

# Exclusive: flagship HealthWatch policy to be 'watered down' by amendments

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24 February, 2012 | By [Sarah Calkin](#)

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Government plans to amend the Health Bill to clarify arrangements for HealthWatch have angered campaigners who claim the change will “water down” patient and public involvement in the NHS.

Under the existing wording of the bill, local HealthWatch branches will be statutory organisations charged with scrutinising health and social care services in the area when they replace local involvement networks in April 2013.

However, HSJ understands the government is to table amendments before parliament next week which if passed will remove the statutory status of the organisation. Local authorities, which will commission local HealthWatch, will still have a responsibility to ensure duties around scrutiny and providing advice to the public are carried out.

**The National Association of LINKs Members claims the removal of statutory status will undermine the influence of Local HealthWatch with commissioners and providers. They also fear it will reduce the opportunity for lay involvement in running the organisation.**

**In a letter to association Chair, Malcolm Alexander, Health Minister Earl Howe said it was never the government’s “intention” to legislate for a single organisational model for local HealthWatch.**

**He says he is “unconvinced” creating 152 statutory corporate bodies is the solution to NALM’s concerns and local HealthWatch organisations should be set up following extensive public consultation in order to have democratic legitimacy.**

**Mr Alexander told HSJ removing statutory status amounted to a “watering down” of the policy.**

**The last patient and public involvement organisation to have statutory status were community health councils which are widely regarded as having been more effective than the patient and public involvement forums and then LINKs which replaced them.**

**Future Forum member and senior research fellow in patient and public involvement Sally Brearley told HSJ it was “extremely” disappointing that local HealthWatch would not have statutory status.**

**“We think it would have given it teeth and a clear role. I don’t think ministers have appreciated the implications of what’s now being proposed which is potentially the loss of lay voice and the lay role in monitoring services.”**

However, Tim Gilling, deputy executive director of the Centre for Public Scrutiny, told HSJ flexibility over how the organisations were set up was welcome as long as "their activities remain rooted in statute".

A Department of Health spokesman said the amendments "aim to make clear our intention regarding HealthWatch".

He described it as "nonsense" that the change was a "watering down" of the policy and said without statutory status local authorities would have greater freedom and flexibility to shape the organisation.