



Speaking up for better care

Healthwatch Kent annual report 2025/26

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Acting Chief Executive
Chris McCann

“

The NHS plays a vital role in our lives, and we know it faces real challenges. Listening to people’s thoughts about their care is one of the best ways to improve services. Every comment, concern, and compliment helps health and care professionals see what works and what needs to change, so care can be safer and better for everyone.

“We want to say a heartfelt thanks to all the local people who have taken the time to share their experiences, and to the health and social care professionals who have listened and acted on that feedback. Your commitment has helped make a real difference for our community.”

A message from our chair

This year has seen lots of change but here at Healthwatch Kent we remain committed to having public voice at the heart of it all.

We continue to achieve outcomes and change which brings best value to our partners, stakeholders and community. We continue to deliver projects which have become synonymous with Healthwatch. Two such examples this year are follow up visits on Electronic Referral Systems and also work understanding ADHD experiences.

However, with the announcements last summer we also have one eye on the future. This year, working with our host organisation EK360, we have been determined to become better at delving into the nuances within our data to help demonstrate how public voice is so valuable in decision making.

We continue to recruit volunteers from across the community and we have welcomed volunteers from local Universities and schools to support and enrich the work of our staff. We're proud to give people useful experience of the work place and critical development in their careers.

We recognised how our partners across Kent have overcome challenge and delivered positive change for local people through our annual impact awards.

We continue to study the impact of health inequalities and have made strides in aligning our systems to the Marmot principles and are examining our data through new lenses to support this approach.

This report gives insight to some of our achievements over the past twelve months. I trust you find this interesting and please contact us if you would like to join us on our journey.



“I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the volunteers and staff who support us in our mission to bring public voice into discussions around Health and Social Care. I wish those who have left us good luck in their new positions and extend a big welcome to those who have joined us”

About us

Healthwatch Kent is your local health and social care champion.

We ensure that NHS leaders and decision-makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



Our vision

To bring closer the day when everyone gets the care they need.



Our mission

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



Our values are:

Equity: We're compassionate and inclusive. We build strong connections and empower the communities we serve.

Collaboration: We build internal and external relationships. We communicate clearly and work with partners to amplify our influence.

Impact: We're ambitious about creating change for people and communities. We're accountable to those we serve and hold others to account.

Independence: Our agenda is driven by the public. We're a purposeful, critical friend to decision-makers.

Truth: We work with integrity and honesty, and we speak truth to power.

Our year in numbers

In 2025/2026 we supported more than **3000** people to have their say and get information about their care. We employed **8.8** staff and, our work was supported by **18** volunteers.



Reaching out:

3,236 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

4,031 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as how to make a complaint and finding an



Championing your voice:

We published **10** reports about the improvements people would like to see in areas like Live in Care and Veteran support. Our most popular report was **routes to A&E in East Kent**, highlighting the differing signposting that people were receiving about where to go for care.



Statutory funding:

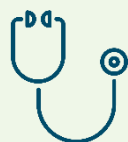
We're funded by Kent County Council. In 2025/26 we received **503,261.18** which is **the same as** last year.

A year of making a difference

Over the year we've been out and about in the community listening to your stories, engaging with partners and working to improve care in **Kent**. Here are a few highlights.

Spring

We continued our programme of hospital visits and produced our first new look insight report.



We submitted evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee looking into Community Mental Health Services.



Summer

We published our report into the journey people took to A&E departments in East Kent



We talked to Care home managers in East Kent to understand their training and support needs.



Autumn

We started our work to understand what people think of their local area and how it impacts their health and wellbeing.



We published our report looking at how a pilot for Live in Care was working for people and their families.

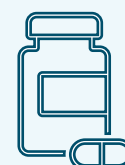


Winter

We submitted a response to the government's NHS online Trust consultation.



We started our analysis of ADHD experiences and what people were telling us about the support they received.



Working together for change

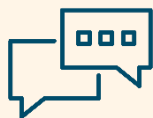
We've worked with neighboring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level, and they influence decisions made about services at **Kent and Medway**.

This year, we've worked with Healthwatch Medway to achieve the following:



A collaborative network of local Healthwatch:

From September 2024, we started to receive more feedback on people's experiences of mental health crisis support. To look into this issue in more detail we identified and analysed 489 related experiences. The ICB, Safe Havens and the Mental Health Trust responded with a range of actions. These included making improvements to waiting times and crisis support, coordination and continuity of care, as well as increasing Safe Haven access.



A big conversation:

The Department of Health and Social Care invited Healthwatch Kent to participate in a consultation on the creation of the NHS Online Trust. Within the feedback we found 4 main themes: Acceptance of digital systems in healthcare, Digital Barriers Experience of Digitally Delivered Care Issues with Digital Systems. This report has been sent to the Department of Health and Social Care, who will use it to help inform the. Clear communication of how the new service works



Building strong relationships to achieve more:

Alongside Healthwatch Medway we hosted the annual Healthwatch Recognition Awards. This celebrated the work of organisations and individuals contributing to positive change in Health and Care. We had over a 100 nominations from professionals and residents using these services. We were able to give them the platform to get the recognition they deserved and share best practice across the system.

Making a difference in the community

We bring people's experiences to healthcare professionals and decision-makers, using their feedback to shape services and improve care over time. Here are some examples of our work in Kent this year:



Creating empathy by bringing experiences to life

Hearing personal experiences and their impact on people's lives helps services better understand the issues people face.

We spoke to patients, carers and healthcare professionals about their experiences of live-in care after hospital discharge. Largely experiences were positive, but people involved in the pilot did make some suggestions for improvement. This resulted in each person being offered a video call introduction with their care worker., queries about practicalities, including costs/food being resolved and an updated patient leaflet being developed.



Getting services to involve the public

By involving local people, services help improve care for everyone.

In 2025/2026, Healthwatch Kent and Healthwatch Medway worked with the Adult Safeguarding Board to ensure people's voices shaped discussions and decisions. With a standing agenda item, we regularly present reports and insights to keep community perspectives at the heart of safeguarding strategies. This has included insights on Veterans, A&E attendances, Live in Care, Co-occurring conditions and Frailty



Improving care over time

Change takes time. We work behind the scenes with services to consistently raise issues and bring about change.

In 2025 we submitted evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee looking into Community Mental Health Services. The report from the 4th session Community Mental Health Services references our submission, utilising insight across EK360, a total of 9 times. We expect the committee to conclude it's review in 2026.

Listening to your experiences

Services can't improve if they don't know what's wrong. Your experiences shine a light on issues that may otherwise go unnoticed.

This year, we've listened to feedback from all areas of our community. People's experiences of care help us know what's working and what isn't, so we can give feedback on services and help them improve.



Understanding routes to A&E

With A&E departments consistently making the news, we visited East Kent to see if we could understand the ways people were ending up there.

The East Kent Health and Care Partnership had been hearing different intelligence about people turning up to local A&E departments and wanted to hear directly from people who ended up there.

What did we do

Healthwatch Kent conducted visits to William Havel Hospital (WHH) and Queen Elizabeth Queen Mother Hospital (QEQM), speaking to people about their journey to the initial assessment area of Accident and Emergency. Across 2 visits to each site, 50 people shared their experiences which included what services they had interacted with before attending and if they felt their attendance could have been avoided.

Key things we heard:



88%

of people had contacted one or more services in the lead up to their A&E attendance

8%

of people reported attending A&E because they were unable to get a GP appointment

22%

of people spoken to were unsure what alternatives to A&E were available to meet their needs.

In total, almost one-third of participants (32%) believed their A&E visit could have been avoided, while half considered it unavoidable (52%) and a further 16% were unsure. Participants from rural and higher overall deprivation areas were overrepresented in the sample, however they were more likely to report uncertainty in the avoidability of their A&E visits.

What difference did this make?

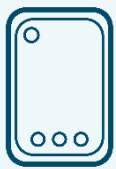
- The findings from this report were presented at the East Kent and Kent and Medway wide urgent care board. They were also included in the JSNA exception report at the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- The findings in the report have been considered as part of the Folkestone and Hythe pioneer site for neighbourhood health supported by NHS England.

How support for veterans evolves after discharge from service

Veterans told us that there is variation in how effective initiatives aimed at supporting them have been in practice.

We spoke with 115 UK Armed Forces Veterans. The engagement was a combination of face to face surveying and digital responses. We attended Veteran's Breakfasts and drop in sessions in person to speak to veterans about their experience.

Key things we heard:



31%

31% of respondents mentioned difficulty in getting an appointment at their GP surgery.

44%

Who had used mental health services shared a negative experience.

“I wish there was more employment support and support with settling into a new area after discharge”

“It’s been a nightmare until I moved to my new surgery. Even though the previous surgery were registered as veteran friendly, they didn’t make access easier for me.”

The most frequently mentioned issue – difficulty in getting an appointment or seeing their GP – is a common experience within the wider population. However, by understanding that many veterans have a previous experience of healthcare access being fast and exclusive, a combination of signposting and reframing expectations would improve veteran experiences. Veterans also talked about a need to improve employment support on discharge and our findings also suggest Nepalese veterans were impacted more.

What difference did this make?

- Kent County Council's employment scheme (Connect to Work) has agreed to do some veteran specific outreach and utilise existing veteran grass roots groups
- The report was presented to the Armed Forces Network, where it has been included in the evidence base for future work
- The findings have been included in the Armed Forces Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Hearing from all communities

We're here for all residents of **Kent**. That's why, over the past year, we've worked hard to reach out to those communities whose voices may go unheard.

Every member of the community should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

This year, we have reached different communities by:

- Visiting Veteran breakfasts to listen to their experiences and support needs
- Being on the highstreets to hear from people who usually wouldn't have the opportunity to share their feedback.
- Improving our collection of demographic data and the tools we use to interrogate the insights within them.



Translation support in primary care

We collated evidence about primary care access for people with additional communication needs.

We have insight from two distinct populations (elder Nepalese community and the D/deaf community) experiencing barriers to accessing their GP in Kent. This evidence came from both experiences collected directly by Healthwatch and examples from local VCSE organisations. The experiences people have shared highlight the barrier some people face using digital services, including digital front door triage.

What difference did this make?

The ICB confirmed they would consider this when they relook at the commissioning of translation services.

We included this in our submission to the national consultation for the NHS online trust highlighting the potential barriers people will face.

Enhancing the understanding of self harm in young people

Working with partners including Healthwatch Medway, we heard from 323 individuals to understand the causes of self-harm and perceptions of self-harm among children and young people, communities and professionals.

Our work revealed the complexity and multifaceted nature of how self-harm is shaped by a range of personal, social and systemic factors. Participants agreed that improvements in service accessibility, awareness and multi-agency collaboration are essential to supporting children and young people to stop self-harming.

What difference did this make?

Our insights have been shared with a wide range of system partners including the ICB, Kent and Medway Council and Medway Maritime Hospital. One key finding highlighted limited awareness of lesser-known forms of self-harm, such as addictive behaviours. In response, Medway and Swale Health and Care Partnership organised workshops to raise awareness of this form of self-harm, and a local charity organisation supporting people with this issue.

Information and signposting

When you're struggling to find an NHS dentist, looking for help about how to make a complaint, or need advice about a good care home for a loved one – we're your first port of call.

This year 4,031 people have reached out to us for advice, support or help finding services. These conversations also help us to understand where, and how, your care can be made better.

This year, we've helped people by:

- Providing up-to-date information people can trust
- Helping people access the services they need
- Supporting people to look after their health
- Signposting people to additional support services



Improving practical communications

Thanks to Lisa's feedback one of our local hospital trusts is improving the way it supports people with a visual impairment.

A visually impaired individual gave their experience following an appointment at a local hospital. The staff they interacted with kept giving them verbal instructions on how to navigate in the hospital and they had to repeatedly ask for someone to guide them. Also, staff did not always introduce themselves, so they did not know who they were interacting with. They found the experience quite frightening and were at the hospital for over 7 hours.

Outcome:

We shared the experience with the Trust which in turn was shared with the Senior Management team at QEQM and also take to the AIS reasonable adjustments steering group in October.

Improving GP Access

Thanks to Brian's feedback, an individual has retained their access to their local GP, ensuring continuity of care.

We were contacted by the neighbour of an individual as they were concerned that the individual had been given notice to leave their GP surgery. They were told that they were no longer within the practice boundary following a merger of the surgery with another practice.

The individual gave consent for us to liaise with their neighbour as they do not have access to IT/Emails etc.

Outcome:

We contacted the ICB. The ICB investigated it and deemed that the individual should remain at the practice, citing legacy rights



"Thank you so much for your e-mail, which is wonderful news. I cannot thank you and your colleague from KMICB enough for what you did".

Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in our community.

This year, our volunteers:

- Visited communities to promote our work
- Collected experiences and supported their communities to share their views
- Helped input experiences into our database and code them ready for analysis
- Represented us at meetings



At the heart of what we do

From finding out what residents think to helping raise awareness, our volunteers have championed community concerns to improve care.



Charlotte

Charlotte joined us for a full-time placement as part of her degree at the University of Surrey. Living in Maidstone it was a great opportunity to hone her skills locally.

"I feel extremely lucky to have gotten the opportunity to do my placement year under Healthwatch Kent. Through my time here I have met so many lovely people and learnt more about the county I've lived in all my life".

Being here has allowed me to develop new and existing transferable skills that I will utilise in.

Charlotte

"I have been volunteering for Healthwatch approximately two years now. I enjoy it immensely. I work on spreadsheets, outlook, engagement forms to be entered into our databases. My confidence has really come along now and so have my social skills".

Suzie

"My time spent as a volunteer has been the most rewarding experience in my life. I have developed multiple different skills and become a valued member of the team. I have developed both as a worker and as a person.

Nic

Be part of the change.

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and find out how you can be part of the change.



www.healthwatchkent.co.uk



[0808 801 0102](tel:0808 801 0102)



info@healthwatchkent.co.uk

Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Kent County Council under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to help us do our work.

Our income and expenditure:

Income		Expenditure	
Annual grant from Government	£503,261.28	Expenditure on pay	344,337.67
Additional income (including VAT)	£0	Non-pay expenditure	£11,248.67
		Office and management fee	£136,662.10
Total income	£503,261.28	Total Expenditure	£492,248.56

Additional income is broken down into:

Integrated Care System (ICS) funding:

We didn't receive any funding from our Integrated Care System (ICS)

Finance and future priorities

Over the next year, we will keep reaching out to every part of society, especially people in the most deprived areas, so that those in power hear their views and experiences.

We will also work together with partners and our local Integrated Care System to help develop an NHS culture where, at every level, staff strive to listen and learn from patients to make care better.

Our top three priorities for the next year are:

1. Care Home managers
2. Neighbourhood Health
3. Learning Disabilities

Statutory statements

Healthwatch Kent, The Old Court House, 8 Tufton Street, Ashford. TN23 1QN

Our host organisation hold the contract, EK360 (Engaging Kent CIC), The Stables, Little Coldharbour Farm, Tong Lane, Lamberhurst, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN3 8AD

Healthwatch Kent 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 in our governance and decision-making.

Our Healthwatch Steering Group consists of 3 members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight, and scrutiny of our activities.

Our steering group ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local communities.

Throughout 2024/25, the steering group met 8 times and made decisions on matters such as our stakeholder engagement plan and agreement of priorities on our workplan. We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities by checking they are rooted in either existing views or where we have a gap in our public insights.

Methods and systems used across the year to obtain people's experiences

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible can provide us with insight into their experience of using services.

During 2025/26, we have been available by phone, text and email, provided a web form on our website and through social media, and attended meetings of community groups and forums. We've also been on local highstreets providing the opportunity for people to talk to us who may not normally do so.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We will publish it on our website and send a physical copy to anyone who requests it.

Statutory statements

Responses to recommendations

We had **0** providers who did not respond to requests for information or recommendations. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by us to the Healthwatch England Committee, so there were no resulting reviews or investigations.

Taking people's experiences to decision-makers

We ensure that people who can make decisions about services hear about the insights and experiences shared with us.

In Kent, for example, we take information to the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board, Trust Patient Experience committees, Joint Strategic Needs Assessment Steering Group, The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, plus our regular catch ups and meetings with key stakeholders in the system .

We also take insight and experiences to decision-makers in Kent and Medway. For example, we work with Healthwatch Medway to share the experiences we've heard at the Kent and Medway Quality Group as well as the Integrated Care Partnership. We also share our data with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level. We're currently developing our connections with the Care Quality Commission to ensure your experiences help inform the regulation of local services.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Kent is represented on the Kent Health and Wellbeing Board by Robbie Goatham, Healthwatch Kent Manager and also, on the Integrated Care Partnership. During 2025/26, this has allowed us to contribute to the strategic direction of Health and Care across Kent and Medway including input into mental health needs and urgent care. We also attend a number of other key decision-making meetings

- 3 Health and Care Partnership Boards until these paused with changes to NHS structures.
- Kent and Medway Primary Care Oversight Group
- Kent and Medway System Quality Group
- Kent and Medway Adults Safeguarding Board

Statutory statements

Enter and view

We didn't do any Enter and View visits this year

2025 – 2026 Outcomes

	Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Social care	We shared feedback about KCC's short term pathway support	For Kent County Council used the feedback as part of their service review
Housing	We collated feedback about housing and homelessness	Kent Housing Group incorporated a number of our recommendations into their Kent and Medway Housing Strategy 2025-2030
Hospitals	We regularly engage across the hospitals in Kent	<p>Changes to automated checking in systems,</p> <p>Reminder to staff about approach and interactions.</p> <p>Investigation of why someone was removed from a waiting list.</p>
Comments from members of the public	"I just wanted to tell someone. Thank you for listening to me"	
	"Thanks a lot, as I will be able to contact the correct person at the Eye clinic now".	
	"That is really useful information. I'll share this option with the patient".	
	"Many thanks in advance and for answering my email so quickly"	

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