

To: All Leaders of Local Authorities
All Local Authority Chief Executives
All Local Authority Directors of Adult Social Services
All Local Authority Directors of Children's Services
All Local Involvement Networks (LINKs via LX)
All Host organisations (via LX)

Cc: All PCT Chief Executives (via The Week)
All Local Authority Directors of Finance

*Department of Health
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Dear Colleagues,

Local HealthWatch Pathfinders in 2011-12

The Government made a commitment in *Liberating the NHS: Legislative framework and next steps* to invite local authorities in partnership with their Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) and host organisations to develop HealthWatch pathfinders. HealthWatch pathfinders will be a crucial part of the work to prepare for the establishment of HealthWatch from April 2012. This letter invites you to submit proposals to become HealthWatch pathfinders and describes the process to follow.

Our vision for Local HealthWatch is to be the local consumer voice for people who use and need health and social care services, to be empowered to improve and influence the commissioning decisions made about those services. It is to build on the good work of LINKs and strengthen the ways in which commissioners and providers take the views and experiences of patients and the public into account when improving the quality and safety of health and social care services.

This will be achieved by Local HealthWatch carrying forward existing LINKs functions as well as delivering on new responsibilities to provide advice and information as well as signposting to enable people to navigate their way round the health and social care system.

The Health and Social Care Bill, introduced on 19 January, sets out the duties and responsibilities for local authorities, HealthWatch England and Local HealthWatch organisations. Local authorities will continue their role as commissioners for Local HealthWatch, as they currently do for LINKs, while HealthWatch England will be a national champion, gathering intelligence from Local HealthWatch to present the national voice for people who use and need health and social care services.

To achieve this, LINKs' functions need to continue under the duties set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 during 2011-12. It is vital that funding and support for LINKs is sustained at a level that maintains the service for local people until, subject to passage of the Bill, Local HealthWatch comes into force from April 2012. Paul Streets wrote to you on 27 October 2010 asking you to support the transition of LINKs and we know that many of you are already doing this in order to ensure that Local HealthWatch organisations have a strong start in 2012.

Departmental analysis of LINKs' annual reports show that some perform well and build strong relationships to influence commissioning decisions, whilst others need support. We believe that continuous learning is key to empowering LINKs, and evidence shows that peer support and the sharing of good practice is conducive to this. Our approach, therefore, is to establish a network of action learning sets which will engage and involve all LINKs. This network of networks, will provide the environment for sustainable development for all LINKs to evolve into Local HealthWatch organisations. It will also provide the environment within which HealthWatch pathfinders will be able to test and challenge emerging models with and alongside other local authorities and LINKs.

Developed from our work with stakeholders from Local Government, the Care Quality Commission, LINKs, member and voluntary organisations, HealthWatch pathfinders are a partnership of Local Authority and LINKs (and host organisations) and will:

- be local authorities who submit funded plans for 2011-12 in partnership with their LINK (and host organisation). Where more than one local authority wants to work collaboratively in order to test new boundaries and potential overlaps in the new system, these plans should be described;
- propose the agreed areas of focus of the pathfinder, in particular, how it will test the new functions for Local HealthWatch. We are keen to test different models for Local HealthWatch to accommodate differences in communities while ensuring consistency of service to individuals and communities;
- build and test new relationships with health and wellbeing board early implementers and GP consortia pathfinders, looking at how collaborative working with community based member and voluntary organisations could help to support the important role of Local HealthWatch;
- tell us how it will evaluate and share its learning with other pathfinders and the network of action learning sets.

We will not expect potential pathfinders to provide extensive plans outlining the proposed approach to developing a Local HealthWatch model. We know that LINKs are run by volunteers who give up their time to work with local authority commissioners and providers to improve health and social care services and we are encouraged that a number of you have already expressed an interest in developing a HealthWatch Pathfinder proposal. Subject to the outcome of the Department's business planning for 2011-12, there may be limited resource available to support the successful Pathfinder proposals that collectively offer a range of operational models and provide learning about particularly testing or challenging circumstances from their:

- geographical spread
- demographic spread
- different local authority types
- enabling LINKs to strengthen their existing functions in preparation for Local HealthWatch.

We know that LINKs and local authorities are best placed to drive this change and their locus provides the right environment to build the new partnerships for Local HealthWatch. The Department's role is to provide the opportunities to support continuous learning by bringing the pathfinders and action learning sets together at HealthWatch sharing events during 2011-12. Work is underway through our HealthWatch programme advisory group to get all LINKs signed up to an action learning set.

Next steps

If you are considering plans to be a HealthWatch Pathfinder, please send your plan to develop a Local HealthWatch operating model that meets the challenges we've set out above to Kasey.Chan@dh.gsi.gov.uk. We would like to get pathfinders to start in late May so receipt of your plan by Thursday 12 May 2011 would be most welcomed.

If you'd like to discuss this further please do feel free to make use of the contacts (below) for the HealthWatch programme who would be happy to talk through any queries or concerns you may have.

We look forward to working even more closely with you in future and to seeing the benefits your leadership brings to utilising the collective local voice to improve outcomes for local people and their communities.

Yours sincerely,



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Director General
Social Care, Local
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Joan Saddler
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Useful contacts:

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