

Championing what matters to you

Healthwatch Reading
Annual Report 2021-22



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Message from our chair

It is with great pride that we deliver our 9th Annual Report to the people of Reading. This has been a year of great achievements from winning another prestigious national award for our work with some of the most vulnerable in our community to tackling some of the difficult issues faced by those whose voices go unheard and suffer the greatest inequalities.

During 2021-22, we were the only local Healthwatch in England to directly engage with refugees and asylum seekers placed in hotels during the pandemic. We also spoke with our community who cannot speak English about accessing health services, we interviewed older, frail members of our community about rapid response services and we called out to our community to share their struggles about accessing GP services and dentists. All resulting in providers and commissioners having to make changes to how services are delivered - it has been an outstanding year for the whole team at Healthwatch Reading and I am grateful as always to the staff, trustees and board members for the support we have received.

Therefore, it is with great sadness that this is the last annual report that Healthwatch Reading in its current form will produce. Our commissioners, Reading Borough Council, recently retendered the local Healthwatch contract and decided near the end of April to award this to another provider, commencing on 1 June 2022. This has meant that there has been very little time to reach out to all our friends and stakeholders to thank them for their continued support and belief in the work of Healthwatch Reading. But most importantly, we would like to say thank you to our local community who have always trusted our charity with their views and experiences to bring about change for all those who use health and social care services.

Thank you.

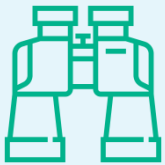


David Shepherd
Healthwatch Reading Chair

About us

Your health and social care champion

Healthwatch Reading is your local health and social care champion. From Whitley to Emmer Green and everywhere in between, we make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



Our vision

A world where we can all get the health and care we need.



Our mission

To make sure people's experiences help make health and care better.



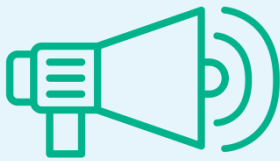
Our values

- Listening to people and making sure their voices are heard.
- Including everyone in the conversation – especially those who don't always have their voice heard.
- Analysing different people's experiences to learn how to improve care.
- Acting on feedback and driving change.
- Partnering with care providers, Government, and the voluntary sector – serving as the public's independent advocate.

Our year in review

Find out how we have engaged and supported people.

Reaching out



1,000+ people

shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

292 people

came to us for clear advice and information about topics such as finding an NHS dentist or Covid vaccines.

Making a difference to care



We undertook

4 major projects

engaging with Reading people on specific health and care topics.

Our most popular report was

'Hanging On'

which highlighted the struggles people had phoning GP surgeries.

Health and care that works for you



We were lucky to have

10 outstanding volunteers

from the community to act as our trustees and board members.

We were proud to win the

Top Award

at the annual Healthwatch Network Awards in 2021, for our team's engagement with asylum seekers in 2020. We were also Highly Commended in the Covid Response category.

Our team dealt with a

52% increase in queries

from the public, within existing resources.

An award winning team

We were proud to be recognised for our ‘bold and innovative’ approach to engagement at a national awards event in November 2021.

Healthwatch Reading won the ‘Engagement’ category in the national Healthwatch Awards 2021, for a project exposing the difficulty asylum seekers faced in accessing healthcare.

Around 30 organisations were shortlisted from a network of 152 local Healthwatch across England. The awards were presented by Healthwatch England on 11 November 2021 in a virtual ceremony

Judges praised our “innovative and bold” approach in interviewing more than 40 asylum seekers who’d been placed in a Reading hotel by the Home Office from other parts of the UK. We discovered they had experienced unsafe breaks in medication and care.



The team celebrate winning the award, from left to right: Rebecca Curtayne, Shahanaz Uddin, Mandeep Kaur Bains, Pat Bunch and Catherine Williams

Making a difference

Healthwatch Reading chief executive Mandeep Kaur Bains says: “As a result of our project, more asylum seekers who’ve been placed in Reading by the Home Office, have been registered much more quickly with GPs and wellbeing services. We have continued to support this group of people to access healthcare, working with other, trusted local charities.” At the awards we were also Highly Commended in the Covid Response category for our prescription delivery scheme for vulnerable residents.

Healthwatch England chair, Sir Robert Francis QC, said our ‘tireless work’ made a difference to people’s lives.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't make improvements without hearing your views. That's why over the last year we have made listening to feedback from all areas of the community a priority. This allows us to understand the full picture, and give feedback to services to help them improve.



Improving access to GP services

As a result of more than 330 local people sharing their frustrations with us, work began to improve GP phone systems and increase the number of face-to-face appointments.

Reading people who answered an online survey we ran in March and April of 2021, expressed frustration that it was getting more difficult to get through to their local doctor's surgery, even though restrictions were easing on wider society.

The strength of people's responses prompted us to lobby for action and to share evidence with our national body, Healthwatch England. People told us their care and medication had been delayed and some had given up seeking GP help altogether.



54% of local people

told us they found it difficult to get through to their GP surgery by phone, up from 34% the previous year

Making a difference

By speaking up, you persuaded NHS commissioners and surgeries to act and contributed to a national change of direction:

- A large, local surgery put on more staff at peak times to reduce long phone queues
- NHS commissioners asked surgeries with the worst access issues to take action
- More up-to-date information about making appointments was put on websites
- Surgery answerphone messages were shortened and caller options made clearer
- Patients started to again receive a choice of phone or face-to-face appointments
- A scrutiny committee of local councillors started a hearing on GP access
- The government published an improvement plan for GP access after receiving evidence from Healthwatch England and the Care Quality Commission



How primary care commissioners responded

“Following the report and the more detailed information provided when you met with my team to discuss early findings, individual practices’ survey outcomes have been shared anonymously with practice managers and we have asked that they discuss them with their Patient Participation Group. Eight practices with reports of particular concern have been asked to review these and formally respond to us.”



Other ways we've made a difference for the community

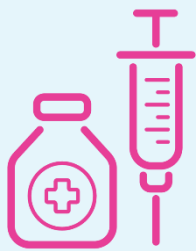
Our other engagement projects ensured we amplified the views of people whose experiences are not often heard.



Creating empathy about health inequalities

By amplifying people's personal experiences, we help services gain a deeper understanding, than just by using data alone.

When we gathered stories from Reading people who speak little or no English, we helped to influence a national campaign. People from Africa, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan and Syria described to us how they'd had to rely on their children to translate for them when they saw doctors, didn't get enough time to fully explain their health issues, or often didn't understand written test results. Using our evidence, Healthwatch England is now pressing for language needs to be made part of the statutory Accessible Information Standard, which already covers people with sight, hearing or learning disabilities.



Continuing to inform the pandemic response

We help services understand public views so they can develop the most effective strategies for combating Covid-19.

New community health champions, being created by Reading council through special government funding, will be better equipped to tackle vaccine hesitancy after we carried out research into the top reasons for some Reading people avoiding vaccination. Our engagement found some working aged people were concerned about side-effects or believed Covid was now 'a mild disease'.



Helping the public evaluate new services

Thanks to constructive relationships, commissioners and providers regularly ask us to independently collect patient feedback.

We were appointed by Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (BHFT) to independently interview people who'd received care from its Berkshire West Urgent Community Response (UCR) team. UCR involves nurses and other professionals visiting people at home within two hours or two days, to help them avoid hospital admission. People praised the 'kind and caring' UCR staff but also wanted more information at the end of visits. BHFT have agreed to make changes.

Advice and information

If you feel lost and don't know where to turn, Healthwatch Reading is here for you. In times of worry or stress, we can provide confidential support and free information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. Whether it's finding an NHS dentist, how to make a complaint or choosing a good care home for a loved one – you can count on us.

This year we helped 293 people who contacted our helpline for information and advice, a 52% increase in enquiries from the previous year.

We also kept the community informed via social media and our website, reaching 166,311 people in 2021-22, up from 131,725 in 2020-21. Our team also attended 208 stakeholder meetings, to help us understand latest developments to share with you and to feed back your experiences.



Information and advice queries

Below is a breakdown of the top services people contacted us about.

Covid tests & jabs



28% of queries

We helped local people to find out:

- Local PCR test venues
- Local vaccination venues
- How to get lateral flow tests
- Age and clinical eligibility
- Details of vaccine pop-ups
- Safety information
- Fit-to-Fly test providers

GP services



15% of queries

Our staff gave out information on:

- Changes to appointment booking processes such as telephone triage
- The role of other clinicians, such as practice-based pharmacists
- How to get medical advice during evenings and weekends
- How to raise concerns about medication or care delays

NHS dentists



14% of queries

Our team:

- Regularly rang around local dentists to see who was seeing new patients
- Sent out advice sheets to callers
- Advised people how to request urgent NHS dental treatment
- Took part in media interviews to explain access problems

Hospitals



9% of queries

We informed the community about:

- How and when to access A&E
- Changes to visiting times and rules due to the pandemic
- Opportunities to have a say about the Royal Berkshire Hospital's future
- New local specialist clinics, such as the Long Covid service at the RBH

Reading Voice Advocacy

As well as providing the local Healthwatch contract, our charity delivered the Reading contract to provide statutory advocacy.

We call this service, Reading Voice, and it helps residents make formal complaints about health or social care or assists vulnerable people to know their rights and options and be heard when services make decisions about their daily lives or treatment.

In 2021-22, we received 523 contacts from local people or health and care staff seeking advocacy for themselves or clients.



About our advocacy service

This was our fourth year of delivering the Single Reading Advocacy Service, commissioned by Reading Borough Council.

In August 2021, we welcomed a new advocacy manager, Maria Falzetti, a former mental health care home manager. She deals with advocacy referrals and coordinates the work of six, part-time advocates, including two from the learning disability charity Talkback.

Our advocacy workload increased compared with the year before, when the pandemic saw a national drop-off in requests.



Our trained staff deliver:

- 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

'Empowering clients gives me great job satisfaction'

A Reading Voice advocate describes their role

"The training and on-the-job experience I have gained has enabled me to take a skilled approach with clients, giving them a voice of their own to have a say in their care planning and also assuring that their rights are upheld and achieving quality of life.

This front-line role can be tough, emotional and frustrating at times, but overall the outcomes make up for this, in particular feeling the empowerment given to my clients, knowing they had my support and through hard work, improve their wellbeing and outcomes whatever their situation - giving me great job satisfaction."

Statutory statements

About us

Healthwatch Reading, PO Box 387 TW16 9DN. Charity number: 1151346

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



The way we work

Involvement of volunteers and lay people

Our Healthwatch board consists of seven members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction and oversight of our activities. Our board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community. Through 2021/22 the board met monthly and made decisions on matters such as requesting the team look into GP phone access for Reading people,

We are governed by trustees who are also volunteers drawn from the local community to ensure we comply with our statutory, charity and employer obligations. Our chair of trustees, David Shepherd, and our chief executive, Mandeep Kaur Bains, represented Healthwatch Reading on the Reading Health and Wellbeing Board.

Methods and systems to obtain people's views and experience.

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to provide us with insight about their experience of health and care services. During 2021/22 we have been available by phone, by email, provided a webform on our website, 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 decision makers. This year we have done this by, for example, by arranging professional interpreters to assist people who do not speak English as a first language, to share their views about the type of support, if any, they get from the health service to communicate when booking or attending appointments. We also worked with local charities to reach people.

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.

Responses to recommendations and requests

We received responses to all recommendations we made to providers or commissioners.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, we did not make use of our Enter and View powers.

We shared evidence with Healthwatch England (HWE) about GP and dental access and people's experience of the Accessible Information Standard, which helped to inform its national campaign work. We did not formally escalate any issues to HWE or the Care Quality Commission.

Finance and future priorities

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	£100,000
Additional funding	£42,998
Total income	£142,998

Income	
Staff costs	£103,055
Operational costs	£15,482
Support and administration	£9,925
Total expenditure	£128,462

Next steps

The pandemic has shone a stark light on the impact of existing inequalities when using health and care services, highlighting the importance of championing the voices of those who all too often go unheard.

Over the coming years, the goal of local Healthwatch is to help reduce these inequalities by making sure your voice is heard, and decision makers reduce the barriers you face, regardless of whether that's because of where you live, income or race.

Contacting us from 1 June 2022

A new provider will take over Healthwatch Reading from 1 June 2022. The website, main email address, helpline number and social media channels, will remain the same.



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