

# healthwatch

Sandwell

## Enter & View Report Willow Gardens June 2026



## Introduction

Healthwatch Sandwell (HWS) is the independent voice of the public in health and social care in Sandwell. We collect feedback from the public in Sandwell about their experiences of using health and social care services and use that feedback to work with service providers and commissioners to find ways to improve services.

## What is Enter & View

Part of HWS remit is to carry out Enter and View visits. HWS Authorised Representatives (AR) will conduct these visits to health and social care premises to find out how they are being run and make recommendations where there are areas for improvement.

The Health and Social Care Act (2012) allow Authorised Representatives to observe service delivery and talk to service users, their families, and carers on premises such as hospitals, residential homes, GP practices, dental surgeries, opticians, optometrist, and pharmacies.

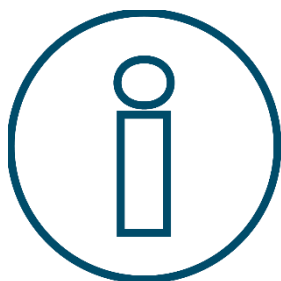
Enter and View visits can happen if people tell us there is a problem with a service but, equally, they can occur when services have a good reputation so that we can learn about and share examples of what they do well from the perspective of people who experience the service first hand.

Healthwatch Sandwell Enter and View visits are not specifically intended to identify safeguarding issues. However, if safeguarding concerns arise during a visit, they are reported in accordance with Healthwatch Sandwell Safeguarding Policy, the service manager will be informed, and the visit will end. The Local Authority Safeguarding Team will also be informed.

We will engage with residents, family/friends and staff who provide care. We will seek to find out about:

- Healthy Environment – The right to live in surroundings that support health and wellbeing.
- Essential Services – Access to high-quality preventative, treatment, and care services to avoid crisis.
- Access – Equal access to services without discrimination, tailored to individual and family needs.
- Safe, Dignified, Quality Services – Services that are safe, confidential, and delivered with dignity and respect.
- Information and Education – Clear, accurate information and education to support informed decisions and self-care.
- Choice – The right to choose from a range of high-quality services and providers.
- Being Listened To – The right to have concerns and views heard and acted upon.
- Being involved – To be treated as an equal partner in determining my own health and wellbeing. I want the right to be involved in

decisions that affect my life and those affecting services in my local community.



HWS will compile a report of the visit. The report will be shared with providers, regulators, the local authority, and NHS commissioners and quality assurers, the public, Healthwatch England and any other relevant partners based on what was found during the visits. They will be published on all our social media platforms.

On this occasion we have conducted an Enter & View visit to **Willow Gardens in Rowley Regis.**

## **Willow Gardens**

**Willow Gardens** in Rowley Regis, Sandwell, is a modern extra-care residential scheme designed to support older adults and individuals with additional care needs. Located on Harvest Road (B65 8FG), it is run by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and combines independent living with on-site care services. The development, completed in 2021, consists of around 90 self-contained one- and two-bedroom apartments, with 24-hour staff support available to residents.

In addition to housing, Willow Gardens provides a range of care services, including personal care and support for conditions such as dementia, physical disabilities, and mental health needs. Care is tailored to each individual, promoting independence while ensuring safety and wellbeing in a supportive, community-focused environment.

Willow Gardens is not a traditional care home but an “extra care housing” scheme, offering residents the privacy of their own home alongside access to professional care and communal support when needed.

Willow Gardens has not yet been assessed by the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

## **The report**

This report outlines the observations and insights gathered during the Enter and View visit carried out on 19th May 2026. The findings reflect the views and experiences of those who chose to share their feedback during the visit and may not represent the perspectives of everyone within the service. It is hoped that the recommendations included will support the ongoing development of the service and help enhance outcomes for individuals who use it.

The visit was conducted by HWS Authorised Representatives (AR):

Helen Bennett, Paul Higgitt & Ayotope Adeboye.

## Methodology

During the visit ARs engaged in conversations with residents, their relatives and staff members using a structured set of questions, these focused on two key areas.



### Service User Experience

Including feedback on care provided by staff, accessibility of the building, availability of information, and suggestions for service improvement.



### Staff Responsiveness to Individual Needs

Exploring how staff address communication needs of service users with impairments, manage anti-social behaviour from service users or relatives, support individuals wishing to raise concerns or complaints, and gather suggestions for enhancing service delivery.

In addition to these discussions, representatives carried out environmental observations both internally and externally. These included assessments of:

- Signage
- Accessibility
- Lighting
- Refreshments
- Cleanliness
- Parking and transport options

Participation was entirely voluntary, and the team respected the wishes of those who chose not to engage.

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## Premises

The exterior environment of Willow Gardens appeared clean and well maintained, with clear and concise signage throughout. There was ample parking available at both the front and rear of the building. Access to the site was controlled by barriers and electric gates at the entrance and exit. The surrounding environment, including trees and shrubs, was tidy and well cared for, with no visible litter observed.

The main front entrance was accessed through digitally controlled locking doors, leading into a reception area that was exceptionally spacious, very clean, and well lit.

We were greeted by the registered manager, Lorraine, who demonstrated how to use the digital sign-in tablet.

The internal ground floor space leading from the reception is open plan, incorporating a communal lounge and kitchen area, a dining space, and a seating area located in one corner. It was observed that this area also contains a wide range of information leaflets available for residents to use.

Throughout the entire space, the flooring was hard-wearing and the décor featured soft pastel tones. All furniture appeared clean and well maintained, with a range of lounge chairs available to meet individual needs. The dining area was clean and easily accessible, including for wheelchair users and those requiring other adaptations. The communal kitchen was fully fitted and equipped with a fridge, microwave, and dishwasher. Rubbish bins were appropriately positioned along the wall.

The back garden was accessible via digitally controlled, fob-locked doors and featured level flooring throughout, allowing easy access for wheelchair users. A large, rubberised mat was in place to provide additional safety during wet weather. The garden appeared well maintained, with wooden seating areas, along with trees and shrubs planted at ground level and within raised borders. A small greenhouse was also present.

A member of staff informed us that:

***“Many residents enjoy gardening and make regular use of the greenhouse to grow plants.”***

The manager explained that Willow Gardens consists of self-contained flats with cooking facilities, meaning that many residents are able to prepare their own meals. For those who choose not to cook, the dining room provides a daily selection of both hot and cold meal options. A menu board was observed, along with an allergen information board. The food available is chargeable.

Some residents who were dining at the time of our visit were happy to share their feedback on the food provided.

***“The food here is okay, it saves me having to cook my own food”***

***“I don’t eat here all the time but it’s nice food, especially the puddings”***

***“If I don’t feel like cooking, I know I can eat here, nice choices”***

***“Generally, the food is ok, I just pick what I like to eat”***

Another resident praised the kitchen staff saying:

***“The ladies in the kitchen are lovely, they are so friendly, nothing is ever too much trouble for them, they proper look after me.”***

During the continuation of the walk-around, it was noted that the corridors were spacious, well-decorated, and fitted with handrails. The manager advised that Willow Gardens has three lifts within the building. One lift was observed to be clean and in good working order.

Communal toilets were located on the ground floor and clearly identified with pictorial signage on the doors. Inside, the facilities were found to be clean and well stocked. The toilet seat was a contrasting colour to the pedestal, and the emergency pull cord was easily accessible.

A spacious communal laundry room is located on the ground floor for residents to use if they wish. The area includes pleasant seating and opening windows to provide natural ventilation. The use of this service is chargeable.

A designated “buggy room” was observed for residents who require mobility assistance devices, such as mobility scooters. This room provides secure storage along with charging facilities. It also has direct access to the outside, in line with Health and Safety procedures at Willow Gardens, which prohibit the use of mobility scooters within the main areas of the home.

On the ground floor, a locked medication room was observed. Inside, there were secure cabinets and a refrigerator used for storing some residents’ medications. A hair salon was also present; however, this space is currently unoccupied.

The reception area featured large glass windows, enabling staff to clearly see all individuals entering the building, which supports overall safety.

On the first floor, the manager provided access for me to observe a guest room. This room is available for relatives of residents to use in emergencies or when their loved one is approaching end of life. The room contained two single beds, an en-suite bathroom, and tea-making facilities.

There were also two dedicated quiet/prayer rooms available for use by both residents and staff. These spaces provide a calm, private environment suitable for reflection, prayer, or quiet time, supporting individuals’ emotional well-being and spiritual needs.

As Willow Gardens consists of self-contained apartments, it was not appropriate or necessary to carry out observations within individual living

spaces. This approach respects residents' privacy, dignity, and independence within their own homes.

Therefore, no direct observations of personal accommodation were undertaken during the visit.

The manager confirmed that CCTV is operational only in communal areas to promote the safety and security of residents. The CCTV monitoring screen was observed to be functioning and is located within the office area.

Fire exit doors were found to be unobstructed and clearly signposted. Fire extinguishers were appropriately wall-mounted and accessible. Visible signs explained that "Fire alarm testing every Thursday morning".

## **Staff interaction & quality of care**

### **Choice**

Residents observed at Willow Gardens appeared to experience a good level of autonomy and independence in their daily lives. Feedback from both staff and residents indicated that individuals are actively encouraged to make their own choices about their routines. This includes deciding when to get up, when and where to eat, and how they wish to spend their time throughout the day.

Some residents informed us:

***"I was one of the first to live here, it's friendly especially Lorraine"***

***"I do cook for myself, but sometimes I chose to eat in the dining room"***

***"I have lived at Willow Gardens for 4 years and I chose to come here based on others' views. The food is reasonably priced but could do with some variation and I would like Chinese food as an option. I'm also in a band here at Willow Gardens"***

***"I have lived here for 1 and half years and I like it here, but it is expensive as I have to pay. Food mostly ok and choice is reasonable. There are a wide range of activities, and we have a part time driver that takes residents on outings."***

Another resident shared:

***"I have my own dentist in Cradley, I do on-line shopping and I catch the bus to Merry Hill"***

Another resident shared:

***“I have good quality care; I always wear my personal alarm”***

Participation in activities at Willow Gardens is entirely the resident’s choice. Individuals are free to decide whether or not they wish to engage in any organised activities, and there is no pressure placed on them to take part.

Some residents informed us:

***“More activities would be nice and more days out”***

***“I love playing Bingo and watching films with other residents”***

***“I would enjoy going out more”***

Residents were seen engaging in activities of their preference and moving freely within the environment, which further supports this observation. Staff demonstrated a person-centred approach, offering support where needed while respecting residents’ rights to make their own decisions. This reflects a supportive, flexible, and empowering environment where independence is promoted and individual preferences are valued.

Residents are able to make their own decisions regarding access to dental, optician, and podiatry services. The manager advised that Specsavers regularly visit Willow Gardens to provide hearing services, and Ingrams Pharmacy delivers medications to the home. At present, there are no controlled medications held on site.

A resident shared:

***“Staff are alright and friendly and will help us where needed. We have a good GP that will come out and see us. However, I need to find out who can come out and do my nails”***

## **Information & Education**

A designated corner of the reception area is devoted to a wide range of informational leaflets from various organisations that provide support for older people. One leaflet that is particularly noticeable is titled *“Comment, Compliment & Complaint.”*

Information about the Care Quality Commission (CQC) is presented on a separate, stand-alone display unit.

A wall-mounted board displays photographs of staff members along with their job roles, which helps residents to easily recognise and identify them. The Willow Gardens First Aiders were also clearly identifiable.

In addition, information about tenancy meetings is available; these meetings are facilitated by Waldrons Solicitors and provide an opportunity for residents to raise and discuss any issues or concerns. (See *Addendum*)

We were also informed that:



**Residents are also encouraged to take part in our extra care panel, giving them the opportunity to be actively involved in decision making.**

The manager explained that when a new resident moves into Willow Gardens, they are provided with a welcome booklet containing all the essential information about living there. This booklet also includes an *Easy Read Guide for Complaints* as well as the tenancy charter. The booklet was shown to us by the management team.

## **Staffing**

Willow Gardens has a large, dedicated team of care staff. The manager explained that staffing is organised using a 16-week rolling rota system, with carers working four days on followed by four days off. Night staff follow a 3-2-3 shift pattern. The management team work full-time during standard weekday hours, Monday to Friday.

The induction process for new care staff is comprehensive, consisting of an intensive six-week programme that combines both face-to-face and online training. This initial training period is then followed by a six-month probationary period to ensure staff are fully supported and competent in their roles.

Housing support staff are also available daily at Willow Gardens.

Management informed us that:

***“We have a good staff retention here and staff do not leave. We have a good workforce and can cover very easily”***

The manager reported that, overall, they maintain positive and effective working relationships with council teams, including transport, social care, and communication services. They also work collaboratively with a range of allied health professionals, such as Occupational Therapists (OTs), to ensure residents receive appropriate and well-coordinated support.

The manager advised that some staff members are fluent in additional languages, which can be used to support individuals whose first language is not English.

Management informed us that:

***“We have a good relationship with Your Health Partnership with the GP at Darby Street and have a direct line to nurses who do come out. We also work closely with Specsavers who come out to Willow Gardens”***

Management also informed us that they regularly visit local hospitals to assess potential referrals from social workers. This process allows them to evaluate whether Willow Gardens is suitable for the individual's needs and to ensure that appropriate care and support can be provided before admission.

Some staff told us:

***“I have worked here for over 2 and half years and I love it here. I provide personal care, medication preparation, companionship, cleaning, calls”***

***“In terms of training I have had manual handling, dealing with challenging behaviours, health and safety, dementia training and there is always 3 training session each month”***

***“I have been a Care Assistant for 12 months. I provide full personal care and I love it here”***

All staff attend team meetings when they are on shift and receive regular supervision. E-learning is ongoing, with occasional face-to-face training sessions also provided.

A staff member shared:

***“We have our supervisions every 6 weeks. In relation to any safeguarding we would speak to our manager and if we were not happy, we could call Sandwell Council”***

## Summary

Willow Gardens' ethos of being a "home for life" is clearly reflected in the atmosphere and day-to-day experience of both residents and staff. During our visit, it was evident that there is a genuine sense of contentment throughout the service. Interactions between staff and residents were warm, respectful, and engaging, demonstrating a positive and supportive environment where individuals feel valued and at ease. Staff appeared motivated and committed, while residents seemed relaxed and comfortable in their surroundings.

As a relatively new build, the environment further enhances this sense of wellbeing. The décor, fixtures, and fittings are all modern, well-maintained, and in excellent condition, contributing to a bright, welcoming, and homely setting. Cleanliness across the service was of a high standard, with all areas observed to be tidy and hygienic.

Overall, the combination of a well-maintained environment and a positive, person-centred culture helps to create a setting that truly supports the "home for life" philosophy.

Lorraine (Registered Manager), her management team, and all staff at Willow Gardens should be recognised for their hard work and dedication in creating a safe, secure, and positive environment that promotes the happiness and wellbeing of all the residents that live there.

## Recommendations

The Registered Manager and Head Office of Willow Gardens should consider the following actions:

- Explore ways to introduce a broader range of structured outdoor activities. While residents reported being satisfied with informal routines, some could benefit from occasional organised group sessions. A flexible activities programme may improve social engagement and overall wellbeing, particularly for those who are less likely to initiate activities independently.

## Feedback from the Manager

*"Thank you for the report it is much appreciated."*

*We have a dedicated Activities Member of Staff starting at Willow Gardens on 8 June 2026 following an induction into the position they we take lead*

*on developing activities and supporting individuals to take part, this will also include community activities.”*

**I have one comment regarding a point that needs clarification, which is as follows:**

‘In addition, information about tenancy meetings is available; these meetings are facilitated by Waldrons Solicitors and provide an opportunity for residents to raise and discuss any issues or concerns.’

The meetings are not facilitated by Waldron Solicitors; they were invited to meet with the Tenants as a one off to discuss making a Will or supporting with Power of Attorney.

The Managers facilitate the meetings, and we invite Guest speakers from outside Willow Gardens to attend and speak to Tenants. I.e. Fire Protection Officers, Facilities Management representative to discuss repairs and any issues with the building. Public Health to talk about activities in the community, Exercise classes. Welfare Rights, Council Officers to talk about disposal of Waste. Housing Representative to talk about the Building and Facilities at Willow Gardens. Systems Managers to talk about the change in the Care system to be changed at WG. Senior ASC Managers to meet and receive feedback from Tenants and their families. Solicitors. and Age well. These are just some of the examples of people we invite to share information and answer questions that our People may have.



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