

Introduction

The mhs homes Customer Scrutiny Panel (CSP) has considered and agreed to do a 'light touch' review detailing their personal experience as an mhs resident living through COVID.

The speed of change and the need to find new ways to live and deliver services safely has been a challenge for all.

We have all had to learn new ways of living and working to meet government guidance and it is likely that we can all take from the current experience and time of reflection to help shape the future ways of communicating, service delivery and engagement. A new normal is inevitable and may bring a new resident service offer that is driven by technology and delivers value for money whilst recognizing that many residents have a range of needs that must be met.

The CSP would like to thank mhs for the hard work and positive approach to supporting their staff and customers. It is recognized and understood that office-based staff are where possible working from home since 23 March. At the time of writing there is no indication of when services will return to normal or a new normal.

The CSP understands that an agile and flexible approach demonstrated through the current pandemic by staff and customers will be further tested and be vital as mobilization of services and financial needs of the business are met.

Key Findings

The CSP has shared their personal experiences and feedback from both staff and other residents living in their communities.

a) Supporting older and vulnerable residents:

Residents have positively welcomed the joint partnership between mhs and the Council to support those that are potentially more vulnerable and asked to isolate for 12 weeks. One CSP member stated:

"We cannot fault the care and kindness offered to those living in our community that are potentially more vulnerable and afraid by staff and other community groups, it shows that we are not forgotten".

Older residents reported receiving telephone calls in the first two weeks of the lockdown to check on their wellbeing and to know if they required support and access to food supplies. Many have received food parcels delivered to their homes by mhs and Council staff containing non-perishable and fresh vegetables. Others who may find cooking difficult have received cooked meals delivered daily between 12-1pm. It was noted that apart from food deliveries that there has been support to collect medical supplies from pharmacies.

One CSP member living in general needs housing who is recognized as vulnerable has not received a telephone call during the pandemic to check on personal wellbeing and whether support is required. This demonstrates that there must be residents slipping through the gaps and perhaps it may be helpful to review the list of residents contacted to check that contact is wider and inclusive.

In supported housing communal lounges and kitchens have been closed to encourage residents to safely isolate in their flats. A CSP member advised that he had contacted the CEO regarding closing the communal lounge in his supported housing scheme because some residents wanted to use it and was very impressed with the speed of response within two hours with a call from the CEO and seeing follow up instructions for all supported housing schemes provided on the website. The response and experience by the CSP member has demonstrated that although the office is closed everyone is still working, listening and helping to keep everyone safe. Leadership at the time of crisis is what residents will take forward and reflects the ethos of MHS as caring and supporting all customers.

b) Caretaking services

Seeing a friendly face and knowing who is delivering a service in their community is important to residents. It was reported by an estate resident monitor that a long serving caretaker on the estate has recently retired. A new person has been recruited and started working on the estate but no information was provided for residents about the change of caretaker either by letter or on the estate noticeboard. It is likely that with all the challenges faced by the service that the importance of updating residents was missed.

There was feedback that in the early weeks of the pandemic that increased cleaning in communal areas and lifts was increased to twice a day. However, it was reported that this has now stopped and surfaces are not being cleaned. Also there was concern expressed that there are no notices provided in blocks of flats advising single usage of lifts and use of hand sanitizers and regular hand washing etc. It was felt that the change in cleaning regime has not been explained and may be a result of staff isolating or the need to divert resources to supported housing schemes to support the more vulnerable residents. It was considered a missed opportunity that caretaking service changes have not been publicized on the website or in a newsletter.

c) Communication

A CSP member stated that an email had been sent to an mhs officer regarding a query related to service charges for caretaking and a written response was not received. A query was then posted using My Account and a response received. This raised a question about the importance of having an automated email message always advising if an officer is working or giving advice to contact and report an issue to the call centre so that it is logged and not likely to get lost or missed.

A query regarding grass cutting was raised on My Account regarding grass having been cut at the front of the property but the rear grass being left

uncut. A positive result was achieved with the rear grass then being cut and demonstrates that if the right channels are used to communicate a positive outcome is achieved. The CSP feels strongly that there should be a clear message on the website about how to report issues and the importance of using the call centre or My Account.

Automatic out of office email notifications are being used to inform residents when officers are on leave. Callers are advised that if the matter for the call is not urgent to come back at a later date. It is accepted that officers are where possible working remotely from home and are contactable and delivering the service remotely.

The complaint reporting service through the website is working effectively through the pandemic. A user of the service wishing to leave a complaint regarding the homeownership team received an acknowledgement within the standard time, but is awaiting an outcome from the complaint. So we need to ensure that we limit the opportunity for blaming COVID for delays in responding and that if agreed timescales are being affected that this is made known on the website so expectations are managed. This has been done for the repairs service but not other services.

The mhs newsletter on the website was considered very helpful but there was a view that this should be a regular update. It was stated that they were pleased to receive and see an update from the CEO on 28 April but would like to see an update fortnightly. Knowing what is happening and the impact on services and resources is very important to residents as many are feeling isolated and reassurance is gratefully received. However, there was a view that the update was officer/service focused and not addressing issues affecting residents.

One CSP member stated that contact was made through on-line chat to find out about options if they were not able to pay rent. The CSP member reported not being able to get advice and at the time no information was found on the website. It is important that those responding to queries are kept updated with advice to give the callers who need important information.

The opportunity to put questions directly to the CEO on 20 May was welcomed. Feedback indicated that this should be an approach to be used after the pandemic because it provides direct access to all residents to participate.

The website does provide information on how to stay safe and changes to service delivery. It was interesting that a number of CSP members had not used the website to access information. However, the header for the section on guidance could be more explicit and tell residents please read to find out about keeping safe and how we are working to help you and your home. The section has helpful information but could be made more welcoming with the use of colour and symbols to make finding the sections easy to find. There is no date as to when the page was updated or information about how to access local services such as food banks etc. It is understood that there are a number of residents who are on the NHS vulnerable list who are supported by the Council hub with food parcels. This can leave a number of residents

struggling to pay their rent and provide food where their personal circumstances have changed due to maybe reduced working hours or being excluded from any external financial support. Providing information through including links to external support would be helpful and allow residents to be resourceful and access additional support that is there to help them.

d) Repairs

Residents understand that only emergency repairs are being carried out because of social distancing and self- isolation restrictions in homes. There were questions regarding how the delayed responsive repairs will be managed going forward and questioned whether there will be a new categorization of responsive non – emergency repairs so that the mobilization of the service once lockdown is eased is fair and not based on “who shouts the loudest”.

e) Community impact of COVID

There was concern amongst CSP members about the longer -term impact on the local economy on jobs and the ability to pay rent/service charges.

No CSP member felt that there was a greater community spirit as a result of COVID. This does not reflect the national view but it maybe that wider resident feedback is required to understand if the view stated by the CSP is reflective of the community.

Concern that the business is losing income due to not letting homes and the need to look at new approaches for viewing and sign ups. CSP suggest that technology could be used with virtual tours of new homes and technology to enable officers to do sign ups using visual audio techniques.

Recommendations

The CSP would like to propose that mhs:

- a) Keep residents updated on changes to staff delivering services frontline in the community
- b) Newsletters be sent fortnightly
- c) Look at developing greater use of technology to provide front line services such as inspections/signups etc.
- d) CEO Q & A session to be retained longer term
- e) Use noticeboards to remind residents about safety and cleaning of communal areas
- f) Carry out a post COVID survey of residents to understand challenges and positive outcomes achieved
- g) If needed change service targets to meet new working arrangements
- h) Ensure that calls to the elderly and vulnerable are regular through the pandemic
- i) While on online chat with mhs. COVID seems to be the standard response on delays. COVID cannot be used as continuous excuse.
- j) Cleaning has been intermittent. Full for two weeks then none for two weeks. Also, not up to standard. Should be a list on the noticeboard on

- what is being cleaned and times/when and if not a contact if it's been missed.
- k) Understand that hand sanitizer cannot be supplied to every site but signage readily available (NHS etc.) could be put in sites. Also, this would be a visual aid to say mhs is taking things seriously. These could include using lift by yourselves etc.
 - l) Seems to be priorities and standards changing based on business rather than resident needs For example not bothered about hovering or grass cutting or just more regular wipe downs of communal areas
 - m) Continue with calls to those that are vulnerable and review list to ensure that other vulnerable residents are not being missed. It was confirmed that those living in supported housing or a retirement property had been contacted but those that are vulnerable in general needs appear to have not been contacted. To ensure that details about resident needs are current request that the call centre checks resident personal details including vulnerability when a resident makes contact because this may explain why 20% of CSP members with ill health and vulnerable have not been contacted to check on their wellbeing or illustrates that only those in supported/hostel housing were contacted.

Conclusion

Overall there is positive feedback on the way that mhs has communicated and supported residents through this challenging time. There are learning outcomes that can be used to shape service delivery. Strong leadership has positively raised the profile of mhs and managed expectations of residents. It is always important to look at things through the 'eyes' of residents because their priorities at times may conflict with the business needs- so it is about listening and together working to make a difference.