

# DH agrees funding for HealthWatch Pathfinders

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The government has finally agreed to provide funding for the development of local HealthWatch organisations. However, concerns remain that the organisation is being "set up to fail" under current plans.

Members of Local Involvement Networks, which are being replaced by HealthWatch, were furious to find out in the summer that there would be no funding to help with the transition. Unlike LINKs, local HealthWatch branches must be constituted as corporate bodies in order for local authorities to commission services from them, involving start up costs and legal advice.

However, HSJ understands the Department of Health has now agreed to provide funding for each of the 75 HealthWatch pathfinders, probably in the region of £3,000 each.

Chair of the National Association of LINKs Members, Malcolm Alexander, welcomed the commitment. However, he said concerns remained about the lack of a ring-fence for the £60m local HealthWatch budget which will be distributed by local authorities. He also expressed concern about the impact of council funding on the independence of the HealthWatch branches that are supposed to scrutinise council social care services, as well as health.

Local HealthWatch will be supported by HealthWatch England, which will be a committee of the Care Quality Commission. This has prompted concern about the organisation's independence at a national level.

Jeremy Taylor, Chief Executive of the patients' group National Voices, said: "The start up finding is a move in the right direction but it doesn't necessarily address the issues about the workability of the HealthWatch model ... it's not enough to ensure an effective consumer champion."

HealthWatch is a flagship policy which the government has promised will bring "real local democratic accountability and legitimacy" to the NHS "for the first time in 40 years". It will be the third time patient and public involvement has been re-organised in a decade.

The post of chair of HealthWatch England is due to be advertised in January. Under current arrangements the holder of the post will also have a seat on the CQC's board.

Action Against Medical Accidents' Chief Executive, Peter Walsh, predicted the DH would find it difficult to recruit a "good" candidate when there was still so much concern about the design of HealthWatch.

"The way it's currently designed it could end up being a poisoned chalice. Unless they change that the government will be setting it up to fail."