

The Future of Care

Covid-19 and beyond: challenges impacting & influencing residential care

The pandemic has changed the care industry for the foreseeable future. Challenges that care home professionals have struggled with for years have become increasingly difficult whilst other issues have been given more attention, resulting in tighter measures to better protect staff and residents. This report explores some of the key issues experienced by care home professionals during the pandemic and how these are shaping the future.



Overview

We surveyed senior care professionals working in the UK to find out how Covid-19 has impacted the industry – and what challenges they expect to face in the long term.

To support our research, we hosted a forum in partnership with a leading industry publication to take a deeper look at the issues affecting today's care homes and how these will influence the care home of tomorrow.

Topics ranged from infection control and recruitment through to quality of life for residents as well as better support.

Both the research and the forum highlighted similar themes:



The adverse impacts of the pandemic on the care industry have magnified the importance of infection prevention.



Recruitment is proving to be increasingly difficult, with many care homes highlighting that staff retention has been an area of concern over the past two years.



Quality of life for residents declined during the pandemic due to multiple lockdowns and visitor restrictions.



Care homes are not receiving enough support to handle increased hygiene measures and more funding needs to be put in place to help acquire PPE and other equipment.

This report will expand on these themes to better explore current challenges of care and explain what steps need to be taken to make improvements within the industry.



Infection Control

Infection prevention in health and social care settings has always been a top priority. Yet, the pandemic provided unprecedented challenges that have changed hygiene protocols for the foreseeable future.

“It’s hard to remember life before Covid-19 and all the changes to practices and policies are now the norm.”

During the midst of the pandemic, care professionals were on the brink of information overload with 91% of respondents experiencing challenges with changing regulations.

“It was difficult to keep up to date with all the guidance – and these changes were even harder to implement”.

Information needed to be cascaded quickly but according to care home managers this was easier said than done. The ongoing guidance was sometimes complex and confusing and required a large amount of time to read and relay key points to staff, families, and residents.

From additional cleaning routines and PPE requirements through to testing measures and visitor regulations, care professionals certainly have had plenty to contend with outside of looking after vulnerable residents. 4 out of 10 state that the added focus on infection control has been moderately to extremely challenging.

“At the height of the pandemic, we had to ensure high touch point areas were cleaned every 30 minutes and records were signed 48 times per day. Normally, it’s six.”

Despite this, 88% believe that since 2020, changes in the care industry have had a positive impact on hygiene measures, while nearly half agree that they have also helped with infection outbreaks. As a result, many respondents think that strict hygiene guidelines will remain long term and will be focusing on infection prevention methods to achieve operational success.

To ensure staff are onboard and understand infection prevention, some care homes are already taking proactive steps. For example, the role of Infection Control Champion has been created in some care homes to help handle ‘walk arounds’, whereas others are using social media channels such as TikTok to encourage staff to watch ‘how to’ videos e.g., correct hand washing procedures. This is complementary to the fundamentals such as regular e-learning and training.



Recruitment

Recruitment contd...

There are more than 100,000 vacancies open within the care industry and staff turnover is estimated to be 30% and trending upwards. According to recruitment experts, this is at a time when people are increasingly needing care services.

Supporting this claim, our research showed that 8 out of 10 respondents have experienced negative changes to staff retention and recruitment over the past two years. Surprisingly, 90% believe Covid-19 had little impact on the perception of care workers despite the general public applauding the resilience of care professionals during the pandemic.

While attracting and retaining staff in the care industry has been an area of concern for many years, survey respondents believe that the pandemic exacerbated this with 37% stating it had direct consequences to staff working hours. Forum participants said:

“Staff were working long hours, and this caused burnout and stress – they can only do so much”.

With pressures mounting, some staff offered their support to get their care homes through the pandemic but then left to go into other careers. Additionally, care homes across the UK experienced staff shortages due to Covid-19 isolation periods as well as mandatory vaccination requirements. Forum respondents commented that some staff didn't want to have the Covid-19 vaccine due to personal reasons but, as it was a requirement, they had to leave their positions.

“Now we have to manage staff views and feelings on vaccinations as they have had no choice in the matter”.



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Contd... Recruitment

81% of survey respondents claim staff shortages and recruitment is moderately to extremely challenging. There is lots of time and effort put into attracting carers, senior leaders and support staff within the care home, but often once training is complete people say it's not for them and leave. As a result, they don't expect this will get any better in the future and have identified that this is a focus area for long term operational success. Forum participants believe that care is not a valued career and work needs to be done to change the perception of working in this sector. Some care homes are investing more into marketing the role of a carer through channels such as social media to help showcase the positives, while others are making sure they have a good career pathway in place to support staff who are interested in progression. At management level, there has also been efforts to bring in managers from other industries that have

transferable skills. One participant said: "The next generation of care home managers will be looking after me, so it's important that we are productive about setting up the journey for the future manager of care homes."

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The consensus was that working within care is a fulfilling role and many people working within the industry are passionate about what they do – it is often seen more as a vocation rather than just a job. People working in care really do care about the people they are looking after.



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Quality of Life

Visitor restrictions, isolation, shielding, and increased hygiene protocols were just a few of the measures put in place to help protect care home residents from the transmission of Covid-19. However, this came at a cost with 28% of survey respondents believing that over the past two years, quality of life for care home residents has declined substantially. Forum participants said that residents had to be wrapped up in cotton wool and were not given the experiences they needed to 'live life'.

"While everything is a priority, the number one priority should always be the residents. It's about quality of life not longevity and that's been lost a bit."

Survey respondents agree that the emphasis on value of life will remain in the long term, and care homes are placing

greater focus on quality of life now that rules and restrictions are easing.

"We are trying to bring the fun back".

This is done in the safest way possible as each resident is given a risk assessment to establish what activities they can feasibly do and what help they need. However, forum participants stated that it is challenging to get some residents to relax and start enjoying life again as they are afraid to go out or don't want to mix with visitors to remain safe. Here, it is important for staff to provide peace of mind to residents and their families that all infection control protocols are being followed within the care homes and help facilitate this where possible when considering external activities.



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Support

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Support contd...

With increased infection control procedures and reporting to adhere to, combined with more residents and dwindling staffing levels, UK care homes need more support not only to cope with everyday challenges but to also protect employees and residents better. One third of survey respondents highlighted that the pandemic has helped expose the lack of funding and resources available whilst forum participants agreed that resourcing needs to be put in place to help ease the burden on some of these issues. So, what does this support look like?

1 Working more closely with inspectors on clarity for guidance

40% of survey respondents state that over the past two years paperwork has seen the most negative change. One care home manager said: “I love my job but it’s becoming harder to get on the floor with residents as there is so much to be done”. Another commented, “there is a lot of work being transferred to care homes in order to produce documentation”. It’s no surprise that 91% of respondents claim that staff are struggling with changing regulations and 63% are finding increased inspections a challenge. While respondents expect high levels of paperwork will remain in the long term, one way that support

can be given is to make this less confusing. For example, forum participants identified that government advice was hard to interpret, and CQC inspections appear to be subjective meaning they are difficult to prepare for. Speaking with the local CQC inspector can go some way into easing this burden. While paperwork might not be going anywhere anytime soon, one forum participant indicated that their inspector encouraged them to ask questions, provided information on touch points, and even discussed topics such as safeguarding and wellbeing.



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Support

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Support contd...

2 Investment in equipment

Over half of respondent state that they are challenged by outdated equipment, yet many don't see this as a priority for long term operational success. 94% claim laundry is done in-house which means equipment is integral to preventing infection. If machines are outdated and unreliable, this could not only lead to long periods of downtime but also infection outbreaks due to items not being thoroughly cleaned or through mountains of dirty laundry attracting bacteria.

Investing in professional equipment provides reassurance that infection control measures are being correctly adhered to within the laundry. Best-in-class machines have specialised disinfection programmes, reach the required high temperatures, are WRAS category 5 compliant, and easy to operate for users of different languages.

Some professional machines also include innovative technology that captures data, so if maintenance is required it can be completed quickly.

Whilst purchasing a professional machine can be expensive initially, opting for the right brand can bring care homes long term cost savings through energy efficiency, minimal repairs, and a longer service life. They can also have a positive impact on the care homes environmental footprint. If you are considering changing your laundry equipment, come and talk to Miele about our professional solutions that can help you to achieve your desired hygiene goals as well as adding to your sustainability credentials.



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Support

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3 Staff resourcing

Just 26% of survey respondents agreed that the pandemic showed an urgency for more care workers, despite this being an ongoing challenge faced by care homes up and down the country. With more paperwork to do and residents to care for and less staff to do it, support is required to make the care profession more attractive and to give current employees the resources to do their jobs without them being overloaded.

With the consensus being that there is not enough funding from the government, there are ways for care homes to market themselves on a local level (or national if part of a wider business model).

Social media

Making use of tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook can help increase recognition of the care home within the community and be an excellent way of showcasing the work each individual is doing to care for the elderly. For example, without violating residents' privacy, short 'day in the life' videos can be created to give potential recruits a behind-the-scenes look.

Apprenticeships

Offering opportunities for apprenticeships or work experience to people who are leaving education or are thinking about changing their career can be a great way to get skilled employees.

Local network

Tapping into your local community to find partnerships (e.g., local job centres) or new recruits (schools/ colleges/universities/career fairs) can be another method to help find candidates. You can also think about using these local networks to educate potential employees about the benefits of working in care. Remember many carers love working in the industry as they are passionate about helping people.

Reward packages

If your care home has the means, providing rewards such as gym memberships, dental plans, or even flexible working can help you make the job role more attractive. Additionally, ensuring current staff also receive rewards and recognition for the work that they do can go a long way to support retention.

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If you are looking for more ways to show how the role of a carer is an attractive career choice and want to find new ideas to support your recruitment and retention programme, there are many resources available to help you do this. Why not start looking at industry specific magazines or web blogs for inspiration.

Conclusion

The impacts of Covid-19 on the social care industry will be long lasting. Whilst infection prevention will continue to be a top priority for care homes, it's clear that recruitment and retention will be the greatest challenge to overcome in the future for operational success. Additional to this, there is also an ongoing effort to improve the quality of life of residents as the UK population ages. This is underpinned by having a safe, infection-free environment as well as the right number of staff to provide the levels of care needed.

To help ease some of the enormous amounts of pressure on today's carer, support such as clear guidance around infection control, reliable and future-proofed equipment, and staff resourcing is required. Though this may not solve some of the long-term issues, it will be a step in the right direction to prepare for the care home of tomorrow.

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