Healthwatch Hertfordshire Board Meeting
1pm on Wednesday 26th November 2025, Online

Board Members: Alex Booth, Ryan Heard (arr. 14:12), Amanda Hutchinson, Enoch Kanagaraj, Natalie Kelly, Karen Middleton, Ramone Samuda, Jan Taylor, Neil Tester (Chair)
Executive Team: Ivana Chalmers (Chief Executive), Alice Lovell (Office & Signposting Manager), Asha McDonagh (Research Officer) (dep. 13:57)
Visitors/others: Susan Ebanyat (HCC Commissioner), Lavanya Gamsani (arr. 13:23) (Radfield Home Care Watford & Borehamwood)
Apologies: Natalie Stone, Yolanda Roach, 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 28th August

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 referred to his report circulated as part of the meeting papers and highlighted as follows:

- Board Meetings are likely to have more content in the closed, confidential sessions given the current environment – however, our statutory local Healthwatch functions are and will continue to be conducted during public Board sessions. Neil asked the Board for their views on that section of his paper and there were no concerns about the proposal
- Sincere thanks to the staff team for their work, and especially Nuray Ercan who recently left the organisation. Alice was thanked for taking over the meeting governance today.
- The Chair's Action to sign-off the termination of our office contract has been completed since the last Board Meeting, as recommended.
- We've been pleased to be involved alongside other local Healthwatch as the new 'Central East' ICB takes shape, in recognition of our value
- Further updates from the Department of Health and Social Care for local Healthwatch: a meeting has been confirmed in January 2026, where we hope we will get an understanding of the government's plans for the patient involvement framework nationally, and then locally.

In response to a query about the anticipated plans for local government reform, and whether any particular structure is currently favoured locally, Neil said he has been monitoring the Hertfordshire County Council and district councils, noting that there is some disparity in the preference for different options. This will all be submitted for government to pick a preferred option, which will then have a statutory consultation for Hertfordshire residents in 2026, before the decision is made final.

Regarding a query about local Healthwatch and the Voluntary, Community, Faith & Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Alliance working within the new Central East ICB: Neil highlighted the continuation of the productive relationship with the HWE ICB. Ivana also said it is important to properly differentiate between the work of the Alliance and the local Healthwatch; the Alliance is

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there to give voice to the voluntary sector in the health & social care system, and local Healthwatch exist to give voice to the general public, whether or not they are utilising voluntary services, and Ivana is happy to follow up after the meeting if helpful..

The Board:

- Agreed the recommendations regarding the public and confidential Board Meetings
- Noted the action taken to terminate our office contract
- Noted the Chair's Update

4. Chief Executive's Update and Contract Monitoring

Ivana highlighted the following from her update:

- The contents of this update hopefully goes some way to show the scale of what has been accomplished over the past 3-6 months, in spite of the changes in the system.
- We are starting to plan our work programme for 2026-27 and have been asking Chairs & Chief Executives of local Trusts if they have suggestions, and we are working through our own learnings from public engagement during the 2025-26 work programme.
- Internally, we are currently filling vacancies from staff departures with interim support as well as providing opportunities for upskilling current members of the team.
- Most importantly, however, we are awaiting details of the funding envelope from Hertfordshire County Council which will help us effectively shape our work program for next year.

We are also staying involved alongside other local Healthwatch as the new 'Central East' ICB takes shape, with a more strategic purview. We're consciously working on ensuring we can offer combined insights from across the whole geography (Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes (BLMK), Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough).

Neil thanked Ivana for the paper and wanted to clarify that the right-most column in the table referring to our decision making timelines (relating to legislative change) at the end of her paper is the most conservative estimate enabling prudent planning.

There were positive comments from the Board about our continued commitment to the people of Hertfordshire whilst waiting for more news. The importance of ensuring that we continue to meet our contracted duties, but maintaining sensitivity to the stresses being placed on staff, was also highlighted.

Regarding the 6-Monthly Services Update Report, Neil provided further context that this is a document that much of the Board has already seen recently through the Board Advisory Committee; this could mean there is not as much to be said at Board about it because it has already been said in an earlier meeting. However, Neil commented that the signposting section of the paper in particular is a dynamic and changing indicator of issues or concerns within the local health and care system. The update on the current Research and Engagement projects was also highlighted as a great way to ensure it is clear to all that we are still carrying out a significantly ambitious program of work and adding value. Neil commented when he has met with local Chairs and CEOs, they've been very clear on the excellent insights HwH can bring to the table.

There was a question about continued capacity of our signposting service. Ivana responded by explaining that the outgoing Deputy CEO had an oversight role which we're looking to formally

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transfer to Alice; however, other team members trained in signposting are still here, and it is our intention to further build resilience in this service.

The 'healthy' mixture of live and completed projects was praised, with particular emphasis on the social care focus that seems to be coming up. Regarding the care home visits, Ivana clarified that this is a pilot project to see how effective a new quality framework is for the care homes using it. She explained that we're excited to be involved in it, and it is hoped to be a useful reading for the local system.

Board agreed the proposed timeline for forward planning in the Chief Executive's update, as corrected, with 'Business Advisory Committee' given its proper name as 'Board Advisory Committee' and references to plans for 2025 corrected to say 2026.

5. Financial Wellbeing & Mental Health: "Golden Threads"

Asha spoke to her presentation, which summarised the contents of the Golden Threads paper looking at the themes of financial wellbeing and mental health across a number of our projects over the past year. Neil thanked Asha for her work in pulling this all together and for a concise presentation.

In response to a question about whether there is any practical learning to take into account in future, Asha said it had been interesting – however, responses from some groups were relatively small, which limited what conclusions could be drawn. In terms of learning, Asha said that we would want to collect more qualitative data in future, so that we can start to understand why people are in the position they say they're in.

The report was praised for its insights, and the implications sitting behind them. The attention taken in highlighting those communities we had not so easily been able to reach, was also praised, as we can then look to remove those barriers to reach into those lesser-heard communities. Another comment about the paper was that it was written in an accessible way, and quick to read, which was appreciated as we are a public-facing organisation.

There was a question about what the report had highlighted in terms of: what issues potentially need immediate action, and what issues need more long-term strategic focus. Ivana acknowledged that the local and national healthcare systems are already aware of some of the insights that were gathered through this work (e.g. people smoking to help manage their mental health), and there are strategies being employed to try to address some of those concerns. However, it was explained that the 'Golden Threads' paper is intended to act as a 'call to action' for our own program of work and ensuring that we include the views of people in those underserved communities. In terms of more immediate concerns, Asha highlighted long waiting lists as an issue that ran through both the financial and mental wellbeing concerns we recorded in this report (as examples: people were placing themselves under financial stress to access private healthcare because they could not wait on the NHS list, and/or because they were struggling with pain while waiting for treatment). Asha explained that, as that is a national issue which we know the government is working to address, we will take the challenge to reflect on whether there might be local system partners who might not be aware of this.

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It was also was suggested that if we could identify the most important things that we need the local system to do to improve the situations of these underserved groups, that would be a great way to make a difference to the people we heard from.

Neil commented that it was a contractual agreement with Hertfordshire County Council that we would continue to diversify the range of people that we hear from through our work, and that this continues to be an increasing trend, and this work serves as evidence of the investment in time to do so.

Ivana echoed that and thanked the Board for what has been a highly useful conversation, with good challenges. In addition, Ivana said that we should aspire to find our unique role where we can add most value, and identify where we can champion the work of other organisations who are already making a difference for some of these communities. For example, our project looking at the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees would not have been possible without collaboration with Herts Mind Network; we are taking a similar approach in our research into the experiences of children and young people, and of blind and deaf people; and so, working in partnership will be a key part of achieving our strategic objectives this year, as it was last year.

Ivana thanked Asha for all her effort, which she said achieved all the objectives that were set out at the start of the year for the approach to 'Golden Threads'. Neil seconded that and further thanked the whole research team for their efforts across the year, which have all fed into this report.

Board noted the report.

6. Risk Register

Neil prefaced the discussion by saying that the register was produced in collaboration between the Chair and Chief Executive, and wanted to clarify that where the risk scores are higher it tends to be due to the impact should it come to pass, rather than the likelihood of it. Neil also commented that the mitigations being taken by Ivana and the Board are believed to be effective, but that any improvements that could be identified would be very welcome.

Ivana spoke about her key objective when producing this register, which was that it should be accessible, digestible, and understood in the current context, as documents of this nature can get quite complicated and the purpose is to discuss and agree risk appetite – and whether the mitigating activity is sufficient or could be improved. Further to that, Ivana clarified that many of the risks listed are interlinked, and so mitigations for one item will also have an impact on others, this is why they were presented in this way in the paper. This document should act as an audit trail for decision-making in the context we're currently operating, but as agreed it will be returning to every future Board meeting so it can be updated accordingly as the context changes. Lastly, an operational risk register covering day to day running of the organisation exists but was not brought to Board on this occasion.

It was raised that risk D11 (p5) in the register does not appear to have been explicitly addressed by any of the Mitigation Approaches. Neil and Ivana agreed that this did appear to be missing, and that a line would be added to highlight it as a concern for the Scheme of Delegation to incorporate.

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Action: Line to be added into the Mitigation Approaches column to ensure that line D11 in the Risk Register is explicitly addressed.

Also on p5 of the Register, there is a line in Mitigation Approaches which says, 'Investment in external management accountancy expertise already put in place'. It was pointed out that other advice may and can be sought externally on other issues aside from finance, as that had been agreed at the previous Board Meeting. The suggestion that we broaden out that statement, or include a broader statement elsewhere to cover that explicitly, was put forward.

Regarding the Mitigation Approach statement on p4: 'Ensuring the CEO is enabled to balance their workload between internal focus, delivery of existing commitments, planning for upcoming financial year and enabling board to help steer the organisation through any future change.' Neil raised that there should perhaps be specific mitigating activity to address the risk of Board failing to support the CEO, in order to support the team. The Board did not object to the inclusion of this.

Risk B6 (p4), and its probability score, was raised as potentially too low. It was discussed that there might be a lack of clarity in the way the risk was presented, and that the focus should be on our ability to identify and maintain relationships. It was also noted that the ability to mitigate this was already affected and that the scores presented included some of the mitigations already, which perhaps obscures what the score would have been prior to any action taken. As a crucial risk, this will continue to be monitored, but it was agreed that it would be prudent to increase the probability score to be higher than moderate.

Action: Increase the probability score on risk B6 from 3 to 4.

Ivana noted that in previous roles she had created a table at the start of the register which put all the scores side by side with each other, so it was clear to see how each risk related to all the others.

Board agreed this would be helpful in future approaches.

Further to that, it was suggested that future conversations about risk should include opportunity to reflect on whether a mitigation has worked, or not worked. Ivana stated that as the document evolves over time, she hopes that the scores will change accordingly, and that will be an indicator of how effective the mitigations have been. Within future versions of the Register, it was proposed that arrows going up, down, or level, compared to the previous versions would be helpful.

Board agreed the Risk Register, subject to the tweaks identified above.

7. Board Advisory Committee (BAC) Update

Amanda provided her update verbally as the new chair of the Board Advisory Committee, as follows:

- The last meeting was very engaged and enabled a number of helpful discussions around items such as the Scheme of Delegation, as well as operational considerations.
- The meeting also looked ahead to the new year, considering the Board's position without a Treasurer and the potential to upskill within current Board membership.
- The value added by new Board Members has been clear to see in those discussions, and the conversations overall were very helpful and productive.

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Neil reiterated his thanks to Amanda for taking up the chair role for BAC.

The Board noted the update.

8. Management Accounts as at September 2025

Ivana noted that this is a document our Finance and Resources Manager, Natalie Stone, leads on but is sending her apologies to this meeting. This document is routinely brought to Board Advisory Committee, and then Board Meeting in public for transparency.

Within the document, Ivana highlighted that the paper reflects upon how we might treat our Reserves, but that this will be coming back to Board for discussion in future. Ivana also said that it is important to note that it is a dynamic situation at the moment – for example, normally we would have been forecasting expenses for an office but that won't be the case as we have decided to close it.

Overall, the anticipated costs are still manageable, and the predictions shown in the document should not be hugely 'out of kilter' aside from if there is a substantive change (which will be evident as we see changes in staffing and vacancies being filled).

The Board noted the Management Accounts.

9. Any other business including questions from the public

There was no other business.

Neil thanked Lavanya Gamsani for attending the meeting and asked if she had any comments she wanted to make. Lavanya stated that she was grateful for the opportunity to observe and had found the meeting really interesting.

Susan Ebanyat wanted to note the appreciation of the Hertfordshire County Council for the valuable research carried out by Asha and the Research Team. She noted that she appreciates and acknowledges the really important work that the team does, and how this has been useful in informing the commissioning decisions and targeting support to specific communities in Hertfordshire. Neil said he was sure that compliment would be passed onto the team by Ivana, and thanked Susan for letting us know.

10. Closed CEO and Board session

Next formal meeting of the Board: Tuesday 17th March 2026

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