



Speaking up for better care

Healthwatch Southampton
annual report 2025/26

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As CEO of SVS, the charity that hosts Healthwatch Southampton (HWS), I am delighted to endorse this report outlining the amazing work undertaken over the year by our dedicated team of paid staff and volunteers.

The activity includes assisting members of the public to access care or help with concerns, advocating for patients and the public at strategic partnership.

As ever, HWS has connected with specific priority groups of people to highlight their needs to system decision makers, including people living with hearing loss, unpaid carers, and older people living in care homes. These reports provide valuable insight into lived experience, and ensures these groups have a voice and route to influence.

This report underlines the value and importance of a trusted independent system actor, unencumbered by organisational bias, and able to freely speak truth to power – something I'm concerned will be lost if plans to abolish local Healthwatch go ahead unchallenged.



Rob Kurn
CEO, Southampton
Voluntary Services

A message from our chair

While more Southampton residents now share their experiences online, we know that digital engagement alone is not enough, in a city where many people remain digitally excluded. For this reason, we have maintained our commitment to personal outreach, community conversations and targeted engagement with groups who may otherwise be overlooked.

The stories people share with us have helped us identify where improvements need to be made e.g., no pharmacies being open after 9pm, transport to medical appointments and access to both mental health services and primary care. We have worked with commissioners and providers to improve these issues. Thank you to everyone who has given us feedback.

We have concerns about the Health Reform Bill which

- Looks to abolish Healthwatch thus losing independent, objective feedback, particularly from people who are digitally excluded.
- Leaves patient feedback to be gathered separately by health and social care.
- Misses an opportunity to reform the integration of health and social care services

However, we remain positive about working with local decision makers on the following issues:



Chair
Suki Sitaram

- developing a baseline for the city on Pharmacy First services in the city
- the Neighbourhood Plan for the city and its implementation
- the Health Determinants Research Collaboration project.

My thanks to the staff team, volunteers, Strategic Group members and Southampton Voluntary Services for their contribution to the achievements and impact detailed in this report and my particular thanks to Lesley Gilder, who was involved with the Strategic Group for many years and stepped down in Autumn 2025.

About us

Healthwatch Southampton is your local health and social care champion.

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



Our vision

First class and timely health and care services for all citizens.



Our mission

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



Our values are:

Collect and analyse information about health and social care services with particular reference to lived experiences.

Support health and care decision makers in their work, by sharing and utilising public feedback to HWS and promoting the involvement of local communities in decisions that affect them

Actively partner with Healthwatch England, local government and social care providers and the voluntary sector, acting as a critical friend whilst maintaining our role as independent advisor.

Our year in numbers

In 2025/2026 we supported more than 1600 people to have their say and get information about their care. We employed 3 staff and, our work was supported by 14 volunteers.



Reaching out:

1246 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

369 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as access to GP's services, mental health support, finding a dentist, Patient Participation Groups and G.P website audit.



Championing your voice:

We published 6 reports into the East Community Mental Health team, Dementia, Unpaid Carers Views on Respite and Health Services, Care Homes in Southampton, Patient Participation Groups, and GP Website Audit. They were accessed on our website 398 times.



Statutory funding:

We are funded by Southampton City Council. In 2025/26 we received £136,258 which is 2% more than last year.

A year of making a difference

Over the year we've been out and about in the community listening to your stories, engaging with partners and working to improve care in Southampton. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We facilitated a city-wide Patient Participation Group (PPG) network meeting to map and improve provision of the different models that support patient voice in GP practices.

Residents in Southampton shared how they travel to non-emergency health appointments—by bus, taxi, patient transport, walking, or cycling—through an online & paper survey.

Summer

Published our GP Website audit which demonstrated improvements needed and changes made to GP websites, highlighting the importance of good quality information for patient access.

Launched a new Healthwatch website, tested by the public, to ensure information and navigation was easy, with new contact and feedback forms included. Also launched a new text service to enable accessibility to all members of the community.

Autumn

Listening to people's experience of direct payments we were able to take part in workshops and provide telephone support to inform a new Council strategy.

Volunteers contributed to Patient Led Assessments of the Care Environment (PLACE) inspections in the city to ensure compliance with a clean, safe environment.

Winter

Our report on East Community Mental Health Team (East CMHT) Southampton, helped patients and the public to understand the systems and structures within local mental health services and Community Mental Health Teams.

Our work started on capturing the voice of young adult carers, We used online workshops and face to face to feed the experiences of hidden and supported carers into the Carers Strategy Review of 2026.

Working together for change

We have worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in Southampton are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level, and they influence decisions made about services at Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care System.



A collaborative network of local Healthwatch

Working collaboratively across Hampshire, Portsmouth, the Isle of Wight and Southampton, the four local Healthwatch organisations have a strong partnership to support public engagement, funded by the Hampshire & Isle of Wight ICB. Together, we contribute to key system forums including the System Quality Group, Integrated Care Partnership, and a range of Transformation Boards.

Through this collaborative approach, the four local Healthwatch have aligned their activity to gather, analyse and present patient feedback at scale. This includes for example, joint insight-gathering work on NHS dental appointment availability, supporting the ICB's flexible commissioning approach, and providing specialist patient and public involvement (PPI) support to system stakeholders.



Accessible Information Standard (AIS)

In addition, our collaboration has driven Accessible Information Standard (AIS) work, supporting four priority workstreams and a dedicated steering group established in response to the findings. Across all of this work, we share insights with ICB leadership—who attend our quarterly meetings—using a combination of quantitative data, lived experience stories, and direct quotes from residents.

This collective evidence enables us to provide a richer, system-wide understanding of people's experiences and ensures that the patient voice is consistently embedded in decision-making to inform and improve local health and care services.

We have also summarised some of our other outcomes achieved this year in the Statutory Statements section at the end of this report.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to health and social care professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time. Here are some examples of our work in Southampton this year:



Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life

Hearing personal experiences and their impact on people's lives helps services better understand the issues people face.

We engaged with people to hear about their travel experiences when getting to their health appointments in the city. We were able to share these experiences with transport providers and hospitals to help them better understand issues people face and make improvements they were able to.



Getting services to involve the public

By involving local people, services help improve care for everyone.

We prioritised work in improving patient voice in primary care. In March 2025, we set up a Southampton focused Patient Participation Group Network. In June 2025, we published a report highlighting good practice examples of patient participation and involvement in Southampton.



Improving care over time

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

The NHS 10-year plan aims to make health services more accessible to the community. We have worked in partnership with NHS services and other voluntary sector partners to develop the local integrated neighbourhood working pilot project which aims to tackle frailty issues by improving access to exercise and health services.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, we gathered feedback from people across our community. Their experiences with care help us understand what is working well and where improvements are needed, allowing us to share feedback with services and support positive change. Some of the community groups and events we have worked with:

- Let's Communicate – a hard of hearing support group
- Busy People – a community group for adults with learning disabilities
- St Denys Action Group – weekly city-wide mental health support group
- Young and Young Adult Carers (aged 14–30)
- Mela Festival – celebrating South Asian arts across the Southern region of the UK
- Unpaid Carers events including SEND Fun Day and Carers Rights Day
- Care home residents and staff
- Maintaining Your Independence Event – for residents 55+
- Wellbeing Day – organised by several GP surgeries for patients and local community



Championing unpaid carers needs for respite and activities.

Last year we championed the voices of unpaid adult carers in Southampton and their need for recognition and support.

Working with Unpaid Carers Support Southampton (UCSS) we were keen to gain feedback on how carers prefer to spend their time off from caring and how they felt their needs had been recognised and met by services.

What did we do

HWS launched the survey during Carers Week 2025, available online and in person at events and community outreach.

Key things we heard:

50%

felt they would like an Unpaid Carers Support service or activity that they could go to with the person they cared for.

79%

felt it was important to attend activities away from the care for person.

26%

of respondents said that they felt listened to by local health and social care organisations.

People told us that *"Despite filling out forms to state I'm a carer, I frequently get told I can't deal with partner's care - it has to come from them."*

"Sometimes it feels like banging your head against a brick wall, and repeated requests and conversations are needed to get any action or results required for the cared for individuals. Very exhausting and mentally draining."

What difference did this make?

We highlighted the lack of recognition and understanding of unpaid carers roles and collected positive feedback about individual professionals. But there remains across the whole system work to do, to listen and respond in a timely way to unpaid carers. The views and experiences we gathered will feed into the next versions of the citywide Carers Strategy work.

Listening to care home residents about their cultural and social needs

In October, HWS surveyed care home residents, family members and staff.

We received 62 survey responses from 10 care homes across the city. These included 37 residents, 5 family members and 20 staff members. We also received 11 easy read responses.

Key things we heard:

The things people said were important were accessibility, quality of care, food, being on the ground floor, access to a garden, and having a home that feels comfortable and welcoming.

12 out of 62 people said they were happy and would not change anything about their home.

10 out of 11 participants with learning disabilities said they were very happy where they lived and felt that staff spoke to them kindly.

Some residents asked for better cleanliness, more choice on the menu, more help with making friends, and more trips and activities outside the home.



“I’m left to my own devices when I want alone time – not forced to engage with the group entertainment in the communal room. I like living here”.

What difference did this make?

The recommendations included residents having more choice, improving accessibility, more training for staff, making sure all services collect equality monitoring data, and identifying unmet needs. The views of residents, family members and care home staff will help shape the new Care Home Strategy for the city.

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of Southampton. That's why, over the past year, we've worked hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Every member of the community should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

This year, we have reached different communities by:

- Testing our new Healthwatch Southampton website with community groups to gather feedback about usability and accessibility and made changes to accommodate people's needs.
- Listening to people with hearing loss about their experiences of travelling to healthcare appointments. Their feedback contributed to our Travelling to Healthcare Appointments report and our transport booklet.
- Visiting residential care homes and hearing from residents and staff about their experiences of living and working there. Their voices contributed to shaping the Southampton City Council Care Home Policy 2026.

Improving understanding of the needs of people with hearing loss

Let's Communicate community group.

People from the Let's Communicate group told us about difficulties travelling to hospital appointments, communicating with health services on the phone, as well as at appointments and as hospital inpatients. They faced obstacles often caused by a lack of awareness of their disability from transport providers, members of the public and health service providers. The group shared their frustrations with the lack of hearing loops available at hospitals, GP's and outpatient clinics resulting in reliance on family and friends.

What difference did this make?

Healthwatch highlighted the importance for local health services to improve the communication access needs of people with hearing loss e.g. Southampton General Hospital and GP surgeries.

- We supported individual people with access to their GP Services.
- We liaised with the Patient Experience Team at University Hospitals Southampton.
- We introduced a textphone service at Healthwatch Southampton to ensure better access to our service for people with hearing loss.
- We ensured that their voice was included in our exploration into travelling to health care appointments and access to GP services. We shared our Travelling to Healthcare Appointments booklet which provides useful information for patients and carers.

Helping people understand and access NHS mental health services

We often receive feedback and requests from people who are supported by local community mental health teams.

Among the themes raised were, lack of understanding of mental health services, poor communication with both GPs and mental health professionals, inconsistent support due to staffing changes, and a need for greater understanding of the needs of ethnic minority communities.

What difference did this make?

Mental Health has been a priority focus for Healthwatch Southampton this year. We have engaged with professionals and members of the public to better understand the issues.

- Our report “Exploration into Community Mental Health Teams in Southampton” highlights the issues raised and responsive changes made. It highlights the need for improved understanding of the structure of secondary mental health services.
- Gathered feedback from community and carers’ groups on GP access, transport to healthcare, and digital services.
- Attended the Mental Wellbeing Awareness Day to improve access to mental health information and amplify ethnic minority voices.
- We contributed to the development of HlOW Healthcare’s Patient and Carers Race Equality Framework.
- Participated in patient engagement work using the “Esther approach”.

Information and signposting

When you're struggling to find an NHS dentist, looking for help about how to make a complaint, or need advice about a good care home for a loved one – we're your first port of call.

This year 369 people have contacted us for advice, support or help finding services. These conversations also help us to understand where, and how, care in Southampton can be improved.

This year, we've helped people by:

- Providing up to date information people can trust.
- Visiting and engaging communities to promote our work.
- Collecting experiences and supporting communities to share their views.
- Collating information on dentists, researched GP websites for population information and extended online access information.
- Creating a transport booklet to help people travel across the city for health appointments.
- Helping people access the services they need.



How we have helped

Improving GP care for people with hearing loss

Ben felt he was being denied access due to healthcare due to his impairment

Ben has a hearing impairment and despite repeatedly reminding the surgery staff of his disability and preferred method of communication (text/email and face to face appointments), the surgery continued to communicate via phone calls which Ben could not receive.

We looked at alternative GP surgeries he could register with in his catchment area asking specific questions about access of care and communication methods for patients with a hearing impairment. We shared this information with Ben to enable him to make an informed choice about changing to a more suitable GP surgery.

Access to an optician for an unpaid carer

Unable to attend an appointment Sonia contacted Healthwatch

We helped Sonia to raise a concern about her eyecare. Sonia has mobility issues and cannot walk far. She had an issue with the service received and the location of her follow up eye appointment with the NHS (outside of Southampton).

We listened to her and helped her, which resulted in the medical appointment being moved to a more accessible location which she could attend.

We also helped Sonia with her access to her GP practice, assisted her to re-engage with Southampton Unpaid Carers and SCC Adult Social Care for a new assessment of her mum's and her own care needs.

Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given 1292 hours to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in your community.

This year, our volunteers:

- Visited and engaged communities to promote our work.
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views.
- Collated information on dentists, researched GP websites for population and extended online access information.
- Created a transport booklet to help people travel across the city for health appointments.
- Contributed their experience to strategic discussions with partner agencies, helping to shape local policy and the roll out of local initiatives.

This year, our Strategic Group was comprised of the following members: Suki Sitaram, Rob Kurn, Lesley Gilder, Matt King, Anne Cato, Simon Mantle, Kevin Allan MBA, Stephen Boswell, Vanessa Shahani, Carole Binns, Jane Stephenson, Maryrose Tarpey, Matt Stevens and Luke Newman.



At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think to helping raise awareness, our volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.



Mohamed

"Fuelled by my strong passion for Public Health and backed by my dental studies and my ongoing development in public health, I am particularly interested in health equity, patient experience, and service improvement.

Volunteering with Healthwatch Southampton allows me to engage directly with the community, understand their needs, and contribute towards shaping better health and social care services. I am especially motivated by the opportunity to make a meaningful impact at a local level while continuing to develop my skills in public health practice".

"Producing the transport booklet for Southampton residents has been a great opportunity that I've thoroughly enjoyed.

I hope that we can help patients feel less anxious about this part of their healthcare experience, by providing clear and detailed information in an accessible format."



Olivia

Be part of the change.

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and find out how you can be part of the change.



www.healthwatchsouthampton.co.uk



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Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Southampton City Council under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to help us do our work.

Our income and expenditure:

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£137,258	Expenditure on pay	£104,076
Additional income	£2,500	Non-pay expenditure	£3,003
		Office and management fee	£25,052
Total income	£139,758	Total Expenditure	£132,131

Additional income is broken down into:

- £1,000 funding received from Southampton City Council to consult with young adult carers on their needs.

Integrated Care System (ICS) funding:

Healthwatch across Hampshire and Isle of Wight also receive funding from our Integrated Care System (ICS) to support new areas of collaborative work at this level, including:

Purpose of ICS funding	Amount
Participation in the joint work with the 4 local Healthwatch and the ICB	£1500

Finance and future priorities

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. Primary Care including access to GP practices, Pharmacy First and Patient Participation Groups.
2. Continued involvement in the developing neighbourhood plans and hubs.
3. Adult Social Care including Enter and View and Young Adult Carers.

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Chair
Suki Sitaram

In 2025/26 we have prioritised changing our membership model to ensure that it better reflects the diversity of our City and brings a broader range of skills and experiences into our work. We were successful in recruiting 5 new members who bring experience of youth engagement, adult social care, community development, finance, patient information, and health research involving patients, carers, health care practitioners and reaching out to young people.

Statutory statements

Healthwatch Southampton 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 Strategic Group consists of 11 members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities.

Our Strategic Group ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community.

Throughout 2025/26, the Strategic Group met 8 times and prioritised updating its membership model to boost participation, diversify skills, and better represent young people. This led to recruiting five new members with expertise in areas such as youth engagement, healthcare, research, and community development.

Improving access to primary care was another key focus. Analysis of the 2025 GP Survey and local enquiries showed that major concerns included difficulty accessing GP services, issues with repeat prescriptions, inconsistent care coordination and referrals, mixed effectiveness of digital access, and communication gaps. Ongoing discussions with the Integrated Care Board aim to address these challenges. Despite these access issues, patient feedback is generally positive once care is received, indicating that the main problem lies in accessing services rather than the quality of care itself.

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 2025/26, we have been available by phone and email, provided a web form on our website, textphone and through social media, and attended 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. We will publish it on our website and make it available in print at Southampton Voluntary Services.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

There were no providers who did not respond to requests for information or recommendations. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so there were no resulting reviews or investigations.

Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

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

For example, in our local authority area, we take information to the Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel, Health and Wellbeing Board and Health and Care Partnership Board.

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care System. For example, with our colleagues in Healthwatch Hampshire, Isle of Wight and Portsmouth we share information with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) at the System Quality Group, Solutions Group, Community Engagement group and Accessible Information Standard Working Group. We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Southampton is represented on the Health and Care Partnership Board and the Health and Wellbeing Board by the Chair of Healthwatch Southampton.

During 2025/26, our representative has effectively carried out this role by contributing feedback on major strategies including health, housing, adult social care, and neighbourhood development, and supporting preparation for CQC inspections. The Chair has influenced the Health Determinants Research Collaboration to increase public involvement and is invited onto its Steering Group.

Healthwatch Southampton is represented on the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Partnerships by Neil Bolton Heaton and on Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Boards by Neil Bolton Heaton on System Quality Group and a range of transformation boards.

Statutory statements

2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Contributed to consultations from SCC Including the Housing Strategy	Highlighting the significant impact housing has on health inequalities.
Direct Payments work, hearing from resident's experiences	Ensuring peoples experiences are used in the work on a new strategy.
Southampton Health and Wellbeing Strategy	Highlighting the issues that people raise with HWS.
Pain letter review	Involved in the review of letters sent out by an NHS Trust to patients.
GP website audit report	Provided every GP practice with a report to improve website information and accessibility, helping patients access services more easily.
Patient Participation Groups Insight	Produced a report outlining the three PPG models in the city and ways to involve patients.
Dementia report review	Reviewed recommendations to assess development of dementia services at University Hospital Southampton (UHS) and support for patients and unpaid carers.
East Community Health Team insight	Increased understanding and clarity about the pathways of care for adults who need support from community mental health.
Quarterly Dental Report	Published quarterly dentistry updates to help people find NHS dentists and urgent dental appointments across the city.

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