

## ENGAGING WITH HEALTHWATCH

### Chair of Healthwatch England, Jane Mordue

The health service is a beloved national treasure and is commonly referred to by people as “our NHS”. Yet in the past it has too often felt like decisions all come from the top and that we, health service users, should be content with what we are given.

Thankfully, in recent years this notion has begun to change, with the relationship between frontline professionals and patients shifting towards the principle of “no decision about me without me”.

With the NHS facing huge pressures and significant change, it is time to extend this principle to how whole communities are involved in decisions about their care.

The case for public engagement is a compelling one. It is an important tool for promoting an accountable and responsive health system, and can help those in charge make the right decisions first time.

The idea is not new by any means. Developing channels for patients to engage with their local healthcare providers going on for decades, all the way back to 1974, when Community Health Councils (CHC) were set up.

Crucially though, we now live in a world where people both want and expect to play a greater role in the development and design of services.

Last year local Healthwatch, the latest iteration of the public’s voice in the NHS, visited more than 3,500 GP surgeries, hospitals and care homes, and collectively gathered the views of 385,000 people to create an unrivalled source of qualitative intelligence about consumer experience of local services.

We are independent and act as a critical friend, using people’s experiences to hold services to account. We are also a strategic partner, with a seat 'at the table' with NHS bodies, local authorities and other local system leaders, and we influence strategic decision-making.

Healthwatch can request information from local organisations, commissioners and providers. Our Enter and View volunteers and staff have the powers to have a look at the work standards in practice at services including GP practices, hospitals, dental surgeries, care homes and pharmacies.

We work very hard to create partnerships and collaborative relationships with local services in order to discuss issues openly and effectively. One of the key partnerships is of course between local Healthwatch and the governors of local hospital trusts. For example, one of Healthwatch Doncaster’s volunteers, Mark Bright, is also a governor at his local hospital. He says it’s a very rewarding role and an opportunity to contribute towards improving the services offered to patients. They hold the Board of Directors to account, offer crucial input and give voice to local communities.

Healthwatch Dorset also has a number of volunteers who also sit on governors' boards. Some of them have taken part in mystery shopping projects, phoned GP surgeries to ask questions about registering and helped with promotion stands.

It is the role of Healthwatch to listen to people's experiences of health and social care services in our local areas, whether they are good or bad. We use this information to bring about real changes in how local services are designed and delivered, to make them better for everyone.

From day one we hit the ground running, improving services all over the country, from diagnosis rates for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Cornwall to access to NHS dentistry services in Kirklees.

We have worked with countless hospitals too. When Healthwatch East Sussex surveyed patients across the county's two A&E and three minor injuries units, it found that 51% of patients had gone straight to A&E without seeking help elsewhere first. Less than a quarter tried to speak to their GP before turning up at the hospital. The local Healthwatch team is now working with the NHS Trust and local clinical commissioning groups to improve signposting of services in hope of easing some of the pressure on A&E.

In a similar vein, Healthwatch Reading staff and volunteers visited Royal Berkshire Hospital and spoke to people who went to A&E that week. Healthwatch Reading won a national award for its project looking at why people go to the emergency department of the hospital. They discovered that more than half of people had sought help from other services before going to the emergency department, and that people wanted changes in the A&E department itself.

In response, Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Groups said that GPs would be reviewing patients to check they had care in place to prevent unnecessary A&E visits, and the hospital also said it would be making improvements to signs, check-in and other parts of the waiting area.

These are just some of the many ways that we are making people's voices heard and helping to drive change in the way care is delivered.

Healthwatch continues to become a more influential and effective collective voice of the public, we do this by using innovative engagement approaches to be more representative of all of our local communities.

Public engagement is the best way of maximising limited resources. Engaging and involving people in how NHS services are designed and refined is an essential part of ensuring they deliver what patients both want and need. This is even more important at a time when the NHS has to make some tough decisions about how care is provided.

Good engagement is about much more than carrying out formal consultations. It's about a mindset that puts people's experiences at the heart of decision making every single day. This includes increasing our volunteer base.

Healthwatch volunteers come from all walks of life and have a great variety of experience and knowledge. If someone is passionate about the health and wellbeing of people; enjoys working with and listening to others, and wants to develop their understanding of community health services they would make a great asset to Healthwatch. The same skills and interests make them ideal candidates to work with local providers as governors.

Taking the lead from the likes of Healthwatch Doncaster and Dorset, we will be encouraging those who work across our network to look at how they can work more closely with their local providers.

Equally, as governors have a statutory duty to represent the interests of members and the public I hope they will engage with local Healthwatch more to amplify our voices so that we can achieve the best possible care for everyone in England. We look forward to working with you long into the future.