very poor, which includes tenants with disabilities. The Council has been informed of this but are not concerned." **Resident**

"Thank you for your email and the concerns you have raised. I have asked my team to carry out an inspection of the property and to chat to the tenants about any concerns they may have." **Head of Temporary & Supported Accommodation, BHCC**

Escalating concerns about hospital discharge

We raised concerns with our acute hospital Trust and NHS Sussex after hearing that frail, elderly patients had been discharged after midnight. One case was reported as a safety incident to support learning and prevent recurrence. The hospital has since introduced a new discharge process and staff training. We met with commissioners working to improve discharge and shared patient experiences to support this work.

Investigating translation services

We escalated concerns about dental services after hearing from a patient who had been offered an emergency appointment, but only if she could take a bilingual friend with her to interpret. The practice had declined to book an interpreter. Dental leads at NHS Sussex responded to our request by agreeing to issue information and a link to resources to all dental providers which was intended to improve accessibility to interpreting and translation services.

We received enquiries through our helpline about public toilet facilities closing in various locations across the city. The intelligence we gathered enabled us to effectively contribute to the reversal of these plans, with the Council developing a plan for the medium to long term provision of public toilets.

Other examples of our work and impact

Sexual Health

We raised concerns about privacy and the physical environment at a sexual health clinic in the city. A team of managers and nurses were there the next morning to start an improvement programme.

Personal Benefits

We highlighted significant concerns about the experiences of people undergoing [disability assessments](#). We shared these with a Parliamentary Select Committee and used our influence to set up, for the first time, meetings between DWP officials, representatives from PIP assessment providers and local charities and advocates of vulnerable adults. This created direct routes of contact, provided 'top tips' for caseworkers, and helped to better explain certain aspects of the application processes.

Improving hospital discharge

Our volunteers spoke to 2,400 patients to check on their welfare after they were [discharged from hospital](#). 23% raised concerns, which we fed back to the Discharge Team to improve processes. Our volunteers helped nearly 700 people find additional support to help them and support their recovery.

Reviewing NHS Services

We have conducted two reviews of the [Equipment and Adaptations Service](#), and our reports included views from over 800 service users and professionals. Our recommendations fed into the future service specification including improving the recycling of equipment and being able to order and review deliveries and installations (including reporting faults) online.

End Of Life care

We reviewed [End-of-Life care](#) at our local hospital, and our work was nominated for the contribution our volunteers had made. Our report found care was not always dignified and well-arranged and our recommendations were accepted in full and embedded into strategy and policy. Our city's Health and Wellbeing Board Committee asked for our report to form part of the city's 'Dying Well' programme.



The value of local independence – what stakeholders and the public have told us

The following comments were made following the government's decision to abolish Healthwatch. They categorically affirm the importance to local people of having an independent patient voice organisation.



“The need to listen to people using services, and their carers, has never been greater. Taking away independent routes to raise issues and limiting other ways of reaching and hearing from people and communities – particularly those who don't readily speak out – through contraction of public involvement functions is short sighted and will pose a risk to quality, safety and experience.”

“We went to Healthwatch because we've been repeatedly stonewalled and failed by the existing NHS complaints system. We wanted a calm, detached and unbiased assessment of our case. We did not want to be forced down the path of litigation to get to the facts.”

“We need independent scrutiny to help fix failures in health and social services so that nobody is disadvantaged in accessing these services due to their protected characteristics, including age.”

“You all do such important work which is highly valued by patients and their loved ones. I for one have been extremely grateful for the input of Healthwatch and for your advice and support on a more one to one level.”

“Here in Brighton and Hove, the service is an important part of the checks and balances for social care and health services. Your organisation's record of influence is considerable.”

“Healthwatch has helped me personally on two occasions to access the correct medical provision when GPs have got it wrong. We need someone for our residents to go to, to push back and get the services they are entitled to.”

“Healthwatch provides an important role in the healthcare ecosystem. This could leave a huge gap in public health and on the heart of our community by de franchising many residents.”



“Healthwatch, especially locally, do an excellent job, ensuring that all sections of the community are represented in the decision-making process and ensuring NHS leaders and other decision-makers hear your voice. It is absolutely imperative that scrutinising organisations exist and are entirely independent.”

“I think it is appalling that a decision has been made to withdraw the funding for this body. It will not in any way improve the service by doing this and in fact I believe it will enable the Government to create a false narrative around the workings of the NHS.”

“It feels to me like knee-jerk decision making; looking to save money without heed to the consequences. It is bad news for everyone to lose a service that can advocate, challenge and represent for the most vulnerable of us.”

“Healthwatch have been a hugely important partner completing much needed work within our local systems and providing that crucial independent scrutiny.”

“There are ... specific powers that Healthwatch have that can help shine a light on issues and concerns in the health and care sector. What will happen fill this vacuum?”

“The loss of Healthwatch is a loss of a unique, independent defender of patients' voices, an essential mechanism for holding health and care providers to account and ensuring decisions are shaped by real experiences. Very sad times.

“Healthwatch is a crucial voice for patients and communities, reaching those often unheard, working constructively with health and care providers to drive change, and ensuring real experiences shape the way care is delivered”

“I've worked in Health and Care facing services for nearly 30 years prior and every NHS Board I've ever been part of (there are a lot) has always valued the contribution of Healthwatch and their drive for improvement and learning. It's so disappointing to see this move as part of the NHS reforms.”

“It is my pleasure and privilege to work with Healthwatch. Why? Because when people help create and change services, they work better. Healthwatch know this and make it happen everyday, and I love helping them do it. There is so much learning from what they do, we must make sure it is not lost.”



“When I heard the Government announcement about closing 201 organisations I was stunned. The fact there has been no thought really gone into this decision, no consultation, and really not knowing what fantastic work organisations like Healthwatch do. No doubt people will have to raise any concerns they have via an App or a Bot in the future!”

“We recognise Healthwatch as being an important and effective champion of patients; and a useful resource for information on health matters.”

“The innovative work and projects you all undertake – with patients care, welfare and experiences always being at the forefront of everything – really are praiseworthy.”

“We absolutely need organisations like Healthwatch. They don’t just provide scrutiny; they generate the evidence we need to target healthcare more effectively, identify gaps, and drive improvements. My experience is that they provide a lot of useful local data and research. That insight is an invaluable piece in holding healthcare to account.”

“Losing Healthwatch; or more specifically, losing an independent layer of oversight and local public-health research; is deeply concerning. We’ve already seen the damage that follows when accountability gaps open.”

“I was truly saddened to hear about the government’s decision to close Healthwatch. The role you take advocating for patients and the public, both proactively and reactively, has been influential in decisions I have made and the direction we have steered.”



Your
voice
matters



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Click here to share your experiences and feedback with us, or if you need help or advice. **Thank you!**

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