



Choosing a Care Home

Customer Experience Project Report

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1.0 Executive Summary

Whilst many service users and their relatives go through the process of choosing a care home successfully and without problem, it can be a difficult experience for some. This research has highlighted the wide range of experiences customers undergo, and Adult and Community Services (ACS) aim to improve the process so that all customers have the same level of experience.

When choosing a care home, similar factors influence all customers regardless of any demographic differences, but the level of financial information that some receive is poor, and has led to confusion and consequently, a lack of trust in the process.

Furthermore, those customers who go through the process under the guidance of Lancashire County Council's (LCC) Care Navigation team have a better experience overall compared to those who do not, highlighting the importance of the service.

1.1 Main findings

The main findings from the research are:

- Staff, and the facilities of care homes are the most influential factors when choosing a home, and 74% of respondents would be influenced by the same factors should they go through the experience again.
- Several respondents had to identify potential homes themselves and were not given any help or support through the difficult process of choosing a care home for a relative.
- Those respondents who went through the experience of choosing a care home under the guidance of LCC's Care Navigation team said they were more fully briefed on the process and all the implications of choosing a care home, with 80% agreeing there was nothing more LCC and the Care Navigation team could do to improve their experience.
- 42% of all respondents said that they did not understand the information they were given about the way LCC funds places, and 40% did not understand how LCC sets the fees that it pays. Only 24% of respondents knew how much LCC would contribute before they chose the care home.
- Half of all respondents said they did not look for, or use online reviews or Care Quality Commission (CQC) ratings online before choosing a home although 87% of respondents did visit a home before making their choice.

1.2 Recommendations

- Lists of potential homes could be made available to all customers, regardless of the service they are under, sorted by their individual, specific needs – for example distance from home, location, facilities, size, staff to resident ratio, giving the service user more choice, the opportunity to independently search for homes aided by trusted information, and enable them to be better informed about the process and their alternatives;
- A single point of contact for service users, and a more personal approach with a consistent message from all officers. A leaflet or information pack outlining the processes, an expected timeline, and a list of useful contacts could ensure this, as well as officer's actively making regular contact with service users and their families; and
- Officers could inform customers of the benefits of viewing the CQC reports of potential homes, as this may provide them with the ability to make an informed decision while remaining impartial as a service.

2.0 Introduction

Customer Experience Projects are undertaken to gain a better understanding of the customer or end user experience of LCC services and how they compare to the frontline staff experience of delivering services. This will facilitate service-level improvements.

This research was commissioned by Brian Monk (One Connect Ltd- Lancashire Procurement Centre of Excellence) and Jane Kitchen (Care Navigation/Brokerage Manager, Adult and Community Services), to help understand and improve the experience of customers when choosing Lancashire County Council residential care for a relative.

The issue of fees and how LCC contributes to the funding of places is important, and ACS would like to investigate if those choosing care homes are aware of such financial information prior to making their choice, if the information they receive is easy to understand, and if the fees that LCC pays are explained adequately. ACS wish to make the process of choosing a care home as simple as possible for service users and their families who are likely to be going through a difficult time.

ACS also offers the Care Navigation service, which is dedicated to assisting service users to make informed choices about their care. The team help people, including self funders, to find services to meet their personal needs by talking to users about their preferences, and identifying the services available that match their specific needs and requirements. They search for care providers, discuss options and views, and advise users on the next steps. They also approach care agencies and arrange visits and trials so users can give them a try.

3.0 Research objectives

The objectives of the research were to:

- Understand what factors people consider important when making their choice of residential care;
- Understand the experience of the service user and their family when choosing residential care in a Lancashire County Council care home;
- Assess the level of funding information and LCC contributions to fees a person receives when making their choice of residential care; and
- Assess whether those customers who use LCC's care navigation team have a different experience to those who do not.

4.0 Methodology

A database was compiled by ACS of a selection of service users and their relatives who had chosen a care home between September 2012 and February 2013, and letters were sent to the selected sample explaining the research and giving them the opportunity to opt out. 46 people from this sample agreed to speak with officers and complete the telephone interview, with the majority of people being close family members of the service users. 10 of the participants had been under the guidance of the Care Navigation team.

A script of 11 questions was produced that incorporated all of the research objectives. This was split into appropriate sections, such as choosing the care home, fees, and influences. The script was printed so that researchers could make notes during telephone calls. Open ended questions were asked of respondents and once all the calls had been completed, results were coded and analysed.

4.1 Limitations

Although this study was as thorough and responsive as possible it is still inevitable that there were some limitations. For example, it was at times difficult to ask the questions in the order they were designed, as respondents often spoke at length about their experience in no particular order, especially if their experience had been bad. This meant that some questions were not recorded for a small number of participants.

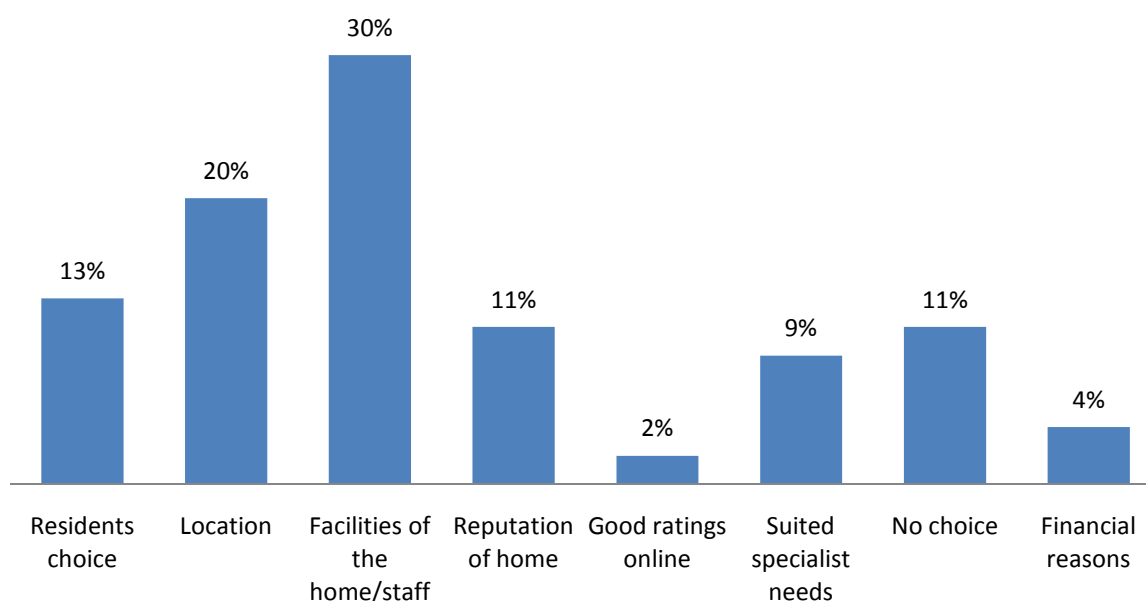
5.0 Main research findings

5.1 Influences when choosing residential care

When asked what influenced their choice of care home, nearly a third of respondents said the facilities of the home and the staff (30%). The location of a home was the second most common response (20%).

Chart 1 – What influenced your choice of home?

BASE: All respondents (46)

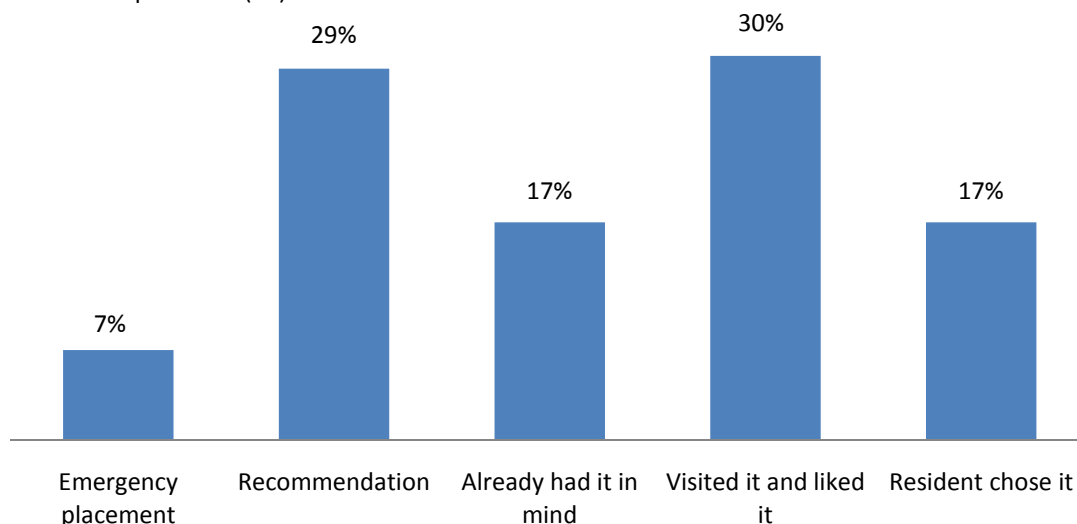


When asked if the same things would influence them if they had to make the decision again, nearly three quarters of respondents said they would.

When asked, 'how did you choose the care home?' nearly three fifths of respondents said because of a recommendation or because they had visited it and liked it.

Chart 2 – How did you choose the care home?

BASE: All respondents (46)



Several respondents said that they had to identify potential care homes themselves and that they were not adequately supported through the process.

Respondents were asked if they visited the home before they made their choice. Nearly 9 in every 10 respondents said they had.

5.2 The Care Navigation team

Four-fifths of those who had been through the Care Navigation team were satisfied that nothing further could be done to improve their experience of choosing a home. (80%) Only a quarter of those who had not been through the Care Navigation team agreed that nothing more could improve their experience. (24%)

Four-fifths of respondents who had been through the Care Navigation team said that they were satisfied that the financial implications of choosing a care home were fully explained to them and said that they understood the way LCC sets fees. (80%)

5.3 Fees and financial guidance

5.3.1 Funding information

Respondents were asked if they had received information about the way LCC funds places, 11% recalled receiving no such information.

However, two thirds of respondents answered that they chose the home before knowing how much money LCC would contribute.

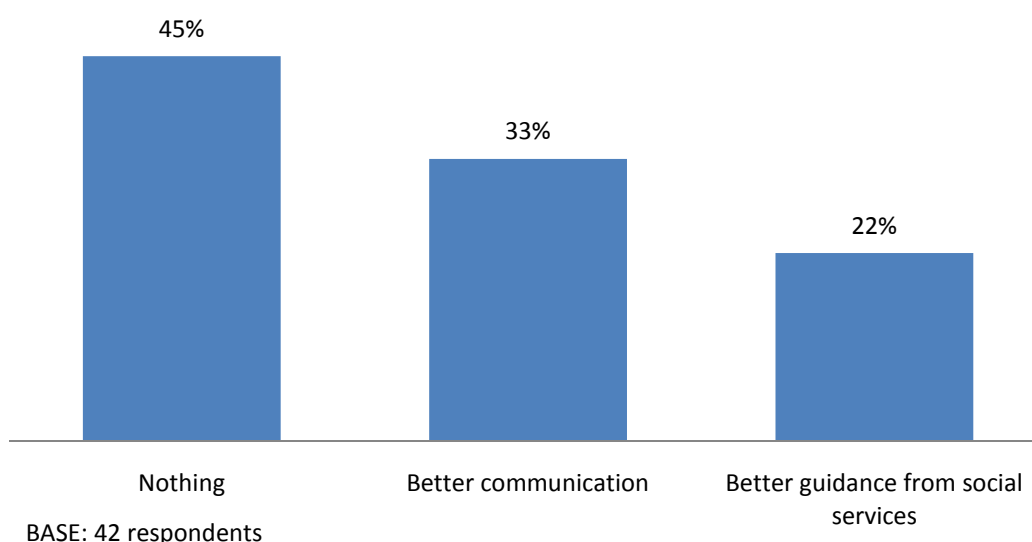
5.3.2 Lack of understanding

When asked if they understood the information they were given about the way LCC funds places, 42% of all respondents said they did not understand it and 40% did not understand how LCC sets the fees that it pays.

5.3.3 Communication

While just under half of all respondents were satisfied with their experience, over a third asked for better communication during the process, with a strong emphasis on an improvement of financial information with one respondent stating, "I didn't understand how the money side of it worked, I had to make phone calls to find out exactly what I owed and I would like to see better communication between the council and other financial organisations."

Chart 3 – If you could change anything about your experience what would it be?



While the majority of respondents felt nothing more could be done to improve their experience and that LCC had been as helpful as possible, verbatim answers to this question also demonstrated the wide range of experiences customers had, from "under the circumstances I felt that everyone was very kind and helpful" and "the social worker was exceptionally good", to "it was a nightmare going through the process", and "I had no guidance from anyone."

5.4 Using online reviews when choosing care

Half of all respondents surveyed did not look online for information about the home before they picked it.

Out of those who did check online Care Quality Commission ratings, 87% of respondents would do the same if they had to go through the process again.

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The main findings from this research are:

6.1.1 Influences when choosing residential care

- Similar influential factors affect customer's decisions in choosing a care home whether they have the support of social services, the Care Navigation team, or go through the experience independently. These are most commonly the location of the care home and the facilities and staff of the home and three quarters would be influenced by the same things if they had to make the decision again.
- Respondents had a wide range of experiences when choosing a care home, from those who had no problems to those who had a very difficult and upsetting time with several respondents stating they had to identify potential homes themselves.

6.1.2 The Care Navigation team

- Customers who have been under the guidance of the Care Navigation team are more likely to say they are happy with their experience of choosing a care home, with four out of five respondents satisfied that nothing could improve their experience compared to just one quarter of those who had not been supported by the Care Navigation team.

6.1.3 Fees and financial guidance

- The way finance is managed is extremely important to all, and respondents identified a desire for better financial guidance. Respondents stated, "Someone should spend more time sat with people to go over issues and confusion with bills" and another, "the financial and legal aspects not clear enough".
- One in ten stated that they had received no financial information detailing how LCC funds places. Those who had received the information commented on its confusing nature, "I would like financial information to be presented simpler" and, "Council information does go on a bit".

6.1.4 Using online reviews when choosing care

- Those who used online reviews, in particular the Care Quality Commission website for guidance found it useful, and the majority would use it again if they were to go through the same process, indicating its importance as a source of information when choosing a care home.

6.2 Recommendations

- Lists of potential homes could be made available to all customers, regardless of the service they are under, sorted by their individual, specific needs – for example distance from home, location, facilities, size, staff to resident ratio. A database could hold details of all care homes under LCC jurisdiction and allow filtering to create these lists. This may give the service user more choice, the opportunity to independently search for homes aided by trusted information, and enable them to be better informed about the process and their options.
- Service users may feel more informed and involved in the process if cases were overseen by one single officer that they could contact for support and guidance. A more personal approach and a consistent message from all officers dealing with customers looking for a care home may ensure every customer has a similar experience, and negate the wide ranging opinions found in this research. A leaflet or information pack outlining the processes, an expected timeline, and a list useful contacts could ensure this, as well as officers making regular contact with service users and their families.
- Service users and their relatives asked for better financial support from LCC. Although officers cannot be experts in financial assessments, having a single point of contact and one officer in charge of cases that can oversee all aspects of the process may encourage better practise and more faith in LCC. Ensuring that all customers receive the relevant financial information may also be useful.
- Officers could inform customers of the benefits of viewing the CQC reports of potential homes, as this may provide them with the ability to make an informed decision while remaining impartial as a service.