

Cllr J Hanna OBE

Chair, Oxfordshire Health
Overview and Scrutiny
Committee

18 August 2026

Dear Secretary of State for Health & Social Care,

Subject: Future of Healthwatch and the Need to Preserve an Independent Patient and Resident Voice

I am writing on behalf of the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JHOSC) to express our concern regarding the Government's proposed abolition of Healthwatch England and the network of local Healthwatch organisations. The Committee urges the Government to reconsider the implications of this proposal and, should it proceed, to ensure that local systems are afforded the greatest possible flexibility to develop arrangements that preserve an independent, locally rooted patient and resident voice.

The Committee recognises the Government's ambition to strengthen patient and public voice within health and care decision-making and understands the rationale for ensuring feedback is more closely connected to those responsible for commissioning and delivering services. However, we remain concerned that abolishing Healthwatch without a clear independent replacement risks weakening rather than strengthening the ability of patients, carers and residents to influence decisions about health and care services.

In Oxfordshire, we have consistently recognised the value of a local independent patient voice function. The ability of residents to provide feedback through an organisation that is visibly separate from providers and commissioners is fundamental to public confidence. Independence is not a peripheral feature of the current model; it is the reason many people feel able to raise concerns, challenge decisions and share experiences openly. This is particularly important for those who face barriers to engagement, have lost confidence in services, or belong to seldom-heard communities. The local Healthwatch has a standard item on our agenda of every local scrutiny meeting and we work closely with Healthwatch Oxfordshire in-between our public meetings. This helps bring together a vital independent lived experience perspective of critical issues across our local population, and their reports are part of the evidence we use for the local scrutiny function.

The Committee notes that the Local Government Association has recently warned that transferring patient voice responsibilities into organisations responsible for delivering or commissioning services risks those organisations being perceived as "marking their own homework". The LGA has further highlighted the risk of fragmentation, duplication and weakened accountability if an independent local patient voice is removed without a clear alternative.

Similarly, research undertaken by The King's Fund into the future of patient voice found that Healthwatch's independence was central to its credibility with communities and enabled it to raise issues that the health and care system might otherwise overlook. The report highlighted the value of trusted local relationships, particularly with people experiencing health inequalities and those less likely to engage directly with statutory organisations. Importantly, it concluded that any future arrangements should retain independence from government and service providers and continue to provide a trusted mechanism capable of "speaking truth to power".

The Government's own equality impact assessment also acknowledges that some people are more likely to share feedback with an independent organisation than with bodies responsible for delivering or commissioning their care. It recognises that the loss of an independent patient voice function may create challenges for some communities and that trust in new arrangements will need to be established over time.

For these reasons, the Committee believes there remains a strong case for reconsidering the abolition of Healthwatch. Whilst the current model is capable of improvement, we believe reform and strengthening of an independent local patient voice function would better protect public confidence, accountability and meaningful engagement than its removal. We recognise that there is duplication between the national Healthwatch and National voices, but that this duplication does not exist at a local level.

At the same time, we recognise that the Government may decide to proceed with its proposed reforms. If so, the Committee strongly urges that the legislation and accompanying guidance provide maximum local flexibility. Local systems should be able to determine the arrangements that best meet the needs of their communities, including the ability to retain or commission independent organisations where this is considered the most effective means of ensuring that patient and resident voices are heard. This point is particularly important in Oxfordshire. Following a County Council motion and JHOSC recommendations, the Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board has already established a multi-agency Independent Patient Voice Working Group involving key system partners to explore what a future independent patient voice function could look like locally should Healthwatch be abolished. The group has been tasked with considering potential models, overseeing public engagement, and identifying the key principles that should underpin any future arrangements.

Those discussions have consistently identified independence, trust, credibility, meaningful influence, and strong relationships with communities as essential characteristics of any future patient voice function. The purpose of this work is not simply to create a replacement for Healthwatch, but to ensure that Oxfordshire retains a trusted mechanism through which residents can influence health and care services and hold organisations to account.

The Committee therefore urges the Government to:

1. **Reconsider the proposed abolition of Healthwatch** and explore whether the objectives of strengthening patient and public voice could be achieved through reform of the existing independent model rather than abolition of local Health watch.
2. **Protect the principle of independence** within any future patient voice arrangements so that local areas may retain or commission independent organisations where appropriate.

3. **Provide maximum local flexibility** for health and care systems to design arrangements that reflect local circumstances, existing partnerships and community needs.

The Committee firmly believes that an independent patient and resident voice is an essential component of an accountable, person-centred and continuously improving health and care system. Whatever national reforms are pursued, we urge the Government to ensure that the principles of independence, trust and local accountability are not lost. Oxfordshire's partners are already working constructively to explore future arrangements, and we believe that local flexibility will be critical to the success of that work. We would be grateful for your consideration of these concerns and three requests as well as clarification as to how the Government intends to safeguard independent patient and resident voice if Healthwatch is abolished.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Jane Hanna'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cllr Jane Hanna OBE

Chair, Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview Scrutiny Committee