

Chair's Update

FOR INFORMATION/DISCUSSION/DECISION

1. Board and organisational developments

This meeting will be a pivotal one for us. It comes towards the end of a business year during which our team has dealt with unprecedented change while still delivering the highest levels of quality and impact, our stakeholder relationships have continued to broaden and deepen, and our board has thought deeply about how to manage fundamental change and substantial risk while supporting our staff. In previous years, we have been able to be confident that the plans and budgets approved by the board for the year ahead would look overwhelmingly similar through the rear-view mirror. Our current context means that will not be the case this time. It remains our statutory responsibility as the board of a local Healthwatch to ensure that the topics on which we plan to focus our work for 2026/27 are those of most importance and potential to people in Hertfordshire and are driven by the evidence. We are also still bound to ensure that the public funding we are given to discharge our statutory functions is being applied appropriately to deliver those plans. I am confident that the plans and information being presented to us will enable us to do that, but I am also conscious that this year we are likely to need to see this as a dynamic picture and be prepared to review and adapt both plans and budgets each quarter as our internal position and external context continue to develop.

At our last meeting we agreed that it would be helpful to report key decisions taken during confidential sections of our agenda at the next meeting in public. During the confidential section of that meeting we considered our approach to managing financial reserves and agreed to review the reserves policy in conjunction with our budget decisions. This is on the agenda for this meeting.

As we reflect on the end of the 2025/26 year, I am glad that we have been able to undertake a piece of additional work that crystallises many of the things that are special about the Healthwatch role. Current legislation requires the relevant local Healthwatch to be consulted whenever a new NHS Trust is being established. The Government's decision to set up a new

NHS Online Trust, covering the whole of England, has required the Department of Health and Social Care to work with Healthwatch England to establish a mechanism by which every Healthwatch could contribute evidence. Board members have been sent a copy of the excellent response we have submitted, drawing upon a wide range of our evidence and making strong use of direct quotes from people across the county. We now look forward to seeing how the Department makes use of these insights in developing the new organisation.

As board members are aware, Ramone Samuda has had to resign as a trustee due to pressure of work and other commitments. My thanks to Ramone for her thoughtful and insightful contributions to our work over the years.

2. National and local system context and stakeholder meetings

The report from the Future Planning Working Group, to be considered during our confidential session, provides a summary of the intelligence we have received from the Department of Health and Social Care and Healthwatch England concerning the forthcoming legislation which is intended to move our statutory functions into the NHS and local government. To further summarise for the public record, we have been told to expect the Bill to be published in mid-April and for it to take a full year for it to be scrutinised and become law, with a subsequent transition period likely. This means that our current functions and contracting relationship with the County Council will exist beyond the end of the year for which we are now agreeing plans. The Government continues to confirm that it is not intending to preclude the NHS or councils from using organisations like ours to discharge their new duties. Substantial attention is already being paid in both Houses of Parliament to the need for independent public voice in the system, so we should be in for an interesting year.

The DHSC has been helpful in providing councils with earlier than usual confirmation of their funding for Healthwatch for 2026/27. I am pleased and grateful that our Hertfordshire County Council commissioners then moved swiftly to confirm that our core contract funding is being maintained and uprated in line with inflation. This is a testament to the quality of our work and to their understanding of our strategic value.

Since the last board meeting, Ivana and I have met a range of system stakeholders, including the chair and senior executives of the new Central East Integrated Care Board, those developing the new Hertfordshire-level structure for the ICB, and executive members and executive directors leading Hertfordshire County Council's adult care services, children's services and public health. We are also working with key staff members to establish the most effective way for us to contribute to the process as the Health and Wellbeing Board develops the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS - The Board is asked to:

1. Consider and note the update.
2. Thank Ramone Samuda for her service on the board.