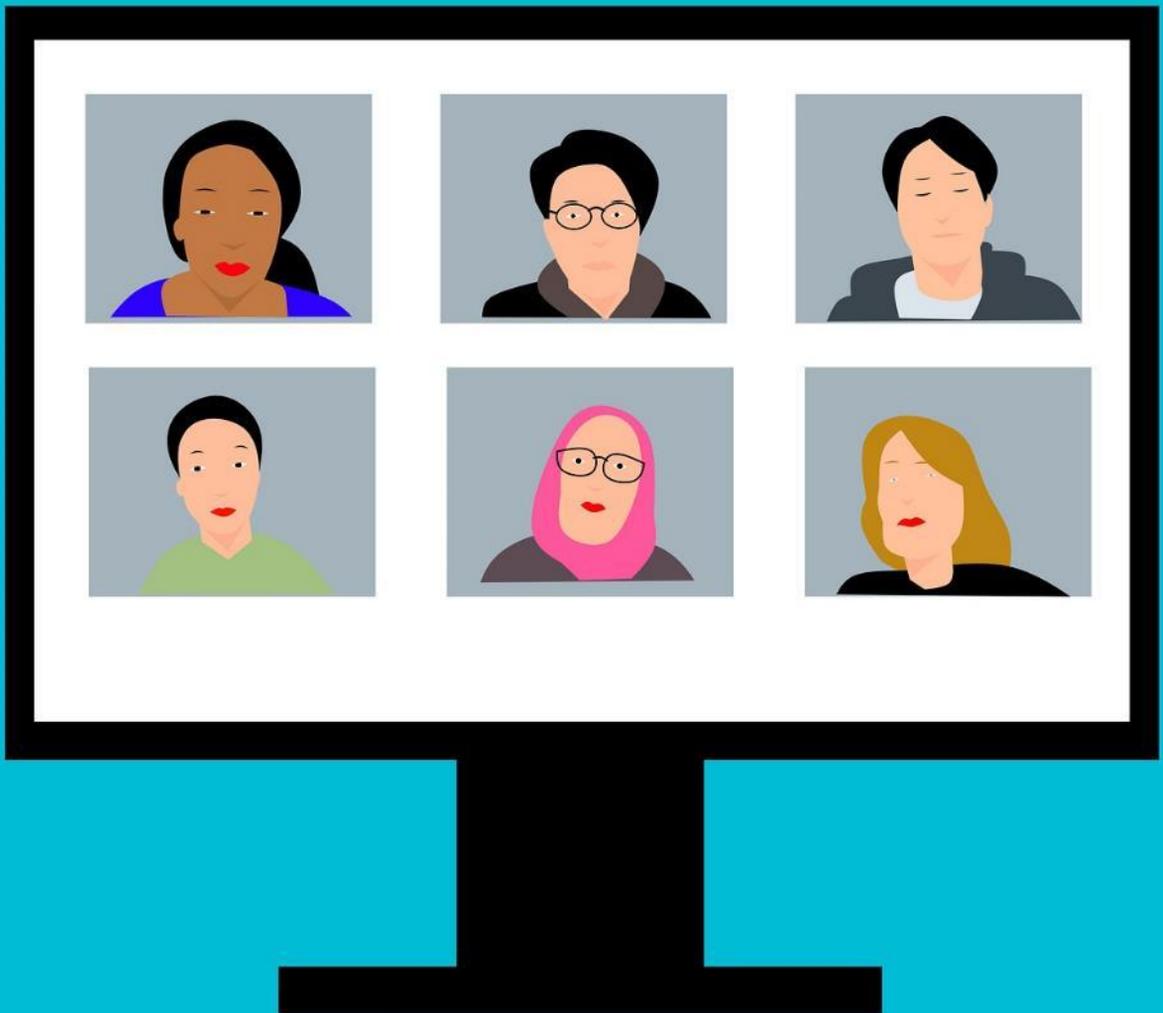


# Annual Report

2020-2021

Supporting Reading people through the pandemic



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All case studies have had names and identifying details altered to protect anonymity. Accompanying photos are posed by models.

# Message from our Chair

**Our staff and volunteers have kept an unwavering focus on supporting local people during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

## Dedication of thanks

I would like to dedicate this annual report to those members of our community who have sadly suffered greatly during this last year due to Covid-19 and the brave efforts of our local community - paid and unpaid carers, key workers, NHS and social care staff - who have supported our health and wellbeing.

This has been a year of extraordinary challenges and I am proud of how our team, staff and volunteers have responded to this crisis. This has included changing and adapting the way we connect with our community, setting up new ways of working and ensuring that a strong community voice is present in the design and delivery of health and social care services.

We ensured that we continued to provide information and advice in new ways and supported the highest number of people through this service than in any other year since Healthwatch Reading's inception. This included setting up information and advice clinics at a local hotel housing displaced refugees and asylum seekers due to the pandemic.



**"We supported the highest number of local people through our information and advice service than in any other year since our inception."**

## Our commitment to you

We also ensured, at a time when vulnerable people needed our advocacy services more than they ever have, that we did not fail them and continued to reach as many people as we could.

As we enter this new year, I know that Healthwatch Reading's focus as an organisation that speaks for those whose voices go unheard and those who are impacted by health inequalities, will continue to be strong and we will always take on the issues that matter the most to our community.



**David Shepherd, chair of trustees, Healthwatch Reading**

# About us

## Here to make health and care better

We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Reading. We're here to find out what matters to people and help make sure your views shape the support you need, by sharing these views with those who have the power to make change happen.

## Helping you to find the information you need

We help people find the information they need about services in their area. This has been vital during the pandemic with the ever-changing environment and restrictions limiting people's access to health and social care services.

### Our goals



#### 1 Supporting you to have your say

We want more people to get the information they need to take control of their health and care, make informed decisions and shape the services that support them.



#### 2 Providing a high quality service

We want everyone who shares an experience or seeks advice from us to get a high quality service and to understand the difference their views make.



#### 3 Ensuring your views help improve health & care

We want more services to use your views to shape the health and care support you need today and in the future.



**“Local Healthwatch have done fantastic work throughout the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is more work ahead to ensure that everyone’s views are heard. COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities and to tackle these unfair health differences we will need those in power to listen, to hear the experiences of those facing inequality and understand the steps that could improve people’s lives.”**

**Sir Robert Francis QC, Chair of Healthwatch England**

# Highlights from our year

Find out about our resources and how we have engaged and supported people in 2020-21.

## Reaching out



We collected views from:

**215 people**

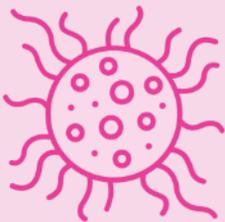
via four projects we ran to get experiences of health and social care

In addition, we engaged with:

**200 people**

who attended Zoom sessions we ran with local experts on vaccines

## Keeping you informed



We posted:

**26 updates**

on vaccines & Covid news to local Facebook groups with 38,000 members

We emailed out:

**9 special Covid newsletters**

## Making a difference



We used:

**130 comments**

people gave us as instant feedback on social media to secure better information from official bodies about the vaccination programme

We helped:

**44% more people**

compared with the year before, to get their queries answered

## Working for you



**10 volunteers**

acted as trustees or board members of our charity, with our board meeting via Zoom instead of face-to-face on 10 occasions over the year

**12 people**

make up our team, mostly on part-time or occasional hours, across Healthwatch and advocacy services

We responded to:

**201 emails**

from local people seeking help, 64 more than the previous year



# Responding to COVID-19

**The pandemic didn't stop our team from working hard for local residents to keep them informed, hear their views and speak up on their behalf. Most of our work was done online or by phone but we made exceptions to carry out face-to-face outreach with the most vulnerable people.**

## **Our year included:**

- helping asylum seekers placed in Reading during the pandemic to access urgent healthcare
- running Zoom Q&A sessions to understand and overcome vaccine hesitancy
- surveying the public to learn the lessons from Lockdown 1
- sending out special Covid newsletters and social media updates with essential information
- speaking up for local people on the Reading Covid Outbreak Engagement Board and
- linking people in need to NHS Volunteer Responders after we ended our emergency local prescription delivery scheme (covered in last year's annual report).



## Responding to Covid: asylum seekers

**One of the most vulnerable groups of people we supported during the pandemic were asylum seekers who were moved by the Home Office from other parts of the UK and placed in a single hotel in Reading.**

The government placed around 80 asylum-seekers in Reading to ensure they would be in 'Covid-safe' accommodation but when we met them, we discovered the move had caused many problems. They experienced unsafe breaks in healthcare such as running out of prescription medicines or missing hospital care they'd been referred for in other parts of the UK.

They were not registered with a local GP surgery for weeks after arriving in Reading, due to bureaucracy and confusion about who was responsible for meeting their needs. Some of the people we met could not speak English and didn't understand their rights to healthcare, while others didn't have money to buy basics such as paracetamol.

We met with around 40 people during multiple visits to the hotel in the summer of 2020 and worked with other charities such as Reading Refugees Support Group to support people.

We wrote a report sharing the asylum seekers' experiences and called for better local working as well as a national overhaul of the asylum system.



### Case study

Mohammed was moved to the hotel in Reading from London in April 2020. Originally from Africa, he had a basic understanding of English.

He told us that he was a diabetic and had not had any medication for the past month. He was trying to control it through his diet but the food supplied to people at the hotel was mostly carbohydrate-based.

We contacted Mohammed's London GP on his behalf and arranged an electronic prescription to be sent to a local pharmacy. We checked it had arrived and he was finally able to get it.



**"All the health and social care agencies involved are grateful for Healthwatch's work in supporting the asylum seekers, whose arrival came at the height of the Covid pandemic, which posed huge challenges and demands across the whole of the healthcare system in Berkshire West."** Berkshire West CCG



### The impact of our project

- We secured urgent medical or dental appointments for asylum seekers
- We informed people about their rights to NHS care and which forms to complete
- The council & NHS publicly answered our questions about problems we found
- We were interviewed by BBC Radio Berkshire about the problems
- Reading East MP Matt Rodda spoke up about the issues in the House of Commons



## Responding to Covid: Zoom vaccine talks

**As the national Covid vaccination programme rolled out, we decided to run targeted sessions to help local people talk through any concerns about getting a vaccine and to hear all the information they needed to make a decision for themselves.**

We worked with local charities and groups including race equality body ACRE, Age UK Berkshire, and the Reading Kenyan Association to promote the sessions, all held online via Zoom at various times of the day and week between February and May 2021.

We also persuaded local health professionals, including a nurse practitioner, practice-based pharmacist, biomedical scientist, Long Covid hospital doctor and the director of public health for Berkshire West to give up time in their busy schedules to take part and answer questions.

The sessions reached around 200 people, and covered a wide variety of topics including vaccine safety, efficacy and health inequalities. We have published summaries of the sessions to make the information more widely available to local people.

We have also shared feedback with NHS and public health officials to help improve the way they engage with local people over Covid vaccination.



### National backing for our approach

Healthwatch England commissioned research with African, Bangladeshi, Caribbean and Pakistani people on vaccines, which found:

- people trust local health professionals more than distant politicians or celebrities
- people don't want to be stigmatised or lumped into a single 'BAME' group
- engaging directly, locally and with accessible information will help people make up their own minds.



## Responding to Covid: Lockdown 1 Survey

**When the peak of the first wave of coronavirus had eased, we sought local people's views to see if there was any constructive feedback we could give to the NHS for the future.**

Our online survey received 153 responses between June and August 2020 and found:

- 44% hadn't contacted the NHS because they didn't want to bother busy staff, thought their problem could wait or feared they would catch Covid
- 36% felt better communication would have improved their experiences
- the most used services at the time were GPs (75%), pharmacies (51%) or outpatients (22%)
- 55 people left messages of praise for NHS staff and other key workers for their pandemic response.



**"Healthwatch Reading's report will be a useful resource in developing these [communication] plans."**

Joint response from Reading Borough Council and Berkshire West Integrated Care System



# Information, advice and advocacy

**Early in the pandemic, the public told us they were unsure how services were operating and what new rules meant for them. Our role became more focused on providing people with timely, simple and concise information and advice as well as providing advocacy to eligible clients.**

## **Key questions people asked us:**

- What does shielding mean?
- What is the difference between social distancing and self-isolation?
- Can I see my GP in person?
- Is A&E open?
- Where can I get help for an urgent dental problem?
- Can I visit my very unwell relative in hospital?
- When will care homes let visitors in?
- When will my GP start inviting people in for a vaccine?
- Where is my nearest vaccine hub?
- Can I choose which vaccine I get?

## Top four services that people contacted us about:



35% on GP services



14% on hospital care



7% on dentistry



6% on social care

## Case Study



Andy contacted us in July 2020 to say he'd been in a lot of pain with teeth problems for the past four months and been on numerous antibiotics due to reoccurring abscesses. NHS dentistry had drastically been cut back due to Covid-19 and Andy said his usual dentist could not find a specialist to carry out root canal treatment or tooth extraction. With Andy's permission, we made multiple calls to NHS dentists on his behalf and finally secured an appointment for him to be seen in three weeks. Evidence from local Healthwatch about problems with access to NHS dentistry has led our national body, Healthwatch England to pressure NHS England to reform services.



### Contact us to get the information you need

If you have a query about a health or social care service, or need help with where you can go to access further support, get in touch. Don't struggle alone. Healthwatch Reading is here for you.



[www.healthwatchreading.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchreading.co.uk)



07786 476 257



[info@healthwatchreading.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchreading.co.uk)

## Striving to provide advocacy in challenging times

This was our third year of delivering the Single Reading Advocacy Service, commissioned by Reading Borough Council. This is in addition to our Healthwatch contract.

Our total number of advocacy clients for the year (276) was lower than the previous year (411) due to the pandemic. The NHS suspended its complaints procedures, while Prospect Park Hospital stopped ward visits, which meant we couldn't offer our usual on-the-spot Independent Mental Health Advocacy for sectioned patients. Pressures on hospital staff also meant they were often unable to facilitate advocacy by phone. However we were able to provide Care Act advocacy by phone or video calls to vulnerable people at home.

Advocates are now finding clients have more complex needs due to the impact of lockdowns on their mental health and wellbeing.

### Our Reading Voice service provides:

- Care Act Advocacy
- Independent Mental Health Advocacy
- NHS Complaints Advocacy
- Social Care Complaints Advocacy

### On request we may also be able to provide:

- Parent advocacy in child protection cases
- Appropriate Adult
- Litigation Friend

### Our service is:

- Free for clients
- Independent
- Confidential

### Case Study



Mark, a man in his early 30s, was referred by a social worker to receive Care Act Advocacy to help him have his say during a review of his care package. He was bored and angry by the restrictions of lockdown and also frustrated with the world seeing him as disabled and needing constant visits from care staff. Our advocate held regular phone and video call sessions with Mark, gaining his trust and helping him to articulate his wishes to become more independent, less reliant on care and able to describe the strategies he would use in various situations. This led to the social worker agreeing to trial some changes.



**“She [the advocate] has built an excellent working relationship with him. At our last meeting I was amazed at how well they communicate, he looked and sounded like a new man.”**

Reading social worker

### Contact the Reading Voice advocacy hub

Members of the public or referring professionals can call or email:



**07365 519 920**



**readingvoice@healthwatchreading.co.uk**



**Reading  
Voice**



## Shaping future services

**As well as responding to the Covid pandemic, we spent the year working hard to influence the shape of future health and care services.**

We have done this by:

- holding Reading focus groups to inform a new Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- contributing to a five-borough Healthwatch-led review of health inequalities
- responding with other local Healthwatch to Care Quality Commission plans on future regulation
- jointly responding with other local Healthwatch to NHS England plans for integrated care systems
- jointly responding with other local Healthwatch to government plans for A&E targets.

To influence decision-makers we increasingly need to take a creative approach. Local Healthwatch are commissioned to give a voice to people living in mainly, one local authority area. But as NHS structures have evolved, decisions affecting people living in Reading are now taken beyond the borough - such as within the Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group and Berkshire Integrated Care Partnership (both of which cover Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire) and the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care System ('BOB ICS'), covering services for people living in five different local authority areas. BOB ICS has funded a Healthwatch liaison lead, to ensure one person can liaise with its leaders to discuss and represent collective and diverse views from Healthwatch Reading and local Healthwatch in Wokingham, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. This liaison postholder – Catherine Williams – is hosted within our Reading team.

## Shaping services: Health and wellbeing strategy

We held two focus groups to hear what local people thought of 11 proposed priorities for a future Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

One group was held with secondary school students and the other with ethnic minority people. Both groups picked the same three top priorities but young people also wanted a fourth added, relating to Covid prevention.

The Berkshire West strategy, due out in October 2021, will be the first of its kind, involving the three local authorities in Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire agreeing common goals, whereas previously they drew up individual plans. Local Healthwatch in the other two areas have also held focus groups.

Once the strategy is agreed, it will be monitored by each borough's Health and Wellbeing Board to check if the goals are being met. Healthwatch Reading sits on the Reading board.



### Top priorities chosen by young people:

1. Good mental health and wellbeing for all children and young people
2. Build strong, socially connected communities
3. Stop unfair differences in health between different groups of people
4. Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 before and after we get vaccinated.



**“Mental health services need to be provided in schools so that it is tackled early before crisis help is needed.”**

Focus group participant

## Shaping services: Tackling health inequalities

A powerful report on health inequalities was submitted on behalf of five local Healthwatch to the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care System.

The report included a review of 21 reports covering 1200+ people's views, published by the local Healthwatch in Reading, Wokingham, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, from 2018-20. We described the experiences of a wide variety of people, including those experiencing homelessness, mental health needs or learning disabilities; people seeking asylum; people identifying as LGBT+, pregnant woman, people from ethnic minorities, military veterans and boaters. Across all groups, we found consistent themes of the need to improve on communication and access to services.



**“Never [have I been told about my right to request an interpreter or had access to one] for any GP appointment .”**

Person who doesn't speak English as their main language



# Statutory statements

## About us

Healthwatch Reading, 3rd floor, Reading Central Library, Abbey Square, Reading, RG1 3BQ.  
Charity number: 1151346

Healthwatch Reading uses the Healthwatch Trademark when undertaking our statutory activities as covered by the licence agreement.

## Methods used to obtain people's views

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to provide us with insight. During 2020/21 we have been available by phone, email and webform, attended virtual meetings of community groups and forums, provided our own virtual activities and engaged with the public through social media.

We are committed to taking additional steps to ensure we obtain the views of people from diverse backgrounds who are often not heard by health and care decision makers. This year we have done this, for example, by working with the Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality, the Reading Kenyan Association and Age UK Berkshire, to arrange online sessions for their members.

## Statutory powers

This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and under guidance from Healthwatch England, we did not use our Enter and View powers. Consequently, no recommendations or other actions resulted from this remit.

We escalated concerns about the national asylum system and how it impacted on access to healthcare, to Healthwatch England and to the Home Office.

## Health and Wellbeing Board

Healthwatch Reading is represented on the Reading Health and Wellbeing Board by David Shepherd, our chair of trustees, and Mandeep Kaur Bains, our chief executive. During 2020/21 our representatives have presented reports to this board on our Lockdown 1 Survey, asylum seekers' project, and a final report on university and college students' health.

We also attended a newly convened council committee - the Reading Covid-19 Outbreak Engagement Board - from September 2020 onwards to help inform local communication and action plans to protect the public from coronavirus.

## Annual report

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We publish it on our website and promote it via our monthly newsletter, social media and a presentation to the Reading Health and Wellbeing Board.

# Next steps

## Top three priorities for 2021-22

- Understanding access to GPs as we move out of pandemic restrictions
- Ensuring people's voices are heard as commissioners focus on health inequalities
- Launching a hospital discharge experience project to see if services join up for people



**"As society moves beyond pandemic restrictions, we'll be there to help navigate Reading people through the altered health and care landscape and to ensure that the voices of those affected most by health inequalities, are heard by decision-makers."**

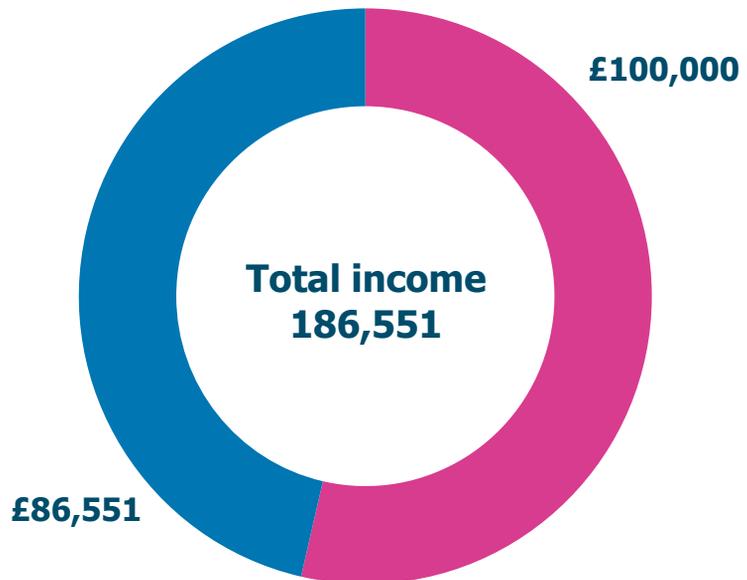
Mandeep Kaur Bains, chief executive, Healthwatch Reading

# Finances

To help us carry out our work we receive funding from our local authority under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

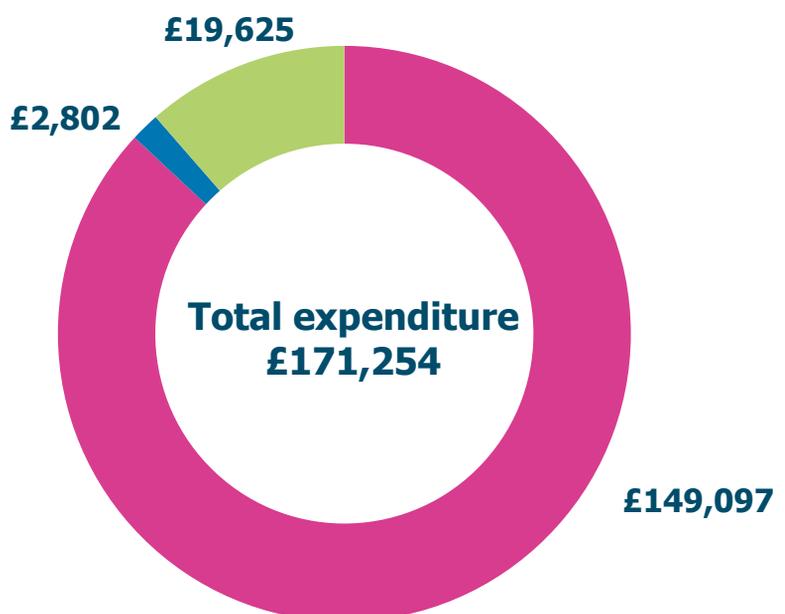
## Income

- Funding received from local authority
- Additional funding



## Expenditure

- Staff costs
- Operational costs
- Support and administration



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