



Maintaining Independence

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1 Independence

Local Healthwatch needs to be independent and accessible to all sections of the community, seen by the public as part of the community they live in, able to reflect the experiences that they have shared about health and social care services. To maintain this independence requires local Healthwatch to behave in a particular way that enables them to listen to the voice of their communities carefully and impartially.

1.1 Managing Independence

It is independence of purpose, voice and action which should set local Healthwatch apart from the statutory structures they work within, enabling them to effectively deliver their statutory duties as the consumer champion for health and social care.

The key areas to achieve independence outlined below are those used by the Independence Panel in July 2011, and have been adapted for local Healthwatch.

1.2 Purpose of independence

The network is there to add value to people's lives by amplifying their voice and experiences of the most pressing and difficult issues in health and social care. That strength of purpose will only be upheld if the Healthwatch network, and those with whom it works, value independence and respect it in everything they do.

1.3 Independence of voice

The ability to speak up independently on behalf of sometimes unpopular causes or marginalised groups is critical to the work of the network. To maintain this independent freedom local Healthwatch must make sure people and stakeholders are clear of their independent position, one that cannot be compromised for any reason. Independence can also be undermined if local Healthwatch fail to base their views on evidence and are out of touch with the real concerns of those with whom they work. The principle of presenting the lived experience in an evidence based way is vital, as voices may be muted if it becomes clear that the evidence is not credible and partners may therefore be unwilling to listen.



1.4 Independence of action

Independence of action enables the Healthwatch network to design and deliver activities that best meet the needs of the people they serve. It helps to foster the innovation that leads to better services and solutions. If local Healthwatch decide to take on extra commissioned work it must be clear, within the contract, how this independence will be preserved. For example, that they own the information collected, the right to publish any information collected and publish the final report in full.

1.5 Top tips for local Healthwatch in maintaining independence

Local Healthwatch

- Must work to the highest levels of transparency and accountability in all activities. Good governance is fundamental.
- Must declare and manage conflicts of interest - remember that it can be the public's perception of a conflict that undermines trust and independence. Local Healthwatch must be particularly careful about political affiliations.
- Must be seen as independent and accessible to all, representing all parts of the community, reflecting their experiences of health and social care services set apart from campaigning organisations.
- Are subject to oversight by Local Authority Commissioners and required to meet contractual requirements, this control over daily activities should not have undue influence on freedom to set priorities.
- Must not compromise their position through commercial or provider interest.
- Independence does not mean avoiding partnership with others. Strong and trusted relationships are vital to having local insight and influence.
- In undertaking contracted work there is a risk that commissioners might not understand your independence and statutory powers. It is important to make these clear upfront to manage expectations.
- Keep free of any political influence, be careful when inviting speakers to events not to give a political message inadvertently or engage in a conversation that might give the wrong message about political impartiality.
- Must use the Healthwatch brand with care so that they do not appear to have the wrong associations.



Campaigning

The regulations effecting local Healthwatch prevent them from being set up as a political body or making political activities its main activity. The regulations allow local Healthwatch to speak out and to campaign (including for policy or legislative change) provided it is in support of their core purpose of being a consumer champion.

Local Healthwatch must not give support or funding to a political party. Local Healthwatch must not be used as a vehicle for the expression of political views, or endorse or comment on any party or candidate, but instead concentrate on the issue that they are raising as it relates to consumers.

Elections

During an election period, both for local and national elections, it is critical that all members of the Healthwatch network continue to act in a politically neutral manner and do not engage in activities, or advocate positions, which are party political.

Local Healthwatch should continue to operate as usual and carry out day-to-day activities. However, it would be advisable to have an early discussion with your local authority commissioner to establish if there will be any specific guidance that the local authority will expect local Healthwatch to comply with.



It is also important to consider the implications and risks around conducting communications and external engagement activity during election periods. Please contact your Healthwatch England regional lead if you have questions about how to operate during election periods.

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