*STP LEADS HAVE 'DUTY TO TAKE WITH THE PUBLIC'*

Healthwatch England has today warned that the public is at risk of being brought in at the “very end” of the sustainability and transformation plan process to “simply ‘rubber stamp’ over-simplified plans”.

Jane Mordue, Interim Chair of the National Health and Care “consumer champion”, said a “strong sense of fear” among policymakers that proposed services changes will face an “army of activists” could translate into delayed public consultations.

Ms Mordue said if this happened it would leave the public “feeling ignored” and this would “understandably fuel the fires of opposition”.  She urged STP leads to not retreat from “their duty to talk with the public”, warning that a lack of proper consultation risks creating a “vicious circle” where service change becomes “needlessly painful”, communities are left “feeling betrayed” and future change would be jeopardised by the creation of “unnecessary barriers”.

Susan Robinson, Acting National Director for Healthwatch, discussed the organisation’s role in the STP process. She said Healthwatch has not asked NHS England to push back its implementation timeline for STPs, which could enable a more robust consultation process, and it will work within the constraints NHS England has set. She said Healthwatch will “do what we can with the role that we have… and make sure that the public are adequately involved in any kind of changes in their local services”.

However, a Healthwatch paper authored by Ms Robinson and submitted to the the Care Quality Commission’s September Board Meeting said: ”We all know that good public engagement requires time… The STP process has moved so fast that this has been a challenge.”

When asked if STPs should be published without delay, Ms Robinson said: “Well until we see the plans it is all speculative, isn’t it? We are working with local Healthwatch groups to make sure that they are there poised ready to do what needs to be done and make sure that the public are involved as quickly as possible.”

Full submissions from the 44 STP areas were made to NHS England last Friday, and two plans have so far been published.

To help local groups support STP consultations, Healthwatch as established a 20-member group, which first met over the summer. It also has two “champions” that will represent Healthwatch England at the national STP oversight group.