

Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers
Leader, South Oxfordshire District Council
Abbey House
Abbey Close
Abingdon
OX14 3JE

By email

**The Leader's Office
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
New Road
Oxford
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OX1 1ND**

Councillor Tim Bearder
Leader of the Council

26 June 2026

Dear Cllr Filipova-Rivers

Re: Abolition of Healthwatch and the future of local patient voice

Thank you for your letter following South Oxfordshire District Council's motion on the Government's proposed abolition of Healthwatch. I welcome the Council's clear support for retaining an independent patient voice and for the work already underway in Oxfordshire to consider how it can be protected locally.

I would like to confirm that Oxfordshire County Council shares the concerns expressed by South Oxfordshire District Council. Independent patient voice is a core part of our local health and care system: it enables residents to speak candidly about their experiences, helps ensure seldom-heard communities are not overlooked, and provides decision-makers with evidence that is grounded in lived experience. It is important that any future arrangements preserve public trust, independence and local accountability.

This position is consistent with the County Council's cross-party motion of 9 September 2025, which called for urgent consideration of how the Healthwatch function could be safeguarded and developed with NHS partners and local stakeholders. It also reflects the sustained scrutiny undertaken by the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which has emphasised the need to protect the core functions currently provided by Healthwatch and to retain meaningful local oversight of any future model.

In response, the Oxfordshire Health & Wellbeing Board has established a dedicated working group to explore options for a future independent patient voice function. The group is considering how best to preserve the principles that have made Healthwatch valuable locally: independence from commissioners and providers, trusted community relationships, and a clear route for resident insight to influence service improvement.

A key part of this work is public engagement. The County Council has commissioned REMind Research to gather views from residents, stakeholders, adults with different levels of service experience, and young people. This evidence will help test the principles

for a future model, identify risks or gaps, and inform the next stage of Oxfordshire's approach.

Our objective is clear: if the national statutory model changes, Oxfordshire must retain a credible, independent and locally grounded mechanism through which residents can influence health and care services. That is why we continue to make the case for local flexibility, rather than a prescriptive national approach that could weaken patient voice.

I am therefore grateful that South Oxfordshire District Council has added its voice to this issue. Your motion strengthens the wider local mandate for protecting independent patient representation and demonstrates the importance district councils place on trusted and community-based routes for residents to be heard.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Bearder', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Tim Bearder
Leader, Oxfordshire County Council
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