

Notes from care home online forum – 9 January 2023

DN opened the forum and all participants introduced themselves.

Presentation by Alan Curry

AC explained his role as Senior Manager – Commissioning at Northumberland County Council. He said the last few forums have focused on the pandemic and visiting restrictions, today's session will focus on broader issues but any questions are welcome. If anyone is experiencing any issues AC suggests speaking directly with the care home or having a conversation with HWN.

New guidance around Covid and infection control was released on 22 December. This was not the best time for new guidance as the festive period is already a very busy time arranging care and staffing rotas for over Christmas. AC is still trying to determine what the new guidance means and what individual care homes are doing to implement this.

AC gave an overview of the care home market in Northumberland. There are 71 care homes for older people in Northumberland with 3000 CQC registered beds. A new service is running from Rothbury Hospital run by People First and the NHS.

One issue which has continued post-pandemic is high vacancy rates in some care homes but not all, and overall the number of people in care homes has returned to pre pandemic levels. Currently 6% of operational beds are vacant and 13% of registered beds are vacant (not all beds are operational).

There is a shortage of nurses - this has led to two de-registrations of nursing homes in the last two years – one in Hexham and one in the Bedlington area. These homes will continue to operate as residential homes rather than nursing homes. Northumberland County Council is currently looking at initiatives to recruit staff from abroad.

CQC ratings – 79.4% of care homes in Northumberland rated good/outstanding compared with 78.3% nationally. Some care homes have struggled with their rating since the pandemic but it is a Council priority to work with them to improve.

Community services – 88% rated good/outstanding compared with 65% nationally.

Contract arrangements to pay higher fees to small care homes with less than 40 beds and those with higher ratings.

AC went through the quality ratings for Northumberland compared to the national average. The main challenge is 'Well-led' at 74.2%.

NCC actions

- Quality monitoring – aim to get into each care home at least once a year, didn't have capacity over Covid pandemic which could explain dip in CQC ratings.
- Performance information
- Training e.g. free safeguarding training
- Provider Forums – these are run online now
- Individual home support – working with care homes if they have a specific issue

- Safeguarding – investigating concerns and producing action plans
- Excellence course – supporting managers to develop skills, knowledge and resilience
- Enter and View – HWN to play a part in this

Questions

One attendee asked about respite care for dementia patients who can be physically and verbally aggressive and knows people who have struggled to get respite in these circumstances. A concern was raised that there are hardly any respite units in Northumberland which can cater for aggressive patients.

AC said although some care homes have a dementia specialism many struggle to deal with aggressive residents. This can be due to other residents being vulnerable, lack of skills in dealing with this type of behaviour or the wrong environment. The Council has recently tried to commission a separate specialist unit but there was little response to the tender. There is definitely a gap in the market and work is ongoing to fix this. AC suggested contacting the social worker or care manager and said he is happy to pick this up with the patients relatives directly who are having issues. He also suggested the Dementia Matters day service in Cramlington.

The same attendee said it can be especially difficult at night and it is often difficult to get any sleep.

AC recommended liaising with the patient's GP regarding night time needs as there could be an underlying health or medication issue.

DN said it is important relatives know where to turn to for information and help and HWN is keen for that information to be available. She said it is important not to forget underlying health issues and mental health services.

Another attendee said their spouse has recently started end of life care. They have to travel out of the county to visit them as there was not a care home in Northumberland suitable for their needs. Caring for their spouse was particularly difficult at night.

Support services available for the attendee were discussed and DN said it is worth noting for others that a suitable placement might be available outside of the county and travel may be necessary.

A representative from Carers Northumberland came along to the forum. They said they often hear about respite care and the inability to book this in advance. This makes booking time away very difficult and it is often more stressful to arrange a holiday than not to have one at all.

AC said he will look into the possibility of block-booking a bed for respite care. He said the learning disability service has done this so it is an option and he will look into demand for this. If Carers Northumberland has any specific ideas or figures they can send them to AC.

One attendee said their spouse has dementia and they have their own health issues. They need to book respite care when feeling tired to get a good night's sleep. They chose a care home with a good CQC rating but there were some issues with their spouse's care (issues with medication, staff on duty unable to lift patient out of bed to use the toilet during the night). The manager agreed this was unacceptable but this person feels they can't rest for worrying. They asked if they should report this to HWN?

DN said yes HWN and AC would both like to hear any feedback about care homes. It's important that there is confidence in the quality of care provided. AC said it was the right thing to do to talk to the care manager and ask them if they can guarantee staff will be available to meet the patient's needs.

DN said HWN is going to work with the Council on a program of Enter and View visits in 2023. Summary reports will be published.

AC said confidence levels are slowly returning and numbers are going in the right direction. There is monitoring planned and professionals such as district nurses and social workers are going in and spotting things which helps to restore confidence. The care homes want to improve and it's beneficial to have direct feedback like these forums.

DN asked about the effect of care homes de-registering from nursing and whether this would affect choice.

AC said two de-registrations is manageable but anymore would affect choice, especially in the West and North of Northumberland. Nursing care is funded by the NHS so it has to be viable to employ a nurse. The Council helped the CCG with a scheme last year to put more funding in. This is an issue to keep an eye on.

DN said the emerging theme of today's forum is 'Choice'.

The next care home forum will be Monday 17 April 2023 at 10am.