Healthwatch England – written evidence (CCE0168)

About Healthwatch England
Healthwatch England is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We exist to ensure that people are at the heart of care. We listen to what people like about services, and what could be improved, and we share their views with those with the power to make change happen. We also help people find the information they need about services in their area. We have the power to ensure that people’s voices are heard by the government and those running services. As well as seeking the public’s views ourselves, we also encourage services to involve people in decisions that affect them. Our sole purpose is to help make care better for people.

Role of local Healthwatch
There is a local Healthwatch in every area of England, one in each top-tier local authority area. They provide information and advice about publicly-funded health and care services. They also go out and speak to local people about what they think of local care, and share what people like and what could be improved with those running services. They share feedback with Healthwatch England so that we can spot patterns in what people are saying about care, and ensure that people’s voices are heard on a national level.

Importance of civic engagement/volunteering

1. Healthwatch England and the Healthwatch network were set up under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, with the intention of providing local communities with a way of influencing local health and care provision.

2. Local Healthwatch organisations:
   - Have the legal power to carry out Enter and View visits to health and social care providers, so they can see these services in action and advise those in charge about how to improve.
   - Represent the views of people who use services, carers and the public on the Health and Wellbeing Boards set up by local authorities.
   - Report feedback about the quality of health and social care to Healthwatch England, which can then recommend that organisations such as NHS England, the Care Quality Commission and other arms-length bodies take action.

3. The activity of the Healthwatch network and Healthwatch England is dependent on civic engagement, both as a source of information and in order to carry out its statutory duties.

4. Although we as a network have around 800 staff, the network could not make a difference without people being prepared to give up their time to help improve health and care services.
5. This volunteering takes the form both of people formally giving up their time to help gather local people’s experiences and views and providing signposting advice, and of people ‘micro-volunteering’ by offering their views and experiences of health and care services.

6. Our volunteers outnumber paid staff by a ratio of over 5:1, with a voluntary base last year of nearly 5,000 people from a range of backgrounds, including an active cohort of youth volunteers. In addition, last year over 300,000 people volunteered their views and experiences of health and care services.

7. This engagement makes a real difference to people’s experiences of health and care. Our most recent public awareness campaign, #ItStartsWithYou, highlighted the effect that individual stories could have on changing the way things work and sought to encourage others to come forward. As one example, Rebecca Loo, a mother from Staffordshire, successfully campaigned for health commissioners to redesign the local equipment ordering services when her son’s long wait for a foot brace meant he had to have avoidable surgery – wasting precious money and resources and causing her son needless additional pain and discomfort. Working with her local Healthwatch, Rebecca has now been able to spread this approach around the country helping to improve services for many more patients than just her son. This way of working has been identified by NHS England as having the potential to save the NHS tens of millions of pounds.¹

8. In this sense, civic engagement has the potential to play a crucial role in the work of the public and voluntary sectors through helping to ensure that public services work for all members of the community.

Barriers to participation

9. Last year Healthwatch England commissioned a poll to better understand the reasons why people volunteered, or the barriers that prevented them from participating. 44% of people polled said that they have given up their time in the past for a community they belong to or are currently doing so. Amongst those who do not currently volunteer 49% said that they are willing to do so, with the majority (74%) of this group saying that they would be prepared to donate an hour or more of their time per week.

10. The main barriers appeared to be time, awareness and relevance. 53% of those who said that they don’t currently volunteer feel like they don’t have enough time, while 18% were unsure of the organisations or causes to which they could contribute. 17% said that none of their local organisations or causes felt relevant to them.

11. We also asked adults in the poll what factors might make them more or less likely to choose a particular issue to get involved with. The most influential factors seem to be whether an issue had touched their lives or their family (63% said this would make them more likely) or if an

organisation aims to help members of their community (57% said this would make them more likely).

**Civic engagement in the 21st century**

12. In order to make the most of people’s willingness to volunteer, and to maximise the benefits of civic engagement, organisations need more flexible approaches to provide opportunities that fit individuals’ needs and remove the barriers that impede people’s participation. For example, one student volunteer from Healthwatch Sheffield highlighted how she appreciated the opportunity to fit in volunteering around her studies. Similarly, Healthwatch Staffordshire worked with Keele University to create a number of bespoke roles for medical students, who have to spend time working in the community in order to complete their course.

**Relationship between civic engagement and social cohesion**

13. Local Healthwatch work to help ensure that health and social care services meet the needs of all users. By sharing the voices and experiences of people who may not otherwise be heard, Healthwatch embody the relationship between civic engagement and social cohesion. Engagement from every section of the community is key to ensuring that public services are right for those using them, and do not exclude anyone. Organisations like Healthwatch can help to facilitate this engagement to ensure different groups, not just those who “shout the loudest”, are able to contribute to decisions about services that affect them. As one example, Healthwatch Islington trained a group of young adult volunteers to interview their peers from a range of backgrounds about their mental health and the support services that they would find most useful. This research helped change the way that local mental health services for young people were being delivered. One volunteer was also asked to sit on the procurement panel that decided who would deliver these new services.

14. Volunteers also help to reach people who are isolated, or who may have difficulty in accessing services. Another Islington volunteer undertook a ‘mystery shopping’ exercise to discover how many GP surgeries offered interpreters for those who spoke little or no English. Their report then led to an increased number of practices being aware of, and offering, such services.

**Responsibility of society for supporting civic engagement**

15. Supported by central government, funded by local authorities and run as social enterprises, the organisations that make up the Healthwatch network represent just some of the ways that third-sector and public sector organisations can support civic engagement. Through enabling people to share their experiences of health and care services in order to affect change, Healthwatch supports a model of civic engagement with health and care services that more closely fits the ways in which people live their lives, by making engagement timely and relevant to them. This model demonstrates just one of the ways in which volunteering and

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4 [http://www.healthwatchislington.co.uk/sites/default/files/mental_health_report.pdf](http://www.healthwatchislington.co.uk/sites/default/files/mental_health_report.pdf)
civic engagement underpin public services, and provide a route for those who may otherwise have little contact with community groups to contribute to wider society.

8 September 2017