



Care Homes, Covid-19 and beyond

Keeping in touch with loved ones

Healthwatch Northumberland is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We are a listening organisation working across Northumberland, interested in what people like about services and what can be improved. We also undertake research projects with the aim of helping improve the quality of services and help people find information about services in their area.

About the project

In September 2020 it was widely reported that people who were living in care homes during lockdowns had struggled to keep in touch with their loved ones, as visiting restrictions were in place to protect the most vulnerable from infection.

We responded by asking for feedback from people whose loved ones were in care homes in Northumberland. We hosted a series of online forums which took place in November 2020, January 2021, March 2021, and June 2021. We had 46 attendees across these four forums consisting of 26 different people, as many attended more than one and in some cases all of the forums.

At different stages of changes in visiting guidance for care homes these forums gathered feedback from relatives around their experiences of visiting and other ways they were keeping in touch with loved ones during the pandemic. We also heard from professionals who work with older people including those with dementia, their carers, and other professionals in the health and social care field.

It is important to acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented and care home staff had to work under extremely difficult and challenging conditions for a long time. Whilst many relatives who attended the forums generally had less than positive experiences to share, they were also keen to know what good practice was taking place across care homes.

Visiting experiences had also improved by our final forum and survey responses have also shared positive approaches taking place. We ran a survey for relatives of those living in care homes and care home staff from mid-March to early June 2021 to gather additional feedback. The survey had a total of 22 responses.

“Very useful to split screens to allow family chats from a variety of locations at once.” (staff member about continuing with video chats post Covid-19)

“Initial Skype calls now not being supported. Not answering telephone calls.”

Aims of the project

The aim of the two surveys was to get additional information from relatives and care home staff as to what in-person visits were able to be facilitated across care homes in Northumberland, what other methods of keeping in touch had been used and had been particularly useful or well received and what barriers, if any, there were in using virtual methods of contact.

We also asked what methods of communication people would like to see moving out of the pandemic once restrictions were eased and asked for feedback on activities within the home, any barriers and what people would like to see post Covid-19.

Along with the feedback received in our online forums and from other means such as individual feedback by telephone and email, we have summarised the main issues arising. We have outlined the resulting recommendations for care home providers which we hope will improve the experiences of staff, those living in care homes and their loved ones in the future.



"One email received in a year, two calls received, no letters answered."

"I cannot praise the staff enough for their care, support and professionalism."

Findings

Feedback we received across our forums and surveys are reported under the following themes

In-person visiting

For various reasons including infection outbreaks many people attending our forums had been unable to visit their loved ones in person, even during periods where restrictions had been reduced. Nine relatives completing our surveys said that face to face visiting was permitted at their loved one's care home. However, this did not always lead to successful visits, for example, due to infection outbreaks or in one case because the change in location of the indoor visit was too confusing/upsetting for the resident.

At our last forum in June in-person visits had generally increased for many but visiting policies were inconsistent between providers and were still far from pre Covid-19 'normal'. Some had enjoyed taking their relatives out of the care home on trips out and had reported this had helped their relatives wellbeing as had their increased visiting.

Other survey responses from relatives mentioned window visits to be the most frequently used followed by visits via a 'pod'. Two respondents stated they had no options at all for face to face visiting. The care home survey found pods to be the most usual visiting option, followed jointly by face to face and window visits then outdoor visits.

Virtual contact

Nearly half of respondents said they do have video calls and the remainder reporting they do not, whilst nearly all care home staff responding said they facilitated video calls.

All but one response from care home staff stated that they would like to continue with video calls even when social distancing restrictions are eased. This is either for increased social contact or for relatives that live too far to visit. Six relatives responded to say they would like to continue, three said no and the remainder (four respondents) were unsure.

Over half of relatives responding to the survey said that video calls could be confusing and upsetting for their relatives which mirrors feedback from our forums where we have heard that video calls were often confusing for those with dementia or hearing loss. It is therefore unsurprising that this would not always be a preferred means of communication for relatives if there was an alternative. Similarly, one care home staff respondent said they were unsure whether they would like to continue with video calls for the same reason mentioned by relatives - that it was sometimes inappropriate for those with advanced cognitive impairment.

At our forums we have been told about inconsistent access to, or ability to use devices to facilitate calls within care homes. Digital skills seemed less of a barrier to facilitate video calls from our survey responses as this may have improved as the pandemic continued. However, other barriers to facilitating more frequent video contact mentioned staff time/responsibilities most frequently as a barrier followed by access to devices. Having poor Wi-Fi signal at the home was also mentioned in one response as a barrier to facilitating calls.

Other ways of keeping in touch

From our survey responses the most frequent method of keeping in touch with relatives directly or getting updates on their activities was by telephone, followed by Facebook, letters/emails, videos and photos sent by other means, WhatsApp groups and newsletters.

These methods were also used before the pandemic in nearly half of responses from relatives and just over half of care home staff responses. The remainder of care home staff responses stated that these methods were used pre-Covid-19 but not as frequently, and one response stated they were not used pre-pandemic. The remainder of relatives said they were not used pre pandemic or that they were unsure, and one person stated they were used but not as frequently. All care home staff said they would like to continue with these methods of communication post Covid-19 and most relatives (11 out of 13 respondents) agreed.

At our forums we have heard that communication with care home staff had been difficult for relatives at times and often felt to be one-sided/initiated by relatives or initiated by the care home only when their loved one had a health concern. We were also told that more communication about how loved ones were spending their days would be welcomed particularly during times when face to face visits had been restricted, with suggestions of WhatsApp groups, emails or newsletters.

These sentiments were echoed in our survey results with relatives saying post Covid-19 they would love more communication such as emails, photos, activity diaries or via a WhatsApp group with updates about their relative. Two relatives in our survey said updates via letters and emails had been well received and one respondent praised the care homes private Facebook page.

Staff responses said that emails to relatives from management and trustees had been appreciated. One care home told us they had employed a specific Covid-19 marshal who deals with all testing, visitation and contacting relatives. Another response indicated that staff intended to continue with WhatsApp groups and private Facebook pages as a way of communicating with relatives post Covid-19.

Activities within the home

At our forums relatives said they would appreciate more social and stimulating activities in care homes. All survey responses from care home staff said various activities had been taking place including physical exercise, social activities such as bingo, music and quizzes and outdoor activities like walks or access to outside spaces. This compared with under half of relatives responses which stated that limited or no activities appeared to be available for their relatives or that they were unsure.

Some relatives were unsure whether there was a specific keyworker in the home responsible for activities. This discrepancy may relate to a lack of communication between relatives and care home staff about how residents are spending their days, what activities are taking place and how residents engage with activities. Survey respondents said that more communication around activities in the homes would be welcomed.

Other suggestions were around establishing a regular programme of activities for residents. Outdoor activities were mentioned most often along with mental stimulation especially for those with dementia, followed by social activities like chats, flower arranging and local history. Some care home staff said barriers to arranging activities post pandemic could include accessibility to transport for trips limits on activities due to the location of the home.

Wellbeing, care and services

Relatives have given feedback during forums about their concern around loved ones experiencing a decline in issues such as footcare, teeth, hearing aid maintenance, clothing and around the impact of services such as opticians, podiatry, dentists and mental health being unable to visit. There has also been uncertainty about how care plans were being updated during the pandemic.

"Put extra effort into seeking relatives to support in all activities provision' (staff member about what they may do differently post Covid-19)

Whilst relatives recognised the risk of infection from Covid-19 they also felt this needed to be balanced with the risks of isolation on their loved one's wellbeing especially in 'end of life' situations (which had more permissive government guidance) and many had witnessed a deterioration due to the lack of visiting.

Relatives at our last forum told us that their loved ones had experienced a marked increase in wellbeing from an increase in visits and being able to go on trips outdoors again.

Support for relatives

Whilst concern about loved ones in care homes was significant, many relatives have also given feedback on the negative effects of enforced separation on their own wellbeing including feelings of anxiety, sadness, frustration and guilt.

Attending the forums and being able to share experiences has been extremely important as one attendee told us:

"The forum has been most important to me over the past year as it has been the only opportunity for me to talk about my mother's isolation during the pandemic. It has also been the only chance I have had to meet others coping with the emotional and practical difficulties of maintaining contact with relatives in care homes."

In one forum we were joined by Dr Jim Brown from Public Health and Alan Curry Senior Manager - Commissioning. Relatives attending the forum greatly appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences with commissioners directly and get clarification on care homes visiting guidance. This was important as the guidance changed over time and it was not always clear to relatives if it was local or national interpretations.

At our last forum there was an appetite to create a regular support group via Healthwatch Northumberland for relatives whose loved ones are in care homes and also for those who may be going through the process of choosing a home for their loved ones.

This group could be promoted via partner agencies or care home providers directly. Planning around this group is still at the very early stages, terms of reference need to be developed and frequency of meetings will need to be determined.

"A regular email would have been nice about any activity in the home or simply the meals she had enjoyed."

Recommendations

Suggested recommendations for care home providers:

1. Clear policy and procedure available as to how care homes will update relatives and loved ones of those living in care homes in the event of future lockdowns resulting in restricted visiting. Whilst Covid-19 was obviously unprecedented, care homes also experience regular restricted visiting during other sickness outbreaks for example the norovirus.
2. Increased and regular communication with relatives, ideally at least on a weekly basis, about activities taking place within the home and how residents have been spending their day(s). Less time-consuming methods of communication can be group WhatsApp messages, private Facebook pages or group emails with updates. Photos and videos of activities and activity diaries would be particularly well-received. This type of pre-emptive communication could lessen requests for information and responses to individual relatives.
3. Where practical ensure each resident has a named keyworker/staff contact responsible for communicating with relatives, arranging visits and virtual contact, and updating on care plans. Although updates and communication are still needed amongst all staff at the care home particularly considering staff leave/absence having a named keyworker can help to facilitate good relationships between staff, residents, and their relatives and with coordination of care. A staff photo board at the home has also been suggested as useful for relatives.
4. Access to sufficient designated electronic devices (not staff members own) and reasonable Wi-Fi connection to help facilitate video calls. Where necessary ensure staff have had basic training in Zoom/Facetime. When video calls are scheduled ensure that hearing aids and glasses are available and ready prior to the start of the call for those with sensory impairments and minimise background noise/distractions.
5. Consider alternatives to video calls for those with dementia as they can be upsetting or confusing. Relatives have suggested live transcribe services or walkie talkies as potential options.
6. Setting up a relatives' group can be a great way of facilitating contact and support between relatives and encouraging an open dialogue on the way the home operates or is running but they can also allow staff to communicate any changes and get help organising activities or making improvements within the home.

The Relatives and Residents Association produced a useful guide to setting up a relatives' group: www.relres.org/wp-content/uploads/SettingUpRelsGroup.pdf

Summary

Covid-19 was an unprecedented pandemic which undoubtedly will have had a major impact on care home staff, residents and their relatives and loved ones. Whilst recognising the very real need to prioritise infection outbreaks many relatives have told us how enforced separation and resulting changes in visiting guidance have led to a decline in wellbeing, both their own and their relatives living in care homes.

The need for restricted visiting was accepted as necessary due to the risk of Covid-19 but many hoped for clearer and more frequent communication from care homes during this time around visiting guidance and to keep in touch with their relatives directly by other means as well as getting more frequent updates on their wellbeing, activities and care.

Relatives and care home staff giving feedback about their experiences during Covid-19 and what they would like to see for the future have been central to the key recommendations outlined which largely focus on ways to improve communication between those living in care homes, their relatives and care home staff which we hope will lead to more positive experiences in the future.

"The private Facebook page is fabulous as you see the range of activities the residents are involved with."



"The photographs are few and far between and phones are left to ring depending on staff. I can't remember the last time I had a video call as some staff don't know how to do it."

Contact Us

Healthwatch Northumberland
Adapt (NE), Burn Lane, Hexham
Northumberland NE46 3HN
03332 408468
info@healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk
healthwatchnorthumberland.co.uk
Facebook: @healthwatchnorthumberland
Twitter: @HWNland
Instagram: hwnland