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Headline Brief: Healthwatch UK

What Does Healthwatch Do?

Launched in October 2012, Healthwatch England is the independent national champion for consumers and users of adult and child health and social care services, their carers and the wider public. However, despite being a national body, its focus is very much on local communities and, to that end, there is a network of 152 independent local Healthwatch organisations.

Each local Healthwatch is part of its local community and works in partnership with other local organisations, such as local government, local healthcare organisations, charities and, of course, local hospitals, many of which are Foundation Trusts.

Healthwatch's role is to listen to the views and concerns of users of health and social care services at a local level and to use these to influence local and national policy, as well as to provide advice to The Care Quality Commission (CQC), Monitor, NHS England, the Secretary of State and English local authorities on the issues that matter most to them.

The organisation has the power to ask the health and social care regulator CQC to take action where it has particular concerns about the quality of care and, in turn, CQC has a legal

responsibility to respond and answer those concerns.

As part of its brief, Healthwatch England must report annually to Parliament and has just presented its first one. According to the accompanying research, the public has serious concerns about the way they are being treated and cared for. However, surprisingly, perhaps, satisfaction levels appear to be high, with almost three-quarters stating that they receive good quality of care.

Led by CEO Dr Katherine Rake OBE and chaired by Anna Bradley, the organisation has full independence to report on the issues and trends it believes are relevant and important to the community, particularly those of the most vulnerable in society.

Why Was It Set Up?

Healthwatch England was set up to make sure the views and experiences of consumers across the country are heard clearly by those who plan and run health and social care services. Its aim is to ensure that the consumer's voice is heard so that it can help make services better.

The organisation was also set up to provide leadership and support for local Healthwatch, who carry out a similar role at a local community level.

Local Healthwatch – How Governors Can Get Involved

There are various ways in which Healthwatch can help governors. As mentioned, all local Healthwatch setups are slightly different. So, if a local Healthwatch is based around members, then individual governors can become members, always ensuring they pay due regard to conflict of interest, of course. However, if the local Healthwatch is not membership based then governors could become a volunteer for it, again bearing in mind conflict of interest.

Additionally, Councils of Governors (CoGs) could invite their local Healthwatch to speak to them as a group, Generally speaking, governors only know what the users of their Trust think about various issues from the Trust itself but Local Healthwatch is independent, so consumers may be more honest with it than with their health service provider. Also, Healthwatch has a reach into parts of the community Trusts may find it difficult to access.

CEO of Healthwatch Birmingham, Paul Devlin, who spoke to a number of governors at the FTGA's Development Day in November gave this example: if a maternity service was having a new clinical pathway put in, the local Trust would likely hear from recent mums who had used the service. But they may not hear from families who used other services, nor other members of the public interested in different health priorities. Healthwatch should be able to find and present those wider views.

Even if there is no relationship between a CoG and the local Healthwatch, their website can still be a reference point for governors, who can keep up-to-date with issues affecting the Trust and may discover information they can use to challenge it. For example, Healthwatch Birmingham's website includes an innovative "Feedback Centre" enabling people to rate their local health and social care services. As you can see from the 'Latest News' section of this brief, opinions and thoughts gathered by Healthwatch inform every aspect of the NHS and governors should be aware of what the body is doing.

Healthwatch & Foundation Trust Governors

There are a number of parallels between Healthwatch and Councils of Governors (CoGs). For one thing, there are no national guidelines for the local Healthwatch, much like there is no set pattern for Foundation Trusts, although there is a clear statutory framework for both. However, the individuals who make up each body are enormously powerful in being able to influence important issues in the health space, with the patient at

the centre and governors are accountable to the public, as is Healthwatch.

However, like governors, Healthwatch does not have direct power to change practice. Rather, it gathers and presents evidence of shortfalls and issues in health and social care services to local decision-makers and commissioners, regulators, other arms-length bodies, and government departments. They are obliged to respond to Healthwatch and their response will always be made public.

As the FTGA is the voice of the governor, so Healthwatch is the voice of the people and, according to Paul, the potential is massive, as it provides a platform for the opinions of all local people, including those who are seldom heard.