

The voluntary sector: a key partner in local Healthwatch

A Guide for local Healthwatch and
the voluntary and community sector



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Introduction

The voluntary sector is an active and effective partner in health and social care provision and support across England.

This guide explains how voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) can play an active role in supporting local Healthwatch to provide a strong voice for citizens and communities.

What makes a good Healthwatch?

According to the Local Government Association...

"Gathers the views and experiences of individual service users as well as other sorts of local information that is already available from local voluntary and community groups and triangulates this with other sources of information."

"...Healthwatch will need to draw on help from established voluntary and third sector organisations that already perform advice and information signposting functions well."

"Is proactively engaged in the development and operation of working partnerships and networks, seeking to maximise the complementary relationship with the wider community engagement mechanisms and activities in the local area."

"Provides voluntary and community organisations with the information they need to be able to take an active part in strategic partnerships."

Local Healthwatch

Local Healthwatch gives communities a stronger voice by influencing and challenging how health and social care services are delivered as well as providing or signposting people to information to help them make choices about health and care services.

Many organisations work directly in health and social care, whilst others work to improve the wider determinants of health, such as housing or sports. Work may focus on a particular part of the life course, such as charities for older people, or on people with particular protected characteristics, such as groups serving a particular ethnic group..

The voluntary and community sector in health and social care

Voluntary and community sector organisations have a vital role in addressing the health and social care needs of communities. They can represent the "voice" of the communities they serve, including those that are often marginalised.

Voluntary and community organisations establish in response to an unmet need - where public or private sector interventions have not fully addressed the needs of a population. They often work with the most disadvantaged communities - both geographic localities and communities of interest.

The voluntary and community sector and local Healthwatch

The contribution of the voluntary and community sector to the design and delivery of services, and to reducing health inequalities, makes it an essential partner in the success of local Healthwatch.

Regional Voices believes local Healthwatch organisations need to collaborate closely with the voluntary and community sector in order to be an effective voice for communities.

How the voluntary sector can support local Healthwatch

Function one:

Gathering views and understanding the experiences of people who use services, carers and the wider community

Network of networks:

established voluntary and community sector networks and partnerships provide access to a wide range of communities and individuals in a co-ordinated way. They can help local Healthwatch to widen its engagement with communities.

Reaching new voices:

Voluntary and community organisations often work with communities and individuals that don't access traditional services – just the voices that local Healthwatch needs to be hearing.

Community-based research:

Local voluntary organisations are often specialists at gathering views from their beneficiaries. They can help local Healthwatch produce effective and robust community-based and action research.

Streamlined communication:

Voluntary and community sector organisations are experienced at developing effective methods of communication with a range of patient and user groups. They can help local Healthwatch by using their existing communication channels to promote Healthwatch activity, and to target information appropriately.

Feedback loops:

VCOs use their networks to ensure people understand why and how Healthwatch values their views, how the information they gather will be used and what impact it has had.

Identifying causes for concern:

Voluntary sector organisations work closely with their beneficiaries in a range of areas. They often hear about causes for concern early on and can feed this into local Healthwatch. This could help local Healthwatch to identify priorities for action and be well-informed when seeking to influence decision making bodies.

Function two:

Making people's views known

Function three:

Promoting and supporting the involvement of people in the commissioning and provision of local care services and how they are scrutinised

Providing information and intelligence:

The voluntary and community sector gathers a wide range of information and intelligence (both quantitative and qualitative) across a wide range of topics and are often specialists in working with specific communities or around specific conditions. Local Healthwatch can use this information to develop a more robust evidence base. Voluntary organisations will also be a useful source of information about local, regional and national policies that affect communities.

Influencing health and wellbeing boards:

In many areas the voluntary and community sector has an additional seat on the Health and Wellbeing Board. Whilst both the voluntary sector and local Healthwatch must respect their different roles, by working together they will be able to make a stronger case, have a bigger influence on commissioning and more effectively represent patients, the public and communities.

Promoting inclusive involvement in commissioning and provision:

The voluntary sector can support local Healthwatch to be accessible and inclusive by promoting it and ensuring people know how to engage with it. The two can also share collective experience and expertise in effectively influencing local strategies and provision.

Function five:

Providing advice and information about access to services and support for making informed choices

Co-ordinating information:

Voluntary and community sector organisations run a huge range of services in health and care, both direct delivery and signposting services. Additionally, voluntary sector support and development organisations are a rich source of information about what services exist in area and often operate signposting services themselves. Many have extensive databases about local services. Local Healthwatch and the voluntary sector should work together to co-ordinate these information services and ensure that people receive high quality and up to date information about what services are available.

Raising awareness of local Healthwatch as an information and advice resource:

Local voluntary organisations can help local Healthwatch to promote their advice and information function to their beneficiary groups. Additionally, local support and development organisations can promote the function across the voluntary and community sector in an area.

Identifying gaps:

By sharing information about services in an area, local Healthwatch and the voluntary sector can identify gaps in both provision and information. They can use this shared intelligence to effectively and robustly make the case for services that fill these gaps and meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Recommending investigation or special review of services via Healthwatch England or directly to the Care Quality Commission (CQC)

Function four:

Gathering a wide range of views:

Local voluntary sector organisations have deep roots into communities and can use their relationships and networks to help local Healthwatch gather in-depth knowledge from beneficiaries, identify areas for review, and have the information to escalate serious concerns in a timely way.

Harnessing existing data and intelligence:

Local voluntary sector support and development organisations often have strong relationships with local authorities and health bodies as well as being a source of data and intelligence in their own right. They can support local Healthwatch by using these relationships to gather and analyse qualitative and quantitative intelligence to support local Healthwatch activities.

Raising awareness:

The voluntary and community sector can work in partnership with local Healthwatch to raise awareness amongst patients and the public about how review and regulation processes work and understand how they can feed in concerns.

Making the views and experiences of people known to Healthwatch England and providing a steer to help it carry out its role as national champion

Function six:

Co-ordination:

Voluntary sector networks at local and regional levels are well-established and provide a mechanism for local Healthwatch to work together across boundaries. This could include identifying common issues that could be fed into Healthwatch England, providing peer support for Healthwatch staff and volunteers, and offering training where there are common needs.

Providing robust and high quality evidence:

Healthwatch England will require high quality intelligence and evidence in order to carry out its role as a national champion effectively.

Voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations and their networks can help local Healthwatch gather robust intelligence and to identify and fill gaps in evidence.

Raising awareness:

Local voluntary and community organisations can help local Healthwatch to raise awareness of the role the important national role of Healthwatch England. Local Healthwatch should use voluntary sector networks to ensure that citizens and users understand how the information they provide is being used to influence nationally.

Making contact with the voluntary and community sector

Locally, the best source of support for linking with the sector is the local support and development organisation (sometimes called a Council for Voluntary Services/ CVS or Voluntary Action). They help a wide range of local partners to reach voluntary organisations. Many of these organisations also facilitate a network of organisations working in health and social care, and other networks working with particular communities or on a specific issue.

For more information and to find out about local support and development organisations in your area visit <http://www.navca.org.uk/directory>

If you require this information in an alternative format or further information call 0113 394 2300 or email contact@regionalvoices.org

Further information can be found at www.regionalvoices.org

About Regional Voices

Regional Voices champions the work of voluntary and community organisations to improve health, wellbeing and care across England. As a Strategic Partner, Regional Voices is strengthening links between the Department of Health, the NHS Commissioning Board and Public Health England and the voluntary sector.

Regional Voices is a partnership of nine regional networks, connecting directly to over 25,000 voluntary and community organisations across England. Our coverage broad, deep and well established. The nine regional networks can support local Healthwatch to work across boundaries, share good practice and are a good point for an alternative view on engaging with the voluntary and community sector.

regional voices  for better health

Local Government Association