

Chief Exec Briefing:

1. Background and Purpose of the Paper

This paper sets the background context for the upcoming meeting of the Board in public. It provides a cohering cover note and sets the backdrop to the paper pack for the meeting. Trustees are asked to use the framing of this cover note as a guideline to navigate the papers and to inform the discussion at our meeting.

2. External context

As outlined in the Chair's update and as you will have likely seen in the media, there are some significant national and local system changes ahead of us. Whilst clarity on impact to frontline organisations, and therefore service users, is not clear at the time of writing this paper—we must steadfastly continue to champion that service user voice ought to be at the centre of thinking and planning ahead – an important message at a very disruptive time where governance, staffing, budgets and new collaboration agreements are foremost in the minds of leaders.

Healthwatch are of course also likely to be affected nationally and locally by these changes, and those arising from the Dash review and the NHS 10 year plan. Your continued support to help us navigate these changes is very valuable, and we also look forward to welcoming three new Trustees to support us in bringing our ambitions to fruition.

3. Context for elements of the agenda at the Board meeting in public

- Item 6. Annual Business Plan

After a great deal of work behind the scenes and opportunity to discuss at our Board Advisory Committee and in one-to-ones with Trustees, a high level version of the FY 25/26 business plan is presented to you for your endorsement. We are using this to inform individual and team plans, measures of success and objectives for the year.

Given the external context, we must anticipate some flexibility in our planning in order to be responsive to the needs of our residents and

partners. We look forward to using this plan to better inform our discussions and strategic thinking at Board, to prioritize what matters most. Much thanks to you all for such an engaged and productive set of conversations in bringing this to life.

- Item 7. **Financial year 2025 – 2026 Budget**

We are delighted to have a formal confirmation of our annual grant from Hertfordshire County Council, which reflects a 6% inflationary uplift. In challenging financial circumstances, it is reassuring that we are recognised for the value we deliver and protected from inflationary pressures in this way.

This core contract covers approximately 80% of our overall costs, and we have an established reputation with partners that have previously supported us with additional public funds to make up the difference and bolster our impact and reach as a Healthwatch. We deliver outstanding value to our partners and the public, but the availability of such funding appears to be on a decline and this is reflected in our revenue projections.

It is therefore important to continue using our funding in the most effective ways, and delivering value for the residents of Hertfordshire by working in partnership with others. This is one of the key themes of our Annual Business Plan and our Research and Engagement Plan.

- Item 8. **Research and Engagement Annual Plan**

We are proud that our public signposting service enables thousands of Hertfordshire residents to contact us and share the challenges and concerns with health and social care services. These insights are helpful in our *holding to account* conversations with health and social care leaders. But in order ensure we are comprehensively evidence led, we also curate projects for proactive engagement with our communities, shaped by our learnings from both of these spaces, as well as those of our staff team, trustees, partners and relevant stakeholders, and the coproduction fora we lead.

This forms the basis for our research and engagement annual plan, brought to you here after a fruitful discussion at our Board Advisory Committee, with suggestions of thematic focus for the upcoming year.

There is some challenge to striking a good balance across varying dimensions including group and geographical representativeness, spotlighting health inequalities, ensuring our work has impact and changes outcomes, opportunities for partnering, links with regional and national issues, and so on, whilst balancing our resource against a backdrop of an overall decline in public funding. We hope you will recognise how carefully we have considered these nuances into the work program and invite your support by endorsing it.

4. Closed session of the agenda

For members of the public that may be reading this paper pack, it is worthwhile noting that the closed session of the agenda is there to enable the Board to review documents containing sensitive, confidential and/or personally identifiable information – such as that contained in our contract monitoring documentation.

On this occasion, we will also welcome a presentation by Toby Hyde, Chief Strategy & Collaboration Officer at the West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust. This trust is one of the key acute providers in our area, and have also taken a leadership role in cohering the work of the South and West Hertfordshire Health and Care Partnership.

This is an opportunity for Board members to hear of the latest developments in the South and West Hertfordshire region, how these partners have taken to the challenges over the past few years including a delay to the anticipated development of the Watford Hospital site, and how they are thinking about the future – and how patient voice informs it all.

We will follow the presentation with a Q&A from the Board so please take some time to reflect on your questions, and please do share them with me ahead of time as it could inform what Toby shares with us at the meeting.

5. Thank you

I also want to sincerely express my gratitude for the support of the staff team over the past six months, since I have joined. Joining a formidable organisation with a clear call to action has been exciting and challenging, but it is truly the people in the team that have made it worthwhile. I am looking forward to enabling us to have a successful year ahead, backed by a dynamic and purpose driven board of Trustees.

Ivana Chalmers

20.03.2025