**Robert Francis attacks 'perilous state' of Local Healthwatch funding**

1 November 2018

Funding of local Healthwatch services has been plunged into a “perilous state” and their effectiveness is starting to be impaired, Sir Robert Francis has warned.

In a letter to health and social care secretary Matt Hancock, the chairman of the Mid Staffordshire Public Inquiry warned the numbers of full-time staff employed by Healthwatch had crashed by 22 per cent in two years, while this year’s funding for some local areas had been slashed by 50 per cent.

Full time staff employed by Healthwatch has fallen from 525 in 2015-16 to 408 in 2017-18, while funding has dropped 35 per cent since Healthwatch was created under the Health and Social Care Act in 2013.

In his letter, dated 24 October, Sir Robert said*: “I am writing to you today in my first official act as chair of Healthwatch England to inform you of the perilous state of the Healthwatch network’s funding.*

*“In my final report on Mid Staffs I warned the proposed mechanism for funding Healthwatch under the Health and Social Care Act would leave them subjected to the vagaries of the health of local authority finances.*

“We of course recognise the government’s position on ringfencing. We also understand the funding pressures on local councils. But the fact remains, my initial concerns have come true and are starting to impair the effectiveness of Healthwatch in certain areas.”

Sir Robert, who carried out two investigations into poor care at the Mid Staffordshire Trust, told Mr Hancock 86 local Healthwatch groups were receiving less funding now than their predecessors, the Local Involvement Networks. Sir Robert said: “The ineffectiveness and limited remit of [LINKs] was apparent in my investigations into the failings at Mid Staffs NHS Trust.”

He added: “If one thing was clear to me from my enquiries into the incidents at Mid Staffs, it was that to do public engagement well it needs to have a professional infrastructure. Without this, people are too easily ignored and health and care services ignores their voice at their peril.”

There are 152 local Healthwatch services in England which are funded by the Department of Health and Social Care via local councils.

According to a new report by Healthwatch England, *this year’s funding for Healthwatch has dropped 4.3 per cent* compared to 2017-18, with the cuts focused on around a third of services.

The worst affected local services have seen cuts of up to 50 per cent, with Staffordshire’s funding falling 49.4 per cent to just £210,000 in 2018-19 compared to the previous year.

A DHSC spokesman said: “Last year, Healthwatch England reported a 17 per cent increase in people engaging with their local network and we will continue to keep the situation under review to ensure these services receive the funding they need.”

**Source**

Letter from Sir Robert Francis to the health and social care secretary, Healthwatch England report

**Source Date**

October 2018