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Malcolm Alexander
Chair
National Association of LINKs Members

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Dear Malcolm,

Thank you for your email of 27 January setting out your latest concerns about Healthwatch, as well as your acknowledgement of the progress that is being made with both Healthwatch Pathfinders and learning sets for Local Involvement Networks (LINKs).

I, too, am looking forward to considering the results of the consultation on the Regulations for membership of Healthwatch England.

I have considered very carefully the issues you have raised about the legal status of local Healthwatch organisations but continue to be unconvinced that creating statutory corporate bodies in 152 locations is the best solution. I hope it will be helpful to share my thinking with you and, of course, I should be happy to expand on or clarify any points in person. My diary secretary will be in touch shortly to arrange a meeting.

As you know, the Government's vision for an independent consumer champion – Healthwatch - at the local and national levels was first set out in the White Paper *Equity and excellence: Liberating the NHS* (July 2010). Our plans for Healthwatch are set very clearly within the context of a much wider reform of the NHS where patients and the public come first, where citizens have a greater say in how the NHS is run and where clinicians, hospitals and providers have the freedom to innovate for improved clinical outcomes. At the same time, we firmly believe that there should be much less central 'command and control' of local services.

Instead, we believe it is right to strengthen the local democratic legitimacy of the health and care system. Local authorities will have a lead role in joining up the commissioning of local NHS services, social care and health improvement through health and wellbeing boards. These boards will

allow the local authority – with partners including in the NHS and with local Healthwatch representing communities - to lead a strategic and more holistic approach to the commissioning and provision of local services and to promote their integration. We want local authorities to listen to their communities and work with their public, voluntary and community sector partners to improve the health and wellbeing of their neighbourhoods. In this context, we believe they should be able to talk to their community about their local Healthwatch organisation and work with the full range of stakeholders to shape what it should look like. I do not believe that statutory corporate bodies would deliver this vision.

This greater freedom to make decisions locally, based on what local people have said they want and need, goes to the heart of the Government's localism agenda. It was never our intention to legislate for a single organisational model for local Healthwatch; rather we wanted to give local people the chance to influence what their local Healthwatch would look like.

I cannot agree, either, that a “painless transition” from LINKs to local Healthwatch is necessarily precluded as a result. Nor does it require every local authority to undergo EU procurement, although this remains an option should local authorities decide to pursue that route to funding. (Not all LINKs will be able to make the transition to local Healthwatch as you have, I know, previously acknowledged.)

You also mention the power and influence of local Healthwatch organisations. I do not believe these emanate from its organisational form but rather from its functions, actions, behaviours and relationships. The litmus test for local Healthwatch will be whether local people know it is there, understand what it does, know how to use it and get evidence that their voices are heard and represented.

As I outlined earlier, a local Healthwatch formed as a corporate body following extensive community engagement has local legitimacy; a local Healthwatch established as a statutory body corporate created and set up through legislation risks excluding the expertise that resides in local communities and the voluntary sector from the process. A centrally regulated membership would not fulfil the ambitions for local Healthwatch to be locally accountable and representative.

with my best wishes,

Yours ever,

Frankie

EARL HOWE