

Hawthorn House

Enter and View Report 10th September 2025



Disclaimer: This report relates only to the service viewed at the time of the visit and is only representative of the views of the staff, visitors and residents who met members of the Enter and View team on that date.

Visit information

**Service address:**

Hawthorn House
Saint Godric's Close
Durham
DH1 5PJ

**Service provider**

Durham County Council

**Service manager**

Susan Smith

**Date of visit**

10th September 2025

**CQC rating**

Outstanding (December 2019)

**Healthwatch County Durham Enter and View Officer**

Claire Sisterson

**Authorised representatives**

Paulette Burgess (Volunteer)
Julie Brown (Volunteer)
Rosemary Chessum (Volunteer)
Mervyn Hockin (Volunteer)

Introduction

Our role at Healthwatch County Durham is to gather people's views and experiences, especially those that are seldom heard, to give them the opportunity to express how they feel about a service. The aim of an Enter and View visit is to gather views and experiences of residents, relatives and staff of a service and observe the environment to assess the quality of the service.

This was an announced Enter and View visit undertaken by authorised representatives who have the authority to enter health and social care premises, announced or unannounced. The team collate feedback gathered and observations made to compile a report. The report identifies aspects of good practice as well as possible areas of improvement. Healthwatch County Durham is an independent organisation, therefore we do not make judgements or express personal opinions, but rely on feedback received and objective observations of the environment. The report is sent to the manager for their opportunity to respond before being published on the Healthwatch County Durham website at www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk.

Where appropriate, Healthwatch County Durham may arrange a revisit to check the progress of improvements. The report is available to the Care Quality Commission, Healthwatch England and any other relevant organisations.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch County Durham would like to thank management, staff, residents and relatives, for making us feel welcome and for taking the time to speak to us during the visit.



General Information

Hawthorn House is a purpose built respite centre for people aged 16+ with complex needs, operating at its current location since 2007. They offer short term breaks and are based near Durham City centre. The facility can accommodate up to seven residents at any given time. During our visit, five residents were present and available to speak with us. Each bedroom is equipped with its own ensuite bathroom. A new wing has recently opened at Hawthorn House. The two Bluebell apartments are now available to service users with complex behavioural needs and are expected to access the service for longer durations than those using respite beds. Admissions to these apartments will often be unplanned or emergency placements (step-up admissions) from other community or residential settings. These placements will require Hawthorn House to provide a safer, more stable and specialist level of care to manage and address the individual's complex behaviours.

Hawthorn House employs approximately 26 staff members, including a cook and handyperson.

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) last inspected Hawthorn House in December 2019 and rated the service as outstanding. The most recent review of the property was in July 2023.

Methodology

The Enter and View representatives made an announced visit on 10th September 2025 and received feedback from 5 residents, 2 relatives (returned surveys by post) and 7 staff. Three further staff members responded to our questions in writing.

Two weeks prior to the Enter and View visit, we publicised our visit by leaving a display about Healthwatch County Durham and details of our visit. In order to capture as many residents and their families as possible, we left surveys and a 'post box' to be completed and left for our return.

We spoke extensively with the manager to ensure we could best meet the needs of the residents and enable them to share their experiences. We asked residents about 4 areas of their care; communication, environment, social preferences and the staff and service. We created an easy read version of the survey and also used visual prompts and emoji faces to gain insight into specific areas of the service. The team also recorded their own observations on the environment and staff-member interactions. Interviews were conducted one to one, and where necessary, staff assisted with communication. All responses were recorded anonymously.

To retain confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, any identifiable details have been removed from quotes.

The five residents who provided feedback ranged in age from 18 to 54 years old. We spoke with 2 male residents and 3 female residents.

Staff respondents included support workers, senior support workers, cook and handyman.

Summary

Hawthorn House provides a warm, person-centred environment where residents receive one-to-one support from caring, well-trained staff.

Communication is tailored to each individual, including those who are non-verbal, ensuring residents feel understood, empowered, and secure. The home is bright and welcoming, with personalised rooms, communal areas, gardens, and a sensory room.

Residents enjoy a wide range of activities and flexible routines that respect their preferences, including food choices and mealtimes. Families and residents expressed confidence in the care provided and described the staff as supportive and respectful.

Staff report feeling valued, supported, and part of a strong, collaborative team. Leadership promotes open communication, professional growth, and a positive workplace culture.

Hawthorn House demonstrates high-quality, compassionate, and inclusive care.

Recommendations include offering more evening and sensory activities, improving communication with families through shared electronic records, and continuing to celebrate staff achievements and teamwork.

Findings

Communication...

All residents we spoke with were supported by a member of staff on a one to one basis. Staff and residents were able to communicate well with each other. Staff were aware of individual communication needs and ensured they built up good rapport and trust with residents, this was evident by the empowerment we saw in the residents.

Many of the residents were non verbal, the staff adjusted communication styles as necessary and were able to understand all the residents needs and requests. During our observations, staff were close by to residents so they felt confident and secure, but were given the space to take the lead if they wanted to.

We witnessed a group activity and two of the residents joined in, one individual didn't want to, but indicated he wanted to be included in the shared space. The staff understood this and ensured he was happy. He sat and watched from the sideline, whilst tapping his foot to the music.

One family member mentioned they would like more details about the individuals care whilst at Hawthorn House, and suggested shared electronic records would be a useful source of information.

"I found it unusual to start with but the staff and the other service users talk to me"

"My daughter is completely non verbal. Familiar staff have a good understanding of her needs and preferences. I feel able to approach staff if I have a concern or question. Different staff talk to me at 'handover' "

"Shared electronic records have been discussed in the past which would improve communication, even a printout of care notes on discharge would be good"



Monthly Newsletters are created

Environment...

Hawthorn House is a warm, light and airy building. It feels welcoming, residents are encouraged to bring familiar items with them from home and their rooms are personalised with their name plate and belongings each time they stay. The building is a purpose built property, located in a residential area outside Durham City Centre.

The home offers a communal lounge, dining area and kitchen and seven private en-suite bedrooms all on one floor. The home also offers a sensory room and outdoor gardens.

Before each visit the bedroom will be completely emptied, a thorough health and safety and maintenance check takes place and the incoming residents belongings will all be placed in the room, to ensure it is familiar and welcoming for them. The bathrooms all have adapted baths and staff work on a two to one ratio for any moving and handling interventions.

The home offers a wide range of activities, both indoors and outdoors in their gardens, and has a minibus to organise outings.

“My daughter prefers her own space and staff help facilitate that utilising sensory room, garden and TV in her own room. Environment is maintained to a high standard. Always clean, modern and comfortable looking.”

Residents told us they felt safe here, and are happy to return. One resident has been coming since Hawthorn House opened in 2007 and feels they accommodate her well, with a bigger bathroom which she prefers.

“I find it is a safe environment here, I bring colouring books and pens and I do a lot of reading”

Sunflowers grown in the gardens



Photo of the hallway



Social Preferences...

Staff were fully aware of residents preferences and accommodated these. Staff carry a One Touch mobile device which gave staff access to all the residents records, whereby all preferences are recorded. We heard a range of activities that take place for residents, including:

- Arts and crafts
- Board games
- Disco nights
- Colouring
- Reading
- Music
- Photography
- Gardening
- Produce a newsletter
- Exercise sessions
- Community Walks
- Trips into the community for Christmas discos and Summer fayres etc

“Regular staff know my daughter well and accommodate her preferences—she likes to eat little and often and doesn’t like the dining room. I feel happy that regular staff work hard to keep my daughter happy and comfortable.”

Staff proactively accommodate a variety of individual preferences, for instance, a diverse mix of music, from pop and country to reggae and ska, to ensure everyone was included and catered for. One resident’s family noted there wasn’t a lot of activities in the evening.

Hawthorn House catered well for food preferences and dietary needs, including cultural requirements. One resident is Muslim and eats at certain times, work was done with the family to ensure this met their needs. All staff get to know the residents preferences; what they like and how they like things to be done. They work with residents to get their opinions and can be flexible depending on the individual on the day. They follow a menu but can be flexible if someone doesn’t want that dish. They are also flexible around portion sizes and textures. Breakfast is served as and when the individual wakes up and would like it, lunch around 12pm, dinner 4pm and supper 7pm.

Photos of staff and residents pets



Giant Connect 4 game



Staff and Service...

We heard and observed that staff were friendly and supportive. Both residents and their family felt comfortable and confident in the staff at Hawthorn House. Whilst there we observed staff encouraging and motivating residents and assisting them to be as independent as possible.

A key worker is allocated to each resident which means they gain a greater knowledge of the individual and their needs and preferences. One key worker works with a maximum of 3 residents. Staff seem to be proactive in being warm and welcoming to residents and ensuring they are at the heart of their own care.

“Staff are warm and welcoming. It is great that there are a lot of regular staff which helps with continuity and high standards of care.”

“I get very spoilt here I always look forward to going home too. And I tell my mom and dad about what I've been doing”

Staff feedback

Staff at Hawthorn House report feeling valued and well supported in their roles. There is a strong sense of teamwork and mutual respect between colleagues and managers, which contributes to a positive and welcoming working environment.

Staff consistently express that they feel valued, supported, and listened to by both their managers and their colleagues. Managers are described as kind, understanding, and flexible. The open-door approach to communication allows staff to raise concerns or ideas confidently, knowing that they will be taken seriously and handled fairly.

The staff teams work closely together and show a genuine willingness to help one another whenever needed. There is a strong team spirit, with everyone sharing responsibilities and supporting their colleagues during busy times or complicated situations. Staff report high levels of job satisfaction, often noting that teamwork makes their roles more enjoyable and helps ensure the best outcomes for service users.

“Its a relaxed and nice environment—we are close to each other as staff. We pick up on issues but I like to have time with the service users”

Staff feel well-trained and confident in their roles. Continuous learning and professional development are encouraged, ensuring that staff remain knowledgeable and capable in providing quality care. Team members demonstrate a clear understanding of individual service users' needs and preferences, which supports person-centred and flexible care practices.

“Getting to know one service user is key priority and every service user has a profile of their likes and dislikes and each time they come to stay a list of foods they like or dislike is put up in the kitchen it also indicates a type of diet that they require”

Staff consistently make time to talk and listen to service users, building strong and trusting relationships. There are over 70 registered users at Hawthorn House and the staff were aware of their individual preferences; how to communicate, favourite food, favourite activities etc. They describe the most rewarding part of their job as seeing service users happy, comfortable, and thriving. This close connection with the people they support helps to create a warm and supportive atmosphere at Hawthorn Hall.

“Resident is non verbal –if he is in pain or upset about something we see it. He doesn’t like it too noisy”

“I communicate with the service users a lot using their preferred method taking time to ensure that they understand. If they didn’t I would use a different method of communication or rephrase what I am saying. Periodically I hold a service users meeting and ask them what their wishes are and how we can improve the service to make their stay more enjoyable. If a service user disagrees with something I’d ask what they would like to change and speak to my seniors hopefully reaching a solution”

Overall, staff report a high level of satisfaction with their roles. They feel appreciated, empowered, and part of a caring, professional, and inclusive team. The combination of strong leadership, open communication, and mutual respect ensures that both staff and service users benefit from a positive, nurturing, and person-centred environment.

“The best thing about the care home is the high level of care that the person has and the staff carrying out their duties to a high standard”

“I feel the work is really worthwhile if I can make a service user smile give them happy memory or raise their self esteem I get so much job satisfaction from this”



Recommendations and provider's response

The following recommendations have been formulated based on observations of the environment and feedback gathered from residents, relatives and staff.

- More activities during the evening for residents to enhance overall wellbeing and reduce isolation during quieter times.**

Response: - Our daytime activities are designed to provide engaging experiences while ensuring evenings remain available for personal care and health support. Many of our residents have specialised care needs, so we prioritize continuity by aligning evening routines with those at home. This approach promotes comfort and consistency. In addition to care, we offer relaxing evening options such as movie nights and themed events. Social inclusion is a key focus—our staff are always present in communal areas to encourage interaction and prevent isolation.

- Staff requested more sensory activities such as water beads and sand foam to improve residents engagement.**

Response: - We appreciate staff contributions and strive to implement ideas that enhance activities. Following your recent feedback, we reviewed the proposed purchases. Unfortunately, we are unable to proceed due to safety and hygiene concerns.

·Water Beads: These products carry warnings regarding ingestion and choking hazards. Despite staff supervision, the potential risk is considered unacceptable.
·Sand Foam: This material cannot be washed or disinfected after use. Repeated handling by multiple individuals would create a significant risk of contamination.

- Maintain the current positive practices which contribute to better team work and ultimately more effective service delivery.**

Response :-We maintain our practises by regular staff supervision and appraisal in line with DCC requirements .We also value and act upon suggestions and feedback on our service via the annual sometimes bi annual customer surveys that we conduct across al of our service user families ,likewise service users are involved in monthly meetings These practices provide opportunities for service users and their families to share their views and contribute to service development and they will continue to be promoted

- **Shared electronic communication or improved information sharing at handover with families/carers to ensure continuity of care and build trust with families.**

Response:- Current Practice for Discharge Communication

Although most records are stored and transmitted electronically, we continue to provide discharge information to families and carers in handwritten letter format for several reasons:

- Personal Touch: A handwritten letter demonstrates care and attention, reinforcing a personal connection.
- Reliability: This method ensures families receive important information, as many do not routinely use email. It also allows us to confirm that each letter is sent home.
- Audit and Compliance: Mixing electronic and handwritten communication would complicate auditing. Additionally, handwritten letters reduce the risk of GDPR breaches, such as sending sensitive information to an incorrect email address.

We do use electronic communication for less confidential matters, such as respite booking, but many families still prefer paper copies

- **Continue to celebrate team and individual accomplishments which reinforces mutual respect, motivation and belonging.**

Response:- The team consistently promotes and celebrates achievements at both service and individual levels. Recently, the Bluebell Apartments at Hawthorn House received a prestigious award for service excellence. Additionally, the team secured three nominations in the DCC Inspire Awards:

- Innovation and Change – Recognizing efforts to make information accessible for all.
- Unsung Hero – Highlighting the manager's exceptional support for staff.
- Employee of the Year – Honouring the upcoming retirement of a long-serving team member.

The award ceremony is scheduled for December 2025.

- **Recognise and celebrate that staff feel confident reaching out for help, whether for expertise or moral support, this fosters inclusion and value.**

Response: – The manager will indeed continue to maintain an open-door policy, encouraging staff to seek support for both work-related and personal matters. This approach has fostered a positive team culture, reflected in a nomination for a DCC award a few years ago when she achieved DCC Employee of the Year and more recently she has been nominated and is now a finalist in the upcoming DCC Unsung Hero Award. Staff comments to support the nomination highlight the manager's commitment to family-friendly practices and the provision of emotional and practical assistance when needed. Indeed the team members support and value each other.

- **Encourage the team to highlight how staff contributions connect to the broader goals of the service, helping maintain a positive sense of belonging.**

Response:- To assist the team to know how their work contributes to the overall goals of the service, first of all they need to understand the goals and how to meet them ,this entails the management continuing to promote robust training to everyone, ensuring that all mandatory and specialist training is fulfilled and that there is continuous mentoring and support on site. By doing this, team members will hopefully feel equipped to fulfil their roles and that their efforts matter and are connected to a bigger purpose, which helps create a positive sense of belonging and engagement.

healthwatch

County Durham

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