



15-Point Checklist for Providers and Consumers of Residential Aged Care

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National Seniors
AUSTRALIA

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This document is based on the longer National Seniors research report:

Orthia L., Hosking D. and McCallum J. (2022) *“As close to home as possible”: Older Australians’ Hopes and Fears for Aged Care*. Canberra: National Seniors Australia.
Available from: <https://nationalseniors.com.au/research/reports>.

Introduction

In October 2021 National Seniors Australia surveyed 598 older Australians about their communication needs related to residential aged care. The 598 had already completed a larger survey about aged care and had expressed interest in participating in follow-up studies. As such, they were a highly engaged group of people who self-selected to participate in this study.

We asked them:

What type of guidance, assistance and information do you think should be easily available for people when they need residential age care?

Their answers offered a rich variety of suggestions for how people seeking aged care can best be served. A common suggestion was that there be a single one-stop shop for aged care information, guidance and assistance at all stages of the process of accessing aged care. Within that one-stop shop model, many older Australians would like a case worker model whereby one professional supports a care seeker from start to finish, getting to know their needs and tailoring their service to suit. Respondents also made suggestions for public communication strategies that will prompt older Australians to plan for aged care. They offered their insights into improving all communication about aged care in terms of language, formats and mediums, to make it as accessible and relevant as possible for older Australians. The details of these suggestions are available in a research report we published in February 2022 entitled, *“As close to home as possible”: Older Australians’ Hopes and Fears for Aged Care* (available from: <https://nationalseniors.com.au/research/reports>).

Collectively, respondents also listed over 100 traits of residential aged care facilities that they would like information about when considering a facility. This is practical information that consumers need from aged care providers during what is often a difficult life transition to residential aged care. It is information they want upfront, to inform their decisions, not after accepting a place in a care facility.

We have grouped those listed traits into a 15-point checklist that aged care providers can use to build a template when preparing information about specific facilities. Care seekers can also use it to help ensure a facility will meet their needs.

Each of the 15 points contains many items within it, in a comprehensive summary of what aged care consumers want. Providers are urged to engage with every item to fully meet consumers’ needs and to continue refining their information template in response to evolving consumer need.

The checklist

The full 15-point checklist takes the form of comprehensive descriptions of what consumers want to know when considering an aged care facility. As such it is more than a checklist and providers are urged to create information templates responding to the detail, not just the 15 points themselves. The descriptive approach enables us to contextualise and at times explain *why* consumers want each kind of information.

The 15 points are:

1. Costs and financial implications for prospective residents
2. Care levels and the range of care services available
3. Staff qualifications, ratios, roles, pay and conditions
4. Additional medical, health and well-being support
5. Availability, application processes, contracts and trial options
6. Room environment, personal belongings and sharing spaces
7. Communal areas and activities
8. Food and water
9. Facility routines
10. Visitors, transport, communication technologies and isolation
11. Facility culture, diversity and resident relationships
12. Turnover statistics and incident records
13. Corporate management, organisation, budget details and history
14. Accountability to residents and loved ones, and conflict resolution
15. Summary reviews and ratings.

The remainder of this document describes the details for each.

1 Costs and financial implications for prospective residents

Costs was the theme most often raised by respondents. Respondents were highly concerned about the lack of clarity and transparency regarding the costs of residential aged care. Some, including people who have worked in the system, expressed much frustration at this.

Respondents collectively identified a wide range of cost-related information that they want to access easily when making aged care choices. Information from providers should include:

- any refundable and non-refundable costs for securing a place;
- any interim costs while holding the place but prior to moving into the facility;
- any non-refundable costs for entering a facility or exiting a facility;
- regular, ongoing and maintenance fees during residency;
- whether such regular fees continue if a resident temporarily enters hospital or goes away on holiday;
- a list of provided services that are free to all residents, and a list of any services that are paid for individually;
- different care and service options available for different fee levels;
- any hidden and incidental costs covered or not covered by upfront or regular fees such as for incontinence pads, haircuts, hearing aids or podiatry;
- how costs would differ if a couple was to enter a residential facility or independent living property together rather than one person entering alone;
- whether and how the provider will implement cost increases over time;
- taxes on any of these transactions;
- timeframes to make these payments including penalties for late payments.

In addition to these, a highly important cost care-seekers want to know about is the amount of any refundable bonds that are held by the provider for the duration of residency. They want information on arrangements for refunding the bonds to residents who leave or the beneficiaries of residents who die, and the amount the provider will keep in these circumstances. Under the current system, respondents said they want more information about RADs (refundable accommodation deposits), including why they vary between different facilities, and any options for negotiating the amounts.

Those entering independent living facilities and retirement villages want to know what maintenance they are responsible for paying for and arranging and which the facility will take care of; any preferred contractor arrangements; expectations around obtaining quotes; and waiting times for upgrading structures and infrastructure.

2 Care levels and the range of care services available

When considering a facility, respondents desire information about the different levels of care it provides (e.g. low, medium or high care); whether the costs for care increase with higher needs; the ability to vary care levels and costs; the triggers used to identify the need for higher levels of care and how higher care conditions such as dementia are diagnosed by associated staff; whether there are provisions for residents to age in place for the duration of their lives or if they must move to a different site for higher levels of care; and back up services when the facility cannot provide a service and how a resident can access them.

People also want to know if the facility provides services for people with specialist needs, such as people with dementia, people with different kinds of disability, and people with terminal illness; the levels and kinds of training staff have for supporting people in those circumstances; and the quality of any palliative care services. They want to know the facility's policy regarding residents who wish to access voluntary assisted dying (VAD) provisions, and whether VAD counselling is available through the facility.

3 Staff qualifications, ratios, roles, pay and conditions

The staffing situation is another high priority for people seeking aged care. They want to know about the qualifications and expertise of all staff including kitchen staff, cleaners, and management as well as carers and medical staff. They seek information on the training staff have had in specialist areas such as geriatric care, palliative care, wound care, nutrition, and caring for people with Alzheimer's Disease or Parkinson's Disease. They want to know the ratios of all staff to residents; caring and nursing staff to residents; and registered nurses (RNs) to residents. They want to know how many carers and how many RNs are on duty at night and during the day.

Respondents are highly concerned about the pay and conditions under which aged care staff work, so would like information on that when deciding on a facility. They want to know whether staff are paid above award wages; the numbers of full time, part time, casual and agency workers; the services that are provided by third parties; and policies and practices around staff diversity. They are interested in staff safety, OHS plans, staff vaccination rates, and infection control protocols.

4 Additional medical, health and well-being support

Numerous respondents identified their need for information about how the facility handles residents' medical and health needs beyond the routine aspects handled by carers and duty nurses. They want to know if they would be assisted to access external medical providers such as their own GP or allied health providers including alternative medicine providers; how the facility would accommodate specialist diets and supplements recommended by health providers; and if the facility has regular visits from a GP for those without their own GP, and from health providers such as podiatrists, physiotherapists, diversional therapists, and dentists. They want to know whether the facility provides routine checks to find out if residents need specialist health and well-being services such as podiatry, physiotherapy, diversional therapy, or dentistry, and if there is a chemist on the premises.

They also want to know how the facility manages emergency medical assistance that is serious but doesn't require an ambulance, such as a wound, infection, or illness. They seek clarity on what the procedures are for care in the case of serious illness, and under what circumstances a person would be hospitalised or would remain in their residence.

Mental health support is another prominent concern, with respondents wanting to know if the facility provides mental health, psychological and counselling support to residents, including through non-healthcare professionals, such as a chaplain.

5 Availability, application processes, contracts and trial options

Respondents said they want at-a-glance information about vacancies currently available in facilities they are considering; how long they would be likely to wait to be offered a place; any eligibility criteria; medical and legal documents required; and the best methods of applying and communicating with the facility about an application. For example, one respondent had been told to phone a particular facility every day to secure their loved one a place. People also need to know what arrangements are possible after securing a place but before moving in, while raising funds to pay for it (for example by sale of a private home).

People want easy to understand versions of any contracts they must sign, and for any legal rules and obligations to be clearly spelled out, such as their obligations on leaving a facility and any exit or entry requirements. They also want to know the details of property titles when entering independent living arrangements. They want clear lists of mandated inclusions and what is not included in the service they are signing up for, and for any special needs services to be detailed in writing.

To consider a facility, many respondents would like to know if it offers respite trial periods to “try-before-you-buy”; how much that would cost; and whether the facility has a cooling off period if a person secures a place but later decides to leave. In this circumstance, they need to know before entering a facility what the cooling off period is, which fees will be refunded when they leave, what amount or percentage providers will keep, and any other information about their contractual obligations should they decide to leave.

6 Room environment, personal belongings and sharing spaces

Care seekers want information about the room they will stay in as a resident, including the room size and configuration; their ability to make the room more home-like; what is included in the standard fittings such as internet access, a television and television recording device; rooms' security and safety features including lockable storage furniture or a safe; rules about privacy; rules about music; heating and cooling equipment and a resident's level of control over it; access to their own landline phone; any direct access to outside areas; and the physical condition of the building. They also need to know how much space is available for storage of their personal items both in their room and elsewhere, for example whether (and where) they would be able to store a car, mobility scooter or wheelchair. They want information on what furniture is built-in and what can be replaced with their own furniture, including electronic equipment such as televisions.

Some respondents discussed sharing a room and would want to know whether they can choose to have a room to themselves in a residential aged care facility or would have to share with one or more others. They also want to know if they would have an ensuite or shared bathroom. In the case of any shared rooms, people want to know how the facility would manage a situation where a resident did not get along with a roommate.

Conversely, some respondents mentioned they would like to know whether a facility can accommodate couples in the same room, interconnected rooms or adjoining rooms. Others want to know about a facility's rules on keeping pets. One said they would ask if carers or other family members can live with them on site, or if they can stay over for a night.

7 Communal areas and activities

Respondents generally mentioned wanting information on facilities' shared spaces, programs, entertainment, and assistance with tasks beyond bodily care. They want to know if facilities have in-house services and equipment such as a hairdresser, nail technician, pool, library, games room, or music room, and the type of outdoor areas and gardens on the premises, as well as information about access to all these outside business hours. They seek information about entertainment, activities, social gatherings, and excursions provided by the facility, including both formal and informal activities, any activities oriented towards "brain stimulation" and any physical exercise options. They want to know about activity programs designed for people with cognitive conditions like dementia. They want to know if staff are available to assist them with technical tasks such as using their phones or computers and accessing the internet.

8 Food and water

Care seekers are highly concerned about the provision of food in residential aged care and want to access information about that prior to choosing a facility. They want to know what kinds of meals are provided; how much choice they have over what to eat; whether they can eat in their rooms or must go to a communal area; whether the facility accommodates specialised diets; if mealtimes are set or residents can eat on demand; whether they can suggest items for the menu; and whether they have access to leisure foods such as quality alcohol and coffee.

They also want information about the behind-the-scenes aspects of food, including the facility's nutrition track record; whether it develops individual meal plans; if the meals are prepared on site or at a central external kitchen; and the expenditure per meal per resident. Some respondents want information on how the facility ensures residents are hydrated and have access to water in their rooms including at night.

9 Facility routines

In addition to food routines, care seekers are also interested in other routines of each facility they are considering. These include the daily and weekly scheduling of laundry, cleaning, and personal care regimes; the process for managing medication; and the degree of personal freedom within routines such as whether residents can sleep in. Generally, they want to know about the degree of autonomy and freedom they would have in the facility and any restrictions on their activities.

10 Visitors, transport, communication technologies and isolation

Access to the outside world is important for care seekers and was the topic of many comments. People want to know about a facility's rules regarding visits by family members and friends including the flexibility of visiting hours and vaccination requirements, and any rules about residents leaving the facility to visit others. They want information about transport options and costs, including access to local public transport; any transport provided by the facility for shopping trips and other outings; and how close the facility is to services such as shops and medical care. Care seekers also want information on assistance or equipment for communicating with others online, such as video calling facilities.

Some respondents are concerned for residents who do not have visitors but who may need assistance with tasks beyond the minimum routinely provided by the facility. They asked who will buy such residents clothing, toiletries and so on if they cannot travel themselves. They seek information about the special care a facility would provide to residents in this situation, including company for the lonely and occupational therapy to devise activities for them to avoid boredom.

11 Facility culture, diversity and resident relationships

Care seekers want information about the philosophy and culture of each residential aged care facility they are considering, to ensure they are a good fit and that they will not feel isolated or marginalised there. That information includes whether a facility welcomes and embraces diversity in sexual orientation, gender, culture, ethnicity, and religion; if it is specifically targeted to one or more demographics or groups; or if it has options for some internal separation of groups (for example, gender separation options or requirements). They also want to know whether and how a facility can accommodate the needs of people with different types of disability, including people who are blind or have limited vision, people who are deaf or have limited hearing, people who require mobility assistance, and people who have difficulty communicating with others.

Aside from that kind of organisational information, people want to know about the social norms of the facility that have evolved by chance with resident composition, including levels and kinds of social interaction between residents, and any dominant political views held by the population. They are interested in facility policies and norms regarding consensual sex and intimate relationships between residents, both existing relationships and new ones.

12 Turnover statistics and incident records

Some metrics are of key interest to respondents as indicators of what happens within a residential aged care facility. Respondents expressed interest in information about staff turnover rates and resident turnover rates, and the reasons why people have left (as a proxy for the facility's quality and priorities). They seek transparency about the number of falls residents have suffered, hospital admissions and other incidents in the past 12 months, and the facility's performance and compliance track record on any measures aged care facilities are evaluated on. Some want to know if there are surveillance technologies in place, or if any are needed, such as CCTV in rooms to protect against abuse.

13 Corporate management, organisation, budget details and history

Care seekers want transparent information about how facilities are managed. When considering a facility, they would like to see up-to-date budget information including easy to understand summaries of the facility's sources of income, the costs it incurs by providing its services, a breakdown of those different expenditure areas, any profits generated, and how profits have been spent. The profit-making aim of some facilities was a concern to many respondents, so clear information about whether a provider operates for profit or not-for-profit is important to them.

People want access to audit summaries; information on solvency; historical corporate information such as the umbrella and parent organisations the facility has had during the past decade; past and present names of any businesses associated with the facility; information about the board of management and CEO; and information about any other facilities owned or managed by the same people or organisation.

14 Accountability to residents and loved ones, and conflict resolution

Care seekers are interested in the role of residents and loved ones in facility management, including whether there is a commitment to self-determination and listening to the agency of a person needing care; whether the facility has a charter of residents' rights; the role residents can play in decision-making processes for the facility and for their own care; and the role of residents' family and friends in helping manage life in the residence.

Accountability is a further consideration, with respondents wanting to know about any communication plans and practices in place for keeping loved ones aware of how things are going in all aspects of a resident's life; details of an emergency contact within the facility for residents to contact and/or for loved ones to contact to enquire on residents' behalf; whether care standards for each resident are written out with a checklist for staff; how residents' care plans are implemented; and who ensures such written directions are followed.

Care seekers also want to know about facilities' complaints processes for residents, staff and loved ones. As part of this they seek historical information about complaints, including a transparent list of complaints and records of complaint resolution.

They want to hear whether and how a facility plans for continuous improvement and shows its respect for residents in practice, through actions responding to residents' experiences and views.

15 Summary reviews and ratings

Finally, as well as wanting to drill down into the nitty-gritty detail of items included in the previous 14 points, respondents identified their desire to have access to at least four kinds of overarching review:

- Official ratings of the facilities by a government-sponsored or independent agency, that give an at-a-glance indication of both a facility's quality of service and its value for money, plus recommendations of good facilities. The comparison was made to the recommendations Choice makes for other kinds of product and service.
- Honest, comprehensive resident reviews of facilities including commentary on matters such as privacy, care, restraints, medical issues and more.
- Honest, comprehensive staff reviews of facilities, with protections in place for any staff to speak out, including protection for whistle-blowers.
- The care seeker's own observations of a facility, gained from open days at facilities that allow open chats with willing residents and staff, the opportunity to eat in the dining room and participate in activities, and a tour of all areas including kitchens (while respecting residents' privacy).

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