

Care Homes during Covid:

care staff perspective



Introduction

Healthwatch Somerset is the county's independent health and care champion. It exists to ensure that people are at the heart of care. A dedicated team of staff and volunteers listen to what people like about local health services, and what could be improved. These views are then shared with the decision-making organisations, so together a real difference can be made. This report is an example of how views are shared.

Healthwatch Somerset wanted to find out about the challenges faced by care home staff during the Covid-19 pandemic, and to understand how they have managed during this time. We held a focused feedback interview with a local care home; this is what they told us.

What challenges have you faced during the pandemic?

All staff felt anxious about the safety of those they care for, and many were concerned about the reputation of their care homes if residents caught the virus.

- There have been different challenges during the different stages.
- All staff and managers had this overwhelming sense of doom early on - we look after very frail, elderly people.
- We followed our own outbreak policy, but we were constantly worried that we might have a staff member bring it in to the home.
- Some nights I worried myself to sleep.
- All managers just want to keep it out of their care home.
- When care homes were on the news, so many died or had the virus.
- The media didn't help - it was portrayed as a stigma to have it in your home.
- Care homes felt neglected - the focus was all on the NHS.

Were you able to access PPE, food and other provisions?

The care home staff we spoke to had generally been able to get PPE from Somerset County Council or through their own organisation if they were part of a larger care home group. The local community was a great support.

- Public Health were able to supply us with PPE.

- We could contact the Local Authority every Monday to let them know if we needed PPE.
- Being part of a large organisation helped with sourcing PPE.
- I purchased an order of PPE and the cost had ramped up.
- Our food orders weren't affected, we use a large, national supplier.
- We were using loads more hand gel, aprons, and gloves, so stock was running out quickly.
- I couldn't believe the community spirit - schools were donating food to us, neighbours were bringing things... So many deliveries including Easter eggs and clothes.
- We couldn't get shaving foam for one of our residents - one of our care staff mentioned this on her Facebook page and her local villagers gave her some.

Did you feel supported by the Local Authority, Clinical Commissioning Group, Public Health, GPs?

Care home staff felt well supported by local GPs and Somerset Council's social care services.

- We had a really good experience with access to GPs.
- We have an established relationship with our GPs and this continued - they know the residents, so this helps.
- We use only a few local GPs and they were happy to visit.
- I think Somerset has been amazing with the support we have had.
- The care home support team and the continuing health care team have been in touch... we've had weekly support calls.
- The Larch team really helped with end of life planning, forms, etc and this eased the tension.

Did you accept new residents during the pandemic and were any directly from hospital?

Hospitals were overwhelmed at the start of the pandemic and needed to discharge patients, including into care homes, but the lack of testing had consequences.

- Yes, we accepted new residents before testing was in place.
- It was never a plan to accept Covid positive patients.
- Someone came from hospital with coronavirus - within 12 hours she developed symptoms. Public Health advised us to lockdown the unit, so it didn't spread anywhere else in the home.
- Nobody could have anticipated how the pandemic would pan out and that hospitals would be overwhelmed. I can understand the knock-on effect if care homes had closed their doors.

How have staff coped?

Staff had to manage concerns about their own health as well as the health of residents, so regular staff communications and support was essential.

- We had a couple of staff who contracted the virus and were off for a couple of months.
- The feeling at the start was that if you get it you may die; this subsided as time went on.
- A couple of staff have been off with Covid related anxiety.
- It was very difficult in the early stages - we had a resident who developed symptoms, and this freaked out the staff.
- I experienced panic at the start, then you get on with it.
- For those who needed to shield and isolate there were company-wide processes.
- Within our organisation we already have a staff assistance programme in place.
- We had a poster with links for counselling support groups.
- We have had daily meetings.
- Night staff may have felt a bit out of the loop, so I spent time on calls with them - it was important that they felt included and supported.
- The Local Authority sent out update emails.

How have residents coped?

Most residents adapted relatively well to changes at the home with the support of care staff and relatives, but some were scared, and for some PPE was disconcerting.

- 🌱 In the main residents were fine; we have a good proportion who live with dementia.
- 🌱 Some people have sensed the loss of their spouse not visiting, so we've worked with them.
- 🌱 PPE mask wearing has been dramatic for some, so we've done a lot of work to familiarise and make them feel safe.
- 🌱 Some residents wore masks to join in.
- 🌱 The media and TV frightened some residents - we reassured them as much as we could.
- 🌱 The staff know our residents, you can't underestimate the importance of this.
- 🌱 Activity staff spent time with residents facilitating visits.
- 🌱 We had some families who came and waved through the doors, but that became problematic.
- 🌱 The company sent a tablet device and iPhone to all homes.
- 🌱 Our phones went mad! Everyone was phoning, so we put more staff hours into reception.

What would you need to cope better if this happened again in the future?

The staff we spoke to think it's important to test early and to learn from previous experiences so that they are better prepared.

- 🌱 Testing is key... early access to testing.
- 🌱 We've been through it and learned so much, so we would be better prepared.
- 🌱 The learning from this will be invaluable.
- 🌱 We wouldn't be as panicked as we've already been through it.
- 🌱 Understand that the media is not always helpful.

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