

# Championing what matters to you

Healthwatch Islington  
Annual Report 2021-22



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# Message from our chair

We know many people are experiencing very difficult times with the ongoing impact of the pandemic, increasing inequality, and now the cost of living crisis. Many of the residents we have heard from this year have expressed concern about rising costs for gas and electricity. Working together with our community partners, we have supported these residents to access the Seasonal Health Intervention Network for the help they need with their energy bills.

Concerns about access to dentistry remained high throughout the year as dentists struggle to meet demand for NHS services. Our signposting team helped many Islington residents find NHS dentists. We sent some to dentists outside the borough, and liaised with specialist organisations in cases of severe need.

We also continued to hear concerns about non-emergency patient transport services. This seems to have settled down again but we have been sharing our concerns with other Healthwatch across the country and with national partner, Healthwatch England, to ensure that NHS England policy better reflects resident needs.

## Engagement

During 2021-22 we continued to talk to residents in virtual meetings, over the phone and to support small numbers of residents face-to-face. Overall, we engaged with over 2,200 residents. We gathered views on accessing health and care, experiences of Long Covid, and the impact of the pandemic.

Our Winter Wellness campaign, funded by North Central London Clinical Commissioning Group, helped us to reach 587 residents to share information about vaccinations for flu and Covid, tips for staying well during cold weather, and signposting to financial support. We continued to highlight the potential benefits of vaccination to local residents, reaching 150 people through a hyperlocal project funded by Islington Council, and delivering workshops to 100 students including unaccompanied minors from Somalia, Eritrea and Afghanistan at City and Islington College with colleagues from public health, Islington Somali Community and Eritrean Community in the UK.

## Advocacy

We continued to advocate for more inclusive services in general, and more inclusive mental health services in particular, through our positions within local commissioning structures. We co-designed a guide for local providers and commissioners, sharing top tips from across sectors for making mental health services more welcoming and inclusive to people from all backgrounds.

## Volunteering

We are incredibly proud that this year, our volunteers received national recognition when Healthwatch Islington won the 'Celebrating our volunteer team' category in the Healthwatch Awards 2021, which were run by Healthwatch England. It's the second time we have won this award and we feel both lucky and grateful to have volunteers of such high calibre.

Responding to the emerging crisis in dentistry, our volunteers contacted all local dental practices to see which practices were taking NHS patients. They also visited local pharmacies to see how accessible they are for disabled people, including those with sensory impairments. And our Team of Digital Champion volunteers supported 178 residents to access digital support on topics including online safety, using e-consult to access a GP, and NHS vaccine passports.

We're concerned about how difficult it is to navigate many NHS websites, and the huge number of apps available. We're keen for local providers to test their online tools with residents who are less digitally confident so that services can be more inclusive, and we continue to advocate for the digitally excluded. It is not acceptable for public services not to offer alternatives to digital access.

We thank everyone who has been in touch with us this year and kept us all going through this challenging time. We also thank our funders, and particular thanks again to Healthwatch Islington's volunteer team, and our dedicated staff.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jana Witt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jana Witt  
Healthwatch Islington Chair

# About us

## Your health and social care champion

Healthwatch Islington is your local health and social care champion. We make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers hear your voice and use your feedback to improve care. We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.



### Our vision

Improved health and social care outcomes for local residents.



### Our mission

- To collect knowledge that reflects the diversity of needs and experiences within the borough and encourage people to feedback their honest views on services.
- To use the evidence we gather to influence service delivery, provision and commissioning for the benefit of local people to improve their experience.
- To reach out to and empower our local community to be informed about and involved in local services and exercise choice in taking up services.
- To support the independent assessment and audit of local services.



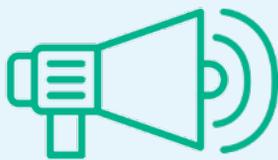
### Our values

We want to engage communities on issues that matter to them, in ways that are accessible and meaningful to them. We don't ask people to give us their opinions or feedback on services without offering them information or support in return.

# Our year in review

Find out how we have engaged and supported people.

## Reaching out



**400 people**

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

**1,269 people**

received our clear advice and information about topics such as keeping warm in winter and COVID-19 vaccinations.

## Making a difference to care



We published

**6 reports**

about the improvements people would like to see to health and social care services.

Our most popular report responded to a national consultation on **patient transport services**

where we highlighted the struggles people have accessing this service in Islington.

## Health and care that works for you



We're lucky to have

**26**

outstanding volunteers, who gave their time across 107 days to make care better for our community.

We're funded by our local authority. In 2021-22 we received:

**£156,100**

which is the same as the previous year.

We also currently employ

**7 staff**

who help us carry out this work.

## How we've made a difference throughout the year

These are the biggest projects we worked on from April 2021 to March 2022.

Spring



Teaming up with expert researchers, clinicians, and commissioners, our programme of online information events kept the community up to date about emerging issues like Long Covid.



We talked to different communities to understand their concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine, and gave reliable information to empower people to make informed decisions.

Summer



We celebrated the return of our face-to-face digital support sessions. Our volunteers helped residents get online to connect to friends, family, and the services they needed to stay healthy.



Our signposting team helped people in pain to find NHS dentists. We sent some to dentists outside Islington who were still taking patients, and liaised with specialist organisations in cases of severe need.

Autumn



We interviewed care home managers to find out how easy it was to access GPs, dentists, hospital transport, and other key services. We reported our findings to commissioners.



Working with Healthwatch across north central London, we conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups with Long Covid patients to better understand their experiences of accessing care.

Winter



We had 'winter wellness' conversations in community languages with over 700 residents. Many of those we helped to support were living in poverty made worse by the cost of living crisis.



We responded to Islington Council's call for evidence of inequality, sharing many examples of unfairness in access to health and other essential services that we've seen in our work.

# Listening to your experiences

Services can't make improvements without hearing your views. That's why over the last year we have made listening to feedback from all areas of the community a priority. This allows us to understand the full picture, and feedback to services to help them improve.



## Improving access to GP services

Thanks to people sharing their experiences of GP appointments with us, we've been able to help local commissioners draw up an action plan to make GP services easier to access for all our residents.

In May 2021, we published a report sharing people's feedback on GP access during the pandemic, based on phone surveys with residents and an analysis of GP websites. This year, we continued to gather people's feedback on access in a number of ways: interviews with care home managers and voluntary sector partners; an online survey; and by hosting a series of online meetings enabling residents to raise issues about GP access directly with commissioners.



# 29 of 70 respondents

**who completed our online survey said they had found it difficult to contact their GP practice in the last 6 months.**

In January 2022, commissioners responded by sharing a list of improvements they intend to implement relating to GP access. This will help resolve a number of issues we had raised with them on patients' behalf. Planned improvements include:

- Reviewing and improving practice websites to ensure information is up to date and easy to find.
- Working with e-consult providers to make the platform more user-friendly, particularly for less digitally-confident patients.
- Reducing the length of recorded messages on practice telephone lines.
- Providing ongoing support to community organisations to increase their capacity to support residents to access digital services.
- Reducing the time window when the GP can be expected to call for a telephone consultation, to allow patients more control over their other commitments.
- Better use of video consultations, and more consistency regarding when and why these appointments are offered.

### What difference will this make?

Our insight has helped commissioners reflect on what they are already doing and what further action is needed to improve access to GP services.



"My experience of telephone consultation was good but being offered a video link would be better."

Patient insight shared with Healthwatch, then shared onwards with commissioners, October 2021.



## Raising awareness of problems with NHS dental services

Thanks to so many people coming to us for help to find an NHS dentist, we have been able to understand the scale of the problems with NHS dentistry, and bring this to the attention of decision-makers.

- From our signposting work, and from feedback we received from surveys, we realised that people who weren't currently registered with an NHS dentist were having great difficulty accessing dental care.
- Though they may have had to wait a long time for an appointment due to Covid, patients who were already registered with a dentist tended to have fewer issues with access.
- Our volunteers carried out a mystery shopping exercise involving 19 local dentists and confirmed that it was much harder to get an appointment if you weren't already registered with the dentist. Dental practices tended to have an existing patient cohort and lacked capacity to take on more patients for NHS care.

In March 2022, we published a report sharing our findings with commissioners and local press. People were less likely to be able to find a dentist if they had moved to Islington within the last two years. Those needing treatment that their existing dentist didn't offer, such as certain root canal treatments, could also struggle to access treatment. Additionally, patients who hadn't been to their dentist regularly told us that they hadn't realised that non-attendance would jeopardise their ongoing access. We feel that more could be done to make patients aware of this danger.



"Thank you for getting back to me, your help is wholeheartedly appreciated ...Thank you for being a light at the end of a dark tunnel."

Resident with a high level of need, who we supported to access NHS dental care



### What difference did this make?

We helped 64 local residents, some with very high levels of need, to find an NHS dentist who would treat them.

Our efforts to draw attention to problems with NHS dentistry have been replicated across the Healthwatch network. Healthwatch England have drawn attention to the crisis in the national media, and called for rapid and radical reform of the way dentistry is commissioned and provided. Together with the British Dental Association, Healthwatch England has sent an open letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak calling for a recovery plan for NHS dentistry.

## Three ways we've made a difference for the community

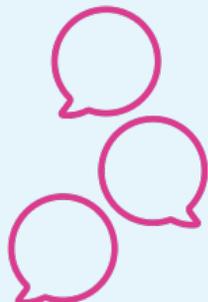
Throughout our work we gather information about health inequalities by speaking to people whose experiences aren't often heard.



### Improving access to health services

It's important that NHS and social care services have strong links with the community. This helps make services easier to access and more responsive.

Philippa normally works full-time for Healthwatch, but this year she is based at CANDI (our local mental health trust). Her job is to strengthen links between the trust and the community and help ensure that mental health services reflect and consider the needs of the diverse population in Islington. Working with Population Health Nurses, Philippa has been going out to community settings to support the provision of free health checks. This has enabled residents to access a health check in an environment which feels familiar and safe. It's proved to be a great way of helping people to engage with the idea of physical and mental health.



### Championing community-based services

When we spoke to vulnerable residents at the Health Connector service at Manor Gardens, they told us that a friendly, warm welcome and positive, caring relationships with staff gave them a sense of belonging and feeling valued. It's also important that there isn't pressure to progress to other services if they don't feel ready. This helps them keep attending when they are feeling less confident.

We've heard a similar message in the past from residents using mental health day services, and many other community-based services. This voluntary sector model of support, focused on the residents' own priorities (rather than those of the wider health and care system) is really valued by residents, particularly those experiencing health inequalities. We stressed this point to Islington Council when they asked how they could make Islington fairer.



### Counselling in community languages

Change takes time. We asked for this provision when we published our report 'Mental health support services for migrant communities in Islington' back in 2020. Pilot programmes ran this year and we're now conducting an evaluation of the service.



“It has been extremely beneficial to be able to express myself more clearly in my mother tongue. The benefit I have felt during and since my counselling has been so profound because I was able to speak freely without having to overcome a language barrier in order to express my feelings. I also felt that the counsellor was able to understand the cultural nuances of my problems. I know other people who would really benefit from this and who struggle, so I feel really grateful that I have been able to access this service at Arachne.”



Feedback on the mother-tongue counselling service piloted this year. We asked for this provision in our 2020 report, ‘Mental health support services for migrant communities in Islington’.



“I have been in the UK for 7 months. I wish this could happen often. It’s the first time I’ve had advice. Language line is not available with my GP.”



Feedback on the provision of free health checks with interpreting support, a programme Healthwatch has been delivering together with community and statutory partners.

# Advice and information

If you feel lost and don't know where to turn, Healthwatch is here for you. In times of worry or stress, we can provide confidential support and free information to help you understand your options and get the help you need. Whether it's finding an NHS dentist, learning how to make a complaint, or getting access to counselling or other kinds of support– you can count on us.

This year we helped people by:

- Supporting the COVID-19 vaccination and booster programme
- Hosting 20,000+ visits to advice and information resources on our website
- Supporting over 700 residents to keep well and warm in winter
- Assisting 64 local people to find an NHS dentist



## Working in partnership to address vaccine hesitancy

Arachne Greek Cypriot Women's Group partnered with us on a signposting project. We gave reliable information on Covid vaccinations to 150 local residents.

When Arachne contacted an elderly, Greek-speaking lady to talk about the importance of Covid vaccinations, she said that although she had had two COVID-19 vaccinations, she was reluctant to have any more boosters as she felt the pandemic was coming to an end. Arachne explained the importance of taking up the offer of a further booster, and that the pandemic was not yet over. They also explained the benefit of the



vaccine helping to make the illness milder in the event that she did catch it. Better informed, she decided to go ahead and get herself the booster.

## Helping residents in poverty cope with rising energy bills.

Islington Somali Community partnered with us on our Winter Wellness project. Across the partnership we helped over 700 residents, giving out information in a wide range of community languages.

One of the residents who Islington Somali Community supported had been through a difficult time during the pandemic. Her husband was their main provider. When he got Covid he was hospitalised for many weeks, and he was unable to return to work. Her eldest son was in a mental health facility. The family were struggling financially, and the bills kept piling up. She had tried to stay on top of things and most of her bills were paid. However, her energy bills were too much for her, and the amount she owed kept increasing due to extra fines. Islington Somali Community tried reasoning with her energy provider who demanded the full payment. They eventually said there was nothing they could do because they had passed her account on to debt collectors.



Islington Somali Community found out about Step Change, a specialist debt charity, through Healthwatch at one of our Winter Wellness information briefings. As a result, they were able to advise their client to apply to Step Change for support.

After the client signed up for Step Change, Islington Somali Community contacted her energy provider and managed to set up a repayment plan of £50 per month. At the client's request a key meter was also installed and she was very happy with the outcome.

# Volunteers

We're supported by a team of amazing volunteers who are the heart of Healthwatch Islington.

This year our volunteers:

- Helped people improve their digital skills by providing one-to-one digital support sessions for 134 residents, and supporting the delivery of specialist digital training events on themes such as understanding email, digital safety, and shopping online.
- Visited 40 Islington pharmacies to assess each building's physical accessibility, and see how information was displayed about the services the pharmacies provided.
- Carried out phone-based mystery shopping of 19 Islington dental practices to see how easy it was to access NHS appointments.
- Designed surveys, interviewed care providers, and shared their own experiences, all with the aim of improving local health and care services.





### Ibrahim

"I have found volunteering with Healthwatch very brilliant and rewarding. I feel good to help people learn more about digital activities and feel safe online. I believe this is very good opportunity to gain new skills and enhance my knowledge on how to care for patients with compassion and empathy. This will definitely help me to become a good nurse in the future."



### Seraphine

"I started off online but have been supporting digital learners in person for almost a year now. Volunteering helps me to put things in perspective, improve my organisation and panic less! It's a real team effort and together we achieve good outcomes. One learner was anxious and convinced she couldn't do online shopping but by the end of the session she'd bought herself a gown from M&S."



### Jenni

"I'm a retired social worker. Volunteering with Healthwatch gives me opportunities to do what I've always enjoyed, talking with people about their experiences and hearing their views. I find it really interesting to consider different aspects of health provision. Most recently, I did some pharmacy visits which really made me think about how difficult it can be for people to get in and out of shops."



### Do you feel inspired?

We are always on the lookout for new volunteers, so please get in touch today.



[www.healthwatchislington.co.uk/volunteer](http://www.healthwatchislington.co.uk/volunteer)



07538 764457



[jennifer.kent@healthwatchislington.co.uk](mailto:jennifer.kent@healthwatchislington.co.uk)

# Finance and future priorities

To help us carry out our work we receive funding from our local authority, Islington Council, under the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We bid for additional funding to enable us to carry out more projects and increase our impact.

Income		Expenditure	
Funding received from local authority	£156,100	Staff costs	£182,277
Additional funding	£108,992	Operational costs	£33,576
		Support and administration	£23,184
<b>Total income</b>	<b>£265,092</b>	<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>£239,037</b>

## Top three priorities for 2022–23

1. Hypertension (high blood pressure) – we’ll be raising awareness of this condition which affects as many as one in five of us in Islington.
2. Championing inclusivity in health and care services. As well as promoting the adoption of the Accessible Information Standard, we’ll be working with commissioners to encourage providers to develop Inclusion Action Plans.
3. Extending our digital inclusion work.

## Next steps

The coming years are likely to be very difficult for local residents and for service providers, with increasing numbers of people experiencing poverty, and demand for services outstripping supply. Islington already has extremely high rates of child and pensioner poverty and this will continue to exacerbate health inequalities in our borough. We will continue to strive to reach more residents and work with local providers to be increasingly inclusive. We were really thrilled to be awarded a new contract to continue to deliver Healthwatch in Islington.

If this report has found you, get in touch and tell us about your experience, ask about our digital learning or come and volunteer.

# Statutory statements

## About us

Healthwatch Islington, 6-9 Manor Gardens, London N7 6LA.

Healthwatch Islington uses the Healthwatch Trademark when undertaking our statutory activities as covered by the licence agreement.

Healthwatch Islington is a charitable company. Company no: 8407852  
Charity Number: 1173157



## The way we work

### Involvement of volunteers and lay people in our governance and decision-making.

Our Healthwatch board consists of 6 members who work on a voluntary basis to provide direction to, and oversight and scrutiny of, our activities. Our board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local community. Through 2021/22 the board met seven times and made decisions on matters such as our revised volunteering policies and approving our budget.

We ensure wider public involvement in deciding our work priorities. For example, we used insight from information and signposting enquiries to prioritise looking at NHS dental services this year. Similarly, feedback shared by service users led to us continuing to work to highlight issues with non-emergency patient transport. We hosted online public meetings (such as the Islington Patient Group meetings) which also gave residents the opportunity to identify emerging issues of concern.

### Methods and systems used across the year's work to obtain people's views and experience.

We use a wide range of approaches to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to provide us with insight about their experience of health and care services. During 2021/22 we have been available by phone, by email, provided a webform on our website, attended virtual and physical meetings of community groups and forums, and provided our own virtual activities.

We are committed to taking additional steps to ensure we obtain the views of people from diverse backgrounds who are often not heard by health and care decision makers. We do this by continuing to work with our [Diverse Communities partnership](#). Each of our partners represent communities that are less able to get their voices heard by mainstream services.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to as many members of the public and partner organisations as possible. We publish it on our website and printed copies are available on request.

### Responses to recommendations and requests

There were no providers who failed to respond to our requests for information or our recommendations. This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we did not make use of our Enter and View powers. Consequently, no recommendations or other actions resulted from this area of activity. There were no issues or recommendations escalated by our Healthwatch to the Healthwatch England Committee and so no resulting special reviews or investigations.

## Health and Wellbeing Board

Healthwatch Islington is represented on the Islington Health and Wellbeing Board by Emma Whitby, our Chief Executive.

### 2021-2022 Additional outcomes

Project / Activity Area	Impact
North Central London Fertility Policy Review	As we had requested when we spoke with commissioners, the new Fertility Policy adhered to existing guidance that had been produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.
Ensuring more diverse representation in commissioning conversations	Commissioners were invited to meetings of our Diverse Communities Health Voice partnership to get direct feedback from communities facing health inequalities. Services discussed included the Experts by Experience programme, the Community Mental Health Framework, and statutory advocacy services.
Accessibility of Long Covid treatment pathways	Residents who had a GP in Islington but lived in Hackney told us they found it harder to access treatment. We told commissioners, who have responded by drafting an agreement on cross-border referrals which all providers are signing-up to.
Reaching into schools	Healthwatch Islington's work on the Accessible Information Standard has been selected to be featured on the school curriculum via an exam paper from Oxford Cambridge and RSA (Royal Society of Arts) Examinations.



**healthwatch**  
Islington

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