

Chair's update

FOR INFORMATION/DISCUSSION/DECISION

1. Board developments

This will be an interesting and important meeting at the end of another busy and productive quarter for us. We have a full agenda but one which will enable us to give the right attention to how Hertfordshire residents are experiencing health and care, how things are continuing to change around us and how we are delivering 'business as usual' while preparing our organisation for and shaping the changes to come.

At our last meeting, due to the unique combination of the national announcement of the proposed changes to Healthwatch and the arrival of new trustee colleagues, we took an unusual approach to the structure of the meeting, with confidential sessions either side of our meeting in public. I am pleased that we are able to return at this meeting to our usual practice of beginning with our public session and following it with confidential items. I hope this will enable us to continue to have open and spontaneous discussions in our public session. Transparency and public accountability in the way we make decisions about the discharge of our duties as a local Healthwatch are legal requirements but are also intrinsic to our values and culture. In more normal times, we have needed to give less time to our own organisational questions but for the foreseeable future these discussions, and thus the confidential section of the agenda, are likely to continue to be more substantial. It may be helpful for the board to agree and put on the record some principles about why items should be considered either in the meeting in public or in the confidential session. As a starter for discussion I suggest the following:

- All agenda items relating to formal decisions on how we identify issues for our Healthwatch work programme and how we allocate the public money we receive for those purposes should be taken during the public session.
- All agenda items reporting on how we have discharged our functions as a Healthwatch should be taken during the public session.
- All agenda items relating to our governance should be taken during the public session as our default position. If there is a confidential

aspect to any such items that element should be considered in the confidential session but the decision(s) put on the public record, either through an additional note in the public minutes or by means of a report to the next meeting in public.

- Where papers, discussions and/or decisions relate to commercially confidential or sensitive information or there is a need to protect the confidentiality or wellbeing of service users or staff, these items should be taken in the private session.
- If there is a need to discuss information provided to us on a confidential basis, these items should be taken in the private session.

Our face-to-face board sessions are always important moments in our calendar. We had a productive board development day on 25 September and I am looking forward to our board strategic session next month. Elsewhere on our agenda we will be discussing plans for that day.

There is a constant need for us to review and reflect upon how we work as a board – now more than ever. Later in the agenda we will consider the report from the Future Planning Working Group, which includes a recommendation relating to this. Our recent discussions on strategic risk have been helpful in this respect and we will be discussing the latest update to the risk register at this meeting. I am pleased to see that the updated [Charity Governance Code](#) has been published. Board colleagues may find it helpful to read before our December session and ahead of the annual trustee 1:1s that I will soon be organising for January.

2. Organisational developments

My continued thanks to our staff team. Under Ivana's strong leadership they continue to deliver to the highest standards and their ability to do that in the current environment receives as much admiration externally as it does from me. As a board we will continue to keep support for staff actively on our agendas. Special thanks and best wishes go to our Deputy Chief Executive Nuray Ercan, the longest-serving member of our team and a constant support to the board, as she moves on to take up an exciting new role in higher education.

I should also take this opportunity to report formally to the Board that, having received the confirmation that trustees were seeking about mailing

arrangements, I have taken the agreed Chair's action to authorise the chief executive to terminate the office rental agreement.

3. National and local system context

I am pleased to report that the new executive and non-executive leaders of the Central East Integrated Care Board cluster have taken a constructive and proactive approach to building upon the relationships with Healthwatch in the predecessor ICBs. Ivana has been working closely with her fellow chief executives to develop the collaborative arrangements we will continue to need. The new 'super-ICB' intends to have a non-voting Healthwatch seat at its board table, which I will fill on behalf of and in close contact with Healthwatch across the patch. There will be sub-committees at the level of the previous ICBs and Ivana will attend the one covering Hertfordshire. Together with the helpful section relating to public engagement in the new [strategic commissioning framework](#) for ICBs, this gives us a platform from which we can help the new structures to develop the right approaches.

The Department of Health and Social Care have been able to update us further on the potential changes to Healthwatch, confirming that the Bill will not be introduced to Parliament until after the King's Speech in the Spring of 2026 and that the Department is working with other ministries to provide confirmation to local authorities about how the funding to commission Healthwatch will be delivered in 2026-27. The Department is currently working through the design of its own new Patient Experience Directorate and has not yet begun to design its proposed update. Healthwatch England and the King's Fund are working on a joint project to understand [lessons from the Healthwatch experience](#) so far and they expect to report early enough in 2026 to inform both the drafting of and Parliament's consideration of the Bill. I was glad to attend a recent stakeholder workshop as part of this research.

Discussions on local government reform in Hertfordshire continue and the local authorities are due to make their joint submission to the Government by 28 November. We will be able to take account of this in our subsequent strategic thinking.

4. 'Holding to account' and other meetings

Since the last board meeting, Ivana and I have met a range of system stakeholders, including the outgoing chair and chief executive of the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board, the chair of the new Central East ICB, the new county council executive members responsible for public health, children's services and children's care, and the chair and chief executive of Hertfordshire Community NHS Trust. By the time of the board meeting we will also have met the chair and chief executive of West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust. In September we jointly presented to the board of East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust and had an excellent discussion with them about our insight themes and impact and how we can work together as they prepare to take on new responsibilities concerning patient feedback.

I took part in the September and November meetings of the Hertfordshire Health Scrutiny Committee. At the November meeting I raised the issue of the continuing need for Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust to secure capital funding for additional acute mental health beds in the east and north of the county. Councillors were interested in the significant revenue savings that this would generate and unanimously decided to write to the Secretary of State on this issue.

At the October Health and Wellbeing Board I was delighted to present our report on the findings from the research we had carried out for the Integrated Care Partnership. The Board accepted all of our recommendations and was happy to take ownership of the issues raised.

RECOMMENDATIONS – The Board is asked to:

1. Consider and agree the principles relating to our meetings in public and in confidential sessions.
2. Note the Chair's action taken to authorise the termination of the office rental agreement.
3. Note the update.