
The future of patient voice:

Our response to The King's Fund report

March 2026

The publication of "[The future of patient voice: learning from the Healthwatch model](#)" by The King's Fund provides an important and timely assessment of how people and communities are heard across health and care.

The report is clear: Healthwatch has made a significant impact.

It highlights:

- The importance of independence from government and services
- The ability to gather rich insight, including from seldom heard groups
- A local to national model that connects community voice to system influence.

While the report acknowledges challenges – largely linked to funding and commissioning – these are not failures of the model itself, but of how it has been resourced and structured.

A critical moment for decision makers

The report sets a clear test for the future:

"Any future model must enhance – not weaken – the system's capacity to hear, understand and respond to people's experiences."

"Whatever replaces Healthwatch must build on the core conditions that enabled it to have a positive impact."

Given the imminent proposed abolition of Healthwatch, we ask:

- Who is taking responsibility for designing what comes next?
- Who is looking at the risks to patient safety and to progress on the government's desired NHS reforms if there is a gap in an effective patient voice mechanism?
- Where is the transparency around risks and accountability?
- What evidence is there that any changes will strengthen patient voice?

Key elements

Independence and commissioning

Independence is fundamental to impact.

"Independence was widely regarded by participants as a key factor in the impact achieved."

The report also highlights concerns about conflicts of interest in commissioning. Yet proposals would place responsibility within NHS bodies and local authorities themselves.

- How will independence be protected?
- How will challenge be maintained where organisations are effectively scrutinising themselves?

Loss of a whole system view

Healthwatch's strength lies in its ability to see across health and social care and identify where people fall through gaps.

"Local Healthwatch hold a distinctive position, with an overview of the whole health and care system in their area."

- If responsibilities are split, who will hold this integrated, holistic view?

Relationships with communities

We value our relationships with our local communities and the report recognises the strength of these long standing, trusted relationships.

These relationships:

- Take years to build
- Amplify the voice of seldom-heard groups
- Depend on independence and consistency.

They cannot simply be transferred.

Voice, influence and power

Even with statutory powers, Healthwatch has not always been heard.

- What confidence is there that internal functions will have greater influence?
- How will communities be enabled to challenge decisions effectively?

Capacity and data

The report highlights that:

“Healthwatch has been able to collect a very substantial amount of both qualitative and quantitative data, reflecting both solicited and unsolicited feedback from patients and communities.”

It has also been able to effectively share this from a local to a national level.

At the same time, NHS and local authority engagement capacity is reducing due to continued reductions and structural changes.

- Who will do this work in future – and at what scale?
- Who will ensure there is no loss of public voice during times of restructuring?

Funding and consistency

Variation in funding has affected delivery.

- Without ringfenced funding, is there a risk that this variability will increase, leading to even more unequal voice across the country?

Our local perspective

As Healthwatch Surrey, we are proud of what we have achieved over the past 12 years.

However, despite the scale of proposed change, **we have not yet been engaged in shaping what comes next.**

This raises serious concerns about how a credible future model is being developed.

Conclusion: strengthen, don't remove

Given all of the positives in the report, rather than abolishing Healthwatch and with it, independent public voice, this provides an opportunity to strengthen it by:

- Strengthening independence
- Increasing influence
- Addressing funding inconsistencies
- Building on established community trust.

As Healthwatch Surrey, we remain committed to our vision for a society where everyone's voice is heard and will continue to deliver the statutory functions of Healthwatch Surrey whilst building on this legacy through Luminus Insight CIC.