

**An independent evaluation  
of the service provided by  
Healthwatch York  
during the pandemic  
March 2020 to June 2021  
from the  
Stakeholders' Perspective**

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**Conducted by:**

**Michelle Smith**

[michelle@quietleaders.org](mailto:michelle@quietleaders.org)

[www.quietleaders.org](http://www.quietleaders.org)



**Angela Portz**

[angela@aeportz.com](mailto:angela@aeportz.com)

[www.aeportz.com](http://www.aeportz.com)



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## **1. Executive Summary**

There is clear evidence, from the stakeholders who were interviewed, to demonstrate that Healthwatch York (HWY) rapidly adapted to a new way of working at the start of the pandemic. Whilst working hard to meet its existing outcomes, new approaches emerged that will be valuable for the future.

Stakeholders expressed their gratitude to HWY for their wide-ranging contributions across the city whilst resources were stretched and during this particularly challenging time. This included the provision of information, guidance and signposting; research and reporting; activities with young people; welfare calls and using its network to support partners' capacity.

Regular and consistent attendance at the city's boards and forums ensured that the voices of York's residents were represented and that this contributed to action planning and recovery planning. Throughout the pandemic, the team focused on reaching groups of residents in the city whose voices are seldom heard and stakeholders have expressed a desire to continue this work in a collaborative style under a model of co-production.

## **2. Context**

Healthwatch York (HWY) provides the means for local people to influence health and social care services – hospitals, care homes, GP surgeries, home care services and many others. Healthwatch York helps people to become involved in shaping these services. It provides information about local services, improving and increasing access; signposts to independent complaints advocacy; listens to views about local services and makes sure these are considered when services are planned and delivered.

HWY has been in place since 2013. It is a project that sits within the independent charity that is York CVS, with a 'Steering Group' that acts as an advisory board. Ultimate accountability sits with the Trustees of York CVS.

HWY operates under a contract from City of York Council, with the equivalent of 3.3 full time equivalent paid staff and approximately 40 volunteers, who carry out roles as Engagement Volunteers, Care Home Assessors, Research Volunteers, Readability Volunteers, Representatives, Enter and View Volunteers, Communications Volunteers, and members of the Steering Group.

During the past year, the activities of many of these volunteer roles have been stopped. In line with Covid-19 guidance all face to face engagement was suspended with immediate effect in March 2020. This directly affected the activities of HWY Engagement Volunteers, Care Home Assessors, and Enter and View Volunteers. It also indirectly impacted Research Volunteers as staff capacity was redirected to volunteer management linked to welfare calls. There was also an indirectly impact on the Representative role as many of the meetings went online, which some volunteers were unable or unwilling to engage with.

Recent topics of focus for its work have included reaching out to people from ethnic minorities in York to explore their experiences of health and care, supporting work to start up a Mental Health Co-production Network in the city, and exploring the challenges people faced during the first Covid-19 lockdown.

### **3. Healthwatch York's Mission and Aims**

Healthwatch York's Mission Statement is:

“Healthwatch York puts people at the heart of health and social care services, enabling you to be heard. We believe that together we can help make York better for everyone”.

The aims are;

- Healthwatch York is responsive to the needs of York residents.
- Healthwatch York understands what is happening in relation to health and social services in York.
- Healthwatch York speaks up about the provision of health and social care services in York.

- Healthwatch York uses the reviews, words, and stories of service users to show the impact of health and social care services in York.
- Healthwatch York involves the public in the work they do.
- Healthwatch York advocates for people's active involvement in their health and social care.
- Healthwatch York provides an effective service for the people of York using health and social care services.
- Healthwatch York reaches new people and partners.

#### **4. Purpose and method of the evaluation**

The aims of the evaluation are, in the context of the pandemic, to explore:

- what has been different about Healthwatch York;
- the value that stakeholders have placed on Healthwatch York's contribution;
- how Healthwatch York has been able to meet some of its outcomes in principle and in spirit if not in detail;

For the purposes of this evaluation, the Healthwatch York team provided a list of key stakeholders with whom they have worked throughout the pandemic. The sample came from the statutory and voluntary community sector organisations within health and social care. Interviewees are listed at Appendix A.

### **5. Findings**

#### **5.1 What has been different about Healthwatch York during the pandemic?**

Stakeholders offered a range of specific examples to demonstrate how Healthwatch York (HWY) had rapidly diverted resources from the start of the pandemic and how this continued throughout the year. It was clear from the interviewees that HWY adapted the way in which they operated very quickly. Some examples are listed below:

- Following their involvement in the initial multi-agency meeting at the start of the pandemic, York CVS took on responsibility for carrying out welfare calls, with HWY providing support to volunteers making these calls. Between March and June volunteers made 876 welfare calls to 223 vulnerable and isolated people in the city. HWY staff also joined the Link Worker team to arrange support for people in need during the first lockdown. Many needed support with basics like accessing food and medicines. All these calls supported primary care and social care which, in turn, released valuable resources from partner agencies.

***This enabled other services to function without having to do this work (welfare calls). GPs thanked the volunteers for their work (JW)***

- The re-publication of the mental health guide<sup>1</sup>, with hard copies funded by the York Safeguarding Adults Board, helped those without access to the internet to have access to all services. This guide was welcomed and shared widely by a range of professionals whose work touched on mental health and digital exclusion.

***For some people that is almost their telephone directory of up-to-date services (TM)***

- In the early days of the pandemic stakeholders looked to York CVS and their teams, including HWY, and its established networks, to support connection and engagement with voluntary and community groups to meet community need. Initially, concerns around isolation, access to services and digitalisation were highlighted. HWY worked with key local partners to engage with black and minority ethnic communities. They also worked with the Multiple Complex Needs network in order to provide more inclusive information from those who are adversely affected by change or protected characteristics. By taking part in street interviews and working in partnership with key agencies, they were able to contact people affected by mental ill health, drugs, alcohol and homelessness and capture their experiences.

***It is a good network, and a valuable aspect of their work is their willingness to be involved (VB)***

- Throughout the pandemic, HWY supported health and social care agencies by regularly attending forums, carrying out research, and providing feedback and reports from more adversely affected groups such as carers and people with disabilities. This provided information towards a local rapid Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)<sup>ii</sup> that helped to inform the city's approach to recovery.

***Healthwatch York (HWY) could not have done more than was asked of them. HWY was very much at the table. Everyone was pleased with HWY's attendance at forums during the pandemic- people acknowledged the importance of them being there. They retained their presence and maintained visibility throughout the pandemic (JW)***

- HWY was involved in the production of a range of reports. These included:
  - 'Listening to BAME people about Health and Social care services in York!'<sup>iii</sup>
  - 'Listening to Young People about Health and Social Care in York!'<sup>iv</sup> – this report was used to inform the Clinical Commissioning Group's Transformation Report.<sup>v</sup>
  - 'Survey about the impact of coronavirus (covid-19) on the Vale of York residents'<sup>vi</sup>
  - 'What we did during the Covid-19 lockdown: March-June 2020'<sup>vii</sup>
  - 'Urgent Care Rapid Appraisal'<sup>viii</sup>
  - Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) report<sup>ix</sup>

***Their reports are really useful, and they help to get the breadth of voice (VB)***

- Stakeholders reported that everyone was in search of reliable information throughout the pandemic. HWY was a source of that

information, guidance and signposting. Social media remained positive throughout.

*Probably one of the really strong arms of HWY is that it is trusted information. It's not opinionated, it's factual (TM)*

- In their ambitions to reach a wider range of local communities, HWY partnered with the Youth Justice Team and Changing Lives to develop a project linking a local business with young people from the youth justice system. This resulted in a local business donating wood so that the young people could build bird boxes. These were in turn donated to the local community.

*I just think they are a fantastic organisation that is out there with a lot of resources, information for people (KB)*

- In order to support volunteers to develop their own understanding of the needs of the community, HWY arranged for them to have the opportunity to attend awareness raising training such as sessions from the York Travellers Trust.
- At the beginning of the pandemic, HWY compiled a food map to enable residents to access food and essentials safely. This included contact details for food banks, food deliveries and prescriptions.

## **5.2 The value that stakeholders have placed on Healthwatch York's contribution during the pandemic.**

Stakeholders provided good evidence of how much they have valued HWY's support throughout the pandemic. Services were focused on responding collectively and collaboratively, and HWY were very much at the centre of the work, encouraging others to think about how to involve people in co- production in order to achieve improved outcomes. The aim was to better meet their needs and to promptly develop a way of working that helped people to use services in a time of crisis.

*HWY were part of that prompting, saying: 'we don't need a pandemic to start thinking about how to work differently' (TM)*



***Really reliable and trusted in terms of... if you contact them, you know that they will want to help out and do their best to help out (VB)***

At the beginning of lockdown, stakeholders reported that, in some areas, there appeared to be a disconnect between services and those trying to use them. Professionals found themselves involved in regular meetings whilst trying to navigate the new ways of working and this deterred people from asking for support, particularly from a mental health perspective. Stakeholders reported feeling adrift from people trying to gain access to services. HWY spoke out on behalf of people affected by the pandemic, who were struggling with remote working and their inability to find appropriate support.

***During the pandemic they (HWY) took the challenge head on and looked to work collaboratively within the city and within the networks that they have already got, because, as an organisation, HWY is firmly rooted within partnership working within the city (VB)***

Whilst carrying out the welfare calls, as part of the York CVS team supporting the primary care helpline, HWY helped people to get the support they needed at the appropriate place, for example, by not always requiring a GP appointment. This helped primary care health partners with capacity issues.

***They are always key because they are genuinely in touch with the community and various groups for people who access services. (TM)***

Stakeholders reported that HWY provided an active and positive social media presence throughout the pandemic. This offered helpful information and guidance whilst still highlighting the challenges that people were facing. HWY focused on using social media to share public health messages to those who needed them. They also issued press releases providing guidance on the rights and responsibilities of people in employment who had been advised to shield.

Interviewees voiced how much they valued HWY's ability to continue contributing throughout the pandemic, particularly in terms of listening to those who find it difficult to have their voices heard. The Multiple Complex Needs network worked with HWY to produce a 'Making Every Adult Matter' (MEAM) report to influence future commissioning. They continued to do that work through the pandemic. Working with HWY is seen as essential as it is independent and neutral: not a provider and a well-respected organisation. This means that data sourced by HWY can be useful when seeking to influence decision makers to improve existing methods of service delivery.

*The pandemic has shone a light on the health inequalities within the city and HWY has been really present within those conversations (KC)*

Whilst not a provider of health and social care, HWY has been described as "the bridge between the providers where people are struggling to know where to access support". Stakeholders felt that the pandemic had helped to break down barriers and has helped partners to introduce different ways of working very quickly.

*HWY has remained a constant throughout the pandemic, and have obviously had to change how they work...like everyone else...but they have remained central to providing that information resource (KC)*

**5.3 How Healthwatch York has been able to meet some of its outcomes in principle and in spirit if not in detail throughout the pandemic.**

- **Healthwatch York is responsive to the needs of York residents** *by continuing its provision of information, guidance and signposting along with additional provision such as the welfare calls and work with young people.*

*They continued to make contributions right through the pandemic, not just at the start (TM)*

- **Healthwatch York understands what is happening in relation to health and social services in York** *by consistent attendance at boards and forums throughout the period.*

*HWY is firmly rooted in partnership working within the city (VB)*

- **Healthwatch York speaks up about the provision of health and social care services in York** *by working hard with its wider networks to access the seldom heard voices and to represent those groups.*

*They did street interviews...they pulled together a report that was really helpful in thinking about the voice of those who are more adversely impacted by change...which helped feed into our urgent care report...and they still made time to do that even though they were busy (VB)*

- **Healthwatch York uses the reviews, words, and stories of service users to show the impact of health and social care services in York** *by maintaining an active social media presence and by being present in groups across the city.*

*HWY created pressure... in the sense that they put upbeat communications out but reminded people that this wasn't representative of the whole community (TM)*

- **Healthwatch York involves the public in the work they do** *by working with volunteers across a range of projects throughout the period and by recognising their value.*

*HWY team members communicated very well with volunteers during the pandemic. They demonstrated real appreciation by leaving small gifts on their doorsteps (JW)*

- **HWY advocates for people's active involvement in their health and social care** *by creating an open and non-judgmental*

*environment for residents to feel comfortable in becoming involved. Throughout the pandemic, HWY has continued to sit on existing boards and groups- this includes the Wheelchair Forum that meets 3 times a year.*

***HWY is there to offer feedback and know what is happening if wheelchair users contact them. Attendees feel valued and listened to (VB)***

- **Healthwatch York provides an effective service for the people of York using health and social care services by being present in conversations and representing people at the highest level.**

***Thank you to HWY, they have done a great job during the pandemic. They are a trusted and valued resource and also partner in everything that we do. I always think about involving HWY and they have made themselves that way. (VB)***

- **Healthwatch York reaches new people and partners by using its wide-ranging networks effectively.**

***The report was really good, and it helped us to meet our legal duty to ensure we are thinking about those other vulnerable groups...it's the reach that HWY have to those groups and the connections that they have... They have built that trust, so it seems less tokenistic. (VB)***

## **6. Recommendations**

Stakeholders were all mindful of the resource limitations placed on HWY, particularly during the pandemic. All interviewees demonstrated a real desire to work collaboratively with HWY by learning what has worked well and using this learning to continue to develop partnerships, thereby improving services for the city and all its residents. Below we make some recommendations for HWY to consider in relation to their internal workings and in their work with partners.

## 6.1 Internal recommendations

### Communication

**Recommendation:** *HWY to review its communications strategy to make sure that the organisation is using all opportunities to make people aware of who it is, what it does and how to engage with it.*

There was a general feeling that improved marketing and communication across local services will allow HWY to have a bigger presence and share its good work. Some stakeholders highlighted that they had not been aware of HWY before the pandemic. Once involved, they became aware of the great benefits of working together. They are keen to continue to develop partnership working in the future.

An important issue to highlight is that for some people involved in a number of services, HWY is “yet another” service or professional. It is crucial for HWY to promote itself as an independent service and to clarify and communicate the purpose of its role.

*I just think they are a fantastic organisation that is out there with a lot of resources, information for people so they are just fab really, I wouldn't say anything else. Keep doing what they are doing but let's maybe do it on a bigger scale and reach those hard-to-reach groups (KB)*

### Equality, diversity, and inclusion (internal)

**Recommendation:** *HWY to review the way in which its staff and volunteers are reflective of the wider community.*

Whilst HWY represents the community in its work, stakeholders highlighted that its own staff and volunteers are not fully representative of York's diverse communities. Interviewees felt that HWY could consider how they can attract staff and volunteers from across the wider community when recruiting.

*They need to feel safe when talking to someone or trying to access services- that the person who is dealing with them really understands them from a cultural perspective and from a heritage perspective (HN)*

## **Volunteers**

**Recommendation:** *HWY to re-engage with its volunteers and maintain connections, highlight ongoing opportunities post-pandemic and link volunteers with a wide range of training opportunities.*

A large contingent of people offered their services as volunteers through the pandemic. Whilst everyone celebrated the fact that so many people had offered to help during this time of crisis, there were not always systems in place to understand the skills and experience being offered, nor the opportunity to take part in training to support people to take up a new volunteering role. As a result a very significant proportion of potential volunteers were not called upon. Many were upset or frustrated by the failure to use them. It was challenging to explain all these reasons publicly.

HWY played its part by asking volunteers to carry out welfare calls to some of the city's older population, and those with identified health issues. As we emerge from the pandemic, the desire to be involved in community action remains high. HWY can use this sense of community to re-engage and maintain connections with existing and new volunteers.

## **6.2 Partnership wide recommendations**

### **New structures for ICS**

**Recommendation:** *HWY continues and grows its involvement in the new ICS.*

Stakeholders stressed the importance of HWY's involvement in the new Integrated Care System (ICS) structures that will replace the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in order to ensure independence and that partners in the new framework are listening to the right voices. HWY staff have attended the initial meetings. Their perspective is essential when considering how to build consistent engagement across the whole area and in order to deliver the top priorities. Suggestions for HWY's involvement in future work include:

- Working towards more integrated, holistic commissioning rather than health, housing etc being commissioned separately.
- Supporting those who are dependent on services and cannot wait for appointments.

HWY is encouraged to continue with its collaborative approach and to develop relationships with partners at a more senior level.

### **Mental health**

**Recommendation:** *HWY works closely with partners on the mental health partnership board to make sure that mental health services are accessible for all those who need support, including those in most urgent need who may not be known to services.*

Stakeholders raised the question of HWY's role in relation to access to mental health provision. Two key areas were highlighted:

a) HWY reacted immediately to support people with mental ill-health where there was an established element of need before the pandemic. It was more difficult to support those where the acuity element was high, including those who needed to access the most secure services. The challenge for HWY remains in how to raise awareness of support for those who develop mental health needs very quickly and who were not known to services pre-pandemic.

b) York has a population of around 25,000 students from around the world. Whilst the university has its own structures, students are transient members of the city's community. There is a risk that they will become a very vulnerable group in the coming years, and this will be a challenge for the city with HWY being part of that challenge. As this group may need to access local, acute services, there will be a need to engage with this group. HWY, as part of the Mental Health Partnership Board has an opportunity to offer some innovative ideas and flexible responses in relation to what the community may need.

### **Co- production**

**Recommendation:** *HWY to work with partners to increase the involvement of the wider community in co-production of services and to make sure that communications are clear and accessible for all, thus helping to reduce barriers to engagement.*



All stakeholders focused on the importance of co- production and HWY is recognised as having the ability to gather people together in a way that other organisations are not able to. HWY’s involvement is fundamental to shaping the culture and values of co- production work and is seen as central to a co-production “pillar of change” by being involved with development work from the outset. HWY is encouraged to continue to model and raise awareness of good practice in co-production whilst recognising the constraints within the wider system.

### **Equality, diversity and inclusion (external)**

**Recommendation:** HWY to work with agencies, services, and funders to continue its work in reaching, listening to, and acting on behalf of the most seldom heard voices across the whole of the city.

*HWY to make sure that they consider people of colour and not just wait until a report needs to be done...and they are trying to have access to them (HN)*

Stakeholders recognise that HWY has made some progress in this area. It has good levels of engagement and methods of listening to communities by going to directly to them. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of ensuring that boards and forums across the city are more representative and inclusive of the wider communities they serve. It is felt that HWY, with its wide and expanding network, can play a pivotal role in tackling this issue by encouraging and supporting those who are keen to have their voices heard but who lack confidence in coming forward.

HWY is well placed to support boards and forums in creating more informal, accessible board structures that allow people to feel that they can contribute.

There was a reminder from one interviewee that not all residents want to participate in engagement activities. They choose to self-segregate for their own reasons and this choice should be respected.



## **Safeguarding and risk**

**Recommendation:** *HWY to work with partners to consider how the pandemic has changed people's approaches to accessing healthcare and making choices about their own healthcare.*

Stakeholders raised concerns about the huge backlog of people with multiple health needs and/or urgent issues and the potential impact this will have on future health services, waiting times and on mental health from a psychological point of view.

By using public health communications, HWY is in a position to take a role in considering and articulating the high-risk factors that might influence people's healthcare choices. This will support York's residents to make informed choices.

## **Influencing and challenging.**

**Recommendation:** *HWY to explore the use of participatory research and how those principles can be used to better achieve its aims.*

*For some of our clients, those who are marginalised with complex needs, the pandemic hasn't influenced them. They are still homeless. They haven't been able to watch Netflix and have their shopping delivered so it has been interesting to get some of that feedback. That information isn't going to go to HWY, they will have to go and seek that information if they want to hear it and then use some of that information to challenge or influence. (KC)*

HWY has been commissioned by the Multiple Complex Needs (MCN) network for York to investigate participatory research. This will focus on how to improve methods of engagement and finding a way of listening better. It is hoped that the research will open some new possibilities and put HWY in a position to ensure that the most marginalised residents are able to add their voice. One example is the support for street sex workers, including access to contraception and sexual health clinics.

*The partnership would be poorer without HWY, a lot poorer. It is absolutely key. York needs more challenge generally and HWY are one of those that do provide challenge but sometimes they need*

*others to come on board with them and challenge more collectively. (TM)*

## Appendix A

List of stakeholders who took part in the evaluation.

Victoria Binks	Vale of York Clinical Commissioning Group	Head of engagement
Kate Bryan	Changing Lives and Youth Offending Team	Victim Liaison Officer
Kelly Cunningham	Multiple Complex Needs Network	
Tim Madgwick	Safeguarding Adults Board and Mental Health Partnership Board	Chair
Haddy Njie	Speak Up Diversity	Founder
Janet Wright	Healthwatch York	Chair

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MGWB-guide-web-version-final.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.org/media/68577/rapid-review-voluntary-sector-impact-of-covid-19-august-2020.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Listening-to-BAME-people-about-Health-and-Social-care-services-in-York-Final-report.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Healthwatch-York-CAYP-report-A4-Final-Version33101.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.valeofyorkccg.nhs.uk/seecmsfile/?id=4920>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.valeofyorkccg.nhs.uk/seecmsfile/?id=4154>

<sup>vii</sup> [https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/York\\_CVS\\_COVID-19\\_What\\_we\\_did\\_09.2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/York_CVS_COVID-19_What_we_did_09.2020_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Healthwatch-York-Urgent-Care-Rapid-Appraisal-Report-June-2020.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MEAM-report.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MEAM-report.pdf>