

Care Home Website Report

Research into the accessibility of care home websites



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Healthwatch County Durham (HWCD)

On the 1st April 2013 under the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 152 local Healthwatch organisations established throughout England.

These Local Healthwatch have been set up across England to create a strong, independent consumer champion whose aim is to:

- Strengthen the collective voice of citizens and communities in influencing local health and social care services to better meet their needs
- Support people to find the right health and social care services for them by providing appropriate information, advice and signposting
- To encourage and support people and groups to share their views about services; listen to people's needs and experiences of services

We achieve this by:

- Listening to people, especially the most vulnerable, to understand their experiences and what matters most to them
- Influencing those who have the power to change services so that they better meet people's needs now and into the future
- Empowering and informing people to get the most from their health and social care services and encouraging other organisations to do the same

Executive summary

The idea for this piece of research arose through a conversation held within a Care Quality Commission (CQC) joint meeting, involving Healthwatch County Durham's (HWCD) 'Enter & View' representatives.

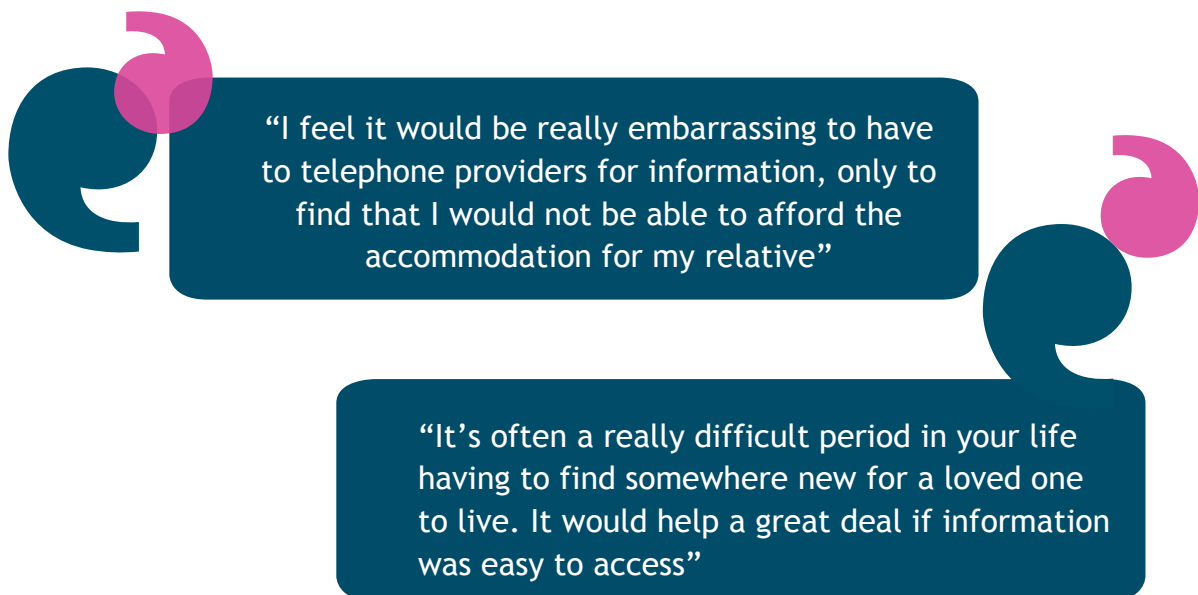
The principle aim of the research was:

- To consider how accessible online websites were when looking for care home providers. The basis of this (which is important to note) was to take a 'lay person's' approach when considering how easy it was to access information
- For volunteers to put themselves in the shoes of a family member starting to look for a care home in County Durham
- To identify the factors and barriers that made it difficult or unclear in finding providers
- To establish both what type of information was needed and whether that was readily available

Two HWCD volunteers came forward to undertake the project with support from the staff team.

The research began in November 2016 and was complete by January 2017.

The quality and accessibility of the care home websites varied widely. The volunteers felt the research gave them greater insight and they said:



The main findings from the research are that care home providers need to ensure that their websites:

- are easily accessible
- are user friendly
- are simple to navigate around
- give clear & useful information
- comply with any CQC requirements
- are accurate and up to date with the information they provide

This report will be shared with care home providers outlining the key things our volunteers found and it is hoped it will assist them in considering the quality of their own website. We will ask them whether they are able to make improvements to their own website.

Healthwatch hopes that by sharing their findings with their partners such as the Durham County Council and CQC, they will be able to consider what they can do to improve the accessibility of information on websites.

Why this work was necessary?

HWCD wanted to know how easy it was for people to find the information they needed about care homes in the county. HWCD Enter and View representatives met with the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in September 2016 and it was through discussions about the content of care home websites that this particular piece of work was initiated.

What we did

The value in the way this research was carried out was in the fact it was undertaken by volunteers, who tried to take the view of a member of the public. It is recognised that circumstances are often strained for families at the time they are trying to access information and advice, sometimes with very tight time restraints. There can be differences of opinion about the options available and what is best for everyone involved, making the need for clear and concise information very important. Sometimes families are not living in the locality of the relative or person who needs support, therefore will not necessarily know the local area or be aware of local care home provision.

The volunteers used standard search tools to see how accessible online websites were when looking for care home providers. They identified the factors and barriers they believed made it difficult or unclear in finding providers or navigating websites. They considered what type of information was needed and whether that was readily available.

What we found

When first looking for a care home provider online in many cases they were presented with generic pages that have lists of care home names mixed in with tenuously related, or completely unrelated, links, all of which look the same. Even if it is obvious that the link under consideration is a care home it may not take you to an actual care home homepage, taking you instead to various alternative sites, e.g. those requesting information about the care home or those simply selling insurance or other non-related services owned by the webpage host.

The experience of the volunteers when searching for a specific care home name was that virtually none opened immediately to that care home's homepage.

Even when a particular link was the correct route to a specific home the website itself often belonged to an umbrella organisation that offered the same, generic pages for all of its homes and even a long trawl through those pages often did not get anywhere near offering relevant information about an individual care home.

The researchers were unable to find the cost of various care options displayed; most sites only offered a 'Contact us' link, therefore the interested party would have to explain circumstances and discuss fees, for example, with numbers of different homes and providers. This could lead to a situation where someone finds what they think is an appropriate provider, has chatted at length about the service and whether it is suitable, only to then find that the fees are unaffordable for them or that the provider has no vacancies available, meaning that the whole process has to start again. From the customer's perspective this is potentially quite embarrassing, wastes time and can be extremely frustrating.

The findings showed that most (not all) websites were not as customer friendly as they could be. Where a site had links to other sites, there were sometimes errors, e.g. they linked to another home owned by the same umbrella company or the link was too generic, not giving any useful information as indicated and expected.

Some care home websites were not intuitive, creating confusion as to where to go for more detail and leaving the enquirer unclear about logical next steps other than phoning the care home itself.

It became evident to the researchers that there was no one, quick way, of accessing CQC reports from care home websites links (a simple way to read the reports behind the care home ratings). To speed up the research other 'short cuts' to relevant information were sought and it became evident that (although not comprehensive itself) the 'Care Choices' site seemed better for useful information on the vast majority of care homes. This 'gateway' site saved time when looking as it hosted a greater number of homes than any of the other gateway sites. However this would not be obvious to the general browser.

Recommendations

Recommendations for providers

The information that would prove helpful for enquirers was determined, through both a mixture of trial and error in carrying out the research and through the personal experience of the researchers.

Websites should have:

- an indication of fee levels, or at least some sort of price banding
- information that is accurate and up to date
- what type of specialisms a provider might offer
- whether the service was 'age related'
- how open the service was to welcoming visitors
- what, if any, activity programmes were provided
- the general ethos of the provider (mission and values)
- easily identifiable, unique care home names and addresses with directions and maps

To expand on a couple of these bullet points -

Fees

It wasn't expected that providers would list set fees on their websites based on the principle that individual requirements differ and therefore individual service provision such as cost would be tailored, at least in some respects, to the individuals being catered for. However there seemed to be no reason why broad pricing parameters should not be disclosed (highest/modal/lowest fees) as a starting point, which would avoid unnecessary dialogue and potential embarrassment

Specialisms

The following, whilst not comprehensive, provide a starting point for the sort of specialisms that prospective customers might require but which are currently rarely shown:

- Learning disability awareness
- Mental Health expertise
- Physical Health specific support
- Sensory support/experience (blind, partially sighted, deaf, deaf/blind)
- Geriatric

- End of Life care strategy/approach/process

With a few exceptions, information on any of these areas could only have been gained by telephoning a selection of homes, asking the relevant questions again and making an informed comparison that way.

Further recommendations

- HWCD will share this report with care home providers to give them the opportunity to review their websites in light of the key findings of the HWCD volunteers, with a view to asking them if they are able to make improvements to their websites
- HWCD will approach Durham County Council to consider reviewing the current information held on their LOCATE website with a view to standardising the information available for individual care homes. Ideally to use a template for the information which is considered most important for people looking for appropriate accommodation/care. This could then be a more consistent resource as a first point of contact
- HWCD will have further discussions with CQC about the value of easily accessible, informative care home websites

Thank you

HWCD would like to thank the HWCD volunteers, Tony Bentley and Mervyn Hockin, for their hard work completing this valuable piece of work