

Third of councils cut Healthwatch budgets

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Healthwatch England has demanded explanations from councils that have imposed deep funding cuts on its local groups this year.

Almost a third of councils cut local Healthwatch budgets in 2015-16 by an average of 14 per cent, *Local Government Chronicle* has learned (see table, below).

Through interviews with 147 of 148 local Healthwatch branches, 10 councils were identified as having cut local Healthwatch budgets by more than the reduction in their overall grant. One of these, Blackpool Council, is now expected to increase the budget.

Using its powers as a statutory adviser, the national body has written to the remaining nine councils to ask for assurance that statutory activities can be provided under the reduced budgets and for contingency plans should resources prove insufficient. Local authorities must respond within 20 working days; their responses will be published.

BIGGEST % CUTS TO HEALTHWATCH BUDGETS			
Local Healthwatch	2015-16 Healthwatch Funding	Difference between 2014-15 and 15-16	% difference between 2014-15 and 15-16
Hounslow LBC	£89,378	-£102,233	-53.4%
Blackpool Council	£58,000	-£62,000	-51.7%
Harrow LBC	£100,000	-£75,000	-42.9%
Leicestershire CC	£187,391	-£87,609	-31.9%
Ealing LBC	£160,300	-£57,700	-26.5%

Local Healthwatch branches act as champions for users of health and social care services and are commissioned by councils.

This year's cuts follow [similar findings last year](#) that councils had not passed on more than £10m of the £43.5m originally allocated to local Healthwatch by the Department of Health.

A Healthwatch England spokesman said funding follows an opaque route from the DH, via the Department of Communities and Local Government grants system, and arrives un-ringfenced at councils, making it difficult to see if local groups are properly resourced.

Healthwatch England chair Anna Bradley said: “We recognise that local authorities are having to cope with their own cuts but the majority of councils have recognised the value local Healthwatch bring and have managed to maintain investment.

“We urge those councils that have decided to impose such severe cuts to outline why they have made this decision and to provide the public with the voice they need to influence the big decisions to come about how local health and care services are delivered.”

Councils with the deepest cuts defended their actions.

Hounslow Council's cabinet member for adult social care and health services Kamaljit Kaur said: “We value the function and ethos of Healthwatch but we are disappointed with the performance of the local group.”

The council asked Healthwatch to focus on jointly agreed priorities and has reduced its funding accordingly.

If it meets these objectives “we will consider extending their role and funding”, Cllr Kaur said.

A Harrow Council spokesman said: “After a full year of negotiations with our local Healthwatch, against a background

of austerity cuts, we agreed on annual funding that will not just continue to deliver the service here in Harrow, but improve it.” Three existing providers were “keen to take on the service at the new price”, he added.

Leicestershire County Council had reduced its funding after consultation, a statement said.

A DH spokesman said: “We want to make the health and social care system the safest and most transparent in the world and know that listening to patients and the public is vital to improving care. Healthwatch plays an important role and it is important that they have sufficient local funding to make sure voices of local people are heard.”