

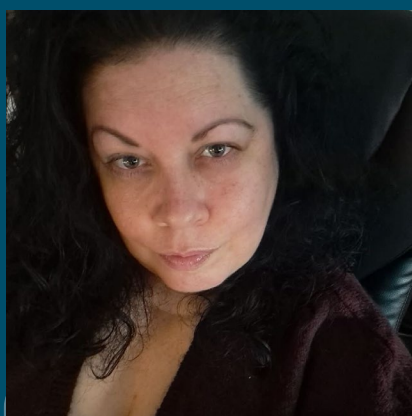


Speaking Up For Better Care

Healthwatch Bedford Borough Annual Report 2025/26

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Emma Freda
CEO, Healthwatch
Bedford Borough

“ Foreword from the CEO

“This year has been challenging for Healthwatch Bedford Borough, with growing pressures across the system and the threat of abolishment. Despite this, we have remained committed to listening to local people and ensuring their experiences help shape better services.

I am immensely proud of the wider Bedford team for their perseverance and resilience. Their hard work has helped us remain a trusted voice for our communities.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the dedication, compassion, and continued commitment of our NHS and social care providers to supporting Bedford residents.

Thank you to you all. Together, we will continue to ensure local voices are heard.”

A message from our chair

Over the past year, Healthwatch Bedford Borough has remained committed to ensuring that the voices of local people are heard and represented within health and social care services. We have continued to engage with residents across our communities, making every effort to reach a diverse range of individuals and groups, including those whose voices are too often overlooked, so that lived experience can help shape service improvement.

The feedback we receive from local people is central to our work. By listening carefully to people's experiences and concerns, we have identified key issues, advocated for improvements, and supported positive change within local services. Through evidence-based insight and constructive challenge, we have helped ensure services are more responsive to the needs of our communities.

Collaboration has been a key strength in our approach. By working closely with neighbouring Healthwatch organisations, we have strengthened our collective influence and enhanced our ability to engage effectively with the Integrated Care Board (ICB), helping ensure local perspectives inform strategic decisions and service planning.

This work has taken place against the backdrop of uncertainty surrounding the proposed abolition of Healthwatch. Despite this, we have remained focused on our purpose, reinforcing the importance of an independent public voice in health and social care.



**Jag Lehal, Chair of
Independent Strategic
Advisory Board (ISAB)
Healthwatch Bedford
Borough Chair**



“On behalf of the board, I thank our staff, volunteers, partners, and everyone who has shared their experiences with us. Your contributions continue to drive improvements and shape the future of local services across Bedford Borough.”

About us

Healthwatch Bedford Borough 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 **1,912** people to have their say and get information about their care. We employed **2.5** staff, and our work was supported by **9** volunteers.



Reaching out:

1,912 people shared their experiences of health and social care services with us, helping to raise awareness of issues and improve care.

874 people came to us for clear advice and information on topics such as how to access occupational therapy and help in a cost-of-living crisis.



Championing your voice:

We champion your voice by turning lived experiences into meaningful change, making sure local people's feedback informs decisions and drives improvements in health and social care.



Statutory funding:

We were funded by Bedford Borough Council In 2025/26. We received £104,825, which is the same amount 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 Bedford borough. Here are a few highlights:

Enter & View

We carried out **5** Enter & View visits this year, examining local care homes and making recommendations for improvement. Through visits, observations, and conversations with service users, relatives, and staff, we have identified good practice, highlighted areas for improvement, and supported services to enhance the quality of care.

Supporting

Over the year, we have supported our NHS and social care providers and ICB colleagues by acting as a trusted partner. Through timely feedback and community insights, we have helped organisations understand the needs and concerns of the people they serve. We have also collaborated to celebrate best practices, address emerging challenges, and improve services, contributing to the development of more accessible and person-centred health and care for our communities.

Advice

Our enquiries service provides essential support to patients, residents, caregivers, and health professionals by offering clear information and guidance when needed most. By listening to concerns and addressing various enquiries, we help individuals understand their rights, navigate health and social care systems, and access appropriate services. Our compassionate service empowers people to make informed decisions and connects them with the resources and support they need.

Feedback

Learning from feedback is crucial for improving health and social care services in our communities. By listening to the experiences and concerns of patients, residents, caregivers, and professionals, we can identify key themes and areas needing change. This feedback provides valuable insights that shape our priorities and support service providers and commissioners in making meaningful improvements.

Working together for change

We've worked with neighbouring Healthwatch to ensure people's experiences of care in Bedford Borough are heard at the Integrated Care System (ICS) level, and they influence decisions made about services at BLMK.

This year, we've worked with Healthwatch across Bedfordshire, Luton, and Milton Keynes (BLMK) to achieve the following:



A collaborative network of local Healthwatch:

National changes to Integrated Care Boards led to the Bedfordshire, Luton, and Milton Keynes ICB merging with Cambridgeshire & Peterborough and Hertfordshire to become NHS Central East ICB. Healthwatch Bedford Borough and the five other local Healthwatch collaborated to revise Healthwatch representation on the new ICB, and with resident insight, inform amendments to merging policies including NHS Central East's Working with People and Communities Policy.



A big conversation:

With the news of the potential future abolition of local Healthwatch, the team worked to raise awareness in the community about what the future might hold for independent resident voice. Recognising that community representatives will be crucial to Neighbourhood Health Services development.



Building strong relationships to achieve more:

The CEO of Healthwatch Milton Keynes served as transformation champion for palliative and End of Life care (PEoLC) across Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes on behalf of the ICB, representing local Healthwatch views. The role supported partnership discussions, provided resident lived-experience insights, and helped drive system wide improvements, including a new PEoLC coordination hub in Bedfordshire and investment in better coordinated care between community and hospice providers.

Listening to your experiences

Services cannot improve if they do not 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 provide feedback on services and help them improve for future generations.



Action on carers support after carers speak out

Unpaid carers said they wanted services that recognised their role earlier, provided more personalised support, and were easier to access.

We spoke with unpaid carers across Bedford borough to understand their experiences of caring, accessing support and planning for the future. Their feedback highlighted that many people do not readily identify themselves as carers and can struggle to navigate support, particularly when caring responsibilities first begin. Carers also told us they wanted services that were more accessible, joined up, and responsive to both emotional and practical needs.

Key things we heard:

Many people see themselves first as a parent, spouse, child or sibling rather than a carer, which can prevent them from accessing support. Carers felt services should recognise and engage people without professionalising their caring role.

Carers wanted support that was flexible, person-centred and easy to access. This included better information, clearer signposting, support outside traditional office hours, and services located in community settings rather than solely in clinical environments such as carers' lounges.



“Some carers do not want to be a professional in order to access services.”

Carers also highlighted the importance of agencies taking a more proactive role, supporting individuals to access services rather than simply signposting them elsewhere, and recognising the needs of the whole family.

What difference did this make?

Carers' feedback helped shape the recommissioning of the service, with bidders asked how they would ensure carers are recognised, supported and engaged in accessible, flexible and person-centred ways, particularly those who may not identify as carers.

A new provider, Blue Sky Carers Support, has since been appointed and successfully launched the service. Early feedback shows the service is performing well, with a strong focus on carer recognition, engagement and personalised support

Championing Ukrainian community voices to improve palliative and End-of-Life care

Last year, we brought together members of Bedford's Ukrainian community to better understand experiences of palliative and End-of-Life care (PEoLC)

8 Ukrainian residents shared their experiences in navigating healthcare, caring for loved ones, and discussing End-of-Life wishes.



What did we do

We held a community focus group in Bedford to discuss awareness of palliative and End-of-Life care services, barriers to access, and cultural beliefs about death. Interpreter support was provided to help participants share their experiences openly.

Key things we heard:

Language barriers:

Limited access to clinical information and limited support for family discussions with clinicians in the primary language.

Low awareness:

Limited understanding of Advanced Care Plans and Do Not Attempt Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (DNACPR) decisions.

Cultural needs:

Greater recognition of faith, prayer and culturally sensitive support is needed.

Navigating services:

Complex systems highlight the need for PEoLC coordinators and a single point of contact.

Better support needed:

Communication gaps can hinder access to quality care and support.

What difference did this make?

Feedback has led to recommendations for improving palliative and End-of-Life care in Bedfordshire, Luton, and Milton Keynes. Key proposals included better interpreter services, tailored care pathways, multilingual resources, and dedicated care coordinators for migrant communities.

Hearing from all communities

We are here for the residents of Bedford borough. That's why, over the past year, we engaged extensively with those communities whose voices often go unheard.

Every local resident should have the chance to share their story and play a part in shaping services to meet their needs.

This year, we have connected with diverse communities, ensuring that we are:

- Reaching people and communities whose voices are often unheard or underrepresented, ensuring their experiences and concerns are listened to and acted upon.
- Supporting individuals and families facing socio-economic challenges, helping them access information, advice, and services when they need them most.
- Working with local NHS organisations and Integrated Care System partners to make sure community feedback influences decision-making, service improvements, and healthcare planning.

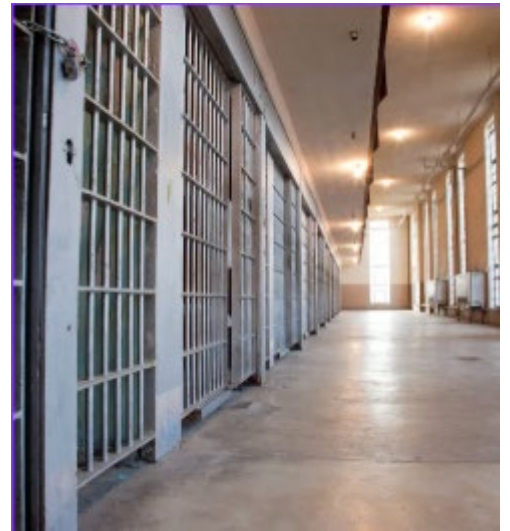


Supporting families affected by imprisonment

A family member contacted us as their brother was not receiving the healthcare they required while serving a custodial sentence.

The family felt distressed and unsure where to turn for help. They were concerned that their loved one's long-term condition was not being properly managed. effectively.

We provided information about the complaints process within the prison system and explained how concerns could be escalated. We also shared details of specialist support services for prisoners' families and emotional wellbeing support.



What difference did this make?

The family received clear guidance on the options available to them and felt more confident navigating the prison system. They thanked us for the information and support and said they would act on the advice provided.

Making sure local voices are heard by NHS leaders and the Integrated Care System

Resolving a lost referral for specialist cardiac care.

A patient waited nine months for a specialist cardiology appointment after an administrative error meant their referral was never sent.

We investigated the issue, worked directly with the provider and highlighted the impact the delay had had on the patient. As a result, the referral was expedited, and an appointment at a specialist centre was secured within days. This case enabled us to raise concerns about referral processes and ensure the patient's experience informed service improvement discussions with NHS partners.



What difference did this make?

The provider accepted the error and worked with the specialist centre to expedite the patient's referral. Instead of waiting several more weeks, the patient received an appointment just four days later.

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 874 people have engaged with us for advice, support or help in finding services. These conversations also help us understand where and how your care can be improved.

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



Helping a local authority professional find the right support for a client



A social care professional contacted us for advice on supporting a client who felt their concerns about a physical disability were not being heard.

The client was living with complex health needs and was reluctant to raise concerns directly with their GP practice because they feared it might affect future care. The professional wanted advice on advocacy and alternative support options.

We explained the NHS complaints process, signposted the team to advocacy services, and shared information about physiotherapy self-referral and other local support available to the client.

“

“The team are grateful for your insight, the materials provided and the support.”

Helping a patient secure surgery after repeated cancellations

An older patient contacted us after their surgery was repeatedly cancelled because an ongoing foot infection prevented it taking place.

The patient lived with several long-term health conditions and explained that cold weather worsened their symptoms. Previous operations had been cancelled after infections developed, leaving them worried the same thing would happen again.

We spoke with the hospital team and highlighted the need for a practical approach that considered the impact of seasonal factors on the patient's condition. We also asked for a clear surgical plan to be put in place.



“I was finally given a theatre slot for 8 weeks' time in the spring and given certainty about my treatment.”

Showcasing volunteer impact

Our fantastic volunteers have given **1,023** hours to support our work. Thanks to their dedication to improving care, we can better understand what is working and what needs improving in the local area.

This year, our volunteers:

- Visited communities to promote our work and share their views
- Collated experiences and supported data analysis
- Carried out Enter and View visits to local services to help them improve



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.



Ashok

Ashok Khandelwal is Healthwatch Bedford Borough's longest-serving board member, bringing over 40 years of experience across the NHS, social care and probation services. A former Occupational Therapist and Clinical Director, Ashok has dedicated his career to improving quality of life and tackling health inequalities.

Since moving to Bedford in 2018, he has continued to champion community voice through voluntary leadership roles.

Passionate about fairness and inclusion, Ashok helps ensure residents' experiences shape local health and care services.

Will joined Healthwatch Bedford Borough in January 2026 as an Admin and Database Support Officer, bringing a background in social research and sports science.

Passionate about supporting his local community, he uses his data analysis skills to turn residents' experiences into meaningful insights that help improve services.

Drawn to Healthwatch's values of inclusivity, transparency and public involvement, Will supports data collection, reporting and intelligence gathering, helping ensure community voices are heard and reflected in local health and care decision-making.



Will

Be part of the change.

If you've felt inspired by these stories, contact us today and Have Your Say on local health and care services!



www.healthwatchbedfordborough.co.uk



01234 638 678



enquiries@healthwatchbedfordborough.co.uk

Finance and future priorities

We receive funding from Bedford Borough 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	£104,825	Expenditure on pay	£91,105
Additional income	£6,667	Non-pay expenditure	£14,860
		Office and management fee	£13,031
Total income	£111,492	Total Expenditure	£118,996

Additional income is broken down into:

- £6,667 received from BLMK ICB for facilitating a bespoke focus group discussion on palliative and End of Life care within the Ukrainian community.



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. Strengthening Youth Voice in Health and Care

Increase the participation and influence of young people aged 16–25 in shaping local health and social care services. Build stronger engagement through schools, Bedford College, and the University of Bedfordshire. Use youth-friendly communication channels such as social media and targeted outreach to ensure young voices are heard and acted upon.

2. Improving Digital Access to Health Services

Understand barriers residents face when using digital healthcare services such as the NHS App, online GP booking systems, and feedback portals. Focus particularly on older adults, those living with disabilities, and non-English speakers who may experience digital exclusion. Use surveys, interviews, and task testing to produce actionable recommendations that improve accessibility and usability.

3. Maximising Impact Through Inclusive Patient Voice and Enquiries

Deliver an accessible, inclusive enquiries service so residents can obtain advice, information, and support. Use intelligence from enquiries, outreach, Enter & View, and public feedback to influence commissioners and providers. Ensure patient, resident, carer, and community voices are embedded in strategic decision-making by attending key statutory boards and committees.

Statutory statements

The way we work

Healthwatch Bedford Borough, 21-23 Gadsby Street, Bedford MK40 3HP – Engaging Community Solutions (ECS) CIC Meeting Point House, Southwater Square, Telford, TF3 4HS

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

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

Healthwatch Bedford Borough's Independent Strategic Advisory Board (ISAB) currently consists of **6** members who work voluntarily to provide direction, oversight and scrutiny of our operational activities.

Our board ensures that decisions about priority areas of work reflect the concerns and interests of our diverse local population. Throughout 2025/26 the board met regularly and made decisions on matters such as work programme priorities and Enter & View visit scheduling.

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

We use a range of platforms to gather people's experiences of using health and social care services, including telephone, email, business WhatsApp, our website 'Have Your Say' portal, outreach activity, SignLive, our enquiries service and our social media platforms.

We ensure that this annual report is made available to local people and publish it on our website, also providing hard copies upon request.

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 make decisions about services hear the insights and experiences shared with us.

In our local authority area, for example, we take information to the Bedford Borough Health and Wellbeing Board, the Bedford Borough Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Bedford Borough Adult Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the monthly BLMK Local Healthwatch and Integrated Care Board strategic meeting, and other external board meetings.

We also share our insights and experiences with decision-makers at the Integrated Care Board, with the CEO of Healthwatch Milton Keynes representing Local Healthwatch.

We have a data-sharing agreement with Healthwatch England to help address health and care issues at a national level with policy makers and undertake quarterly anonymised data returns.

Healthwatch representatives

Healthwatch Bedford Borough was represented on the Bedford Borough Health and Wellbeing Board by Emma Freda, CEO.

During 2025/26, our representative has effectively carried out this role by attending regular board meetings and workshops.

Healthwatch Bedford Borough was represented on BLMK Health and Care Partnership by Emma Freda, CEO, and Maxine Taffetani, CEO, Healthwatch Milton Keynes, represented Local Healthwatch on the BLMK Integrated Care Board.

Statutory statements

Enter and view

Location	Reason for visit	What you did as a result
Oasis House	Enter and View visit to gather residents' experiences and identify good practice.	Highlighted positive dementia-friendly safety measures, including temperature-controlled showers and colour-coded fire evacuation support indicators. Shared examples of innovative AI technology being used to support residents' safety and recognised effective approaches to reducing isolation through the Friends for Life volunteer initiative.
Annandale Lodge	Enter and View visit to understand resident experiences and quality of care.	Recorded great examples of person-centred care, including unrestricted visiting, resident-led changes such as Sunday sherry, and activities promoting cultural awareness. Highlighted the Friends for Life initiative and shared positive feedback from residents and relatives about the quality of care.
Southway	Enter and View visit to engage with residents and assess how feedback is used.	Identified good practice around communication and resident involvement, including the introduction of "#hellomynameis" badges following resident feedback. Reported positive examples of community living, personalised risk management, and residents feeling safe and supported.
Sharnbrook House	Enter and View visit following the appointment of a new manager to understand residents' experiences and identify areas for improvement.	Provided immediate feedback regarding the accessibility of the 'You Said, We Did' board, which was addressed during the visit. Highlighted residents' concerns regarding food and noted the manager's proactive response to resident and relative feedback. Recorded improvements implemented by the new management team.

Statutory statements

Enter and view

Location	Reason for visit	What you did as a result
Elcombe House	Enter and View visit to observe care delivery and resident wellbeing.	Highlighted strong staff–resident interactions, effective use of digital technology, and opportunities for cognitive stimulation and social engagement. Reported positive feedback from residents about staff and identified an area for improvement regarding staff identification and the inconsistent use of name badges.

2025 – 2026 Outcomes

Project/activity	Outcomes achieved
Unpaid Carers Focus Group	Feedback from those with lived experience directly informed the Unpaid Carers tender process and contributed to the development of the service specification, helping to ensure future services better reflect carers' needs and experiences.
Bespoke Ukrainian Palliative and End of Life Focus Group	Improved understanding of Ukrainian cultural and religious practices relating to palliative and End-of-Life care. Identified the impact of language barriers on patients, families, and the wider community, helping to inform more culturally appropriate and accessible service redesign.
Recruitment of volunteers	Recruitment to volunteer roles has been a key priority this year, enabling us to broaden representation and deepen expertise. As a result, the board is better equipped to support effective decision-making and drive meaningful impact across our work, and we have a team of Enter & View Authorised Representatives and four new youth ambassadors.



ECS










Healthwatch Bedford Borough
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