

## Maintaining Independence

Retaining an independent view on local health and social care issues within new Local Healthwatch organisations.

### Introduction

Since 1 April local Healthwatch organisations have become responsible for promoting the patient and public voice. Local Healthwatch is directly commissioned by local authorities with commissioners potentially having a hands-on relationship. Many involved in the old Local Involvement Networks LINks had little experience of this type of funding relationship. Some have expressed concerns that their independence could be threatened and the local authority could prevent Healthwatch being overly critical of their services.

Whilst there is always a risk for voluntary sector organisations or social enterprises where a large proportion of their funding comes from a statutory body, there are many that have made this work.

This paper outlines methods available to local Healthwatch to help maintain independence. Case studies of organisations that have successfully developed a 'critical friend' role can be found here:

[http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/health\\_case\\_study\\_cohpendium.pdf](http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/health_case_study_cohpendium.pdf)

## **The importance of independence**

To be successful local Healthwatch will need to engage with people in their local area in order to identify real and maybe hidden concerns or needs, to speak up without fear or favour, and to influence local service delivery and strategy effectively. This independence - of purpose, voice and action - is key to the success of local Healthwatch. It will enable local Healthwatch to represent the interests of those who lack the power of influence.

To achieve this, local Healthwatch must be seen to be, and actually be, independent of the local authority. Neither the health and wellbeing board nor the local authority should dictate priorities, stifle messages, or in any way prevent the local Healthwatch from doing its business effectively.

## **Tools to support independence**

Local Healthwatch organisations are set up as social enterprises. As not for profit organisations they will face similar worries about independence as those more established in the voluntary sector. There are an existing range of tools for voluntary sector organisations that support maintenance of independence and these will help local Healthwatch when developing new relationships.

### **The Compact**

The Compact is the agreement between the voluntary sector and the Government which outlines a way of working that improves their relationship and benefits both parties. It is accompanied by an Accountability and Transparency Guide which outlines ways to resolve any issues nationally and locally.

As well as the national Compact, most areas in England also have a local Compact, developed to reflect local need. Local Compacts may cover different local government bodies and can span district, county or regional areas.

The Compact safeguards the voluntary sector's independence including its right within the law to campaign and challenge Government policy and the right to manage its own affairs without interference. For further information on the Compact visit:

<http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/compacts-map>

It is crucial that local Healthwatch is able to represent patients' views responsibly. Local Healthwatch can use both the principles of the Compact and local Compact agreements as a tool to develop strong partnerships from the start, rather than waiting for things to go wrong. Taking the Compact to meetings to use as a tool to develop partnerships and improve funding relationships could help.

A local Healthwatch may contain a representative from the voluntary sector, or a local Compact group. Some have plans for a wider stakeholder mechanism to feed into the health and wellbeing board and some may co-opt specialist representatives onto the Board for specific issues..

Where the voluntary and community sector has representation on the health and wellbeing board, it is good practice for this to be backed up with structures for wider sector engagement and feedback. In many cases a wider voluntary and community sector health and social care forum or similar network or reference group can provide this engagement.

Local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations such as councils for voluntary service often provide this primary representative role and host the wider mechanisms through which voluntary and community sector representatives are selected. These organisations provide the link to local Compact working. It is essential that the sector's approach to these boards is coordinated and strategic and clearly links to local Compact mechanisms.

### **The Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector**

A panel was established by the Baring Foundation in 2011 to ensure that independence is seen as a priority for voluntary sector organisations. This panel reports annually and provides recommendations on actions to preserve the independence of the voluntary sector. Visit:

[http://www.independencepanel.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Independence-Under-Threat\\_The-Voluntary-Sector-in-2013\\_WebVersion12.pdf](http://www.independencepanel.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Independence-Under-Threat_The-Voluntary-Sector-in-2013_WebVersion12.pdf) for the latest report.

### **Transparency**

The most successful voluntary sector organisations have a culture of openness and transparency with their commissioner. Open data sharing and an honest relationship provides reassurance to both the commissioner and local Healthwatch. Ongoing dialogue and a commitment to these principles from both commissioner and provider are essential, with agreed mechanisms for regular reporting.

### **Being an effective critical friend**

Lay involvement in health and social care has often been confrontational. Patient and public involvement (either through LINKs or their predecessors) was outside the system. Local Healthwatch will be very different. Through its role on the health and wellbeing board the local Healthwatch will be able to directly influence strategy and service design locally. The behaviours and strategies needed to fulfil this role effectively are significantly different. The Healthwatch representative on the health and wellbeing board will be working directly with the key decision makers locally across health, public health and social care and will therefore be given different opportunities. To help this new way of working, Healthwatch England is developing a support package for local Healthwatch. For further details visit: [www.healthwatch.co.uk](http://www.healthwatch.co.uk)

When a more traditional campaigning approach might be needed local Healthwatch need to establish a balance between when it is appropriate to be a 'critical friend' and when campaigning is necessary. This will depend on the nature of the relationships developed locally and each situation. There will always be a role within patient and public involvement for taking forward issues that may challenge the statutory services. The case studies below highlight examples of voluntary sector organisations successfully managing the balance between being a strategic partner and a 'critical friend'.

### **Perceptions of independence**

The voluntary sector and public sector may have different opinions on the perception of their independence You can read more about this at: [http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/survey\\_report\\_2012.pdf](http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/survey_report_2012.pdf)

It is likely that there will be a gap between the perception of independence amongst local Healthwatch and local authority commissioners. Some ways of addressing this could include:

- Recognising Compact principles in local arrangements
- Identifying ways of reporting to ensure openness and transparency
- Signing up to local Compact groups
- Promoting and sharing case studies about how independence has been supported.

### **Further information**

- Informing and influencing the new local health landscape: A guide for local Compacts - available at <http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/resources/publications/health-guide>.

This guidance provides a detailed overview of the new health landscape. It provides information about the key elements of local health reform, and explains how the new and emerging health landscape will affect local Compact partnerships,

- About Regional Voices

Regional Voices supports both the voluntary sector and local Healthwatch. It provides information about Healthwatch for the voluntary and community sector and emerging Healthwatch organisations. Regional Voices has published resources to support the development of Healthwatch and in particular to promote involvement with the voluntary and community sector, and the communities it works with. Nationally, Regional Voices is working with the Department of Health, Healthwatch England and the Local Government Association to support the successful development of local Healthwatch.

Visit: <http://www.regionalvoices.org/healthwatch> for resources for developing Healthwatch including how to support outreach to new volunteers.

- About Compact Voice

Compact Voice represents the voluntary and community sector on the Compact. Compact Voice jointly signed the national Compact and negotiated its content on behalf of the voluntary and community sector, based on the views and opinions of their members.

Compact Voice's board includes representatives from support organisations such as the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA), National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) and others. A full list of board members is available on the [Compact Voice website](#).

The organisation provides information, training, and support and advice to both sectors on better ways to work when in partnership - nationally and locally - and represents the voluntary and community sector's interests to government, helping to support the principles of the Compact.

Find more information about Compact Voice's work and the resources available, including a number of case studies about its use by visiting: [www.compactvoice.org.uk](http://www.compactvoice.org.uk)