

You told us

During the Health Inequalities Conference held in Reading in March 2024 (run by ACRE and Utulivu and hosted by the Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC)), a discussion highlighted the experience of an elected member of West Berkshire Council who described feeling dehumanised after being incorrectly billed for NHS treatment by the Royal Berkshire Hospital in January 2024. The councillor moved to the UK in 1979 and is a British citizen.

Another conference participant shared a similar experience; their child, born in the UK to British citizen parents was incorrectly billed for NHS treatment 30 years ago.

Our further research revealed that other Reading residents and families had faced similar billing errors, including repeated demanding letters, invoices sent to children, and claims that individuals had only recently arrived in the UK.

These errors caused significant psychological harm, including depression, sleeplessness, panic attacks and loss of trust in the NHS. Voluntary organisations with limited funding, such as Reading Refugee Group, reported spending substantial time supporting affected individuals (outside their remit) by liaising with hospitals, NHS overseas billing teams and the Home Office to resolve these cases for people living in Reading.



What we did

- We reached out to communities and voluntary organisations after attending the Health Inequalities Conference, to find out if anyone else had experienced an NHS billing error. We gathered feedback.
- We wrote a letter to the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust (RBFT) to share anonymous feedback and our concerns.
- We organised and hosted a community conversation, presenting our evidence and seeking solutions. This event brought together 30 people, including Steve McManus (CEO of RBFT), the overseas billing team at RBFT, voluntary organisations and community leaders from across Reading.
- After this community conversation, we sent a letter to RBFT to confirm the actions they had publicly committed to taking to stop future overseas billing errors.

Impact we made

As a result of our work, we've helped bring about real change at the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust (RBFT) improving how overseas billing is communicated and managed.

This includes closer monitoring of overseas billing, better staff training so patients are treated with care and understanding, and clearer, more accessible information through updated webpages and factsheets.

RBFT has also committed to continuing to work with Healthwatch Reading, making sure people's real experiences shape future policies, practices, and services.

Most importantly, this work has strengthened the voices of Reading residents, community leaders, and voluntary organisations, helping to create more positive and fair experiences for patients at RBFT.

Why is this important ?

To ensure that the diverse, often underrepresented communities of Reading are heard and have their concerns addressed, while also supporting local healthcare services to improve care and services for all residents across Reading.

What has changed

- RBFT has committed to resolving billing errors promptly once they are notified.
- Following our recommendations, the trust produced a clearer **factsheet** explaining NHS overseas billing.
- The overseas billing **webpage** has been updated to clarify NHS overseas billing rules, including the definition of "ordinarily resident."
- The website search functionality has been enhanced to direct users to the correct overseas billing information.
- Website links to local community and voluntary organisations (who were part of our community conversation mentioned on page 1) are now listed on the webpage and factsheet.
- At RBFT's request, we have signed off on the final changes to the webpages and factsheet.



Future changes

RBFT are:

- Looking into how to apply the Ordinarily Resident process to stop billing letters being directly sent to children and young people.
- Whilst RBFT has addressed the risk of sending billing letters to children and young people in new cases, they will review existing accounts to ensure this risk is managed.
- Assessing how to monitor billing as part of a broader review into overseas billing to minimise future billing errors.
- Reviewing staff training for the overseas billing process to ensure the team is responding proactively and with compassion towards the patient, and their situation.
- Reviewing ways to improve the public's understanding of the overseas billing process, including accessibility; language use, Easy Read materials, and sharing information with other agencies. They will seek input from Healthwatch Reading in the future.



Further action by Healthwatch Reading

- Push for clearer contact details (i.e. an email address) for the Overseas Visitor team to be published in relevant sections of their webpage and factsheet.
- Share updates from RBFT with the voluntary organisations and community leaders who attended the community conversation. Also, ask them to continue to share any feedback they receive from the community on NHS billing issues.
- Contact our national body, Healthwatch England, to inform them of our findings and to ask whether this is an issue that has been raised with other Healthwatch across England.
- Contact NHS England to find out if they are aware of billing errors at RBFT and if this is happening in other trusts across England.
- Hold RBFT to account whilst also working with and supporting them in their work to ensure improvements are made and that actions which have been agreed are completed.

