

Healthwatch Westminster Independence Policy

Version	1.0
Author	Cleo Chalk, Healthwatch Service Manager
Approved by	Donna Covey, The Advocacy Project Interim CEO
Date approved	November 14 th , 2023
Effective date	November 15 th , 2023
Review date	November 14 th , 2025

Local Healthwatch need to be independent and accessible to all sections of the community, seen by the public as part of the community we live in and able to reflect the experiences that they have shared about health and social care services.

The ability to speak up independently on behalf of sometimes unpopular causes or marginalised groups is critical to the work of Healthwatch Westminster. However we cannot work in isolation.

In the case of Healthwatch Westminster, independence is best described as listening to everyone equally and communicating what has been said without bias or misinterpretation. It is the ability to speak up independently on behalf of sometimes unpopular issues or marginalised groups, in an evidence-based way, and to look at areas and produce reports that, in the view of Healthwatch Westminster, best meet the needs of the people we serve.

Being independent can also be perceived as sitting outside the health and social care system, however we have found that many organisations are already working on improving things, and our work would end up duplicating existing activities and bringing nothing new to the discussion. Not only does this risk undermining how the process of raising public feedback is perceived but working with organisations to ensure we target our activities in the right place and at the right time, makes Healthwatch more effective.

Healthwatch Westminster will:

- Work in a spirit of partnership, sharing information, informing stakeholders about work we are undertaking and supporting work that improves patient/service user experiences.
- Share intelligence that we have received from the public.
- Ensure our activities align with health and social care organisations timescales.
- Meet with stakeholders regularly to discuss shared areas of concern and monitor an action plan made up of agreed issues, report recommendations and CQC findings.
- Provide input in high level strategic issues where there is a need to start to look at how to work with the public or give a high level view. Further input should then be sought from stakeholder engagement teams.
- Declare and manage conflicts of interest.
- Be 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.
- Not compromise our position through commercial or provider interest.
- Be 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.
- Use the Healthwatch brand with care so that we do not appear to have the wrong associations.

During an election period, both for local and national elections, we will continue to act in a politically neutral manner and will not engage in activities, or advocate positions, which are party political. We will continue to operate as usual and carry out day-to-day activities. We will confirm with our commissioner if there will be any specific guidance that the local authority will expect us to comply with.

Relationships with stakeholders

Healthwatch Westminster is not an inspector or regulator. Organisations must respond to our recommendations, but they do not have to act on them. We must ensure organisations understand our approach and are confident that our recommendations are based on evidence from the public and are realistic, to ensure they are acted on. In turn, we need to understand the service we are evaluating, to ensure we are credible. We also need to regularly meet with

organisations to monitor how they are implementing our recommendations, as some can take many months.

Where we act as a critical friend, we may need to give negative feedback that is difficult for the organisation to hear. In response, they usually invite us into discussions much earlier next time. We view this as a success, as one of our statutory duties is to promote and support the involvement of local people in the commissioning, the provision and scrutiny of local care services, which means being involved when conversations about change are just starting.

In short, we have seen that we achieve much more working with, than working against.

Although we are subject to oversight by Local Authority Commissioners and required to meet contractual requirements, we have regular discussions to ensure that this control over daily activities does not have undue influence on freedom to set priorities.

We have an Advisory Board made up of public, volunteers and stakeholders. The Advisory Board constantly looks at how we work, to ensure they are confident in our approach.