

FORMER GOVERNMENT MINISTER BACKS KING'S FUND STUDY ON IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT PATIENT VOICE IN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Government plans to end the existence of an independent voice for patients and service users in health and social care have come under challenging scrutiny today with the publication of a major new report by the respected think tank, the King's Fund.

Local Healthwatch has welcomed the King's Fund report which has also received backing from former Labour Minister Lord Hunt of Kings Heath who was also the first Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation.

Ministers intend to introduce a bill shortly which will include clauses that will abolish Healthwatch England and the network of local Healthwatch organisations across the country which speak up for patients and the public and hold NHS and social care services to account. Local Healthwatch also directly provide information and signposting services to help the public navigate the health and social care system and also have a statutory role to Enter and View health and social care services to observe, gather feedback and make recommendations for improvement.

The government says these services will be brought "in house" in future with local Healthwatch services being divided and transferred to Integrated Care Boards and local authorities themselves. They also say the responsibilities of Healthwatch England will be taken over by a new Director of Patient Experience within the Department of Health and Social Care. If they go ahead, these changes will end government recognition of independent patient voice which has existed in one form or other for over fifty years.

Today's King's Fund Report "[The Future of Patient Voice; Learning from the Healthwatch Model](#)" underlines that a key strength of Healthwatch is its independence of the system, giving it credibility with the public. Independence has also enabled local Healthwatch to develop strong relationships with communities to gather feedback and highlight how the health and social care system is working for patients and service users. While the King's Fund report identifies areas where the current model could be improved further, it concludes that Healthwatch has been more impactful than previous iterations of patient voice functions and underlines that any new system must demonstrate independence of government and the wider health and social care system if it is to retain public trust.

Richard Burden, Local Healthwatch Working Together Parliamentary Engagement Coordinator and Chair of Healthwatch Birmingham and Solihull, said today:

“Patients and the public deserve better than to have the NHS and local authorities marking their own homework but that is what will happen if Ministers go ahead with their current plans to scrap independent patient voice. The Kings Fund is a balanced analysis of the key issues at stake here and I hope it will encourage Ministers to think again.”

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath added:

“Governments of all colours have recognised the importance of independence in patient voice for over fifty years. Providers of health and social care need to know what patients and service users feel about the care they receive, including things that are sometimes uncomfortable to hear. However genuine Ministers are in encouraging health and social care bodies to monitor patients’ experience themselves, it is vital that service users can always be confident there is also an independent body that can speak up on their behalf, without fear or favour.

Along with colleagues in both Houses of Parliament I will be working to ensure that this principle is not lost when the forthcoming Health Reform Bill is debated.”

Ends

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