

Living Well in Care Homes: Insights from Engagement

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About Healthwatch South Tees

Healthwatch South Tees (HWST), the operating name for Healthwatch Redcar and Cleveland and Healthwatch Middlesbrough, is the independent champion for local people who use health and care services.

Healthwatch was established as a statutory service in every Local Authority area in England, by the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Local Healthwatch work to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services, and to represent their voices to decision-makers so that services are better able to meet the needs of their local communities.

Background

As part of our 2025/2026 priorities, we carried out a series of engagement activities between April and June 2025 with 11 care homes across South Tees.

This work aimed to explore what makes a care home a place where residents can live well and have happy lives, while also identifying the challenges care homes face creating and sustaining such environments. Through conversations with residents, staff and families, we gathered insights into the everyday practices, values, and conditions that contribute to a positive quality of life.

Importantly, this work has been informed by insights from previous engagement projects, including *Your Future, Your Care* and *Growing Older: Planning Ahead*. In both projects, negative perceptions of care homes were shared. In this piece of work, we looked at where things are working well in order to share those examples and change perceptions.

In addition, the engagement provided a valuable opportunity to raise awareness of Healthwatch South Tees, our role, our services, and how we can collaborate with care providers, residents and families to promote continuous improvement in adult social care.

Care homes we engaged with

We engaged with a total of 11 care homes across South Tees, six in Redcar and Cleveland and five in Middlesbrough, providing a diverse range of settings and needs, including elderly residential care, enhanced care environments and homes providing specialist support for more complex requirements.

Ways we engaged

As our engagement activities were designed to explore how these care homes support residents to live well and fulfilled lives, we participated in existing activities, in others we provided materials to facilitate additional activities allowing us to build rapport with residents and staff and observe the positive impact firsthand. We also supplied games residents could enjoy together and donated items for raffles to help raise funds.

By doing this, we gained valuable insights into how residents live and the opportunities to support happiness, connection in and improved quality of life.

From the feedback we received, key themes emerged as important contributors to living well in a care home.

Key themes for living well

1. A homely atmosphere & environment

A range of positive practices contributed to a warm, homely environment, though experiences varied across settings.

Good practice observed in some homes included:

- **Personalised living spaces:** for example, in some homes, residents were encouraged to bring their own furniture and decorations, helping to create a familiar and comforting atmosphere. One resident showed his suite, furnished with items chosen with his late wife, describing the home as “the next best thing” to living independently.
- **Strong sense of belonging:** A resident who had lived in the same home for 20 years referred to it as “home,” reflecting the emotional attachment that you might expect to see in those living independently.
- **Positive social connections:** Residents spoke of forming friendships and enjoying social interaction. One commented, “It’s nice to mix with other people like yourself,” while another shared how they felt welcomed by residents during their initial visit.

- **Staff attentiveness:** During our visits staff were often praised for going the extra mile by doing things such as preparing packed lunches for hospital visits, regularly offering refreshments and facilitating meaningful interactions.
- **Family integration:** We observed a gentleman who visited his bed bound wife daily. Staff supported their time together, providing meals and encouraging shared activities, helping to maintain their bond with compassion and kindness.
- **Comfortable communal areas:** Some homes featured luxurious reception spaces, gardens and large shared areas that enhanced the atmosphere.

Individual stories from different homes:

- One resident shared how his move from respite care to permanent residential care during COVID had been supported by regular staff check-ins.
- A family member described how their father was involved in the decision to move into the home and settled quickly, saying, "We've never looked back."
- Another resident, who hadn't had the chance to visit before moving in, settled well and began participating in more activities than they had in a long time.

2. Access to outside spaces/garden

Feedback highlighted the importance of outdoor spaces in residents' wellbeing, with several homes demonstrating good practice in maintaining and using these areas.

Good practice included:

- Well-maintained gardens and outdoor spaces, with seating, shade, flowers, plants and bird feeders. These spaces provided a pleasant and calming environment for residents and visitors.
- In some homes, residents were supported to access outdoor areas, including being helped outside after activities or enjoying views from indoor communal spaces such as cafés.
- Outdoor spaces with parasols, tables and plants created attractive and usable environments, encouraging interaction and relaxation.
- One home had wrap around gardens and a fish pond with koi carp, offering residents and families a peaceful space to enjoy nature.
- Families shared how outdoor spaces supported intergenerational connection, with grandchildren playing in the garden and residents enjoying watching them from their windows.

Areas for improvement:

- In one home, the shade structure in the outdoor area had been broken for some time, limiting residents' ability to sit outside comfortably in warm weather. Both residents and families expressed a desire for shaded areas to be restored or improved.

While not all outdoor areas were viewed during our visits, the feedback suggests well designed, accessible outdoor spaces play a valuable role supporting wellbeing, interaction and family engagement.

3. Resident voices shaping care, activities and daily life

Although feedback on resident and family involvement in decision making was limited, several care homes demonstrated meaningful ways for resident voices to be heard and incorporated into daily life.

Good practice included:

- In one home residents were involved in staff meetings and decision-making processes, including contributing to how the home is run and participating in risk assessments for activities.
- Regular meetings with residents, families, and friends were held bi-monthly or quarterly, providing structured opportunities for feedback and suggestions.
- One home shared an example of responsive action following a family suggestion: a previously unused room was transformed into a "Reflection Room" with prayer books in different languages to support diverse needs and offer a quiet space for families.

These examples show a commitment to inclusive practice and valuing the voices of residents and their families. Expanding these opportunities across more homes could further enhance engagement and shared decision-making.

4. Active participation in planned activities

Feedback highlighted a range of approaches used to actively encourage residents to participate in meaningful activities, with varying levels of success.

Good practice included:

- Several homes offered daily activity sessions which staff reported helped improve residents' mental health, reduce isolation and encourage creativity.

These sessions were seen as a way to draw residents out of their rooms and encourage social interaction.

- During visits, residents were observed actively engaging in activities such as pottery painting, jigsaw puzzles, pool and flower arranging
- Homes with multiple communal spaces enabled different groups to form around shared interests, allowing residents to choose activities that suited them. Staff made efforts to consult residents individually and in groups to understand their preferences and tailor activities accordingly.

Areas for improvement:

- In some homes staff noted low engagement levels, with one activity coordinator stepping back into a care role due to limited resident participation.
- A resident shared that she did not feel she had much choice in the activities and was often unaware of the daily schedule, suggesting a need for clearer communication and more inclusive planning.
- In one setting, the absence of a scheduled activity during the visit contributed to limited interaction, reinforcing the importance of consistent programming to stimulate engagement.

Overall, while many homes demonstrated proactive efforts to encourage participation, there is scope to improve consistency, communication and coproduction planning to ensure activities are inclusive, engaging and person centred.

5. Involvement in everyday household tasks

While we did not receive feedback on this theme from all homes visited, several homes shared or demonstrated good practice in encouraging residents to take part in everyday tasks.

- At one home, staff described their approach as supporting the “whole life picture”, where residents are encouraged to participate in tasks such as gardening, preparing for birthdays, and shopping. This was seen as a way to develop ownership and inclusion.
- In another home, a resident was observed gardening independently, using their own tools and proudly showing the roses they had been growing, reflecting a strong personal connection and a sense of pride.
- A third home shared how residents support one another, with one lady expressing how she loved to help others. Staff described how she regularly

reassures another resident who becomes confused. Staff support these interactions with compassion and humour.

These examples show how individual homes are creating opportunities for residents to remain involved in everyday life, contributing in ways that are meaningful to them. The practices shared highlight the value of enabling residents to participate in household tasks and social roles that promote wellbeing and connection.

6. Variety and choice in activities offered

Feedback highlighted a broad range of activities offered, with varying levels of engagement and accessibility. While not all homes provided the same scope of activities, there were clear examples of good practice and some areas where improvements could be considered.

Good practice observed or reported:

- A selection of activities offered across different care homes included quizzes, bingo, pottery painting, creative writing, therapy dog sessions, Zoo Lab visits, chair-based exercises, sensory mornings and themed social events such as cocktail parties and disco nights.
- One home had three activity coordinators working flexibly to ensure continuity even during staff absences.
- In one home, residents were encouraged to contribute ideas and had opportunities to choose activities they enjoyed. This included planning themed nights and participating in events like the Thrift Challenge, where residents visited charity shops to complete preset tasks.
- In one home, staff reported that daily afternoon activities helped improve residents' mental health, reduced isolation and encouraged creativity.
- A care coordinator shared a comprehensive activity file, showcasing a wide range of outings and social events available to residents.
- Pet therapy was introduced in one home through the adoption of rabbits raised from a young age to enable residents to be comfortable with handling.

Observations made:

- Residents were seen actively participating in activities such as pottery painting, jigsaw puzzles and pool. Others were involved in flower arranging for an open day stall.
- One resident expressed enjoyment in reading, watching films and appreciated spending time in the lounge with a close friend.

Areas for improvement:

- A relative raised concern that there was limited structured physical activity, noting that residents often spent afternoons sitting in communal areas or their rooms, with few opportunities for movement.
- Staff highlighted financial and staffing pressures as barriers to delivering consistent and varied activity programmes, particularly for residents with higher support needs or those who are bed-bound.

Overall, while many homes demonstrated creativity and responsiveness in their activity planning, there are opportunities to improve consistency, physical engagement and communication to ensure all residents can participate meaningfully.

7. Activities tailored to individual needs

Feedback showed a strong commitment to person centred activities, particularly for residents with complex physical or cognitive conditions. However, the level of provision and accessibility varied.

Good practice observed or reported:

- A resident with limited grip and no appetite was able to enjoy a sausage making activity, smiling and pretending to eat, highlighting the impact of inclusive and sensory experiences.
- Some homes offered seven day activity programmes, including day trips, sensory sessions and holidays, with access to facilities like sensory rooms and accessible kitchens.
- Sensory rooms and accessible kitchens were available in some homes, allowing residents to engage independently or with support.
- Staff reported that residents with higher needs responded best to one-to-one engagement, such as music, hand massage and nail painting, which could be integrated into daily care routines.
- A mobile activity station was used to support bed-bound residents, with one individual enjoying foam darts from their bed, remembering the times they played darts for their pub team.
- Staff were described as enthusiastic and conscientious, actively seeking ways to include residents with varying abilities and encouraging participation based on mood and capacity.

Areas for improvement:

- Staff in one home noted that more activity leaders and specialist equipment would help support residents with complex needs more effectively.
- A resident with visual impairment shared that she loved to listen to music and would like to attend a concert, suggesting a need for more personalised opportunities.
- Another resident expressed missing activities she once loved, such as crocheting and swimming, and felt uninspired in the current offers, highlighting the importance of aligning activities with personal interests.
- Suggestions were made to improve accessibility, such as offering large print or audio books and enabling subtitles on televisions for residents with hearing impairments.
- One activities coordinator welcomed ideas for inclusive activities, particularly for residents who are bed-bound or have severe mobility difficulties.

Overall, while many homes demonstrated a person centred approach to activity planning, there is scope to improve provision for residents with complex needs through additional resources, accessibility and personalised engagement.

8. Compassionate and dedicated staff

Feedback and observations from the homes visited highlighted the importance of compassionate, person-centred care in creating a positive and supportive environment for residents.

Good practice observed or reported:

- Staff were consistently described as caring, attentive and compassionate, ensuring residents were comfortable, hydrated and supported throughout the day.
- In one home, staff responded with gentle distraction and care when a resident became agitated, showing sensitivity and emotional awareness.
- Staff were seen engaging residents in music and dancing, creating happy moments and encouraging social interaction.
- A resident shared how staff help her stay connected with her family, including supporting her in sharing photos and stories about loved ones.

- In another home, staff made sure a resident could continue his monthly routine of buying a rose, allocating support to maintain this activity which was so important to him.
- Staff were observed to highlight residents' individual strengths and achievements, such as celebrating a painting displayed in the hallway or encouraging a resident to show her dance moves, reinforcing self-esteem and personal identity.
- One home demonstrated flexibility and emotional responsiveness, with staff using humour, music and gentle interaction to engage a resident with limited communication.
- A staff member bringing their dog into work was appreciated by residents, offering comfort and companionship in a natural and informal way.

Areas for improvement:

- In one home, there was less visible interaction between staff and residents during the visit, though this may have been due to post lunch rest time, as noted by a family member.
- On arrival at one home, staff did not introduce visitors or explain their presence, which may have affected residents' comfort. A brief introduction could help residents feel more at ease during visits.

Overall, the feedback reflects a high standard of compassionate care in many homes, with staff going beyond routine duties to build relationships, support emotional wellbeing and celebrate individuality. Continued attention to communication and consistency in engagement would further strengthen the resident experience.

9. Social connections & community links

Across the care homes visited, there was positive evidence of efforts to encourage social connection and maintain links with the wider community. Many homes actively promoted inclusion, both within the home and through external engagement.

Examples of good practice included:

- Regular open days and monthly coffee mornings that welcomed the local community.

- Intergenerational connections, such as monthly visits from a local nursery, which were valued by both residents and staff.
- Live entertainment and visits from singers helped create a lively and engaging atmosphere.
- One home was noted for being veteran friendly, offering themed activities and maintaining a monthly connection with the Royal British Legion.
- Faith based connections were supported, with one resident attending a Christmas service at the Cathedral, allowing him to reconnect with acquaintances from his church.
- Families appreciated being able to join in with activities, highlighting the importance of shared experiences and continued quality time with loved ones, even when living apart.

Areas for improvement:

- While many homes had strong community links, the depth and frequency of these connections varied. Some homes could benefit from more consistent or diverse opportunities for residents to engage with the outside world.
- There is potential to further support family involvement in activity planning and delivery, ensuring that relatives feel included and empowered to contribute to their loved one's social life.

Overall, the feedback reflects a positive commitment to building community and maintaining meaningful relationships, with opportunities to strengthen consistency and inclusivity across all homes.

10. Bringing the outside in (e.g. health, wellbeing, fun)

There were several positive examples of how care homes are supporting social engagement and creating a welcoming environment for residents:

Good practice observed:

- A fully equipped hairdressing salon was available for residents, contributing to a sense of normality, dignity and personal wellbeing.
- Weekly visits from a local nursery were a clear highlight, offering meaningful intergenerational interaction. Residents, particularly those who enjoy being around young children, find great joy in these visits.

Areas for improvement:

- Despite efforts to involve the wider community, such as delivering leaflets locally, some homes struggled to attract people. Factors such as the location of the home, being less visible, may be a barrier to community engagement.
- This highlights a need for more creative or accessible outreach strategies to strengthen community links.

Overall, while there is strong evidence of enriching social opportunities within the homes, particularly through intergenerational activities, further work could be done to enhance external community involvement and overcome environmental barriers.

11. Celebrations

Across the homes visited, there was strong evidence of celebrations being used to encourage community spirit and recognise important milestones in residents' lives.

Good practice included:

- Personalised celebrations were a key feature, with residents choosing their own themes for birthdays, examples included a "smelly cheese" party and a McDonald's themed celebration.
- Homes made a special effort to mark significant milestones, such as a resident's 25th anniversary of living in the home, celebrated with balloons and a party.
- Themed events were used to bring variety and interest to the home environment. These included VE Day commemorations, Wimbledon themed decorations and garden afternoon teas.
- Everyday celebrations, such as birthdays, were marked with songs and cake, helping residents feel valued and recognised.

Areas for improvement:

- While celebrations were clearly a strength in many homes, the feedback did not indicate whether all residents, particularly those with higher needs or limited communication, were equally included in planning or participating in these events.
- There may be further opportunities to involve families and the wider community more regularly in celebration planning and participation, enhancing the sense of shared joy and connection.

Overall, celebrations were used effectively to create a vibrant and inclusive atmosphere, with several homes demonstrating creativity and a strong commitment to making residents feel special.

12. Opportunities for social outings

Several care homes demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting residents' independence and enabling access to the wider community.

Good practice included:

- Residents who are able are encouraged to go out independently or with family and friends, maintaining autonomy and social connection.
- For those requiring support, outings with a carer or companion can be arranged, provided the resident is able to express their wishes.
- Some homes have invested in a wheelchair accessible minibus, which has been positive for group outings. Residents valued the flexibility to choose destinations and appreciated the freedom this provided.

These examples show how considerate planning and appropriate resources can help residents remain active and engaged in their communities.

Summary of findings

- A comfortable, friendly home helps residents' wellbeing and enjoyment of life.
- Outdoor areas were of great value, but not always accessible.
- When residents helped make decisions, it made a big difference to their sense of purpose.
- Daily activities helped people feel less lonely, but some homes struggled to get everyone involved.
- Activities were varied, but money and staff shortages could regularly have an impact on their provision.
- Helping with small tasks like gardening made residents feel fulfilled.
- Kind, caring staff made a big impact.
- Events and visits helped residents stay connected, though remote homes found this harder.
- Celebrations and trips helped residents feel included and more independent.

Suggestions for going forward

To build on the good practice observed and address areas for improvement, the following actions are suggested:

- Recognise that quality of life is as important as quality of care. Homes should continue to prioritise emotional wellbeing, personal fulfilment and social connection alongside clinical support.
- Coproduce and clearly communicate person centred and consistent activity programmes that are embedded in care planning.
- Support staff with training and resources to deliver meaningful engagement, to help ensure all residents can participate fully.
- Empower residents to shape their daily experiences, from decision making to household tasks and celebration planning.
- Budget to provide activities; recognising this as a core component of care will help ensure consistency and equity across care homes, enabling all residents to benefit from a rich and engaging environment.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the following care homes that we visited as part of our engagement work. We are especially grateful to the staff, residents, and family members who welcomed us, shared their experiences, and contributed valuable insights.

Ann Charlton Lodge

Belmont View

Harmony House

Sandbanks

Skelton Court

Marske Hall – Valorum Care

Delamere Lodge

Nunthorpe Hall

The Willows

Tollesby Hall

Windermere Grange

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