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# Developing recommendations

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# About this guide

Recommendations are key suggestions based on your research findings summarised into several learning points for service providers. Making effective recommendations is essential for service improvement and monitoring.

This guidance outlines the critical elements behind developing successful recommendations, so that you can maximise the chances of achieving changes to services and help deliver impact for people.

# Things to consider before you start your project

* **Think through the Theory of Change** for your piece of work. You can use the [*Theory of Change template*](https://network.healthwatch.co.uk/guidance/2020-09-25/demonstrating-impact#theory_change) to help you understand change due to your work. You can also use the [*Making a Difference Toolkit*](https://network.healthwatch.co.uk/guidance/2019-09-30/making-difference-toolkit) to consider how you are going to make the best use of your research.
* **Know your target audience**, understand the priorities of the service provider(s) you are targeting, and make sure that you talk to stakeholders who share a common interest. Doing this will enable you to gain traction with your recommendations.
* **Identify the right people to help inform the development of your recommendations.** Your research top will direct you. Think about who you need to speak to that may be interested in the subject and has the means to respond to and/or support local change.
* **Think about how you are going to show the success of your recommendations.** Doing this will help you decide if you can build any process into your initial work to make it easier later on. For example, you could gain consent from the people taking part in your research for you to get in touch with them later to ask if anything has changed. Or you could create reminders in your diaries to follow up with relevant stakeholders on the progress of individual recommendations.

# Start having conversations with stakeholders as soon as possible

Where possible, you should develop recommendations in collaboration with stakeholders who, through their influencing power, commissioning or provider responsibilities or their resources and capability, can help make change happen.

* **Identify good practice.** If your Healthwatch and the service provider have worked together before, identify the type of recommendations that have been successfully implemented. When working with a new service provider, you can use good practice from other services and apply them to your recommendations, helping to inform the future success of your recommendations.
* **Where possible, give potential stakeholders early sight of your plans.** Get together to discuss your engagement or research findings at an early stage and identify good practice. Agree on what works and consider and agree on how you can use this information to present locally relevant recommendations that will work.
* **Agree on the timelines you’ll work to with stakeholders** to plan when you will share your findings with them, think through any recommendations with the right people and measure the progress of implementation and success of the recommendations.
* **Remember: effective recommendations provide workable cost-effective solutions.** By working with stakeholders, you can develop cost-effective solutions. Relying on one provider to implement the recommendations may be limiting. Be creative and look to others who have relevant expertise to assist you.

It’s important to note that whilst ideally, you should carry out research in collaboration with relevant stakeholders to ensure the best outcomes for your recommendations, there might be times when a judgement call is needed to continue with a piece of research even if you don’t initially have their support. You should make such decisions after careful consideration and planning.

**For example:**

You are planning an Enter and View visit; however, the provider hasn’t implemented specific recommendations you’ve previously made because they don’t share your perspective on prioritising making improvements. You might even feel they are somewhat hostile. But, if you think there are significant concerns, you can still decide to go ahead with a visit anyway. In such a case, you would need to factor in other approaches to gaining influence and achieving change.

# Explore the potential to involve service users in coming up with solutions

**Think about how you can involve people in the co-designing of services**. For example, you can ask people what solutions they’d suggest during your research. Alternatively, you could ask for their views on your recommendations once you have finished your piece of research. Doing this will ensure service users are more ‘active partners’ rather than passive recipients of the conclusions reached by Healthwatch and the stakeholders.

When making recommendations for specific groups, it is essential to make sure the people from those groups inform them. You should also think through how the recommendations will impact them.

# Formulate recommendations

* **Recommendations should directly respond to the key findings from your research**. Key findings should be those where there is a robust evidence base.
* **Recommendations should be brief** and use a “SMART” format- Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely. Follow each recommendation with a few sentences of explanatory text.
* **Propose solutions to address the issues or opportunities for further improvements uncovered during data analysis**. Keep in mind that you’re constructing an argument - a narrative that nudges your stakeholders towards the proposed recommendations. It is therefore important to back up your advice with evidence and sound reasoning.
* **Check the context** – Although the recommendations need to respond to the key findings from your research, you’ll need to consider the context for each one.
  + Have there been any changes to the service since you undertook the research that might affect what you want to propose? For example, there is no point in recommending a standalone clinic after plans for a health centre are announced.
  + Are there other factors to consider that might affect how people responded? For example, people might have asked for more face-to-face appointments during lockdown as very few were available, but you publish the report after restrictions lift.
* **It might be helpful to link the findings with your recommendations visually.** For example, you can use a two-columned table - the first column list the results, and the second column for respective recommendations listed adjacently.
* **When formulating recommendations, think about equality, diversity and inclusion issues.** Do your research findings make a case for change because you have identified aspects of services that don’t meet the needs of some groups?

# How to make your recommendations stick

* **Use the whole research process to test out possible recommendations**. Making recommendations isn’t something that happens at the end of a process, you should develop them as findings emerge. You might start with options for recommendations and whittle them down to the most workable ones over time by talking to stakeholders. In some cases, recommendations may already have been actioned before a project has finished, indicating a strong and collaborative relationship between you and stakeholders.
* **It is crucial for your stakeholders to understand the value that Healthwatch insight can bring to their work and the importance of our independence**. On some occasions, understanding what has worked well within the local area in the past will come into play. On others, your insight might be useful for stakeholders to plan their future actions.

**For example:**

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some local Healthwatch felt that their stakeholders were nervous and often against them finding out about people’s experiences because they were wary of criticism. However, once they saw what type of information was collected and how valuable the insight was to improve the services, they quickly worked collaboratively with the local Healthwatch.

* **Plan a final meeting before the publication of the report to work through the recommendations one last time.** You need your allies and key stakeholders to engage with this process – and they will if the relationship has been managed well from the outset. Use the meeting to finalise and agree on the recommendations, timeframes for change and the evaluation process. In addition, decide on a communications plan, think about press releases and prepare well for how your stakeholders may respond to this. This is how you will monitor outcomes and impact.
* **Healthwatch also need to understand what the limitations are for those they are trying to influence**. It is crucial to evaluate the feasibility of your recommendations by consulting with local stakeholders. There will be occasions when you will need to choose which recommendations can or cannot be implemented. You might need to have a variety of options.

# Keeping up the pressure

There is always further work to do once the recommendations have been committed to paper and published. It will require you to follow up, which you can do as you continue your engagement and evaluation process. By this point, your stakeholders should be interested in scoping new intelligence and insight, indicating that what they are doing is the right thing for people.

* Offer any new insight that may show the difference that has been made - whether good or bad - and continue to offer new solutions.
* Adapt – your recommendations can alter over time as you learn more about the system and what works for people. Keep your stakeholders on board and on track by reinforcing your recommendations and scheduling reviews. Unexpected change elsewhere in the system may have reduced or altered the nature of the identified problem. If this does occur, note this down as it will be helpful to consider when forming other recommendations based on what has worked/not worked in the past.
* Always remember you can use your findings and recommendations in other ways and for different situations. For example, recommendations related to primary care could be used further down the line in work relating to care homes. This will further emphasise your point and ensure you get maximum value out of your work.
* Agreeing to disagree – the timing of recommendations is critical, and sometimes it can be based upon the interests of the stakeholders involved. Should this happen, be clear why this is the case and plan how you will manage the relationship to ensure that continuing to disagree on a point does not detract from the overall relationship. There will always be other areas that you do agree on, so where you disagree, make your case and hold your ground. You can find out more about how to deliver your statutory duties carefully and impartially in our [guidance](https://network.healthwatch.co.uk/guidance/2021-04-19/working-partners-and-maintaining-healthwatch-independence).

# When recommendations cannot be resolved locally

There can be occasions when local services or systems cannot implement your proposed recommendations. In such cases, you can:

* Search the [National Reports Library](https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/reports-library) to check if other local Healthwatch have identified similar issues.
* Ask a question on Facebook Workplace to see if others have identified similar issues.
* Work with other local Healthwatch (who have identified similar issues) to make recommendations directly to the relevant regional and national level organisations who have the power to implement your recommendations.
* You can also consider reaching out to other external organisations, such as charities, to strengthen your recommendations.
* You can contact Healthwatch England for assistance in raising concerns or making recommendations at a national level. However, remember that you should build recommendations that need action at a national level in partnership with others to create a broader consensus. This helps us considerably when making representations on your behalf.

# Top tips for making effective recommendations

1. Aim to agree on your research objectives in collaboration with those you are trying to influence.
2. Be clear on benefits: highlight in your plan who your stakeholders are (those that can help make a difference) and outline what they will get from the project.
3. Ensure that your stakeholders’ visions for the project do not diverge from yours as the programme progresses. Regular updates and communications will help avoid this, as will well considered, mutually-agreed objectives.
4. Arm the people you are trying to influence with information as you go, speak to them early and be transparent – schedule meetings to share insight, factoring in time to develop your recommendations in collaboration with stakeholders.
5. If you identify insight along the way that may be of value to your stakeholders - even if they do not specifically drive forward your project objectives - share it with them to support you in developing a broader and cooperative relationship.
6. Acknowledge and use expertise - this alone can win some hearts and minds in your current and future activity.
7. Strike a balance between positive and negative feedback and adopt a problem-solving approach. Recommendations should where possible, offer proportionate and realistic solutions. Explore and share good experiences of health and care services to show what works well and use this to inform your recommendations.
8. Never list a series of problems without considering solutions, as this is negative and will not be received well. If the solution is not immediately apparent, speak to your stakeholders to work through possibilities.
9. Make your recommendations and solutions as specific as possible- for example, avoid making recommendations such as *‘access to mental health services needs to be improved’* as that is somewhat stating the obvious and doesn’t give any concrete steps for the providers to follow. You should also avoid recommendations that make a case for more research on the topic.
10. Use your insight and compelling stories to emphasise why the recommendation is important, link them clearly to your findings and, where possible, create cost-effective solutions or use what has been proven to work elsewhere.
11. Not everything can be done at once. It is useful to plan short, medium and long-term recommendations to make things achievable and realistic. Follow-up on your recommendations to find out how things are progressing - you can use the [*Impact Tracker*](https://network.healthwatch.co.uk/guidance/2020-09-25/demonstrating-impact#theory_change)for this purpose.
12. Account for change. Be ready to add new insight and amend your recommendations to adapt to the times. They may become outdated and irrelevant.
13. Make it clear that the order you list your recommendations is based on the capability of the system to respond, and importantly their interests and priorities.
14. Be open to suggestions; conceding a minor point could ensure that you have more impact on what is important.

**Don’t forget to check our further guidance on writing up your findings into a report.**

[**Find out more**](https://network.healthwatch.co.uk/guidance/2021-07-27/writing-your-research-or-engagement-findings-report)