



Life in a care home

**The experiences of care home residents in
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough**

October to December 2021

healthwatch
Cambridgeshire

healthwatch
Peterborough



"I have been amazed how dedicated the staff have been to keep residents safe, with all the extra work of testing , cleaning etc that was required. They also went the extra mile to provide some activities for residents when external providers of such activities have not been able to come into the home."

About us

We are your local health and social care champion.

We are independent and have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to local feedback and improve standards of care.

We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

The quotations in this report were all survey responses from friends or relatives of people who lived in a local care home all or part of the period covered.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on care homes across England. And for care home residents, their friends and families, and staff, the last two years have been exceptionally stressful and challenging.

Between March 2020 and April 2021, there were two waves of Covid-19 infection in which a high number of care home residents died. There was an increase of 19.5% above the five-year average death rate across England and Wales, with almost one in four deaths (24.3%) as a result of Covid-19.¹

Care homes in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough needed to manage outbreaks in their homes, staff absences caused by Covid-19 sickness, and implement frequently changing Covid-19 government safety guidance. This included restrictions on care home visiting, the introduction of PPE and Covid-19 testing, and isolation for residents after trips out of the home for medical and other appointments.

These added challenges have been in an area of care that has been under pressure for some time due to a lack of funding and difficulties recruiting enough care staff.

For friends and family members, not being able to visit, carry out caring duties, or have physical contact with relatives really hit hard.

And, tragically, some families were not able to be with loved ones in their final days and moments and didn't get the chance to say goodbye. Our Healthwatch acknowledges how painful this has been for many families and that it has had a traumatic and lasting impact.

¹ ONS (2022) **Deaths involving COVID-19 in the care sector, England and Wales: deaths registered between week ending 20 March 2020 and week ending 2 April 2021**, Article 11 May 2021 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/deathsinvolvingcovid19inthecaresectorenglandandwales/deathsregisteredbetweenweekending20march2020andweekending2april2021>

Our **Life in a care home** project was developed to find out about the experiences of people in local care homes in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough since the start of the pandemic. And make recommendations to help care staff better support residents and their families whilst managing Covid-19 safety.

Key themes

- ⇒ Most people (70%) told us they were happy with the care and visiting situation in their home, although one in six (17%) were not.
- ⇒ Most people (83%) said the homes had Covid-19 safety measures in place and said they felt safe in visiting.
- ⇒ There was praise for staff working hard to provide safe care in difficult circumstances but concerns about staff shortages.
- ⇒ There was a lack of awareness of the essential care giver role within some homes and concerns about some homes restricting visiting over and beyond the Government's guidelines.
- ⇒ One in five people (21%) had not been told about the home's visiting policy. And only around three in five people (65%) found it easy to find the information they needed on visiting and Covid-19 testing.
- ⇒ Care homes supported residents to access healthcare despite Covid-19 but were often reliant on families to facilitate appointments.
- ⇒ The options for contacting loved ones during lockdowns in homes was mixed. Many used mobile phones, or video chat via iPads and phones or the care home passed on messages.
- ⇒ There were problems during discharge from hospital for some residents, including issues with transport, poor communication as well as concerns about the need for residents to isolate when coming back to the care home, even if not Covid-19 positive.

What we did

We developed a survey which ran from 12 October to 22 December 2021 and promoted it both online and offline, through social media, newsletters, local voluntary and community organisations, local community newsletters and posters and flyers sent to 157 residential and nursing care homes.

We heard from 43 local people from across all council districts in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, including two residents, 39 relatives and friends (91%), and two care home staff. We were not able to visit care homes due to Covid-19 safety concerns and so our ability to talk to residents was limited.

Our self-selecting survey (likely to have a higher proportion of respondents with a negative experience) is not representative of the local care home population in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. But the detailed information that people shared gives insights that can help health and care decision makers improve services for residents.



"Our personal view is that whilst we fully understand the constraints put on care homes during the worst of the pandemic, the impact on the people in their care and their extended families has also been traumatic and more could have been done to communicate and alleviate the situation."

What people told us

Quality of care

Many families and friends praised the care residents receive, thanking staff for going that extra mile for their loved ones, despite the pressures that they are working under.

One family told us “The care is extremely good, with consistently kind and good-humored staff” and “There is a very able Activities Co-ordinator who arranges all kinds of events for the residents”.

Another said, “The care in this care home has brought me to tears. The staff treat mum like one of their family. Always kept me informed of everything that’s going on”.

However, staff shortages and the pressure this created was raised by four people. They told us how this affected basic nursing care, causing anxiety and worry for families and friends of residents.

“It does appear that they are short staffed at the moment which has meant that [my relative] often doesn’t get washed until midday, or even later.”



There were concerns about lack of consistency of a core staff team in the care homes which made it harder for staff to know the relatives well.

“They are short staffed, and the staff I met didn't even know [the resident's] name. Residents were shouting from bedrooms obviously needing care and staff were too busy to get to them right away.”



Care home visiting

The Government developed guidance to support care homes to open visiting to residents. This was first published in July 2020 and updated as the pandemic progressed.²

However, care homes set their own individual visiting policies. And our survey responses showed that there was variation on how homes addressed visiting.

At the beginning of the pandemic, restrictions were strict with limited visiting outside in pods or at residents' windows. As Covid-19 cases lowered, some visiting was allowed but this has been stricter for some than others depending on the individual care home's policy.


Whilst family members understood the measures put in place to protect people's health, some people shared concerns around visiting restrictions.


This included:

- ⇒ Limitations in visiting hours – in one home this was for only 15 minutes on one day of the week.
- ⇒ One person unable to see their parent due to the care home's lack of flexibility in visiting arrangements.
- ⇒ Extended periods of isolation for residents, for example after hospital visits, especially when residents and visitors were vaccinated, and lateral flow tests were freely available.
- ⇒ Closing one home to visitors over Christmas 2021.
- ⇒ Named visitor scheme and essential care giver scheme introduced as part of the guidance not always working.

² Gov.UK (2022) **Guidance on Care home visiting**, updated 15 March 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visiting-care-homes-during-coronavirus/update-on-policies-for-visiting-arrangements-in-care-homes> [Accessed 16 March 2022]

One visitor raised concerns about communication problems caused by the need to wear face masks when visiting a resident.

 "I have to do a lateral flow test before visiting – therefore, since the person in residence is profoundly deaf it is completely stupid to insist [that] I wear a mask when trying to talk with [them] as [they] cannot hear me unless I am really close and not wearing a mask."



Named visitor scheme

Over half (58%) of people said the named visitor scheme introduced as part of the guidance, was, "good" or "excellent". But sadly, one in six (16%) said the way that the scheme worked in their home was "poor" or "very poor."

Initially, the scheme said each resident should be supported to name one person who could visit them regularly. The number of visitors allowed per resident increased as restrictions eased, with the scheme ending in February 2022, after the period of this report.

Lack of awareness of the essential care giver role

We found a lack of awareness and recognition of the essential care giver role, which is part of the Government's care home visiting guidance. It says that all residents should be able to choose an essential care giver and this person should be able to visit more often to offer companionship and support their loved one's health and wellbeing, including during coronavirus outbreaks in the home.

One person told us, "Been trying to get ECG (essential care giver status) but keep getting fobbed off. They agree verbally but once the home goes into lockdown. I'm not able to visit my [relative]. It's very distressing".

Another family explained that the staff had not heard of the role and had no understanding of it, telling us that the Manager said, "Does that mean an ECG [essential care giver] will do all the care and give the staff a break?"

How separation affected people

Families and friends shared concerns about how their loved one's wellbeing had been affected by the pandemic.

 **“With massive respect to the whole staff in care homes, they won't be able to give them love as family can.”**



Some families told us how residents were cared for in their rooms for weeks with concerns over prolonged isolation and loneliness for residents.

One person told us, “Life is still more restricted for my [relative] than before Covid – mixing with other residents is still carefully controlled.”

And another said, “My [relative's] mental health has suffered. I have not been able to visit since December 2020 due to their restrictions on visiting. Their visiting policy has not changed since the last lock down.”

Another told us, “My mother now has trouble remembering who I am as she has had no face to face contact with me since December 2020.”

We also heard how this situation was more difficult for residents with dementia, with one person explaining, “[Resident] was very upset with me, not understanding why [they] had not seen me and blamed me for [their] situation.”



Support from staff to stay in touch

We heard how staff have supported residents to stay in touch with relatives and friends when visiting was not available, by taking messages and supporting calls on iPads and telephones.

But this was complicated at times by poor WIFI connections, or peoples' additional needs such as hearing loss or dementia.



Access to healthcare

Access to healthcare was a mixed picture with one in four (24%) reporting problems accessing services like hearing checks, dental care and eye care. Although family and friends did not always know the answer to healthcare questions.


 “Routine dental audiology, chiropody and optical visits were curtailed although I am reasonably sure the home would have made sure of any “emergency” treatment or assessment.” 

People had better access to GP care with nearly three out of four people (74%) saying they were always or mostly able to get a GP appointment when they needed one.

We heard of reports of GP consultations taking place via an iPad or telephone call and some expressed concerns that their friend or relative wasn't seen in person.

 “Access to GPs is only by telephone from staff with photographs sent of matters requiring attention. As always, the provision of prescribed medicines is not necessarily prompt unless pursued by staff through the local pharmacy.” 

Some care homes were reported to be organised and timely when arranging health care for people.

 “The care staff seem to be well on top of any occurrence to residents requiring other professional attention.” 

Although, one person told us they felt that they were relied on to arrange healthcare appointments, or their relative would go without.

Leaving hospital

Almost one in five (18%) of residents were discharged from hospital into a care home during the pandemic. Whilst some discharges went smoothly, others told us of issues leaving hospital.

One person told us their family member had to wait many hours for transport at the hospital with no food or drink.

Another said there had been poor communication about their relative's condition and hospital stay, when discharged back to the care home.

Families were not always informed or involved in hospital transfers due to Covid-19 restrictions, so they could not always tell us how the hospital discharge had been.

Two people raised concerns about their relatives being sent to a home without proper consultation with the family.

 “[Relative] was discharged to a care home in [town] without any discussions at all, we fought with social services as he was on a top floor with no loo near and staff wouldn't help him to go to loo as they were too busy.” 

End of life care

Just under half the people (49%) we heard from told us they'd had discussions about end-of-life care for their loved ones. Most (73%) felt their wishes for end-of-life care had been respected.

But sadly, two people said end of life wishes were not respected, with one person raising significant concerns about poor care for their friend.

 “This lady is at the end of life care and there is absolutely no love provided.” 

Two other people told us they didn't feel well enough informed to know whether end of life wishes had been respected or not, due to the difficulties caused by visiting during the pandemic.

Learning and recommendations

Our Healthwatch has heard some difficult experiences from care home residents and their family and friends as part of this project. We've also heard some amazing tributes to the care and consideration of staff who have worked hard to support people in difficult circumstances.

A combination of isolation caused by Covid-19 safety measures, staff shortages and sometimes overly restrictive visiting policies have had a significant impact on the quality of life of care home residents.

We also learned how access to healthcare, particularly hearing checks, dental care and footcare have been affected.

Specific concerns raised about care experiences were passed on to health and care commissioners and the Care Quality Commission so they could follow this up. This was done without identifying any local care home residents.

At the time of writing, there are no nationally set direct restrictions on visiting in care homes. And the government say, "We expect and encourage providers to facilitate visits wherever possible, and to do so in a risk-managed way." (Gov.uk, 2022) However, it is up to individual care homes to set their own policy on visiting.

The campaign group **Rights for Residents**³ wants a legal right for people to have a nominated essential care supporter which should be enforced by the regulators. We support this campaign objective, which has also been endorsed by Healthwatch England.

³ Rights for Residents (2022) **Major charities support our call for the legal right to maintain contact**, 4 March 2022 <https://www.rightsforresidents.co.uk/major-charities-support-our-call-for-the-legal-right-to-maintain-contact/>

Recommendations

1. All care homes should take up the **ReSPECT**⁴ training programme to ensure people and their family or carers are included in decisions about their care.
2. Staffing levels should be adequate to provide the quality of care that residents need, including support to access healthcare appointments.
3. All local care homes should implement the Government care home visiting guidance, particularly in relation to the essential care giver scheme as this is vital in supporting the health and wellbeing of residents.
4. Mental health awareness training should be rolled out to care homes so that staff understand how to support residents' wellbeing.
5. Improve communication around hospital discharge as recommended in our 2020 **Leaving hospital during Covid-19**⁵ report. Food, drink and support should be provided to people whilst they are waiting for transport.

4 Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough (2021) **Why ReSPECT matters in decisions near the end of life**, <https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/news/2021-05-13/why-respect-matters-decisions-near-end-life>

5 Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough (2020) **Leaving hospital during Covid-19**, <https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/report/2020-12-15/leaving-hospital-during-covid-19>

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