

STATEMENT FOR THE NALM CONFERENCE FROM EARL HOWE

Thank you for inviting me to attend your conference today, and I am sorry that I cannot be with you to hear how LINK members will be 'dynamic – empowering – inclusive' in their approach to HealthWatch.

HealthWatch is the next important step in building the patient and public voice. HealthWatch is about strengthening the voice of patients, service users and the public in the reformed health and social care system. It will have an important role in influencing commissioners and providers in the NHS and local authorities to offer the right services for local people and improve the quality of health and care. HealthWatch will help to trigger concerns about shortcomings in services to ensure that patients and service users are safely looked after. In its information role it will promote choice to help local people make decisions about their care and support. It will also be inclusive and representative of its diverse communities.

I see the evolution of LINKs as building on the best. LINKs have played an important role during the past three years in laying the foundations for the voice of people to be heard now and as we move into the future. The continuity between LINKs and Local HealthWatch will cement local experience, knowledge and intelligence about our communities. I am in no doubt that the contribution that volunteers have made to LINKs' work has been valued for the impact it has had on the lives of thousands of people across the country. I want to see volunteers continue making that contribution in Local HealthWatch. I have seen the fruits of this commitment for myself. It is something to be proud of; and I believe that now is the time, with the formation of HealthWatch, to make even more of what your members have to offer in our local communities. Change of course is not easy, but this is more about growing what we have in place to build and sustain community engagement and relationships, and to make sure that in HealthWatch we have the necessary continuity to empower the collective local voice and make it heard.

To embed that level of influence, Local HealthWatch will have a seat on the local health and wellbeing board as well as feeding in to HealthWatch England's role nationally. The relationship between HealthWatch England and Local HealthWatch must be an open, two-way dialogue so that critical knowledge of the local views and experiences of patients and service users will have a real influence over the delivery of health and social care. This will also mean working collaboratively with local authorities and clinical commissioning groups.

I hope that you, as LINK members, will agree with me that we need to start now, and not wait, to develop the local collective voice so as to be able to meet the challenges of the future with maximum effectiveness. I am hugely supportive of the work that LINKs have done and want HealthWatch to inherit the strongest possible legacy from them in October 2012.

Let's begin this challenging transition and create a Local HealthWatch that people will know, interact with, influence and be proud of. I wish you every success as you take this work forward.

EARL HOWE
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Quality