

Exploring the work and organisation of local Healthwatch in England: a mixed-methods ethnographic study

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Plain English summary

Healthwatch in England: ethnographic study

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Plain English summary

Ensuring that people's voices are heard is a vital part of planning for provision of health-care services in a patient-centred, publicly funded NHS. The NHS is accountable to the public, communities and the patients whom it serves, and this guarantees that services are more caring, safe and effective. Healthwatch was set up in 2013 to understand the needs and experiences of patients and the local community and to ensure that local residents' views are heard and acted on. Healthwatch is therefore a key partner for the NHS. There are 152 local Healthwatch organisations in England, and they have powers to advise local authorities and local NHS leaders about their communities' needs and concerns relating to health and social care.

The aim of this study was to explore and enhance the way in which local Healthwatch works to ensure meaningful patient and public voice in the commissioning and provision of NHS services. We conducted a national survey of the 150 Healthwatch organisations in England and then studied five Healthwatch organisations in detail by observing what they did and interviewing their staff. During the pandemic, we stayed in touch with these Healthwatch organisations through virtual communications. We also conducted a series of interviews about experiences during the pandemic with staff and volunteers from 15 other Healthwatch organisations who were members of a Healthwatch Involvement Panel. This Healthwatch Involvement Panel also helped make sense of all the information we collected. Finally, we ran feedback sessions that involved not only Healthwatch staff but also other local decision-makers.

We found that how Healthwatch organisations are structured – and the type of work that they do – varies greatly. The relationships between Healthwatch and other health and social care organisations in a local area – and variations in the amount of funding Healthwatch received – helped explain many of these differences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Healthwatch found new ways to give voice to the views of the public and formed effective relationships with other organisations to help it do so.

The study led to important new understandings about patient and public voice in the NHS. The findings suggest how local health and social care systems can best co-operate with residents and patients through Healthwatch.

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