Chief Executive's Update

FOR INFORMATION/DISCUSSION

1. Overview of this paper

This paper takes stock of the year's work program in its final phases and celebrates the impact we have delivered this year, before the remainder of the agenda is considered in a forward look. It also provides an update on our operating realities internally, and externally.

2. Chief Executive's update

A look back on our last year

We have continued to provide our signposting, information and guidance service to the public, with a very thorough and responsive, high quality service. The themes and trends have been taken into account during our "holding to account conversations" with leaders of local healthcare and social care organisations.

We have strived to strengthen our engagement mechanisms and routes, with our communications reach growing over the past year and enabling a very successful recruitment to our research and engagement projects, but also an impactful reach to local decision-makers in the system, and an effective amplifier for our local health charities.

Our proactive approach to engagement with the public has always had a 'health inequalities lens' and our work program this year boasts a significant reach expanded by the partnerships we have brokered and grown, and built upon:

- Worked in partnership with Mind to engage with refugees and asylum seekers to explore their experiences of healthcare, culminating in a significantly impactful piece of work, resulting in active and measurable commitments by Public Health, Hertfordshire County Council and the NHS to change. Our work has also drawn the attention of national independent scrutineers working on safeguarding in temporary accommodation, asking us for input to shape successful engagement; as well as work around food security and health at the University of Hertfordshire's Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care
- Our work on engaging autistic adults whose diagnosis came later in life on the quality and effectiveness of support has drawn much attention, and is currently informing the Autism Strategy Delivery Group's programme of action for change
- Working with the Primary Care Transformation Committee to deliver insights about frailty and aging, working in partnership with Healthwatch Essex

- A suite of case studies spotlighting local young people navigating health and care
- The Mental Health and Substance Use Steering Group has used the learnings from our work engaging with those who are navigating mental health conditions and addiction
- We have shaped the strategic approach to smoking cessation services in Public Health by exploring how smokers and ex-smokers felt about support
- Working in partnership with the Service Quality Improvement Group for Hertfordshire, we visited two care homes (one more visit due soon) to see how they implement the Connected Lives Framework, in the absence of inspections by CQC, leaving many homes feeling their efforts to improve resident lives are 'going unseen' and who are desperate for independent feedback

We have also:

- Provided support for the local Research and Engagement Delivery Network funded by the ICB
- Established and ran a drugs and alcohol coproduction group supporting Public Health to ensure service user voice shapes delivery
- Co-chaired and managed the East and North Hertfordshire Health and Care Partnership's Community Assembly (a diverse local forum of government, health, voluntary and patient voices) as well as the South and West Health and Care Partnership's Coproduction Board (an advisory committee of the partnership's formal board, helping raise the standards of, and awareness of the value of coproduction approaches when shaping services)
- Given feedback on the Quality Accounts of all local trusts which provide services to our Hertfordshire residents
- Collated a Hertfordshire response to the government's consultation on the proposed Online NHS Trust drawing on a substantial body of local evidence, including our own research and engagement with the public, and working with voluntary sector partners
- Supported the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre Programme Board meetings, and their consultation with the public, given this major local change
- Supported Patient-Led Assessments of the Care Environment (PLACE)[1] at Princess Alexandra Hospital and Lister Hospital
- Attended and supported a number of strategically significant health and care decision making committees (see our Contract Reporting paper Projects and Activities document in this pack for more information) and the "Well-led assessments" of West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals Trust, Hertfordshire Partnership University Foundation Trust, and Princess Alexandra Hospital Trust

[1] PLACE is the NHS's national system for assessing the quality of the non-clinical care environment in hospitals and other NHS-funded facilities.

We are also completing work that will report in the coming months:

- A group report by a number of local Healthwatch engaging local residents across the east of England about the use of genomic data in research
- A report working in partnership with local voluntary organisations to engage the deaf community and better understand their experiences of health and care
- A report working in partnership with Healthwatch Essex to explore local people's experiences of local pharmacy, including those from the vision loss community
- A report summarising our partnership with Age UK on collating resources about advanced care planning on their webpages
- Ongoing work around children and young people and their voices in health and care
- A summary and lessons learned from our work with drugs and alcohol service users and providers, on their coproduction group

If we summarise all this in numbers and figures, there is no doubt about the value we bring to our local communities.

Here's a snapshot at the time of our last annual report:

	Last year '24/25	**Last 3 yrs since '21/22**
People who shared their experiences	5,632	29,262
People who came to us for advice and information	49,626	211,450
Signposting hours	400	1,857
Meetings with health and social care leaders and decision makers	200	>600
Published reports	8	31
Recommendations for action	49	224

Internal developments

With thanks to the decisions the Board has made about making Healthwatch an attractive place to remain throughout the transition, the organisation is currently stable and we are in a solid position to plan ahead – both for our annual program of work to deliver our statutory duties and benefit to the local residents of Hertfordshire, and to think about planning for a different future.

Two members of the team have taken on enhanced responsibilities, we have recruited to a senior management position and have a recruitment plan designed to best enable our

annual business plan already in action, now that our program of work has been agreed in broad brush strokes at a meeting of Board Advisory Committee and is getting sign off at Board. We are not offering any permanent roles given the timeline ahead of us and this continues to be a challenge we will need to actively manage.

We have also had a review of our systems and processes in light of staffing changes; we have bolstered our compliance tracking and oversight, completed a thorough review of our financial management systems and processes ahead of year end accounts process, reviewed all our policies and put in a plan to ensuring they continue to serve us well, and agreed updates to our scheme of delegation and risk register – both of which are brought to this meeting.

External developments

We are delighted to report that Hertfordshire County Council's budget planning process has now completed and we can confirm that our grant has been uplifted by 4% in recognition of the ongoing cost of living pressures, and is at a total of £502,945.67. This illustrates the commitment of both government and our local partners, and their recognition of the value of our work to local people.

I have been meeting with the Healthwatch CEOs whose organisations will be part of the bigger Central East Integrated Care Board – the CE ICB. This sees West Essex as moving away, and a new structure to include Cambridge and Peterborough, Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire, Luton and Hertfordshire. As CEOs we've been invited into conversations to inform the approach the new CE ICB will be taking to patient and public engagement and involvement, and the Hertfordshire lead has now been appointed with whom we've had early conversations, but also a prior working relationship in a different capacity. Although the picture is still evolving, we heard a strong message of commitment to patient and public voice as a measure of the quality of NHS services delivery, and expect to continue these conversations over the next few months.

There have also been a lot of changes at Healthwatch England, as they have now significantly reduced their staffing in light of the anticipated changes brought forward by government. They have continued to stay in touch with local Healthwatch, and maintain a streamlined level of support for key network activity, such as the website and content management system, access to survey platforms and ongoing induction training for new staff. They continue to be the default touch point for the Department of Health and Social Care, and they keep local Healthwatch informed of these conversations.

3. Thank you to our staff and trustees

I would like to once again express my sincere appreciation for the dedication and support that the Healthwatch Hertfordshire trustees have shown to the staff team throughout my

18 months in post. With the welcome addition of three new trustees and the election of a Vice-Chair, your guidance has been especially valuable in recent months as we begin to work our way through significant changes taking place locally, nationally, and within our own organisation. Your commitment and energy have played a crucial role in enabling us to have a positive impact on communities across Hertfordshire, and I know you share the same determination as the staff team to continue this important work.

Most importantly, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the staff team for their unwavering commitment and resilience. I am grateful that they have embraced challenges, been open to working in more agile and creative ways, and taken on additional responsibilities to support the team— your willingness to focus on what matters and evolve together is genuinely inspiring. As we prepare to embark on a new year of work, it is encouraging to see how strongly our values continue to guide us. This shared sense of purpose will serve us well in the months ahead.