

The value of listening

Healthwatch Birmingham
Annual Report 2023 – 2024



healthwatch
Birmingham

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“Over the last year, local Healthwatch have shown what happens when people speak up about their care, and services listen. They are helping the NHS unlock the power of people’s views and experiences, especially those facing the most serious health inequalities.”

Louise Ansari, Chief Executive at Healthwatch England



Message from our Chair

Healthwatch Birmingham is here to listen to everybody's experiences of health and social care. This year we're proud to have heard from nearly 9,000 local citizens from more diverse communities than ever before. Thanks to everyone who has shared feedback with us, as this is vital to our work to combat health inequalities.

We do more than just listen. Our responsibility as the voice of the public is extremely important, particularly as the NHS struggles with ever greater pressures, and Birmingham City Council's financial challenges mean cuts to services that will impact vulnerable people already struggling with the cost-of-living. By reporting what we hear to services, and working with them to ensure the changes they make are what people have told us they want, Healthwatch Birmingham puts service users at the heart of decisions about local health and social care.

Our growing influence is demonstrated by our role in uncovering serious problems at University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust (UHB), and we are continuing to press for accountability and support improvement. We have also helped to drive important changes in maternity care for Black women, and are working to improve access to community mental health services. Our reports are now a recognised part of the quality monitoring process across the Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (BSOL ICS), showing how seriously our work is viewed by health and social care leaders.

That we can undertake such a range of work on such a tight budget is testament to the dedication of our staff and volunteers. I would like to thank them on behalf of the entire Healthwatch Board, and also extend our gratitude to everyone who has supported us in our mission to ensure that everyone in Birmingham can get the right care for them.



"By reporting what we hear to services, and working with them to ensure the changes they make are what people have told us they want, Healthwatch Birmingham puts service users at the heart of decisions about local health and social care."

Richard Burden, Chair, Healthwatch Birmingham



About us

Healthwatch Birmingham is your local health and social care champion.

We make sure NHS leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

Our vision

A world where we can all get the health and care we need.



Our mission

To make sure people's experiences help make health and care better.



Our values are:

- **Listening** to people and making sure their voices are heard.
- **Including** everyone in the conversation – especially those who do not always have their voice heard.
- **Analysing** different people's experiences to learn how to improve care.
- **Acting** on feedback and driving change.
- **Partnering** with care providers, Government, and the voluntary sector – serving as the public's independent champion.



Year in review

Reaching out:

8,984 people

shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

5,890 people

came to us for clear advice and information about topics such as mental health and the cost-of-living crisis.



Making a difference to care:

We published

8 reports

about the improvements people would like to see in health and social care services.

Our most popular report was

How has the cost-of-living crisis affected the health and wellbeing of people in Birmingham and Solihull?



Health and social care that works for you:

We're lucky to have

39

outstanding volunteers who help to make care better for our community.

We're funded by our local authority. In 2023 - 24 we received

£422,207

which is the same as the previous year.

We currently employ

11 staff

to carry out our work.



Your voice heard at a wider level

We collaborate with our partners at Healthwatch Solihull to ensure the experiences of people in Birmingham influence decisions made about services at Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS) level.



We investigated how the cost-of-living crisis was affecting people's physical and mental health in Birmingham and Solihull. Over 300 local residents told us about problems paying for healthcare costs like prescriptions and travel to appointments. We shared their experiences in a report to the local authorities and NHS, who committed to raising awareness of financial support available.

We played an important role in tackling problems with staff culture and patient safety at University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust (UHB). Alongside making regular media appearances to raise issues people had told us about, we were core members of the scrutiny group for three independent reviews which have resulted in important changes to management and governance at UHB.



We heard concerns from users of NHS prostate cancer services in Birmingham and Solihull, who told us about lack of information about treatment options, slow pace of treatment and limited support after discharge. Following our report into these issues, UHB has now introduced a number of improvements including improving access to appointments, more holistic needs assessments and recruiting additional staff to support patients.



Listening to your experiences

Services can't make improvements without hearing your views. That's why we make listening to feedback from all areas of the community a priority. This allows us to understand the full picture, and feed this back to services and help them improve.

Better maternity care for Black African and Black Caribbean women

Black African and Black Caribbean women who shared their experiences of maternity services in West Birmingham with us have played a crucial role in making important improvements that will benefit people giving birth across Birmingham and Solihull.

These changes follow our investigation into maternity services provided by Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust (SWBH), in which women of Black African or Black Caribbean backgrounds revealed issues such as:

- Problems around continuity of care leading to anxiety and difficulties discussing other issues such as mental health.
- Failure to be referred to midwives by their GP, which delayed screening and scans.
- Poor staff attitudes and behaviour.
- Lack of access to interpreters or translators.
- Not feeling any real choice around where to give birth, and what type of birth to have.

SWBH has now implemented a number of changes to address the concerns women raised with us.

What difference did this make?

- Increasing the number of midwives from Black African backgrounds, to ensure maternity services better reflect the communities they serve.
- Hiring a Best Start Midwife, attached to GP surgeries in areas with high numbers of Black African and Black Caribbean families, to provide better continuity of care.
- Employing a Patient Experience Midwife to capture and respond to patient feedback.
- Introducing on-the-spot virtual interpreters in maternity and neonatal services, in addition to current telephone and in-person interpretation services.
- 'Drop in' antenatal classes without the need to pre-book, to improve access for ethnically diverse and digitally excluded families.

The recommendations for changes women wanted made in the original investigation have also been taken up by Birmingham and Solihull Local Maternity and Neonatal Services Stakeholder Council (BUMP), which is now undertaking work to improve maternity services for diverse communities across the whole of Birmingham and Solihull.

Challenges accessing community mental health services

We investigated community mental health services in South and East Birmingham after hearing about many people struggling to get high quality mental health care. Over 100 local people told us about issues including:

- **Quality of service:** 49% rated services as poor or very poor.
- **Waiting times:** 22% waited 3-6 months for a first appointment following referral.
- **Over-reliance on prescription medication:** 57% received prescription medication compared to only 19% that received talking therapy.
- **Consistency of care:** 46% could not contact the service to get the help they needed.
- **Care planning and review:** 59% did not have a care plan.

While just over half the people who shared their experiences said they were treated with kindness, dignity and respect by community mental health services, they also told us about the improvements they would like to the care they received. These include:

- Improving access to appointments and reducing waiting times for treatment.
- Offering people reviews after treatment and re-refer people if more support is needed.
- Ensuring that care and support is personalised following a discussion with people about their needs.
- Producing and following good care plans.
- Offering more than just medication.

In response, Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (BSMHFT) has provided an action plan outlining how the Trust intends to tackle the issues identified in the report.

What difference will this make?

- Collaborative, needs led, care planning to ensure that all discussion will be done jointly with service users and will address their needs.
- Meet and Greet staff to support service users when they attend community hubs for their appointments.
- Clear guidance for managing appointment cancellations, so individuals are contacted to be told why their appointment has been cancelled and when their rescheduled appointment will occur.



“They don’t ask you about your daily struggles and what you are going through in life. They just focus on the fact that you are not trying to hurt yourself anymore.”

Three ways we have made a difference in the community

Throughout our work we gather information about health inequalities by speaking to people whose experiences aren't often heard.

Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life

It's important for services to see the bigger picture. Hearing personal experiences and the impact on people's lives provides them with a better understanding of the problems.

We helped BUMP organise a series of listening events so maternity services could better understand the experiences of women giving birth. Focusing on the most disadvantaged communities in Birmingham, and with interpreters provided, staff from all levels were encouraged to 'just listen' to what people were telling them, before reporting what they heard back to services so appropriate action can be taken.



Getting services to involve the public

Services need to understand the benefits of involving local people to help improve care for everyone.

People's feedback forms the basis of our responses to consultations on changing or redesigning services, so we can ensure the views of the public are considered in important decisions that affect them. This year we have presented the public's perspective on issues including visiting rights, suspected cancer and oral health to organisations such as the NHS, CQC and Birmingham City Council, while our written evidence has been published as part of Parliamentary inquiries into women's reproductive health and men's health.



Improving care over time

Change takes time. We often work behind the scenes with services to consistently raise issues and bring about change.

We use our role in the Birmingham & Solihull Integrated Care Partnership to ensure the views of local people are central in future health and social care plans and hold services to account for continuous improvement. All our investigations are now a key part of NHS BSOL's Quality Monitoring System, ensuring our work results in real change for local people which can be measured over time and means that the voice of local people has greater influence over quality improvement.





Hearing from all communities

Over the past year, we have worked hard to make sure we hear from everyone within our local area. We consider it important to reach out to the communities we hear from less frequently to gather their feedback and make sure their voice is heard, and services meet their needs.

This year we have heard:

- From people in each of Birmingham's 69 wards
- More from the city's most deprived wards than the least deprived
- From all of Birmingham's main ethnic groups and faiths

Out in the community

One of the best things about working or volunteering for Healthwatch Birmingham is meeting and talking to so many different people right across the city. We're proud to say that we've spoken to over 13,200 local people at 267 different sessions and events over the past year. Every piece of feedback we've heard has helped our mission to improve health and social care services for everyone.

Our Community Engagement teams are a familiar sight in Birmingham's main hospitals and other health and social care settings, offering a friendly and understanding ear to people who want to share their experiences, or need clear information about where to get support. So if you see us out and about we'd love to hear from you!

But we don't just expect people to come to us. To tackle health inequalities we need to understand the health and social care experiences of people whose voices are less likely to be heard. That's why, with the invaluable support of our partner organisations, we make a special effort to reach out to different communities in the places where they feel most comfortable, such as:

- Members of the Muslim community at Mosques and Masjids
- People from Black backgrounds at Windrush health and Black History Month events
- People experiencing homelessness at soup kitchens and food banks
- Members of the LGBTQ community through the Birmingham LGBTQ+ Network and Open Minds Project
- People with disabilities at events run by Kinmos, Cerebral Palsy West Midlands and Focus Birmingham



We're here to listen to you!

You don't have to catch us out in the community to share your feedback. We can also be contacted on:

- Visit our [online feedback centre](#)
- Call **(freephone) 0800 652 5278**
- Email info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk



Advice and information

If you feel lost and don't know where to turn, Healthwatch is here for you. In times of worry or stress, we can provide free and confidential information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. Whether it's finding an NHS dentist, making a complaint or choosing a good care home for a loved one – you can count on us.

This year we've helped people by:

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Helping people access NHS dentistry
- Supporting people to look after their health during the cost-of-living crisis

Supporting people in Birmingham

Over the past year, we have supported people with many different issues.

Callers have continued to raise issues around GP and dentist access. We have signposted through complaints procedures, and the most up-to-date dentistry information.

Ensuring people with additional needs can access services

We know that everyone's case is different, and pride ourselves on listening to individuals and personalising the information we offer. For example, we were contacted by an individual who was struggling to register with a new GP surgery and did not have access to the internet. They had also had a poor experience with their previous surgery, and also have multiple health issues, so cannot be without a GP for too long.

We provided phone numbers for local surgeries within their postcode area that were taking on new patients, as well as complaints information to raise their concerns with their previous surgery.

They later contacted us to tell us that they had successfully registered with a new surgery, and had also put in a verbal complaint about their previous treatment. They were pleased that we could provide contact details which were difficult to access without the internet, and had taken the time to understand their situation.

People have raised concerns around the cost of living crisis. We have kept up-to-date with local services providing advice and practical support, which we are signposting to.

We have updated all of our Information and Signposting pages on our website, to make information about health and social care as accessible as possible for people. These pages cover a wide range of topics.

We have also developed FAQ guides for our Community Engagement team to give to members of the public. They include topics such as complaints information, accessing social care and finding local community groups.

Providing information during a measles outbreak

- During the local measles outbreak, we received a lot of calls from people with questions about the outbreak and vaccinations.
- Callers were often unsure whether they were up to date with their MMR jabs. We explained routes people could take to find this out.
- We promoted our service on local community radio station Unity FM, encouraging members of the public to call us with any questions.

Got questions about health and social care?

Our friendly team are here to listen to you, and direct you towards the best care and support for your personal needs and situation. Contact us on:

- Call **(freephone) 0800 652 5278**
- Email **info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk**
- You can also read our free new online **[guides for help with the NHS and social care](#)**



Volunteering

We're supported by a team of amazing volunteers who are at the heart of what we do. Thanks to their efforts in the community, we're able to understand what is working and what needs improving.

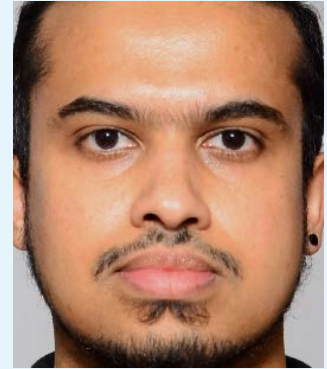
This year our volunteers:

- Collected experiences and supported people in different communities to share their views
- Provided information to members of the public with questions about health and social care
- Helped to compile and analyse data in our reports



Thilanka

"I'm originally from Sri Lanka, and before I started my journey in the UK's healthcare system, I felt it was important to understand the local community. That's why I volunteered with the Royal Voluntary Service during the peak of the pandemic, helping with COVID vaccine distribution. As things settled post-pandemic, I looked for more ways to get involved and found Healthwatch Birmingham.



When I joined last year, I was pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome from the Birmingham team. They're incredibly supportive, which fuelled my passion for volunteering. What makes Healthwatch stand out is how they invest in their volunteers. They not only provide training and guidance within the organization but also encourage us to take part in external programs. For instance, they introduced me to the Orange Badge Scheme and other external training, which has been invaluable for my personal and professional growth.

Volunteering with Healthwatch Birmingham has been life changing. Meeting different communities and attending various events has boosted my confidence and communication skills. The best part is that there are plenty of volunteering opportunities available throughout the year.

I highly recommend Healthwatch to anyone interested in a healthcare or community service career. It's not just about giving back; it's about gaining experience, understanding healthcare systems, and connecting with the community."



Skylar

"Becoming a volunteer with Healthwatch has been a rewarding experience for me on many levels. It marks my first venture into volunteering in the UK, providing me with a platform for learning and personal growth, fostering a more inclusive understanding of the world around me. Through my volunteer work, I've had the chance to engage with diverse individuals and communities, refining my communication skills and expanding my perspective.

I've witnessed firsthand the impactful contributions of Healthwatch volunteers within the community. Our commitment to transparency, fairness, and inclusivity closely aligns with my own values and aspirations.

I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to be part of such a dedicated and impactful organisation, and I eagerly anticipate continuing my journey of service and learning with Healthwatch."



Claire

"I have worked as a clinician in the NHS and social care for over 30 years. In this time, I have been aware that there have not always been real opportunities or the honest welcoming of people's voices as they express their views about the services that they have received or would like to receive. So I was very interested in the work of Healthwatch, and wanted to get involved.

In my experience, I have found that Healthwatch truly works to provide a safe space and give proper time to all the people who are part of our communities. It truly looks to enable the gathering of real meaningful information, giving the NHS and care services the opportunity to respond and do real meaningful change.

For me, I find it so heartening when an individual, at the end of a conversation, leaves feeling encouraged and knows that their views are truly valued, really matter and count. I have found that there are a very wide range of different services that can be volunteered at, giving me the opportunity to engage with particular services of interest. Volunteering with Healthwatch is very flexible, and can fit around my schedule. And very importantly, I have found that the Healthwatch team truly do value their volunteers."



Christine

"I've been volunteering for over 10 years. It's nice to be part of a team that actually respects you and can see the skills you've got."



Do you feel inspired?

We're always looking for new people to join us as volunteers. Please contact us on:

- Call **(freephone) 0800 652 5278**
- Email **volunteering@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk**
- Visit our **[website volunteering pages](#)**



Finance and future priorities

To help us carry out our work we receive funding from our local authority under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

Our income and expenditure

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£422,207	Expenditure on pay	£379,402
Additional income	£40,000	Non-pay expenditure	£13,108
		Office and management fees	£48,778
Total income	£462,207	Total expenditure	£441,288

ICS funding

Healthwatch across Birmingham and Solihull also receives funding from our Integrated Care System (ICS) to support new areas of collaborative work at this level, including:

Purpose of ICS funding	Amount
Provide additional resources at board and locality level	£40,000

Next steps

Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society, especially people in the most deprived areas, so that those in power hear their views and experiences.

We will also work together with partners and our local Integrated Care System to help develop an NHS culture where, at every level, staff strive to listen and learn from patients to make care better.

Our top three priorities for the next year are:

1. Ensure the Mental Health, Community and Acute Provider Collaboratives uses patient feedback in all aspects of service development.
2. Increase our work with communities who experience the biggest inequalities.
3. Monitor the impact of Birmingham City Council cuts through listening to local people.



Statutory statements

**Healthwatch Birmingham, Cobalt Square, Hagley Road,
Birmingham, B16 8QG**

**Healthwatch Birmingham uses the Healthwatch Trademark
when undertaking our statutory activities as covered by
the licence agreement.**

The way we work

Involvement of volunteers and lay people in our governance and decision-making

Our Healthwatch Board consists of 11 members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny of our activities. Our board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2023/24, the board met formally four times and held discussions on important health and social care matters such as University Hospitals Birmingham Reviews and the Birmingham City Council 114 notice. The board have also made decisions about our governance structure, developing a finance and audit subgroup and Vice Chair role in 2024/25.

We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities.

Methods and systems used across the year to obtain people's experiences

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible can provide us with insight into their experience of using services. During 2023/24, we have been available by phone, and email, provided a web form on our website and through social media, as well as visiting health and social care settings and attending meetings of community groups and forums.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. It will be published on our website and distributed to our mailing list and stakeholders.

Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences that have been shared with us.

In our local authority area, for example, we take information to a number of boards and committees, these include Birmingham Place Committee, Birmingham Health and Wellbeing Board and Birmingham Safeguarding Adults Board.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System. For example, we share collated information from Healthwatch Birmingham and Healthwatch Solihull at the Integrated Care Board and Integrated Care Partnership and highlight patient insight and experience at their Quality Committee. We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

Enter and view

This year, we did not make use of our Enter and View powers. Consequently, no recommendations or other actions resulted from this area of activity

Healthwatch representatives


Healthwatch Birmingham is represented on the Birmingham Health and Wellbeing Board by Andy Cave, Chief Executive. During 2023/24 he has effectively carried out this role by championing the involvement of local people in decisions and supporting the board to understand citizens' experiences.

Healthwatch Birmingham is represented in the Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System by:

- Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Partnership – Richard Burden (Chair)
- Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board – Andy Cave (CEO)
- Birmingham Place Committee – Andy Cave (CEO)

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