



Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Care Home Voices

**A snapshot of life in care homes
in Wales during Covid-19**



**An independent voice and champion
for older people**

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales protects and promotes the rights of older people throughout Wales, scrutinising and influencing a wide range of policy and practice to improve their lives. She provides help and support directly to older people through her casework team and works to empower older people and ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon. The Commissioner's role is underpinned by a set of unique legal powers to support her in reviewing the work of public bodies and holding them to account when necessary.

The Commissioner is taking action to end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner wants Wales to be the best place in the world to grow older.

How to contact the Commissioner:

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Cambrian Buildings
Mount Stuart Square
Cardiff
CF10 5FL

Phone: 03442 640 670
Email: ask@olderpeoplewales.com
Website: www.olderpeoplewales.com
Twitter: @talkolderpeople

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Introduction

What has it been like to live or work in a care home over the last few months? To be the friend or relative of a care home resident, and unable to visit them? It has concerned me greatly, as we have seen a tragedy unfolding in care homes, that the voices of those who matter most, the ‘experts by experience’ have not been sufficiently heard.

That’s why I’m publishing this report, which gives a voice to people living and working in our care homes and provides a snapshot of their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The report is based on over 120 responses (received between 14 May and 05 Jun) from older people, their families and friends and care home staff to a series of questions about their experiences during lockdown, the issues and challenges they have faced and the changes and improvements they would like to see. Responses were shared via an online form, over the telephone, by email and by letter. I also arranged engagement sessions with a small number of care home residents in care homes in north and south Wales to allow more detailed discussions with older people about their experiences during the past few months.

The report not only highlights the issues and challenges they have faced, but also some of the good practice that has been making a positive difference to older people’s lives in the most difficult circumstances. In addition to what has been highlighted as part of this report, a number of other, more specific issues have been shared with me, which I am also following up on.

The report includes a number of calls for action – based on what older people, their families and friends, and care home staff have shared with me – which set out what needs to happen, both immediately and in the longer-term, to ensure that older people living in care homes are kept safe and protected, and have the best possible quality of life.

I would like to thank everyone who took the time to respond and share their experiences with me. I know for some this would have been incredibly difficult, but it’s crucial that their voices are heard and are at the centre of plans and decisions about what happens in our care homes as we navigate the difficult path ahead of us.

This report and my calls for action are an important starting point, but further, wider action will be needed, particularly in the longer-term. So as Commissioner I will continue to engage with older people living in care homes, with their families and friends, and with care home staff throughout Wales to ensure their voices are heard and continue to be heard, and that their experiences are used to drive change, both now and in the future.



Heléna Herklots CBE
Older People’s Commissioner for Wales

Keeping care homes safe

The responses received indicate that many care homes throughout Wales took the decision to close their doors to visitors and non-essential professionals weeks before official lockdown measures were introduced, in order to try and minimise the spread of Covid-19 as much as possible, and protect residents and staff.

A number of care home managers and care home workers told us that their homes had managed to remain Covid-free, although concerns were raised about the ongoing risk of the virus entering a home.

“The staff have kept the Covid out of here which is marvellous.”

Care Home Resident

“The home my mum is in locked down two weeks before the country did and I’m so glad. I worry about her as she’s 85 and has terminal cancer. So obviously if Covid was to get in the home, it would be disastrous. I feel it would be good if the staff could have stayed there so they weren’t out and about mixing with people who may have the virus.”

Family Member

“Still able to work, but frightened because you don’t know if anybody is going to bring anything into the home.”

Care Home Worker

“I got more anxious about my family, colleagues, friends, residents and future. I’m scared every day that I’ll bring that virus to my workplace or home.”

Care Home Worker

Issues around access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), crucial in controlling the spread of the virus, were widely publicised by the media, particularly during the earlier stages of the pandemic, and the responses we received indicate that there were significant variations in what was available to care homes.

In early April, the Welsh Government announced it had procured 5 million ‘pieces’ of PPE that would be distributed to local authorities throughout Wales, which I welcomed, and some care home managers reported that they had managed to source consistent supplies of PPE, often with support from the wider ‘system’, and had remained well stocked.

“We now wear full PPE (goggles, mask etc.) on shift, which were not previously needed. Having a healthy stock of PPE has eased some of the worry.”

Care Home Worker

“Maintaining adequate supplies of PPE has been reassuring for staff. The local authority has been informative and we have not experienced any shortages of PPE.”

Care Home Worker

“Access to PPE has been well coordinated from the beginning. Social service commissioners have supported fully with sourcing PPE.”

Care Home Worker

Other responses, however, highlighted the difficulties and frustrations that homes had faced in trying to access PPE, and the length of time it took to obtain this vital equipment.

“Why did a relative have to beg the community for PPE? Why didn’t the care home owner not ensure that his staff had the necessary equipment? Why didn’t the local authority/government ensure that the care homes had everything they needed?”

Family Member

“Delivery of face masks and shields were slow in the beginning, so I was concerned that should we have an outbreak we would not have had the correct equipment to protect ourselves and the residents.”

Care Home Worker

“More PPE at an earlier stage.”

Care Home Manager

“Homes [need] to have the equipment such as PPE readily available rather than have to wait for long periods.”

Family Member

It also seems that, in some cases, access to PPE was dependent on whether a home had the money available to purchase it, rather than having to rely upon and wait for central government supplies.

“I purchased PPE gels, masks etc in February from my own supplier. Even through the months of March - April I never had any issue purchasing PPE.”

Care Home Manager

“We stocked up with PPE, including masks and food in February at significant cost.”

Care Home Manager

Testing

The Welsh Government's policy on testing was heavily scrutinised, and gradually shifted over a period of several weeks following calls from myself, and many others, for testing to be made available to all care home residents and staff in Wales.

Access to testing – both for residents and care home staff – was a key issue highlighted by many of those who responded. It was clear from the responses that testing was seen as a crucial way to keep residents and staff safe, and that the limited availability of testing was a cause of significant worry and concern.

“My Dad is 92, my Mum is 89. Dad says why wasn't Joyce important enough to have a test. We have all cried many tears and I personally feel care home residents have been sacrificed.”

Family Member / Friend

“Care homes have been totally neglected in this pandemic I feel and lack of testing available to care home residents is shameful.”

Care Sector Professional

“Testing of staff and residents would have saved a lot of anxiety within the workplace.”

Care Home Worker

“Access to staff for testing when supporting people with Covid - this was only available if symptomatic which left staff feeling vulnerable.”

Care Home Worker

Responses also indicated that despite changes in testing policy, homes still experienced difficulties in accessing testing for residents and staff.

“When we had a resident who was symptomatic and we requested testing straight away via Public Health Wales – [the Health Board] decided that the resident at that time was not a priority for testing, this was a particularly anxious time for the resident, her family & staff, it was most unhelpful.

Care Home Worker

“More testing at homes. We have tried for weeks to to get tested and hopefully this will now happen in the next 7 days.”

Care Home Worker

“We had to “fight” health agencies to get tests for our residents.”

Care Home Manager

Visits from loved ones and staying connected

The responses from older people and their families and friends highlight just how difficult lockdown has been for many people. Many older people had not seen their family and friends at all for prolonged periods and had concerns about the impact that lockdown could be having on their well-being.

“I’m struggling a bit with not seeing my relatives but they take such good care of us here.”

Care Home Resident

“Not being able to see my 95 year old grandmother who I’ve not gone without seeing ever, would take food to her and feed her to make sure she’s eaten.”

Family Member

“The residents are missing contact with their families.”

Care Home Worker

“It is really difficult not being able to visit my mother and we can see a deterioration in her cognition and state of mind. She is often tearful and we think this is because she does not see her family.”

Family Member

“We haven’t seen Dad for 12 weeks. He has been amazing though like most of us he is sometimes in low spirit.”

Family Member

A small number of respondents were also clearly worried that being unable to visit their loved one under the lockdown measures could mean they would never see them again, should the worst happen.

“If anything happens to me and I won’t be able to see my children again and that depresses me.”

Care Home Resident

“Not being able to see family. Mother in law in care home. 99 years old and worried may not ever see her again.”

Family Member

“Mum has Alzheimer’s and is immobile and prefers to stay in her own room which means she is stimulated by and values family visits. I personally worry that we may never see my Mum again, and her current life experience during lockdown.”

Family Member

Another issue highlighted by a small number of respondents was the difficulty they had faced when trying to get information from the care home about their loved one, in order to provide assurance that they were healthy and safe, and were being well looked after.

“Since lock down, I haven’t had any form of contact at all from the home to let me know she OK etc. and no way of contacting her. When I do try to phone they either don’t answer phone or when they have are extremely rude, say she’s OK and slam phone down. Not happy at all.”

Family Member

“General deterioration of father in care home and not being able to visit. Difficulties in getting through to care home at times and then worrying that I am being a nuisance when they are obviously busy. Lack of information from care home - have to contact for updates so feel very much in the dark a lot of the time.”

Family Member

On the whole, however, the responses we received indicate that people were able to stay connected with their loved ones in care homes, with care home staff supporting residents to do video calls or share updates online via email or Facebook.

“I talk to them [family] on skype which is the main thing, I look forward to things getting back to normal.”

Care Home Resident

“I talk to him [husband] 5 times a day, I’m looking forward to giving him a hug and a kiss. We’ve been married for 63 years.

Care Home Resident

“We are able to make regular calls on WhatsApp or Skype with a carer holding the phone as my mother cannot manage this. She is well cared for and treated very kindly and well.

Family Member

“The care home has been amazing updating me, passing on messages, facilitating phone calls.”

Family Member

Conclusions

Whilst it was encouraging to read a number of positive responses, particularly examples of outstanding care being provided by care staff, it was deeply concerning to see the wide range of issues and challenges care homes throughout Wales have been facing during the past few months, which have caused significant concern, stress and anxiety.

Many feel that there was not a sufficient focus on protecting and supporting people living and working in care homes, and limited understanding amongst public bodies about the policies and support care homes needed to keep older people safe and well.

More action was needed to tackle the significant disconnect between what was being promised at a policy level and what was being delivered on the ground, something that seems to have led to unacceptable delays in some care homes obtaining vital PPE and accessing testing / test results.

It also appears that many of the issues and challenges that have been shared with me could have potentially been avoided, through more effective planning and engagement with care homes at an earlier stage, and the provision of clear, practical information and guidance,

We must also not overlook the significant impact that Covid-19 is having on the day-to-day life, quality of life and mental health of older people living in care homes. Care homes are doing a great deal to try to keep their residents' spirits up and help them to stay connected with their families and friends, but it was clear from the responses that the disruption had left some older people feeling confused and abandoned. Family and friends are understandably desperate to visit their loved ones again, and I welcome the work being led by Welsh Government on how to enable safe visits by family and friends.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on the pressures being faced by the care home sector and by care home workers, and has brought a number of issues that have existed within the sector for many years into sharp focus, particularly issues relating to funding levels and the status of the care home workforce. The responses not only highlighted the dedication and commitment of care home workers throughout Wales, but also the stress and anxiety they have felt during the past few months, and the impact this has had upon their own mental health. There was also a strong feeling amongst those who responded that the pay and conditions of care home workers should better reflect their skills.

Although not an issue raised directly by those who responded, I also have serious concerns that older people's rights – not just in Wales, but across the UK – may not have been sufficiently protected during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have spoken out publicly about my concerns, and I am taking this forward as a separate piece of work, working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to examine how we can best use the levers available to us, including our legal powers, to scrutinise the decisions that have been made by governments and other public bodies during this pandemic and identify any improvements that need to be made to protect people's rights.

By undertaking this work and publishing this report, I wanted to give a voice to older people, their families and friends, and those who care for and support them, and use their experiences to ensure that the right action is taken to better protect and support older people living in

care homes. Alongside this, I will use the information shared with me as a powerful evidence base to shape the wider discussion and debate about the ways that social care needs to be transformed, and what is needed to ensure that social care is valued and properly supported, so that their voices, the voices of ‘experts by experience’, are at the heart of plans and decisions as we move forward together.

I have therefore set out a number of calls for action below, which are focused on both the short- and longer-term.

Calls for action

The experiences shared in this report should be used to help shape the actions the Welsh Government and other public bodies take to ensure that care homes are supported and protected, now and in future.

The voices of older people living in care homes, their friends and family, and care home workers should be central in shaping policy and I have used the experiences shared with me to identify actions that should be taken immediately across a number of key areas:

Engagement with care home residents, their families and friends and staff

Older people living in care homes, and their friends and family, must be provided with opportunities to share their views and experiences with policy- and decision-makers to ensure that the things that matter most to residents are properly understood and shape care home policy on a national and local level.

Similarly, care home staff and managers have a great deal of knowledge and first-hand expertise in providing care and support to older people, which means they understand what works well and what practical support is needed to keep residents and staff safe and well. It is therefore crucial that care home staff and managers are consulted in a meaningful way as policy and guidance for care homes is developed.

Wider research into the experiences of care home residents should also be undertaken to identify the issues and challenges that need to be tackled and inform the wider debate on the future of social care in Wales.

Welsh Government Action Plan for Care Homes

I have previously written to the Welsh Government calling on them to publish a specific plan of action for care homes.

A published action plan would provide assurance to people living and working in care homes and allow constructive and responsible scrutiny of the decisions being made and the action being taken by the Welsh Government and other public bodies.

The action plan should clearly set out the action being taken across a number of key areas that are crucial in protecting and supporting people living and working in care homes:

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