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Support for hepatitis C treatment in homelessness charity

Harbour Housing collaborated with NHS England and Addaction to provide the stability necessary for people who are rough sleeping to complete treatment

Key points

- [Harbour Housing](#) is a homelessness charity providing accommodation and support for up to 70 individuals across six properties in Cornwall.
- Individuals experiencing homelessness face significant barriers to accessing hepatitis C treatment and care, despite the virus being particularly prevalent in this group.
- Since 2018, Harbour Housing has offered a dedicated bed to support individuals who are homeless and infected with hepatitis C.
- In partnership with NHS England and Addaction, Harbour Housing has developed an exclusive pathway to make hepatitis C treatment as easy and rapid as possible.
- Harbour Housing has supported seven people through to treatment in the past year, individuals who would not ordinarily have been able to access treatment.

Overview

Harbour Housing provides support and accommodation to 70 people experiencing homelessness in Cornwall. The organisation aims to provide tailored support to help individuals with varying levels of complex support needs to be able to eventually live independently. People are able to move towards independent living at their own pace, with their six properties offering varying levels of independence, and some stay in accommodation for over two years. Harbour Housing provides advice and assistance for people's mental health, financial situation, employment, addiction, and physical health.

In 2018 Harbour Housing's Cosgarne Hall began offering a dedicated bed to people experiencing homelessness who were also infected with hepatitis C. This recognised the barriers people experiencing homelessness can face when accessing hepatitis C treatment and aimed to support individuals through this process. The project was run in close partnership with Addaction and NHS England, supported by a grant from Gilead Sciences to fund staff support hours.

Published September 2019

Why the service was established

There is a well-documented association between homelessness and hepatitis C infection,¹ with this group classed as 'at risk' by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).² The homeless population face additional barriers when trying to access services, such as the instability of not having a permanent address which can prevent people from attending regular appointments.

Hepatitis C treatment often requires an initial test, a follow-up test to determine viral load and genotype, an assessment in secondary care to check liver function and give out treatment, check-ups, and a final assessment to determine whether the patient has hepatitis C.

The care pathway is often complex and fragmented, making it difficult for anyone to navigate, but particularly individuals with less stable lifestyles. Harbour Housing's hepatitis C project aimed to address these issues to support people who would otherwise have struggled to complete treatment.

How the service works

Those eligible for treatment are identified through Harbour Housing's own outreach work, liaising with both Addaction workers throughout the county and with clinics delivered by homelessness services. Harbour Housing's referral process then assesses these individuals' suitability to the supported accommodation environment.



After the referral, the individual is moved into their own room within the Cosgarne Hall supported accommodation and assigned a key worker. Whilst staying at Cosgarne Hall they have full access to the support provided to residents including key work sessions, training, activities and Addaction meetings.

¹ Hickman, M. et al. (April 2007). 'Hepatitis C virus (HCV) prevalence, and injecting risk behaviour in multiple sites in England in 2004,' in *Journal of Viral Hepatitis* 14, pp. 645-52. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2893.2007.00855.x> [Accessed July 2019].

² NICE. (December 2012). *Hepatitis B and C testing: people at risk of infection*. Available from: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph43/resources/hepatitis-b-and-c-testing-people-at-risk-of-infection-pdf-1996356260293> [Accessed August 2019].

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The individual remains at Cosgarne for the duration of their treatment, which takes an average of 12 weeks, with regular visits from Addaction and NHS workers to administer treatment and testing. They are also given support on harm reduction methods to prevent the transmission of blood-borne viruses (BBVs), such as needle exchange.

After treatment has been concluded the individual may stay in their room for up to two weeks so that suitable accommodation can be found. Many choose to stay on in one of Harbour Housing's properties to receive further support.

Outcomes

Quantitative

Harbour Housing provided support to eight people in the last year, seven of whom successfully completed treatment.

Qualitative

The project has garnered support from both patients and staff.

A participant in the project, BB, said that she thought it was a good system and that the facilities at Cosgarne were 'lovely'. BB's treatment took six weeks and she is determined not to contract the virus again, having learned effective harm reduction practices during her stay. BB could not think of any recommendations to make the process better and was glad for the chance to get treated.

Mary McKenna, hepatology nurse specialist at Royal Cornwall Hospital, said: "From the hospital, the bed has been an illustration in the effectiveness of collaborative working between housing, health and addiction services. This project has enabled people to be treated who previously struggled to engage in care and is essential in working towards hepatitis C elimination."



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Future plans

Harbour Housing now assesses all new referrals into their system to see whether they would benefit from the pathway and holds monthly clinics at Cosgarne Hall where residents can be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B, have liver scans, access BBV testing, and receive expert advice.

The success of the hepatitis C pathway demonstrates the need for it, so Harbour Housing intends to continue to provide this service, as well as working with Addaction, the NHS, and funders to promote the strategy to other providers.

Kate Moss, business development manager at Harbour Housing, commented: “Accommodation is the catalyst that allows people to get treated and be able to move on. We will continue to work with Addaction to make hepatitis C testing the norm rather than the exception and to reduce the discrimination and stigma around blood borne viruses.”

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