

Unity House

Enter and View Report

13th October 2025



Disclaimer: This report relates only to the service viewed at the time of the visit and is only representative of the views of the staff, visitors and residents who met members of the Enter and View team on that date.

Visit information



Service address:

Westcott Road,
Peterlee,
County Durham,
SR8 5JE



Service provider

Lifeways Community Care Limited



Service manager

Peter Seaton



Date of visit

Monday 13th October



CQC rating

Good



Healthwatch County Durham Enter and View Officer

Claire Sisterson



Authorised representatives

Chloe Bradbury (Research and Engagement Officer)
Andrea Lambell (Volunteer)

Introduction

Our role at Healthwatch County Durham is to gather people's views and experiences, especially those that are seldom heard, to give them the opportunity to express how they feel about a service. The aim of an Enter and View visit is to gather views and experiences of residents, relatives and staff of a service and observe the environment to assess the quality of the service.

This was an announced Enter and View visit undertaken by authorised representatives who have the authority to enter health and social care premises, announced or unannounced. The team collate feedback gathered and observations made to compile a report. The report identifies aspects of good practice as well as possible areas for improvement. Healthwatch County Durham is an independent organisation, therefore we do not make judgements or express personal opinions, but rely on feedback received and objective observations of the environment.

The report is sent to the manager for their opportunity to respond before being published on the Healthwatch County Durham website at www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk.

Where appropriate, Healthwatch County Durham may arrange a revisit to check the progress of improvements. The report is available to the Care Quality Commission, Healthwatch England and any other relevant organisations.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch County Durham would like to thank management, staff, residents and relatives, for making us feel welcome and for taking the time to speak to us during the visit.



General Information

Unity House is a residential care home for people with a learning disability in Peterlee. There is room available for 21 residents. Unity House is a purpose built building, based over two floors, all bedrooms have ensuite facilities and in addition there is one main bathroom available. All bedrooms have a small kitchen area should residents prefer to make and dine in their rooms.

The care home employs approximately 50 members of staff, including 3 cooks, 2 cleaners and a handyperson. All residents have one to one care and an allocated key worker.

CQC inspected Unity House 28th February 2023 and rated the service good. The most recent review of the property was 6th July 2023.

Methodology

The enter and view representative made an announced visit on Monday 13th October 2025. We received feedback from 5 residents, 7 staff members, 1 family member and made 9 observations.

Two weeks prior to the Enter and View visit, we publicised our visit by leaving a display about Healthwatch County Durham and details of our visit. In order to capture as many residents and their families as possible, we left surveys and a 'post box' to be completed and left for our return. One family member completed a survey and posted it to us.

We spoke extensively with the manager to ensure we could best meet the needs of the residents and enable them to share their experiences. We asked residents about 4 areas of their care; communication, environment, social preferences and the staff and service. We created an easy read version of the survey and also used visual prompts and emoji faces to gain insight into specific areas of the service. The team also recorded their own observations on the environment and staff member interactions. Interviews were conducted one to one, and where necessary, staff assisted with communication. All responses were recorded anonymously.

To retain confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, any identifiable details have been removed from quotes.

The five residents we spoke with consisted of 2 females and 3 males; we were unable to capture residents age. Staff respondents included a deputy manager, support workers and cooks. On the day we had limited access to the 1st floor of the home due to a sensitive matter concerning one resident, despite this the staff made a point of encouraging residents to come and see us in the dining room.

Summary

Healthwatch County Durham found feedback from residents, staff, and a family member was overwhelmingly positive. Residents said they feel listened to, involved in decisions, and supported by staff who understand their communication needs.

The home was clean, welcoming, and homely, with personalised bedrooms and a variety of communal and outdoor spaces. Residents enjoy a wide range of activities, from trips out and holidays to baking and quieter hobbies, with flexible food options to suit individual preferences.

Staff were praised for being caring and respectful, and observations confirmed strong, enabling interactions. Staff reported high job satisfaction, supportive management, and a positive team culture. Suggested improvements included maintaining comfortable temperatures, reducing noise in busy areas, and ensuring consistency when agency staff cover weekends. These are seen as enhancements to an already effective, person-centred service.

Findings

Communication...

We heard from residents that communication was good at Unity House. All residents receive one to one care, giving staff the ability to know the individuals preferences and communication needs. Staff were described as friendly and approachable and residents reported feeling comfortable talking with staff and confident they would be heard.

"Everybody talks to me and I enjoy talking to them"

"I have lots of say on what I want to do I can speak to any"

"Communication is very good, I'm happy I get a choice and the staff are always here"

Respondents reported feeling they were listened to and had choice and involvement over decisions on a daily basis. Relatives also report good access to staff via email or phone and feel comfortable raising questions or concerns.

"I am able to ask questions and feel that I am able to say if I don't agree with something"



Environment...

Unity House offers a bright, clean and welcoming environment. All the rooms were very personable and residents are encouraged to make it as comfortable as possible, with one family member commenting their relative is happy and considers Unity House their home. The property includes outdoor space such as a garden for residents to use which they value as it provides a quiet and peaceful space. Inside, there are multiple communal areas, including a dining room, games room, cinema and health and beauty room. These facilities ensure that all residents' needs are met, whilst allowing for a personalised and

person-centred approach.

Several residents mentioned it can be cold, and had noticed a drop in temperature in the bedroom. This was particularly important for one resident who dribbles which can mean his clothes become wet. We noticed several windows open, however decorators were painting one of the bedrooms which on this occasion may have contributed to the open window. We observed one resident who wasn't wearing any socks or shoes and this was his preference. The staff encouraged the individual to wear suitable footwear for the communal areas and time of year, but respected the individual's choice as it supported their sensory needs and comfort.

"The garden is my favorite place as I don't like noise"

"I worry sometimes when we visit that he may be COLD as his room isn't as warm as it used to be"

The main activity whilst we were visiting was in the dining room, which had a hatch through to the kitchen and residents could chat to the cook and other kitchen staff as well as support workers. The dining room could accommodate 12 people dining and has two sofas. Lights and garlands were hung to provide some character to the room which could get noisy and echo when there were several people in the room, which may cause discomfort to those with sensory issues.



Social Preferences...

Residents seem to be have choice over their activities and preferences for the day. Staff work on a one to one basis and get to know the residents and their likes and dislikes. We heard that residents are involved in deciding on trips out and holidays and these can be arranged for the individual, not necessarily group trips. For instance, we heard one resident had been to Rothbury with two of the staff for a short holiday and thoroughly

enjoyed it. The residents can decide what activities they do whilst away. We heard there are often trip to go shopping and residents were making shopping lists whilst we were there for ingredients to bake a cake later that day.

"I like to colour in on my iPad. There's lots on but I like to sit in my room"

With regard to food preferences, there is a wide variation. Some residents prefer to make their own meals and eat in their room and they have the flexibility to be able to do that. Others like to order a takeaway or dine in the dining room. Unity House provides a good choice of meals and can be flexible to ensure choice and personal preferences are met. Overall, staff knew the preferences and needs of residents to ensure they were provided with choice and opportunities to maintain their meal requirements.

"I like to cook my own food especially cakes at least three times a week. Cake mix is on my shopping list"

Staff and service...

Residents spoke positively of the staff, with some residents having favourite staff who they see as friendly and playful and enjoy spending time with. One resident mentioned they all help with seasonal decorations and they were going to be making some Halloween decorations later in the week.

Staff encourage residents to support each other and create a community within Unity House. Several residents will go out together and friendships are encouraged. We heard two residents like to bake together.

"The staff are my friends"

We observed staff interacting with residents. One gentleman was sat having a drink and a member of staff interacted with him in a light-hearted and friendly manner, which he appeared to enjoy. This wasn't his key worker but another member of staff in the dining room. We observed a staff member step in to assist a resident pouring hot water in a way that kept the individuals independence and they supported them to do it safely.



We heard from a family member who felt that, at weekends, the increased use of agency staff meant those on shift did not know the residents as well. As a result, communication with residents and understanding of their individual preferences could be more challenging. The family member also noted that, during visits, agency staff were not always able to provide the same level of detailed information as the regular weekday staff.

Staff feedback

Staff emphasised the relationships they have with residents. Some staff members have worked at Unity House for many years and therefore got to know the residents well, which helps with communication. Staff know which communication method works best for the individual and prefer to empower the individual to express themselves. Staff are also aware about their listening skills and ensuring residents are given the time to share their thoughts and feelings. Tools such as easy read materials and flash cards are available to help with communicating and there is a great focus on involving residents in their own decision making.

“Everyone talks to everyone else, the focus is empowering residents to express themselves, listening and responding in a way that suits the resident best, this is very much about why we are here”

Staff feel Unity House is spacious, flexible and centred on resident choice. There are multiple communal areas and residents can move freely around the building and gardens. Bedrooms are personalised where possible, though items are sometimes kept minimal due to risk of damage. Staff feel environmental issues are dealt with quickly, for instance when it was too hot upstairs, this was rectified by the management straight away. Residents can go outside independently if assessed as safe. Outings are available, though confidence in going out has decreased since COVID. Staff have a communal mini bus but expressed that having a shared “pool car” would significantly increase community access and independence and provide more flexibility for unplanned ad hoc outings.

Unity House has a strong community feel with residents at the heart, they are empowered to make their own decisions where possible and the home is flexible to their needs. Because staff work one to one, residents can choose their activities and when they do these, but staff are fully aware of residents favourite foods and activities etc. In each individual care plan is a likes and dislikes food preference, kept in the kitchen, which means the cook can prep and plan meals better. They can provide packed lunches if the resident will be out over a meal time and will cater to the individual. The staff and residents work together to plan activities which have included trips to the pantomime, Santa Claus train, Sunderland illuminations and regular days out. Staff will discuss with the residents about their birthday wishes and if they would like a party or to go somewhere special, again catering for the individual needs.

“All persons we support have an active role in planning special things for the home”
“I know the people we support and have spent a lot of time with them”
“It's important to look at the care plan to go through social preferences. This is updated every month”

Staff expressed strong job satisfaction, describing the team as supportive, collaborative and committed to resident wellbeing. Recognition, positive feedback from managers, and long-term relationships with residents contribute to a stable workforce. Managers are seen as approachable, solution-focused, and trusted to resolve issues. There is an emphasis on equality within the team whereby no one is “precious” about their role and staff take pride in going above and beyond. Many staff feel valued through rewards, bonuses, and supportive leadership, although some mention that a pay rise would be appreciated. A significant concern raised repeatedly relates to sponsorship and visa stability for international staff, who note they want to stay long-term but need clearer support with immigration processes.

“I feel very valued here”
“The home's ethos is to focus fully on the residents and support their autonomy”
“Staff also engage with all persons we support and are willing to go above and beyond for the person who live here.”
“I don't do this job to be rewarded. Seeing the persons we support happy and fulfilling their lives. ”



Recommendations

The following recommendations have been formulated based on observations of the environment and feedback gathered from residents, relatives and staff.

The feedback we received was highly positive, and while a few recommendations have been made, they are intended as enhancements rather than changes; the overall message is to continue the current approach to delivering the service.

1. Consider ways to maintain comfortable temperatures throughout the building.

- Introduce regular temperature checks in bedrooms and communal areas, particularly during colder months.
- Ensure windows are monitored during maintenance or decorating work to prevent rooms becoming too cold.
- Develop individual temperature comfort plans for residents who are more sensitive to cold or at higher risk due to wet clothing or health needs.

2. Proactively manage noise in communal areas to support sensory well-being.

- Review noise levels in the dining room, particularly during busy mealtimes, as echoing may cause discomfort for residents with sensory sensitivities.
- Consider soft furnishings, acoustic panels or alternative quieter dining options at peak times.

3. Ensure consistency of care at weekends.

- When agency staff are required, introduce a clear weekend handover summary outlining residents' communication styles, preferences, routines and key information.
- Provide agency staff with easy-read resident profiles or "quick-reference" guides to support continuity of care and communication.

4. Support greater access and independence for everyone in the community.

- Explore the feasibility of acquiring a shared "pool car" to complement the minibus, allowing for more spontaneous, individual outings.
- Continue to build confidence in community access post-COVID through gradual, resident-led outings that reflect individual interests.

5. Continue to Support and Retain a Skilled Workforce.

- Review pay and benefits periodically to remain competitive and support staff retention.
- Continue recognition schemes, positive feedback and opportunities for staff to contribute ideas, reinforcing the strong team culture already in place.

6. Maintain current positive proactive practice which develops person-centred care.

Provider response

Peter Seaton, Registered Manager at Unity House, thanked us for a highly positive report and responded to the recommendations:

1. Consider ways to maintain comfortable temperatures throughout the building.

We have made the following improvements:

- Worked with Property to fix heating system problems and install Air Conditioning for the hot summer months.
- The heating system has now been fixed, and the Unity home is now nice and cosy in the winter months and much cooler in the summer months through the new Air Conditioning system.
- We review all Support Plans monthly to cover all care aspects – we will introduce temperature comfort plans.

2. Proactively manage noise in communal areas to support sensory well-being.

We have made the following improvements:

- We have reviewed noise levels during mealtimes.
- We will purchase more soft furnishing to help reduce noise levels.

3. Ensure consistency of care at weekends.

We have made the following improvements:

- Our Digital Care system (Nourish) covers handover summary, communication styles and preferences and other key information for agency staff to access when onsite.
- Our Digital Care system (Nourish) provides easy-read profiles, it is acknowledged that not all agency staff are familiar with the Nourish system and more training and support can be provided where applicable.
- When using agency we hand-pick staff who are familiar with and have supported people living at Unity.
- We have significantly reduced agency use through a successful recruitment drive.

4. Support greater access and independence for everyone in the community.

- We have made the following improvements:
- We currently have 2 mini-buses and through good forward-planning spontaneous outings are achievable.
- We actively promote regular community access for people living at Unity reflecting their interests.

5. Continue to Support and Retain a Skilled Workforce.

- We have made the following improvements:
- Pay is reviewed annually.
- We are proactively embedding an innovation culture to empower creative thinking and harmonious teamwork to continually enhance our service.

6. Maintain current positive proactive practice which develops person-centred care.

We have made the following improvements:

- We are proactively embedding a continuous quality improvement which includes positive co-production and collaborative partnership-working to drive person-centred care – putting the people living at Unity at the heart of everything we do.



healthwatch

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