**An Open Letter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care**

**Re: The Future of Public Voice and the Importance of Independent Advocacy**

**Dear Secretary of State,**

**We, the Chief Officers/Chairs of local Healthwatch services across England, are deeply concerned by the government’s proposal to bring public voice functions under the control of local authorities and NHS bodies – undermining the independence that makes public feedback effective.**

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For over a decade, Healthwatch has served as a trusted, impartial voice for members of the public, carers, and communities. Our statutory independence enables us to speak truth to power, challenge poor practice, and amplify the experiences of those too often unheard – particularly the most vulnerable and those with the most complex needs. We work constructively with local systems, but always with the freedom to raise concerns without fear or favour.

The Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust scandal stands as a stark reminder of the consequences of failing to listen. The Francis Inquiry made clear that independent scrutiny and public advocacy are essential. It also exposed the failure of local democratic scrutiny mechanisms, which lacked the expertise to detect serious failings – giving false reassurance to regulators.

Bringing public voice functions in-house risks creating a system where feedback is filtered, inconvenient truths are softened, and accountability is diluted. It sends the wrong message at a time when public trust in institutions must be rebuilt, not eroded.

We have countless examples of where people have chosen to share their experiences with local Healthwatch instead of providers, due to fear of repercussions, previous dismissal, or lack of access. People often tell us we are the first service to truly listen and the only one that follows up to ensure they receive the support needed.

Beyond gathering feedback, Healthwatch provides trusted, independent information and signposting to help people navigate complex health and care systems. We also respond to concerns from the public by carrying out Enter and View visits and conducting focused research that has resulted in real changes to local services. Our local knowledge and impartial advice are often the only support available to those struggling to access services – something not readily offered by the NHS or local authorities, nor covered in the new 10-Year Health Plan.

Since 1974 there has been continuous parliamentary support for independent public voice initiatives being able to hold services to account. Therefore, we urge you to reconsider this direction. Instead of dismantling independence, we should be strengthening it – ensuring every community has access to strong, well-resourced, and fearless local public voice initiatives that hold services to account and shape care that truly meets people’s needs.

We ask to meet with you to discuss why preserving independent public voice is essential. We remain committed to improving services – but cannot do so effectively if our independence is compromised.

Yours sincerely,

The Chief Officers/Chairs of 131 Local Healthwatch services

Manisha Modhvadia Healthwatch Barking and Dagenham

Debra Gordon Healthwatch Barnet

Sarah Campbell Healthwatch Barnet

Dan Rogers Healthwatch Barnet, Healthwatch Croydon, Healthwatch Haringey and Healthwatch Hounslow

Lesley Cooper Healthwatch Barnsley

Amrit Kaur Healthwatch Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire

Kevin Peltonen-Messenger Healthwatch Bath and North East Somerset, Healthwatch Bristol, Healthwatch Gloucestershire, Healthwatch North Somerset, Healthwatch South Glos, Healthwatch Swindon and Healthwatch Wiltshire

Simone Kerr Healthwatch Bexley

Andy Cave Healthwatch Birmingham and Healthwatch Solihull

Sarah Johns Healthwatch Blackburn with Darwen

Julie Darbyshire Healthwatch Bolton

Helen Rushworth Healthwatch Bradford & District

Patricia Zebiri Healthwatch Brent

Gina Aston Healthwatch Brent, Healthwatch Kensington & Chelsea and Healthwatch Westminster

Alan Boyd Healthwatch Brighton and Hove

Geoffrey Bowden Healthwatch Brighton and Hove

Carolina Echegaray Healthwatch Bristol, Healthwatch North Somerset and Healthwatch South Gloucestershire

Charlotte Bradford Healthwatch Bromley

Zoe McIntosh Healthwatch Bucks

Andrew Holland Healthwatch Bury

Stacey Appleyard Healthwatch Calderdale and Healthwatch Kirklees

Jess Slater Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough

Stephen Heard Healthwatch Camden

Diana Blackmun Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire

Louise Barry Healthwatch Cheshire East and Healthwatch Cheshire West

Rachel Cleave Healthwatch City of London

Debbie Gilbert Healthwatch Cornwall

Julia Catharall Healthwatch County Durham

David Blacklock Healthwatch County Durham, Healthwatch Cumberland, Healthwatch Lancashire, Healthwatch Stockton-On-Tees and Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness

Sally Thoburn Healthwatch Cumberland

Michelle Thompson Healthwatch Darlington

James Moore Healthwatch Derby

Helen Henderson Healthwatch Derbyshire

Pat Harris Healthwatch Devon, Healthwatch Plymouth and Healthwatch Torbay

Fran Joel Healthwatch Doncaster

Louise Bate Healthwatch Dorset

Jason Griffiths Healthwatch Dudley

Carleen Duffy Healthwatch Ealing, Healthwatch Hammersmith and Fulham, Healthwatch Hillingdon and Healthwatch Lewisham

Helen Grimwood Healthwatch East Riding, Healthwatch Hull, Healthwatch North East Lincolnshire and Healthwatch North Lincolnshire

Carrie Duran Healthwatch East Riding, Healthwatch Hull, Healthwatch North Lincolnshire, Healthwatch North East Lincolnshire

Veronica Kirwan Healthwatch East Sussex

Sam Glover Healthwatch Essex

Yvonne Probert Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle

Lucy White Healthwatch Gloucestershire

Dave Wilson Healthwatch Halton

Lydia Hughes Healthwatch Halton and Healthwatch Warrington

Stephen John Healthwatch Hampshire, Healthwatch Portsmouth, Healthwatch Reading, Healthwatch Somerset, Healthwatch Southend, Healthwatch West Berkshire and Healthwatch Wokingham Borough

Paull Addae Healthwatch Haringey

Yaa Asamany Healthwatch Harrow

Christopher Ackers-Belcher Healthwatch Hartlepool

Ian Buckmaster Healthwatch Havering

Christine Price Healthwatch Herefordshire

Ivana Chalmers Healthwatch Hertfordshire

Lisa Taylor Healthwatch Hillingdon

Lynn Hill Healthwatch Hillingdon

Aastha Binjrajka Healthwatch Hounslow

Catherine Fuller Healthwatch Isles of Scilly

Laura Saksena Healthwatch Islington

Robbie Goatham Healthwatch Kent

Stephen Bitti Healthwatch Kingston upon Thames

David Aspin Healthwatch Knowsley

Paul Mavers Healthwatch Knowsley

Folake Segun Healthwatch Lambeth

Hannah Davies Healthwatch Leeds

Gemma Barrow Healthwatch Leicester and Healthwatch Leicestershire

Liz Ball Healthwatch Lincolnshire

Navaz Sutton Healthwatch Lincolnshire

Sarah Thwaites Healthwatch Liverpool

Pat Lattimer Healthwatch Luton

Neil Walbran Healthwatch Manchester

Svajune Ulinskiene Healthwatch Medway

Dave Curtis Healthwatch Merton

Maxine Taffetani Healthwatch Milton Keynes

Danielle Ruane Healthwatch Network Greater Manchester

Pratima Dattani Healthwatch North Northamptonshire

Paul Jones Healthwatch North Tyneside

Ashley Green Healthwatch North Yorkshire

Derry Nugent Healthwatch Northumberland

Sabrina Taylor Healthwatch Nottingham and Healthwatch Nottinghamshire

Veronica Barry Healthwatch Oxfordshire

Alice Kunjappy-Clifton Healthwatch Reading and Healthwatch Wokingham

Cathy Turland Healthwatch Redbridge

Mike Derry Healthwatch Richmond

Simon Boddis Healthwatch Richmond

Kate Jones Healthwatch Rochdale

Margaret Parker Healthwatch Rochdale

Duncan Gall Healthwatch Rotherham

Kate Holt Healthwatch Rutland and Healthwatch West Northamptonshire

Sam Cook Healthwatch Salford

Alexia Farmer Healthwatch Sandwell

Amritpal Randhawa Healthwatch Sandwell

Diane Blair Healthwatch Sefton

Lucy Davies Healthwatch Sheffield

Lynn Cawley Healthwatch Shropshire

Sheila Scott Healthwatch South Tyneside

Amanda Kelly Healthwatch Southampton

Owen Richards Healthwatch Southend

Rhyana Ebanks-Babb Healthwatch Southwark

Jayne Parkinson-Loftus Healthwatch St Helens

Anna Mather Healthwatch Staffordshire

Maria Kildunne Healthwatch Stockport

Simon Fogell Healthwatch Stoke-on-Trent and Healthwatch Telford and Wrekin

Andy Yacoub Healthwatch Suffolk

Samantha Botsford Healthwatch Surrey

Janet Wingrove Healthwatch Sutton

Alex Leach Healthwatch Tameside

Andy Latham Healthwatch Trafford

Lewis Smith-Connell Healthwatch Wakefield

Aileen Farrer Healthwatch Walsall

Dianne Barham Healthwatch Waltham Forest

Stephen Hickey Healthwatch Wandsworth

Norman Holding Healthwatch Warrington

Kate Rees Healthwatch Westmorland and Furness

Lacey Briscoe Healthwatch Wigan and Leigh

Kirsteen Sheppard Healthwatch Wirral

Stacey Lewis Healthwatch Wolverhampton

Siân Balsom Healthwatch York