

Keeping Connected During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Good Practice from Outstanding Care Homes

Introduction

Local Healthwatch organisations are independent champions for people who use health and social care services. We're here to find out what matters to people and help make sure their views shape the services they receive.

During the COVID-19 pandemic we are aware that there have been considerable challenges in Hampshire's care homes. These challenges have understandably had the primary concern of preventing the spread of the virus, however we are now seeing emerging innovation and good practice in relation to keeping residents connected with their families, carers and friends.

Objective

Healthwatch Hampshire's (HWH) objective is to identify, and record good practice developed by CQC outstanding rated care homes in keeping residents connected to their family, friends and the community when usual visiting was suspended or restricted due to the pandemic. We will share the information gained cross the sector and will update it as additional good practice is identified.

In addition we will be working in partnership with the outstanding care homes to coproduce an engagement model to enable HWH to better hear the voices and views of home residents and their families. This will focus on their experiences of care and support.

When the engagement model is developed, HWH will test it and aim to deliver a programme of engagement with care home residents and families, providing independent feedback to providers and commissioners and also the broader public.

Method

To identify good practice HWH made contact with 4 care homes who previously took part in our review of outstanding homes in April 2020 titled - What Does Outstanding Care and Support Look Like - [More here](#)
Good relationships have been formed with these homes and a collaborative piece of work focusing on the following themes has been welcomed:

- 1) How are residents being supported to be able to communicate and keep connected with their families, friends and the community? (What methods have been used, and what has, or hasn't worked)
- 2) How are the homes keeping families informed about daily life in the home?
- 3) Feedback from Outstanding Homes.

All information gained has been included in this report which will be published and circulated across the sector. We welcome and encourage other homes to share good practice with us and will update this document on a regular basis.

Keeping residents connected with their families and friends

 **Phone calls** have worked very well for many of the people that we support, and we have been facilitating them on a regular basis. Those we support who live with advanced dementia, have appeared to find it somewhat challenging to connect the voice coming out of the phone with the person at the other end of the line. In these cases, people didn't appear distressed, but engagement was often low which proved disappointing or even upsetting for the friends and family calling.

 **Facetime/skype/teams/zoom** has generally been successful as they provide visual cues for residents that may need them, and also reassures family and friends that the person is visibly happy and well. Again, this is not the case for all people but for many it was a lovely chance to see their loved ones and to look at their homes, gardens, pets etc. at the same time.

"We have held Microsoft teams meetings with residents enabling them to see multiple family members in different locations at the same time."

"Methods of contact with families has varied, dependent on the individual. We have all been on a learning curve with the technology!"

 **YouTube video messages** were the brainchild of one of our wonderful family members who set up a private place where the family could upload videos of themselves chatting, reading poems, playing instruments and singing songs. These videos were absolute treasures and were accessible for the lady we support.

 **Talking photo frames** was another fantastic idea from a relative. It was a beautiful way for her to keep chatting with her Mum and reminding her of all of the lovely things she had done.

 **Window visits** were something we tried in the early days, but these were not very successful as many people struggled to hear and then were upset that their loved ones weren't allowed in. Another factor was that so few people have rooms that overlook the front of the house and visitors were not (until recently) able to access the garden. In a few cases it was nice, and, on one occasion, a resident's family gathered in the car park to sing a rousing chorus of happy birthday to her while she smiled down at them from the window.

"We did have a few initial visits at the window, but these were not very successful as the residents could not hear their families and it often caused confusion. We were also concerned that families would turn up en-mass."

 **Letters and cards** are a lovely way to stay in touch and are a brilliant opportunity to spend time with people, talking about the things their loved ones had said, or supporting them to write to family and friends. Some families were incredibly organised and notified us of family birthdays so that we could help people to send cards for them too.

"Our activities coordinator has a regular programme for residents to make cards to send to loved ones."

 **Care packages** were an idea that we promoted from the first days of lockdown and people are still sending them in. Some are extravagant, clothes, bouquets of flowers and so on but others are a regular bar of chocolate or some nice soap. The main thing is to make sure that the people we support know that they are remembered and that they are loved.

 **Garden visits.** With the easing of government restrictions, and thanks to the layout of our home and grounds, we have been able to facilitate actual face to face visits in our lovely garden. These were a little nerve-racking initially but as time has gone on, we've seen people settling into the new routine. We've been incredibly lucky, and all of the friends and family attending have been happy to agree to the terms of the robust risk assessment that was put in place and have followed them to the letter. It's been an unadulterated joy to see people chatting and laughing with their loved ones (from a safe distance, of course).

"We set up gazebo, parasols and use our summer house to accommodate the nearest relative to visit following the government guidelines on social distancing. The visitor has to sign a disclaimer. It is very reliant on the weather though."

 **Indoor Visits** -We have a perspex screen installed in our Family Room so families can visit the residents even if the weather is not good. It also complies with the infection control policy of the Home.

Keeping residents connected with the Community

 We have **pen pals** from local and international school children and the local community who keep our residents busy. They talk about their experiences and support each other, knowing that this challenging situation is happening around the world.

 **Church services** have been held either in the garden with residents inside or streamed onto a screen in the lounge.

 **Entertainment** has also been held with musicians in the garden with residents inside.

“We have a music therapy session twice a month which the residents really enjoy. The therapist Skypes us via a tablet and we project the session on a large tv screen.”

 We have started to take residents out in the minibus, even for just a drive round the countryside. We have taken them to quiet parts of the forest and quiet beaches.

How are you keeping families informed about daily life in the home?

 **Email Updates** - Weekly (and in some cases twice weekly) email updates, written in a friendly newsletter style, have been sent to families throughout lockdown. These were well received and kept families up to date with goings on in the home, ideas about staying in touch, information about the wider company as well as asking for their opinions about a variety of topics. It is always important for us to ensure that families and friends never lost their connection with us.

 We update our **website** once a week to keep families updated. We have a ‘private’ area for friends and families where they log in.

 We have an **update** that we send to the relatives as soon as there are new guidelines that we must implement in line with the government guidelines.

 We have a **closed Facebook group** that families and friends can join. With a resident’s consent, we regularly post pictures of their daily activities so their relatives have regular updates and can see everyone enjoying themselves. This has been a particularly effective way of keeping families informed, and it is quite a quick, and easy thing for us to do.

“During lockdown our Facebook posts took on a new importance as they became a way to make sure families could see inside our little bubble. Photos showed residents enjoying crafts, gardening, quizzes and baking. Life never stopped here, it merely adapted”

 Our **Key Workers** phone residents for an update on how they are, and what they have been doing, at least once a week.

 **Videos and photos** that we thought would be of particular interest or emotional importance are sent directly to families along with an email explaining them. We find that adding that personal touch was really positive for maintaining links with family and friends

 We **individually** inform residents families of any changes and updates with their relatives, as a matter of course, and this has not changed.

Keeping Connected - Feedback from Outstanding Homes

 **Masks** - Wearing a mask whilst giving personal care or just talking to a resident comes with its own challenges. Guidance has insisted on masks being worn at all times unless socially distancing which can hinder communication. We need to remember that non-verbal communication is hugely important at this time. Residents can tell from the sound of your voice, your posture and speed whether we are relaxed or stressed, in a good mood or sad.

 **Communicating with residents** - We need to align non-verbal signaling with our spoken word, act out or sentences to give them meaning. Avoid body language that shows frustration or impatience, remember a smile can be seen in your eyes. Use short simple sentences and underline your words with gestures.

“Having given our staff an understanding of non-verbal communication we have enhanced communication within the home during this most challenging time.”

 **Open and honest communication** - we have always adopted an open and honest communication style. The friends and families of the people we support have every right to know about the challenges that their loved ones are experiencing as well as all of the wonderfully positive things that happen. By ensuring that this open style of communication is maintained, it is possible to work alongside friends and families to support individuals to the highest possible standard.

“Our staff have supported residents to use a variety of different communication technologies. Residents within the home become firm friends and therefore do support each other as well as the support they receive from staff. The pandemic has also made us very aware of how resilient our older residents are.

 Our greatest challenge has been with the **families of new residents**. Understandably they do not know us, and they are desperate to see their loved ones and know they are receiving a good standard of care. Families whose residents were with us before the outbreak have been much more relaxed as they know their relatives are in good hands.

 We've been making use of any and all methods that we could think of to maintain great communication between the people we support and those that they love. For each lady or gentleman, we worked with them, and often with their families too, to establish the best method based on their individual needs and preferences and helped them to make the most of it. *As with all things in life, communication isn't one size fits all, so we had to get a bit creative at times.*

 It is important to ensure that all residents who are featured in social media posts etc. have given **informed consent**, or informed consent had been given by their holders of Power of Attorney for Health and Welfare in advance of posts being published.

 We have been able to facilitate '**end of life**' visits, although we have been very strict, and immediate family only to visit. They follow the same procedures as staff and come through the same entrance, wash and sanitise their hands, wear face coverings, blue shoe coverings and full PPE. I do believe these visits are essential.

Summary

Care homes continue to strive to source and develop innovative ideas to keep residents connected with their friends and family. It is clear that a variety of methods can be utilised to ensure every resident has the opportunity to keep connected. One size does not fit all, and the most successful methods identified in this short piece of work include the following:

- Utilise skype/zoom/ MS teams, WhatsApp or facetime to enable residents to physically see, and connect with their families.
- Include relatives and friends in developing ideas for keeping in touch. Methods such as talking photo frames and recorded private YouTube sessions have been created by working collaboratively to create solutions.
- During activity sessions support residents to write a letter, card, or create a piece of artwork to send in the post with a request that the relative also replies by post.
- Create links with local groups, such as WI, schools, scouts, brownies etc. and establish a pen pals' scheme for residents.
- Hold 'virtual' sessions with musicians, and entertainers that would previously visit the home in person. Residents can also attend events such religious services via virtual methods.
- When staff, or relatives wearing a mask are communicating with a resident, use positive body language, and keep sentences short. Act out the communication where possible to help the resident understand.

Healthwatch Hampshire would like to thank the following homes for their assistance in sharing their Best Practice with us:

Tegfield House, Winchester, Oak Lodge Basingstoke, The White House, Curdridge and Andover Nursing Home.

HWH are extremely keen to include further good practice examples from care homes in Hampshire. If you would like to provide additional information for this resource, please contact Kate Knowlton - Kate.knowlton@healthwatchhampshire.co.uk

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