

**Healthwatch Hertfordshire Board Meeting
1pm on Tuesday 17th March 2026, Online**

Board Members: Alex Booth (arr. 13.46, dep. 15.00), Amanda Hutchinson, Natalie Kelly, Karen Middleton, Neil Tester (Chair)

Executive Team: Ivana Chalmers (Chief Executive), Alice Lovell (Interim Governance, Operations & Signposting Manager), Calum Wilson-Smith (Deputy Chief Executive)

Visitors/others: Mark Brennan (Financial Advisor)

Apologies: Susan Ebanyat, Ryan Heard, Enoch Kanagaraj, Yolanda Roach, Jan Taylor, Amy Willcox-Smith

1. Welcome, apologies and register of interests

Neil welcomed everyone present and noted apologies, as above. Register of interests are correct as at the time of publication.

2. Minutes and actions 25th November

The minutes were approved as an accurate record and signed off. The Actions Tracker was also reviewed and noted as correct.

3. Chair's Update

Neil highlighted that this meeting is an important one in terms of the organisation's business cycle – both reflecting back on what 2025/26 delivered, and using that insight to look ahead into 2026/27. Neil asked that his thanks to the staff team and Board be put on record, as we've continued to deliver on our commitments to the people of Hertfordshire, discharging our statutory duties despite all the uncertainty and change in the health and care system around us.

Referring to his report, Neil touched on a few points:

- Our response to the NHS Online Consultation, which exemplifies the breadth and the high quality of the work we do. Neil said he hoped we would be able to publish and promote our response soon but was unsure whether it's still under embargo; Ivana explained that we are writing an article and waiting for a response from Healthwatch England on when we can publish.
- Giving thanks to Ramone Samuda, who has had to step down from the Board. Neil noted that during her time with us she has been a very helpful, thoughtful, and active Board Member, and so he wanted to pass on the Board's thanks to her for her service.
- Relating to our Future Planning Working Group's discussions, Neil updated that he attended a briefing this morning held by the King's Fund and Healthwatch England about a new report due to be published tomorrow (18th March). Neil said the briefing had been helpful and the report will be touching on a number of important issues.
- The discussions with the new Central East Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have continued to be constructive, and a promising indicator for the future is that they would like us to be an integral part of the plans for the next Health and Wellbeing Board Strategy.
- The recent confirmation of another year's funding from HCC with a 4% inflationary uplift, which seems an additional 'vote of confidence' from our local and system stakeholders.

There was further positive feedback from the Board regarding the quality, rigour and breadth of our organisational response to the NHS Online Consultation, which they praised as 'excellent'. The Chair and Chief Executives' leadership was also praised, with the 2026/27 funding uplift being credited to their steady hand as leaders as well as the work of the wider team.

[The Board noted the update and agreed to send thanks to Ramone Samuda for her service on the Board.](#)

4. Chief Executive's Update

Ivana highlighted the following from her update:

- Echoing the Board's comment on the previous item, she hopes that this paper helps demonstrate the breadth and depth of our work during 2025/26, and that despite the announcement about legislative reforms, we have completed what we set out to achieve the past year. Ivana described our output as 'quite phenomenal', and said how proud she has been to be a part of it.
- The impressive numbers of people we've engaged with over the past 3 years, which we pulled from our last 3 annual reports.
- During a meeting this morning with one of the Directors of Nursing in a local Trust, the Director said that it is only our independence that has meant that the Trust has heard from individuals they would never have heard from themselves. Ivana said this is not unusual feedback from system partners and stakeholders, and that it's been heartening to see how conversations about the future of patient voice have continued to include us.
- Reiterating thanks to the staff team for the resilience they have shown, and to those who have moved on into other roles where they are thriving in new environments. We're now in the process of building a new team, which she wanted to thank the Board for supporting.

Neil added that as well as managing to maintain our output this year, the impact has also seemed to be even more visible than ever before, and more people and organisations are talking about us than ever before. He said this was further to the credit of the resilience of the staff team.

Thanks were given to Ivana and the team for their continued high quality output given the uncertain context being operated in.

[The Board noted the update.](#)

5. Management Accounts as at December 2025

Neil thanked Calum and Ivana for the work done to get the Management Accounts paper ready for today's meeting, and to provide the Board with reassurance around the organisation's current financial position.

Calum pulled out a few key points from the paper, as follows:

- We are predicting an end-of-year surplus of £28,000, with the surplus at just over £18,000 at the time of the Management Accounts in December 2025. This has been caused by:
 - Staff salary costs being lower than expected, where we've made significant vacancy savings due to staff departures (he added that, to the credit of the staff team, there seems not to have been any drop in performance).
 - Greater than expected revenue generation through Healthwatch Hertfordshire Trading for commissioned pieces of work.
- This is a welcome surprise considering we had expected a deficit at this point in the year.

- The Board can feel assured that this version of the Management Accounts is up to date , and is within the margin of error identified in the version that was previously scrutinised at Board Advisory Committee in January.

In response to a query about the redesigned format of the accounts, and why the new way of setting the figures out will be better, Calum explained that it will aim to ensure greater clarity on what funding we have received and how then it is being used to cover the running of the business. We are exploring ways of setting that out without creating too much of an administrative burden, as an objective overview so that the Board will be able to see where we have worked at cost, and where work has needed to be subsidised from elsewhere. The change of approach will set us up for any future business model changes.

Ivana added that when Management Accounts reach Board Advisory Committee and then Board, it is historical information looking to provide reassurance to Board about our ways of thinking and planning.

There was a question about whether the unexpected surplus this year was due to a conservative forecast at the start of the year, or whether we had in fact outperformed what was anticipated. Ivana explained that she and the Treasurer had indeed taken a quite conservative view in the forecast, and that was because at the time we were receiving signals that revenue streams were declining, both from partners but also from looking at the bigger picture of what was happening in the system. However, our reputation has meant that we did outperform as we took on pieces of work this year that we hadn't expected; such as with Health Innovation East – that was offered to us in January and we have already completed it. Ivana noted that, in future, it will be even more important for us to have advance notice of projects for resourcing purposes.

Neil clarified that, given what was explained, the Management Accounts have so far acted more as a record of the organisation's finances, and that while the income streams have been relatively steady, detailed scrutiny has not been as necessary. However, in future, if/when our income is no longer guaranteed, the new format for the Accounts will enable Board to assess the situation and adjust course more quickly and easily. Ivana confirmed that was correct.

Mark, acting as a financial advisor for the Board, praised Calum and Ivana's leadership in making the financial processes more robust in recent times. He explained that there are now clearer resilience strategies in place concerning financial governance, and that Board Members can now have confidence in the organisation's financial processes. He added that the budget surplus sets up the organisation's reserves well for the next year, but wanted the Board to be mindful that the surplus is largely due to staff vacancies, and there will be a limit to how long the staffing levels can carry on as they are before it starts to hurt the business. Mark was thanked for this insight.

Further to the above point, Calum clarified that although the staff salary bill was £90,000 less than expected, in fact £30,000 of that came from the increase in commissioned work and therefore some of it is an artefact of the way that we present this information in the Accounts. Currently, where staff have worked towards a commissioned project, their salary is drawn from the commission, and so it makes the salaries bill appear lower as a result because we've had an additional funding stream to subsidise the salary. Therefore, savings from staff vacancies are £60,000.

The Board:

- Agreed to review of the new Management Accounts framework for recommendation via the Board Advisory Committee and then Board for approval.
- Noted the Management Accounts

6. Risk Register

Neil introduced the Register by saying that the limited tweaks from the last Board Meeting have been implemented, and so there shouldn't be any surprises for anyone reading it. Neil explained that very little has changed for us since it was last assessed, and reiterated that the scores are as high as they are due to the impact they would have should the identified risk come to pass rather than a reflection of the likelihood of that happening.

Neil noted that it seems likely the Register will have changed significantly by the time it comes to Board again in June, as we should have had sight of the first cut of the legislation changes. Following that, some risks listed here may no longer be relevant, others may appear, and the mitigations necessary as a result may become obvious. Also, by then, the strategic financial risks for 2027/28 may start to become clearer as well.

Ivana wanted to clarify as well that this is a high-level, strategic, risk register, and it reflects the wider context in which we are operating in rather than the internal, operational context, which would look much more optimistic. She noted that it has been reassuring from her perspective that despite this worrying picture, we have still been able to say that we do not have concerns about our budget, processes, capacity, etc, because internally-driven risks are robustly mitigated within the staff team. This Risk Register is externally-focused, where we have less control, and so that informs the scores being given.

The necessity of risk D11 was questioned, considering that by now it must be known whether the Board has the right skills and knowledge to comply with their obligations as Trustees – and if they do not, it is an issue rather than a risk at this point. It was suggested that we could remove risk D11, or that Category D could be reconsidered and potentially rewritten to reflect the changed situation.

In response, it was pointed out that D11 applies to the staff team as much as the Board, as members of the team have left for other roles and that institutional knowledge has been lost. Also, it is possible that if Healthwatch carries on under a different guise, the Trustees might then need another different set of skills again. Considering these points, it was suggested that D11 be reviewed at the next iteration of the register.

Significant progress on the mitigations identified in the Register was also noted, and the team and Board were thanked and praised for their actions which are actively managing those risks.

Ivana noted that she is in favour of reevaluating Category D in the Register as the situation has indeed changed; mitigations that have become 'business as usual' should be removed, and issues should no longer be listed as risks. It might also be necessary to include risks around quoracy, considering the departure of one of our board members, for example. Ivana thanked the Board for their scrutiny on this section.

Ivana further requested that there be an item in the Register of the risk regarding the delivery of the Annual Business Plan and Engagement and Research Programme in full. She suggested a

mitigation around flexibility, enabling us to reprioritise and to manage expectations with stakeholders around promised delivery. She said this will be a point of concern especially in the last quarter of the financial year. Neil noted that there is a risk for the organisation in that we are having to become ever more agile as the system changes around us.

Board agreed the current Risk Register, subject to the considerations identified above being evaluated for June's Board Meeting, as appropriate.

7. Annual Business Plan and Research Plan

Neil prefaced this agenda item by suggesting that Board's decisions on the Business Plan and the Research Plan be held off until the Budget & Reserves Policy paper has been discussed, so that all the three key documents guiding us for 2026/27 are considered in the round. The Board agreed to this approach.

Ivana spoke to the paper, highlighting and pulling out key points regarding the decisions made and how important Board's guidance and insights gathered from the public had been considered. Central to all had been the organisation's commitment to its values, and to the people of Hertfordshire. Bearing all of this in mind, there is a priority list of projects in the plans which we must aim to undertake within the year, as well as a secondary list, which are important but couldn't be delivered under the current funding and capacity available.

It was additionally highlighted that in last year's plan we included dates and timelines for the completion of projects, but given the landscape in which we are operating it felt more prudent not to be so specific. Ivana clarified that the plan is more like a KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) document for our organisational success.

Neil thanked Ivana for pulling together such a thoughtful document and plan, especially considering all the unknowns at play when much of the thinking for the plans was done.

There was a query about the quantity of work/projects included in the paper, and whether it was too ambitious a plan. It was also asked whether there is any further breakdown of priority order for the plan. It was explained that the sections in each part of the list, 1-9, 10-13, and 14-17 were in priority order within their respective sections. Ivana responded by saying that she is sure it is an achievable plan because she has worked out the staff resource necessary to do it – as a result, there is a planned deficit for 2026/27 to make investments and address the current gaps in staffing which will add delivery capacity. Ivana further explained that 1-9 are system-shaping pieces of work/projects which all Hertfordshire residents should benefit from, and which can be learned from and taken forward by system partners whether or not we continue to exist.

Another query related to how the various different projects and pieces of work compare time-wise and resource-wise, and that they will be interested to see how they shape up. Additionally a concern was raised regarding ensuring that the organisation's soft-power (an example was given of when Ivana had fed back via email regarding Central East ICB's patient engagement strategy) receives appropriate visibility. Ivana responded by explaining that the lists under each section are in time and resource-intensity order, and that because she has been part of developing each of the items there, she feels she is well-placed to assess what it will take to deliver on them – again, this refers to some additional staff resourcing in 2026/27 needed. Regarding the soft-power

mentioned and ensuring that is appropriately weighted in the plan, Ivana said that there is an intention to ensure that is showcased more actively using our comms channels.

Further to the above, there was another comment praising the inclusion of the Care Act Assessments project (11), with what seems like a particular focus on carers and their needs and experiences of this type of support. Considering that Hertfordshire has an ageing population, and the impact on people's health from being an unpaid carer, it feels like an important piece of work.

One other question related to the rationale for placing Experiences of Hospital Care in Hertfordshire (14) in the important work to undertake if commissioned category, as it seems a key element of someone's experience of healthcare. This query was seconded by another Board Member, with the additional request to note that they would be very keen to get this particular item commissioned somehow. There was also a query around how we maintain public visibility so as to be seen to be involved in that area of healthcare, holding to account, but that with current reporting mechanisms it is perhaps not very clear. Ivana explained that there are plans for 2026/27 to increase the comms to have a more direct channel between what comes to us through signposting and the insights we share publicly to demonstrate impact.

In addition to that, it was highlighted that a number of hospital Trusts in our patch already have well-developed patient engagement panels, are holding workshops, sharing case studies internally with focus on improving patient experience; and so, as a result, it did not meet the threshold for us. As previously mentioned in discussions about the plans for 2026/27, we are focusing in on opportunities where we can uniquely add value, and a broad engagement project on all hospital healthcare experiences, in this context, would not make sense. Ivana stated that the broader systemic dilapidation of the physical infrastructure around our hospitals, and how that is affecting people, is an angle we might explore if the plan was to be reprioritised, for example.

In response to any potential challenge on why GP Surgeries don't feature in the document, Ivana pointed out that we have had at least one piece of work focused on GPs/primary care services for several years, and she was pleased that we had been able to look particularly at the experiences of the deaf community in Hertfordshire accessing those services this year. This was especially as that is a subject that hasn't been looked at for quite some time in our patch, and as we are trying to build a body of work that demonstrates our USP (Unique Selling Point) for us, for the years to come.

Ivana said she would welcome any guidance that the Board might have as to which projects/pieces of work to drop should there be any further loss of capacity or unexpected and significant change to the local system which affects our ability to deliver on these listed priorities. Neil pointed out that the operational business plan could and should act as a good guide for that scenario if it should arise, and asked for the Board's views on the key strands of activity listed on pg10.

Again, capacity was raised as a concern and Ivana was asked what support the Board could potentially give to enable her and the Executive Team to keep the business going; in response, Ivana explained that the core elements of the plan cannot be reduced, but that the level of detail or quality of engagement of each of the components could be significantly affected by internal and/or external change. Without knowing what lies ahead, it is difficult to give any meaningful assurances; Ivana reiterated the point that the principles of the plan are the important thing, and

that they will indeed further guide the organisation's priorities when faced with tough choices. The key point about protecting and maintaining staff wellbeing was also referred back to, and it was highlighted that a component part of that relates to whether we are a fulfilling place to work, delivering on our objective to improve the experiences of health and care service users – the plans we have are aiming to do that.

The idea that this operational business plan should act as a guide for both the Board and organisation's priorities was welcomed, and it was pointed out that it would complement the balance of oversight and strategic assurance for the Board in the Executive Team. There are already examples of where this approach of enabling the CEO to make decisions for the best interests of the organisation at speed, such as creating interim roles for existing team members for example, has been used to great effect. Neil said he was pleased with how far the Board/Executive Team relationship had come in the past few years.

[The Board agreed and signed off the Annual Business Plan and the Research Plan later in the agenda, as agreed in the proposed approach at the start of this section.](#)

8. Budget & Reserves Policy 2026/27

Ivana opened the item by giving thanks to Calum for the work that he had done in pulling together the figures retrospectively, as well as working closely together on budget forecasting; she gave thanks to Mark as well for his support in this area.

Ivana explained that the paper is presenting a high-level principle for how to think about the future of the organisation, and outlining the various considerations for the year ahead. We remain in a positive position with our reserves, and we are proposing to have a planned deficit in 2026/27 so that we can invest in transitional thinking and staffing capacity. If we do a budget for 2027/28, we plan to be in the position of having set up some revenue streams to cover that deficit or at least go some way towards it. We have been conservative again estimating income from commissioned work, but we're pleased to be able to show how local stakeholders will be getting great value for money where our core grant can help supplement some of our additionally commissioned pieces of work.

Further to that, Ivana highlighted that there is always the possibility we will have to make a fundamental decision for the organisation, such as investment in more staffing, a change in structure, or a different business model: any and all of those things would affect the budget. Our best case scenario is that our Annual Business Plan and Research Plan gets followed through on, and the budget has been written and designed to support those – however, it's important to recognise that the situation remains dynamic and so if one of those changes, so must the other.

Neil thanked Ivana for a very clear budget paper, and highlighted as well the difficulty created by the dynamic and changing picture we're dealing with.

There was a request for more detail on what the balance is between business-as-usual work potentially being delivered differently to previous years (more in-person engagement, for example), and work on preparing ourselves for a potentially post-Healthwatch world. Ivana explained that for our core activity, the predominant cost is for staff, and our contract with Hertfordshire County Council covers the vast majority of that with additional money coming from commissioned work. We will be investing in covering staff vacancies, which are likely to be slightly

more expensive due to fixed-term posts in a competitive market; further, we're investing in costs around any future transitions, and making sure we are able to cover gaps quickly where needed to meet a deadline (for example, completion of a research project). There are also contingencies built in for consultancy support, and to ensure that our Annual Accounts will be ready in plenty of time for the end of the year.

Regarding the staffing of the organisation, it was explained that the roles of the two Deputy Chief Executives have been dispersed amongst existing and new team. However, that has created pressures for us which we aim to backfill. We are actively recruiting for a new, senior post of Head of Community Engagement and Research to oversee and manage that work programme; this will make a big difference to the time and headspace that Ivana can give to transition planning. We will also be looking to recruit a Community Engagement Officer, an additional Research Officer, a Comms Assistant to help amplify our content (which is part of our strategy for this year), and some administrative support to complement all of this. Further to that, we will be outsourcing our payroll and invoice processing similarly to how we already outsource our HR and IT support. Ivana clarified that it is still possible for existing team members to take on enhanced responsibility and help people grow their portfolio. In any case, the biggest spend for the organisation is on salaries, and for this coming year the majority of that will be our core activity.

Neil pointed out that it feels unlikely the year-end will be anything close to what was anticipated in this budget, and so the key question for the Board will be around how the Board maintains good financial governance as the situation evolves over time.

The response from the Board was positive, with Members saying that they feel reassured this is an intentional deficit with a clear plan in place to finance the transition and ensure we deliver the greatest possible impact. There also was recognition that we are dealing with exceptional circumstances, and so while it may not feel 'comfortable' to accept a planned deficit budget, there is a clear rationale behind it and so on that basis they would agree it.

When asked to provide his views and advice by the Board, Mark explained that it is sensible and appropriate for Trustees to make investment in the company in a transitional and dynamic year such as FY2026/27. He said that this planned deficit, therefore, is that type of investment in action. Mark also pointed out that by designating and anticipating this deficit, it will be clear for Trustees to see in the quarterly Management Accounts whether we are following the planned trajectory – and it is the norm in other sectors for a budget to be re-forecasted each quarter, so that might be a way of handling the financial governance of the organisation if it becomes appropriate and necessary.

Neil thanked Mark for his comments, which he said provided valuable context. He also wanted to let the Board know that an additional paper will be coming via email at a later date – this will be the final Reserves Policy which will have been amended according to the principles agreed in this budget.

It was asked whether we can be completely confident in our ability to deliver the planned work for this year considering current capacity, but caveating awareness that we intend to recruit to a number of posts. Ivana responded by saying that the roles we are actively recruiting to, once filled, will enable the planned programme of work and free up her time to focus more on potential

futures post-legislative change. When asked if there is a backup plan if recruitment is unsuccessful, Ivana explained that we are already close to filling the Head of Community Engagement and Research post as we used an agency with expertise in this area of work to help compile a candidate shortlist. We also have made use of small charities-focused recruitment agencies, who have fixed-term and temporary role recruitment in mind. As well as that, the salary being offered is highly competitive according to market testing we've done. Bearing all of this in mind, we are hopeful that we will successfully recruit. However, if we don't manage to recruit to all these roles, we will need to resource the work in some other way. Fortunately there are no specific deadlines for a particular time of the year, and we can hold off on any of the engagement pieces until such time as we do have staff in place. In the meantime, our current, existing engagement projects remain live and are maintaining our visibility to stakeholders while we consider and plan ahead.

The Board:

- Agreed and signed off the use of reserves to support the current year and future planning, and to inform the Reserves Policy
- Agreed the proposal to electronically approve the amended Reserves Policy according to and subject to the principles discussed today
- Agreed and signed off the recommended Budget.

9. Board Advisory Committee (BAC) Update

Amanda updated the Board as below:

- Since the last Board Meeting in November, the BAC has met twice, and those meetings (on the 29th Jan and 24th Feb) prefigured many of the papers and much of the discussions at Board today.
- BAC was grateful to have had an introductory meeting with Mark Brennan, who helped to 'set the scene' in financial terms for the position of the organisation.
- The BAC received a paper explaining the processes and timeline for amending the organisation's charitable objectives, which they found extremely helpful when considering the future.
- There's been clear progress between what was discussed during the December Strategic Away Day, and what has been taken forward by the Future Planning Working Group (FPWG).
- The BAC has also evaluated some updated organisational governance and policy documents, which have since been signed off electronically by the Board.
- Linked to that, BAC was shown a Compliance Schedule Checklist which the Executive Team has been working towards to ensure the proper and safe running of the business.

Amanda was thanked for her update, and the reminder it provided of the huge amount of work that was done during those meetings.

The Board noted the update.

10. Scheme of Delegation

Neil introduced this item by saying that it had been well looked into by the BAC, and so it was now recommended to Board for formal approval following some stated amendments.

The Board agreed and signed off the updated Scheme of Delegation.

11. Health & Safety Update

Neil requested that his thanks to Board Member, Jan Taylor, be noted in the minutes for her continued role as the Health and Safety Lead for the Board. Particularly, Neil noted that she has kept this important issue on the Board's agenda both formally and informally, and he is grateful for her oversight and the work she has done with relevant team members to ensure we stay compliant.

Ivana spoke to the update paper and said it had been included here for their information, and to provide assurances to the Board that we are staying 'on top of' our obligations in that regard. She asked that all Board Members please be responsive to any asks that come their way, as it's the time of year when we need to make those checks. There'll be a broader update on where we are with Health and Safety at the next Board, as much of that annual process will have been completed by then.

In response to a query around whether a shift towards more in-person activity would have any ramifications as far as Health and Safety compliance is concerned, Ivana said that we are revisiting our risk assessment process, will be including these important considerations for new starters, and are looking at updating our DBS policy. The Charity Commission does not mandate DBS Checks for all trustees and staff in a charity, but they make it clear that this is one of the key ways organisations can illustrate their due diligence. Therefore, we are investigating routes to achieving this as it is not a time or resource-intensive activity overall for the payoff it will give in terms of limiting our risk exposures.

There was a concern raised about the DBS Checking system, and potential pitfalls when trying to access a level of check that a person may not be eligible to apply for. It was agreed that this will be resolved following the Board Meeting.

Ivana explained that no action is being taken yet, given the renewal of our DBS Policy is first coming to the Board Advisory Committee (BAC) for consideration, and at that point we'll make our proposals for how to move forward.

[The Board noted the update.](#)

12. Contract Monitoring – Quarter 3

The documents under this item (HwH-10 – HwH-10d) were taken as read and the volume of work demonstrated within was praised.

There was a query about whether the only amber return in the Organisational Performance Monitoring & Indicators document, relating to website hits, was part of a quarter-to-quarter trend, or if it's a one-off low number. Ivana said she was not sure but would find out and report back to Board.

[The Board noted the update.](#)

13. Any other business including questions from the public

There was no other business.

14. Closed CEO and Board session

Next formal meeting of the Board: Wednesday 3rd June 2026