

READING HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

Date of Meeting	16 July 2026
Title	Healthwatch Reading Annual Report
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report author	Alice Kunjappy-Clifton
Job title	Lead Officer
Organisation	Healthwatch Reading
Recommendations	1) Notes the achievements, impact and findings of Healthwatch Reading during 2025/26. 2) Recognises the contribution of community feedback, lived experience and independent public voice in shaping local health and care services 3) Supports continued partnership working to address identified inequalities and improve access to health and care services across Reading.

1. Executive Summary

The report demonstrates the value of an independent public voice in identifying health inequalities, highlighting barriers to access, amplifying the experiences of underserved communities and influencing improvements in local health and care services.

At a time of significant change across health and care systems, an independent public voice remains essential in ensuring services are shaped by the people who use them and informed by the realities of their experiences. Healthwatch Reading has continued to ensure that the views and experiences of local people remain central to the planning, delivery, and evaluation of services.

2. Policy Context

Healthwatch Reading is the statutory independent champion for people who use health and social care services, established under the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Its role is to ensure that local residents' views, experiences and needs are heard, understood and acted on by commissioners, providers and decision-makers across the health and care system. Through engagement, evidence gathering, information and advice, and statutory functions such as Enter and View, Healthwatch Reading supports public involvement in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services.

The work undertaken during 2025/26 aligns with national health and care priorities, including reducing health inequalities, improving access to services, strengthening prevention and early intervention, supporting digital inclusion and transformation, and increasing community participation in service design and decision-making. It also supports the ambitions of the NHS 10-Year Plan, neighbourhood health approaches, and wider efforts to address the broader determinants of health.

Locally, Healthwatch Reading supports the priorities of the Berkshire West Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Reading's commitment to reducing inequalities, improving population health, promoting community wellbeing and ensuring services respond to the needs of diverse communities. By amplifying residents' voices, particularly those less often heard, Healthwatch Reading provides insight that informs policy, service improvement and strategic decision-making across the local health and care system.

3. The Proposal

The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked to receive and note the Healthwatch Reading Annual Report 2025/26.

During 2025/26, Healthwatch Reading:

- Engaged with more than 8,489 residents through information, advice, outreach and participation activities.
- Published reports on interpreter services, NHS overseas billing and Community Wellness Outreach.
- Contributed to the development of a supervised toothbrushing programme expected to benefit approximately 1,800 children in Reading.
- Evaluated the Community Wellness Outreach Programme, showing positive health impacts and improved access to preventative healthcare.
- Gathered local experiences to support implementation of the NHS 10-Year Plan and understand use of the NHS App.
- Raised concerns about language barriers and inconsistent interpreter provision.
- Facilitated conversations on end-of-life care, racism and discrimination in healthcare settings.
- Worked with communities often underrepresented in engagement, including refugee groups, ethnically diverse communities and digitally excluded residents.

Through community engagement during 2025/26, Healthwatch Reading identified several recurring themes:

- Ongoing challenges accessing healthcare due to language barriers and inconsistent interpreter provision.
- Digital exclusion affecting some residents' ability to access services and use the NHS App.
- The importance of community-based approaches to prevention and early intervention.
- Experiences of racism and discrimination impacting confidence in healthcare services.
- Continued concerns around access to primary care and support services for vulnerable groups.

Examples of Impact

- Healthwatch evidence contributed to the introduction of a supervised toothbrushing programme expected to benefit approximately 1,800 children.
- Community Wellness Outreach evaluation findings demonstrated positive health impacts and informed future discussions on prevention services.
- Community feedback influenced local understanding of barriers relating to interpreter services and digital exclusion.
- Insights gathered from residents helped support planning discussions relating to the NHS 10-Year Plan and neighbourhood health models.

The report shows how community-led insight can inform service improvement and system-wide decision-making. Its findings provide valuable intelligence for commissioners, providers and partners across Reading.

Contribution to Reading's Health and Wellbeing Strategic Aims

Healthwatch Reading's work contributes to the Berkshire West Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy priorities:

- *Reduce the differences in health between different groups of people*

Engagement with ethnically diverse communities, refugees, older people, children, families, and people facing language barriers has helped identify health inequalities and inform action to address them. Work on oral health, interpreter services, racism and digital exclusion directly supports this priority.

- *Support individuals at high risk of bad health outcomes to live healthy lives*

The Community Wellness Outreach evaluation showed that community-based health checks supported earlier intervention and improvements in residents' health and wellbeing.

- *Help children and families in early years*

Healthwatch Reading's oral health work informed the implementation of a supervised toothbrushing programme supporting approximately 1,800 children across Reading.

- *Promote good mental health and wellbeing for all adults*

Work on maternity mental health, suicide prevention discussions and end-of-life care contributes to improved wellbeing and support for residents.

Environmental and Climate Implications

There are no significant direct environmental or climate implications arising from noting this report. Engagement activities continue to utilise a combination of digital and community-based approaches to maximise accessibility and minimise unnecessary travel where appropriate.

4. Community Engagement

Community engagement is central to Healthwatch Reading's statutory role and underpins all aspects of its work. Through engagement, research, outreach, information and advice, Healthwatch Reading provides an independent public voice, ensuring that local people's views, experiences and priorities inform the planning, delivery and improvement of health and care services across Reading.

During 2025/26, Healthwatch Reading engaged with more than 8,489 residents through surveys, community conversations, focus groups, events, outreach activities, and information and advice services. Particular efforts were made to involve communities whose voices are often underrepresented in decision-making, including ethnically diverse communities, refugees and asylum seekers, older people, young people, people facing language barriers, and residents experiencing digital exclusion.

This engagement provided valuable insight into residents' experiences of accessing healthcare, navigating complex systems, using digital health tools, and overcoming barriers linked to inequality, language and discrimination. Feedback gathered throughout the year informed Healthwatch Reading's reports, recommendations and discussions with local health and care partners, helping services remain responsive to community need.

As an independent organisation, Healthwatch Reading enables people to share experiences and concerns that may otherwise go unheard. This insight provides an important source of evidence for decision-makers, helping to identify inequalities, understand barriers to access, and ensure that services are informed not only by performance data but also by the lived experiences of the people who use them. The practical value of an independent public voice is reflected in its ability to bring community perspectives into decision-making, helping partners respond to issues that matter most to local communities.

Residents' experiences continue to play a vital role in shaping Healthwatch Reading's work and influencing local discussions on service improvement.

One resident described difficulties accessing healthcare because interpreter support was not consistently available, making it harder to understand information and communicate with healthcare professionals. Through engagement with Healthwatch Reading, this experience contributed to wider discussions with providers about accessibility, communication and effective interpreter provision. It also informed Healthwatch Reading's ongoing work to promote equitable access to healthcare and reduce barriers for residents facing language difficulties.

Including lived experience alongside engagement data helps keep the voices behind the statistics visible and ensures that service improvement is informed by residents' real experiences. This highlights the importance of an independent public voice in bringing issues to light that may otherwise remain unseen, unheard or unreported. Without opportunities for residents to share their experiences independently, barriers affecting access, quality of care, and patient experience can be more difficult for services to identify and address.

5. Equality Implications

Healthwatch Reading's work is rooted in addressing health inequalities and ensuring that residents' voices are heard and acted on, particularly where people experience barriers to accessing services. During 2025/26, engagement and evidence-gathering highlighted inequalities affecting several protected and underserved groups, including:

- Ethnically diverse communities.
- Refugees, asylum seekers and migrant populations.
- Older people.
- Children and young people.
- Individuals facing language and communication barriers.
- People experiencing digital exclusion.
- People reporting experiences of racism and discrimination within health and care settings.

The Annual Report shows that inequalities in access, experience, and outcomes continue to affect many residents. Through targeted engagement, community outreach, information and advice, and partnership working, Healthwatch Reading has amplified the voices of people most affected by inequality and helped ensure their experiences inform service improvement and decision-making. By identifying barriers to care and highlighting the experiences of underserved communities, Healthwatch Reading contributes to local efforts to reduce health inequalities, improve accessibility and promote more equitable outcomes for residents.

The Annual Report highlights a range of equality issues and health inequalities affecting residents. However, as the report is presented for information only and does not introduce new policies, service changes or decisions, a full Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

6. Other Relevant Considerations

Healthwatch Reading continues to play a vital role in providing independent community insight and ensuring that residents' experiences are reflected in health and care decision-making. As the independent champion for people who use services, Healthwatch provides a trusted route for residents to share experiences, raise concerns, and influence decisions that affect their health and wellbeing.

During a period of significant change across health and care systems, including evolving approaches to public involvement and neighbourhood health, trusted and independent community feedback remains critically important.

Without an independent public voice, many of the issues identified through Healthwatch Reading's work—including language barriers, digital exclusion, experiences of discrimination and difficulties accessing services—may be less visible to decision-makers. Independent community insight helps ensure that the realities of people's experiences are understood alongside performance data, particularly for communities whose voices are less often heard through traditional engagement routes.

The findings highlight both opportunities and challenges for local communities, including health inequalities, language barriers, digital exclusion and variation in people's experiences of care. By gathering evidence directly from residents and sharing it with system partners, Healthwatch Reading helps strengthen accountability, improve service responsiveness and maintain public confidence that community voices are heard and acted on.

The report reinforces the importance of meaningful community engagement in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services, particularly for communities whose experiences may otherwise be overlooked.

7. Legal Implications

Healthwatch Reading undertakes its statutory functions under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which established Healthwatch as the independent consumer champion for health and social care services. Its responsibilities include gathering and representing the views of local people, promoting community involvement in health and care services, providing information and advice, and carrying out statutory Enter and View activities.

The Health and Wellbeing Board is asked solely to receive and note the contents of this report. There are no additional legal implications arising from this recommendation, and no new legal powers, duties or delegations are required because of the Board's noting the report.

8. Financial Implications

Healthwatch Reading received statutory funding of £100,000 from Reading Borough Council during 2025/26, supplemented by additional project funding and Integrated Care System investment. Total income for the year was £130,667, with total expenditure of £137,443.

The difference between income and expenditure reflects planned investment in service delivery, community engagement and project activity during the reporting period and was met through existing organisational reserves. This enabled Healthwatch Reading to maximise opportunities to engage with communities, deliver additional projects and respond to emerging local priorities.

The report demonstrates the value generated through both statutory and additional funding, with community insight contributing to service improvement, prevention initiatives and action to address health inequalities across Reading. There are no direct financial implications arising from the Health and Wellbeing Board noting this report.

9. Timetable for Implementation

Healthwatch Reading has identified the following priority areas for 2026/27, informed by community feedback, local intelligence, emerging health system priorities and the experiences shared by Reading residents during 2025/26:

- **Enter and View activity in partnership with Adult Social Care** – undertaking visits to services to gather the experiences of residents, identify good practice and support improvements in the quality, safety and accessibility of care.
- **Understanding and supporting male carers** – exploring the experiences of male carers, identifying barriers to engagement and access to support, and working with partners to improve awareness, accessibility and service responsiveness.
- **Improving access to healthcare services for young people** – working through Healthwatch Youth to better understand young people's experiences of GP and other health services, ensuring their voices help shape future improvements.

Healthwatch Reading will remain responsive to emerging local and national developments and will adapt its work programme where necessary to address changing community needs and system priorities. Areas expected to influence activity during 2026/27 include:

- **Neighbourhood Health** – ensuring local communities are actively involved in the design and development of neighbourhood-based models of care.
- **Maternity Services** – gathering and amplifying the experiences of women, families and underserved groups to inform improvements in maternity care, safety and outcomes.
- **Experiences of Survivors of Domestic Abuse** – working alongside specialist organisations to better understand barriers to accessing health and support services and to identify opportunities for service improvement.

Healthwatch Reading will continue to review and refresh its priorities throughout the year to ensure its work remains aligned with the issues that matter most to local people and supports the strategic objectives of the wider health and care system and supports the strategic objectives of the wider health and care system, while ensuring that the voice of Reading residents remains central to service improvement and future service design.

10. Background Papers

- Healthwatch Reading Annual Report 2025/26. Available at:
<https://www.healthwatchreading.co.uk/post/healthwatch-reading-annual-report-2025-26>.
- Berkshire West Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- Health and Social Care Act 2012.