

**Working with our most
vulnerable people during the
COVID-19 outbreak.**

**Independent research into the support
received by staff in residential care homes
and domiciliary care agencies.**

Report, September 2020

Report produced by the
Healthwatch St Helens Support Team



Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Healthwatch St Helens felt it was important to understand what people living and working in nursing/care/residential homes and receiving domiciliary care were experiencing.

We were aware that our Local Authority Social Care teams were offering a lot of support. In collaboration, it was agreed that Healthwatch St Helens could be effective in conducting independent research into what the managers and staff of nursing/care/residential homes and domiciliary care agencies felt about that support.

What did we ask?

- What support has been useful from health and social care colleagues since the outbreak of COVID-19?
- What health and social care involvement has been unhelpful?
- What improvements in support/offer from health and social care colleagues would you like to see?
- Any other comments

What did they tell us?

Staff from the homes/agencies had the option of remaining anonymous. However, they were encouraged to identify which home/agency they were from, should follow up work need to be done if any concerns arose about the support given. We spoke to Company Directors, Managers and senior staff who gave their time to speak candidly about their experiences and how they adapted working practices in unprecedented times. Communication was by telephone and email, with telephone calls ranging from five minutes to almost an hour.

Healthwatch contacted 26 care homes, 13 domiciliary care agencies and 1 Extra Care agency, over a six week period. In many cases it became apparent that senior staff felt that care workers were undervalued and not given the same recognition as other health care professionals. One Manager can be quoted as saying, *“My staff have worked like warriors through this pandemic, and should have been given the same recognition as NHS staff.”*

Another Manager we spoke to said, *“I’m just glad that social care has now been recognised as being just as important as the NHS. We did feel overlooked.”*

Many of the individuals we spoke to told us that communication could have been clearer and more informative. We were told that “*communication is often overlapped*” and “*repetitive*”. It was noted that communication from hospital was also poor at times, mainly regarding test results. Many care homes and agencies reported that the weekly phone calls from St Helens Council were good as requests for PPE could be made or information shared. It was felt that the Council did their utmost to offer support and guidance at all times.

Contact Cares was mentioned several times throughout this piece of work. The issue always the same, difficulty in making contact. One senior staff member told us, “*I had a fifteen minute wait to get through, and I only needed some information.*” Another staff member told us, “*Contact Cares - I’m sorry I know they are busy, but the phones don’t even get answered now, so I email, which is hit and miss.*” It was acknowledged, however, that Contact Cares would have been extremely busy during the height of the pandemic, and most agencies accepted that Contact Cares carried the heavy burden of dealing with an extraordinary amount of communication.

The involvement of GPs also came under criticism, with some GPs refusing to visit, or indeed, take calls. One senior member of staff told us that, “*it’s nigh on impossible to get a visit or call from a GP*” and some said they “*got fobbed off*”. However, it is fair to say that some GPs responded quickly and effectively to requests for appointments and this made difficult times a little easier, using ‘FaceTime’ to chat to staff and residents in care settings.

The Frailty Team, Infection Control Team and St Helens Council received high praise in terms of their willingness to help and their quick response times. Managers also mentioned how their staff were willing to take on extra shifts, cancel annual leave and even change or swap job roles to help out. One manager said, “*One of my staff turned into the in-house entertainer at one point.*”

Finally, it is important to mention the community itself. Throughout this piece of work, the kindness of people in this borough was mentioned. Help came in the form of local businesses donating food, schools making face masks and supermarkets donating ‘goodies’ to staff. It is pleasing to know that in these unprecedented times, good will and generosity of St Helens people remains.

In your words...

“ I have been pleased how we have been kept in the loop, how information has been very accessible to us. ”

“ The patient gets referred to rota, but their own GP won't come out. ”

“ The majority of people have been really good. We have had parcels of food, and one lady crocheted hearts for the residents so that they could give them to loved ones. ”

“ There's been a really good level of communication between everyone. ”

“ My staff have been absolutely brilliant, all turned in and took on different roles, e.g. hairdresser, entertainer. One member of staff even wrote a Covid song. ”

“ Lisa Gallagher from the End Of Life Team has been very supportive. The Frailty Team and Infection Control have been really good as well. The COPD team and the Council have been really good, organising taxis and funding beds. ”

“ We have a webinar every Thursday, set up by the council, so that we can all speak to each other. We talk about PPE and food and it's been really helpful. ”

“ We have all really helped each other. ”

“ We have dealt with any situation that has happened. Everyone pulled together. It's been really scary for some of the staff. They have families and have been worried about them. ”

“ Infection control and the Frailty Team have been really good. They have been offering advice over the phone regarding isolation/PPE/guidance. The District Nurses and GPs are still coming into the home, we have been really lucky that way. ”

“ We had positive cases here but we are now clear. We have been really lucky with PPE as well. ”

“ It would be really beneficial if we had a direct link to services. Not everything should go through Contact Cares. ”

“ This virus has shown us that everyone can work together. We have had more involvement from higher bosses and management. We have made new contacts from places where we would not normally have been in contact with. ”

Recommendations

After all the questionnaires were completed, we compiled a list of recommendations that came from social care staff, for what they felt they would benefit from. The recommendations that come from this piece of work are:-

- A mobile unit to test staff would be welcome. Many do not drive and the nearest testing station is St Helens Hospital.
- Re-introduction of the 'Telemeds' system. A Manager explained that although she knew this could cause its own problems it would make life much easier during the pandemic with regards to medication changes and implementation.

(We have since been informed by colleagues from the Local Authority that care homes are now aligned to specific GPs and all have the necessary equipment to carry out remote consultations, which should provide the same service as Telemeds).

- Introduction of a regional 'care bank' to offer help in staffing wherever needed locally.
- A direct contact to the organisation/individual, instead of using Contact Cares for all queries and enquiries.
- Support into the mental health of staff needs to be examined and suitable access to services provided.

'The information collated by Healthwatch has been an invaluable source of independent intelligence, by collecting the views of care providers' experience of the support that they received from St Helens Council and the CCG during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. This information has been largely positive, which has provided assurance to key stakeholders.

Some feedback provided areas that the Council/CCG needed to develop/learn from and has been included within an action plan for the department, which Rachel Cleal (Director of Adult Social Services) leads on.

The Quality Monitoring Team completed a similar exercise with family members of service users in receipt of care; this enabled a holistic view of all Adult Social Care across St Helens and this too has been included within the action plan, helping to inform the Council's monitoring activity.'

Elaine Hardie, Team Manager, Quality Monitoring

The findings from this research were forwarded to the Council's Quality Monitoring Team who will use the information to learn from what social care providers and staff have said.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch St Helens would like to thank everybody who made it possible to carry out this piece of research, including social care providers and our colleagues at St Helens Council.

Thanks also to Annie Lawrenson (Halton St Helens Voluntary and Community Action and CommunicART).

This report will be shared with: -

- St Helens Council
 - Quality Monitoring Team
 - Overview & Scrutiny committee
 - Adult Safeguarding
- St Helens Clinical Commissioning Group
- The Care Quality Commission
- Healthwatch England

This report will be published on our website and paper copies available on request.

Disclaimer

Please note that the information contained in this report does not reflect the opinions of staff or volunteers from Healthwatch St Helens. It relates entirely to the views and experiences provided by staff members we spoke to.

Appendix 1.

Survey

Please advise the person who is completing these questions that they and/or the home can remain anonymous, although providing a name will allow someone to follow up issues raised with them.

Name and role of person completing questions (optional)	
Name of home (optional)	
What support has been useful from health and social care colleagues since the outbreak of Covid -19	
What health and social care involvement has been unhelpful?	
What improvements in support / offer from health and social care colleagues would you like to see?	
Any other comments:	

Contact us

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Please note that the Healthwatch St Helens Support Team are currently working from home but we can still be contacted by telephone, email or through our website.
