

Experts by Experience

Home: The Sycamores (2/2 volunteer visits)

Date: November 2014

What is Experts by Experience?

Several WCS homes have been scrutinised by Age UK Warwickshire volunteers to find out what life was like for people living there. Volunteers explored all aspects of home life, from atmosphere and cleanliness to mealtimes and culture.

As well as using discreet observations, the Age UK also volunteers mingled with people who lived there to find out how they felt about their quality of life. Each volunteer filed a report rating things like cleanliness, staff attitude and atmosphere from poor to excellent, and also commented on how each score was derived. A first round of visits gave 16 'excellents', 16 'goods', and 3 'adequates', however more visits are planned throughout 2015. **Volunteers' names have been redacted, but here are their comments published in full.**

Note: All volunteers' comments are black, while their instructions from Age UK are in Magenta.

Sections:

Home Environment

Staff Attitude

What was Happening in the Home?

Eating and Mealtimes

Quality of Life

Home Environment

Score: 4/5

Describe your own experience of the quality of the home environment. Please consider things like:

How clean the home was, how it was decorated, how homely and comfortable it was, how the home was personalised to the people who live there, how the home smelt and whether the facilities were comfortable, pleasant and easy to find.

First impressions of the Home on entering were of a light, bright and well-cared for space which was very welcoming.

Resident's Areas: The Home is divided into three households on the ground, first and top floors. All the communal spaces in the households were well decorated and felt homely and pleasant. Bedrooms were fairly basic but people had been allowed to bring their own belongings and personalise their space. Some rooms felt better than others – often due to orientation and degree of sunlight. The 'front door' to every resident's bedroom has a knocker and letter box which is a homely touch and keeps an institutional feel at bay. Some people had really made an effort to make the room their own but the room of one person visited felt very sparse; maybe it was the case that they were not be able to make a choice or they have no family nearby to help personalise it more.

All three households have a communal living/dining/kitchen where many people spend the majority of their day. These areas were very well presented and the impression was given that both staff and people liked to spend time here. The main Living Area on the First and Second Floors lend themselves well to a quieter area at one end with the Kitchen at the other end and the lounge area in between. The Ground Floor did not have such a large Living Area and there was a lack of comfortable seating. There is also a separate quiet/TV room as well so people have an alternative place to spend their time. Children's toys and games were in evidence here indicating that visiting families make use of this room perhaps to gain a bit of privacy with their relative. The upper floors were also slightly more appealing than the ground floor as they had good views towards the town centre and of trees and sky.

There was a faint smell of urine on the ground floor which was not present upstairs.

People's comments were very positive, describing the Home as 'cosy', 'happy' and 'sunny'.

Entrance Area: The reception area is easily accessible to visitors and there is a WC here for Visitors use. This WC is obviously well used and seemed to house a linen bin for discarded staff uniform (?). It was quite messy with empty toilet rolls scattered on the floor – I tidied them up twice during my visit.

Staff Areas: The staff offices were secure and reasonably appointed but there seems to be a lack of space. The handover meeting took place in quite a small room which was not very comfortable for staff. The Kitchen was not visited.

Gardens: The rear garden is enclosed and secure and can be accessed by everyone who lives there. It is a tremendous asset being quite large and sunny. It is obviously well used as there are benches, a pergola, raised beds and a greenhouse for older people. A summer house was not accessible because one of the French Doors had come off its hinges so a bench had been placed in front of it to prevent access. There were two old indoor chairs dumped in one corner which detracted from the look of the garden and it felt as though it could do with more maintenance.

The garden near the Main Entrance was well kept with lawn, shrubs and a terrace with table and chairs.

Staff Attitude

Score: 5/5

Describe your own experience of the attitude of staff. Please consider things like:

How you and others at the home were treated, whether people were listened to, whether people were treated with dignity and respect, whether staff were polite and courteous? Whether they had a rapport with you/and people who lived there and how you/others were addressed (eg what name was used and whether you were asked what you'd like to be called), how you and others at the home were treated, whether people were listened to and whether they were treated with dignity and respect.

Members of staff were universally pleasant and welcoming from our first introduction to the Manager and Care Manager through to the domestic staff. They all made eye-contact, willingly engaged in conversation and regularly asked if I was OK and whether they could be of help. The Manager had obviously briefed his staff about our visit which made it easier for us to meld into the daily running of the Home. I introduced myself by my first name and staff remembered it straightaway.

As soon as we arrived the Manager took us into the Handover meeting from night staff to day staff. I was very impressed that the staff knew every patient and from memory described what sort of night they had, what their needs were, how they were on that morning. Despite being visibly tired after the night shift staff did not stint on their descriptions of each patient and often talked about them with affection even if their behaviour overnight had been challenging. Their patience and understanding shone through.

People are treated very well. I felt the staff knew the people that lived there and had a good rapport with them and were very supportive. They readily told me who likes to talk, who likes to listen to what's going on and who enjoys, for example, singing and dancing. One person came and encouraged me to dance to 'Daisy Daisy' with her (she was singing the song) and two others sang some lovely hymns to me! This indicated to me that they all feel relaxed and safe in their home and this extends to how they feel about visitors.

There was a lot of laughter and jolly banter between staff and residents and the Manager too - some residents joined in and some were just happy to sit and listen in a convivial atmosphere. Residents were treated gently if they were unwilling to do something. Challenging behaviour was dealt with quietly and quickly and with good humour – the staff seemed well trained in coping with this. Actions such as the need to put an apron on a very elderly lady who was eating her breakfast by herself (but rather messily) were handled tactfully and with light humour.

The Laundry lady clearly does what is a thankless task very well – she knew all the residents, had a joke with them and the system seems to work well to minimise the risk of missing items. In the day we visited one of the chefs had been involved in a car accident and had to go to hospital. The Manager, receptionist and staff stepped in to help and the lunch was served on time and without any fuss. It was clear that staff are used to working as a team wherever they are needed. People's comments included: 'we have some fun', 'I don't want to be in a Home but if I have to be, this is a good place', 'I am happy to be happy'.

The only negative I was made aware of was the fact that there are not very many men in the home. One male resident expressed the wish that he would have liked some more male company and that conversation tends to be 'all women's talk' but he was philosophical and resigned to this. As the majority of the staff is female this probably adds to the problem. In the absence of more male staff maybe regular input from a male befriender or some activities run by/geared to men would be of benefit.

What was happening in the home?

Score: 3/5

Describe your own experience of what was happening in the home. Please consider things like:

What people were doing – whether it seemed to be their choice, whether people were doing what they might have been doing living independently, whether people's interests and hobbies were being supported, the organised activities you observed, how were people encouraged to join in activities and could people choose not to join in.

We arrived at 8 am and were allowed to observe the handover from night staff to day staff. It was reported that people who suffer from dementia can be up and about for a large part of the night so quite a few of them wish to remain in bed until quite late in the morning. By the time we visited the households at about 8.45 am people who wanted to be up were dressed and having breakfast. Members of staff were in the Kitchens making breakfast and some were helping people to get up, washed and dressed. People in the Living Area were variously reading the paper, watching TV, reading a magazine, talking to the carers or just watching the general activity around them. Some were dressed but asleep. The household on the First Floor was the most lively and active with a good proportion of the residents in the main Living Area. The Ground Floor household was the quietest with not much activity going on when I was there. The people on the Second Floor were perhaps the most needy and the Living Area here had a quiet atmosphere but a lot of people were already there having breakfast, some were just quietly sitting and some were having coffee and biscuits. They seemed quite content to just be there in amongst the general goings on of the household. People could choose to join in or not as they wished.

A cat called Tigger has recently been acquired and staff and people enjoy greeting him and making a fuss of him.

The Manager showed us the Activities Planner and the activities promised for the day were a walk to go and feed the ducks and a Film Night at 7pm. The duck feeding didn't happen when we were there and although it was a lovely day this may have proved difficult to organise with the amount of staff available. The Manager explained that Activities Coordinators are being appointed and trained and will provide 35 hours of organised activities a week. This will help greatly as encouragement is probably needed to instigate or take part in an activity otherwise people will just sit.

In the summer residents clearly make use of the communal garden and some residents mentioned that they like to sit out there and knit whilst enjoying the sunshine and chatting. There is a greenhouse and residents have used it to grow tomatoes and seeds and there have been outdoor concerts there.

The small number of male residents could mean that activities geared to their likes and previous pastimes may be overlooked. Maybe regular input from a male befriender or some activities geared to men would be of benefit. One male resident had built a model railway engine – an activity or hobby group geared to 'tinkering' with bits of machinery would possibly be beneficial to him and others.

A number of residents expressed the view that it was a very good idea for us to come and talk to them and that they liked to meet new people.

Eating and mealtimes

Score: 4/5

Describe your own experience of the meals and eating. Please consider things like:

The comfort and atmosphere at the mealtime(s) you participated in, the quality and quantity of food offered and the way it was presented, whether residents got choice about their food and could they serve themselves, how staff supported people during the mealtime, whether people could choose when and where to eat, whether people could help themselves to drinks and snacks whenever they wished? Whether there was a variety and were they visible to residents and the comfort and atmosphere at the mealtime(s) you participated in.

Breakfast: This was being served when we first went into the various households. Cereal, toast and tea and coffee were being prepared in each household's kitchen. I did not observe any residents eating a cooked breakfast and I am not sure whether they were offered it or could have it if they wanted it. The staff seemed to cope well with the protracted time it took everyone to have breakfast as residents get up at various times of the morning.

Coffee time: This took over from breakfast as and when residents wanted it and there were always plenty of drinks on offer with biscuits and snacks as the residents wished. The staff had acquired some favourite 'pink wafer biscuits' which were very popular! A lot of residents suffer from dementia and so don't think to ask for drinks and snacks but the staff were making sure people were drinking and offered snacks as well.

Lunch: As noted earlier the chef had been involved in an accident so other members of staff had stepped in to help to prepare lunch. We were invited to join in with the lunch in the household on the First Floor. There was not enough space for all of us to sit in the Dining Area so rather than creating a situation where one of the residents had to have their meal in their room we asked to have ours at the breakfast bar in the Kitchen. The food is brought in a heated trolley from the main Kitchen downstairs to the three household Kitchens. The tables in the Dining Area had been set for lunch and residents' wishes as to where they wanted to sit were observed. One of the residents had laid the table as it is something she always likes to do.

The food trolley was placed near the Kitchen counter and the food was served from there. This means that the residents don't really see the food being served out so restricts their ability to say what they would like or how they would like it served. All the staff handling food wore disposable gloves. The first course was soup which was tested for temperature and served into bowls – there was no choice of soup and no bread or toast to accompany it. The main course had been chosen by each resident the day before and the choice was beef casserole or smoked haddock and pasta bake. This was again dished up in the Kitchen area and although there was a choice of new or mashed potatoes, cauliflower and runner beans the residents could not see them from where they were sitting. The vegetables were rather watery and a bit unappetising to look at. Gravy from the casserole was ladelled onto the plates in abundance and I was not aware of residents being given a choice of portion size. The pudding was rhubarb crumble and custard. Like the residents we were not asked about portion size or whether we wanted custard on it – huge amounts of custard were poured onto our puddings and we both had to ask for another one with no custard. We were all offered tea or coffee to follow and there were plenty of cold drinks on offer.

Maybe members of staff know the residents so well that they know what portion size people regularly want or whether they like gravy and custard. However residents may want a change from their usual requirement from time to time and this should be allowed for. In addition I feel that that more could be made of the serving up of the food perhaps from a side table in the Dining Area. This could just apply

to the vegetables, side dishes and gravy and custard so that residents could express some choice from what they can see. Staff members do give the residents the chance of seconds and they can try a bit of the other main course if they wish or try a bit of both.

The soup was a bit thin and watery but the main dish was tasty, hot and appetising and the meat seemed to be of good quality. The pudding was also hot, tasty and not too sweet.

Staff supported residents well during meal times with some having to be assisted to be fed. This was done in a quiet, patient and dignified way and the staff concerned devoted their attention to the person and did not jump up at the beck and call of other more able residents.

After the meal the plates were cleared away assisted by one of the residents and the washing up was done in the Kitchen – this was bit noisy but the Kitchen is well away from the Dining area so probably didn't disturb the residents at the Dining end too much.

We were not there for tea-time but the residents are offered a sandwich tea with cakes at about 4.30/5 pm.

I did not hear any complaints about the food and most of the residents said they enjoyed the food. One said 'it's good - you can't complain about it'.

Quality of Life

Score: 4/5

Describe your own experience of quality of life for people. Please consider things like:

The general appearance of people (clothes, hair, teeth, glasses), whether people's personal appearance choices and preferences were supported (eg men wearing their tie, women wearing makeup or jewellery), whether call bells were intrusive? Were they answered in good time, whether significant events and anniversaries were observed, whether the staff know people (their interests, preferences, life histories, family) and whether people were enjoying themselves in their home? Was there an atmosphere of calm, laughter, fun?

People at The Sycamores were all in clean clothes that matched and were tidy. Hair was neat and ladies were wearing jewellery if they wished to. Nobody seemed to be without glasses or teeth if they were needed. People were offered aprons when eating if needed to protect clothing. I observed one person choosing what he wanted to wear that day: whilst he was in bed the staff member stood by his wardrobe and he was offered a lot of options and suggestions as to what to wear and a choice of cap which was his special requirement! He had lost a lot of weight and many of his trousers were far too big for him leaving a more restricted choice. I asked if his family had been contacted to provide some better fitting clothes. His family are not involved with his care very much so his key-worker should do this. As this had not happened there may be a need for better communication between staff and key-workers.

Call bells were not intrusive at all and were checked when they rang.

Staff knew how old people were and also that birthdays were imminent e.g a 100th birthday in the next few weeks. I asked how this birthday will be celebrated and the staff said they will get as many people together as possible from the three households and gather everyone together on the First Floor for a party.

Staff gave very good descriptions of residents' preferences, life stories where possible and who got on with whom. Residents seemed relaxed, safe and happy and in the short time I was there 3 people sang to me. Many of them said how important music is to them.

The Manager showed me a diary for one of the people in which the staff record what a resident has done on a day to day basis. Family members are encouraged to add to it and stick photos and pictures into the diary and write messages as well. There were quite a few messages from grandchildren with lovely illustrations. This is proving a very useful way to remind people with short term memory loss that family members have been to visit them as well as being entertaining for them to look at. The Manager also showed me an example of a Life History prepared by family members for one of the people with letters and photos of familiar people and places which helps with reminiscence. He said more of this will be done once the Activities Coordinators start next month.

People seemed to enjoy being in the Home – there was a very caring atmosphere and people seemed to trust staff and appreciate the support they were given. Quite a lot of the staff were lively and created an atmosphere of fun and laughter within the households which most people seemed to enjoy. I didn't witness anyone complaining about this but some may find it too noisy and intrusive at times – but perhaps they choose to stay in their rooms.

Any other comments?

The overall experience was very good. Staff worked well as a team and supported each other and they all seemed to be friendly and outgoing from the Manager Clive to the cleaner. The chef had a car accident that day but the whole team pulled together to produce the lunch. The staff seemed happy, took responsibility and created a good ambience - this was especially so in the households on the two upper floors where there were more residents up and about. One 94 year old resident on the second floor told me there is 'love in the house' and she seemed to be a very happy lady. There was an air of contentment which was palpable. Some said they didn't want to be in a home really but if they had to be they were happy with The Sycamores.

Many people praised the Manager and one lady said he is 'really wonderful'. Finally, 1960s buildings are not very pretty to look at but they do have the advantage of good sized rooms with big windows and lots of light. WCS has made the most of these features inside and the standard of decorations, fixtures and fittings for people who lived there were good. However the space seemed rather limited for staff and an extension to provide better staff facilities would be beneficial. Also a large communal space such as a garden room or conservatory opening onto the garden would be an excellent addition to the facilities - perhaps with a small tea kitchen as well. This could be used by everyone from all three households together and could perhaps facilitate further friendships between people. It would also be more convenient for occasions such as musical events and birthdays and as somewhere to go with visitors on days when the weather is inclement or too cold to be able to use the garden.