

From policy to practice : How prepared are care homes in England for heatwaves?

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BACKGROUND

As temperatures in the UK continue to rise, the ageing population, especially care home residents, are becoming more vulnerable to heat related illness and death. Summer 2022 saw temperatures reach 40.3°C for the first time¹, resulting in 1,256 excess deaths in people over the age of 65.²

To address this growing risk, the UK government published two new national guidance documents aimed at social care managers: 'Supporting vulnerable people before and during hot weather: social care managers' and 'Heat-Health Alert action card for health and social care providers'.³ However, evidence suggests that care homes remain underprepared for the growing risk of heatwaves.^{4,5}

AIM

This study aimed to explore whether care homes in England are prepared for heatwaves and evaluate how effective the national guidance is in aiding this preparedness by answering the following research questions:

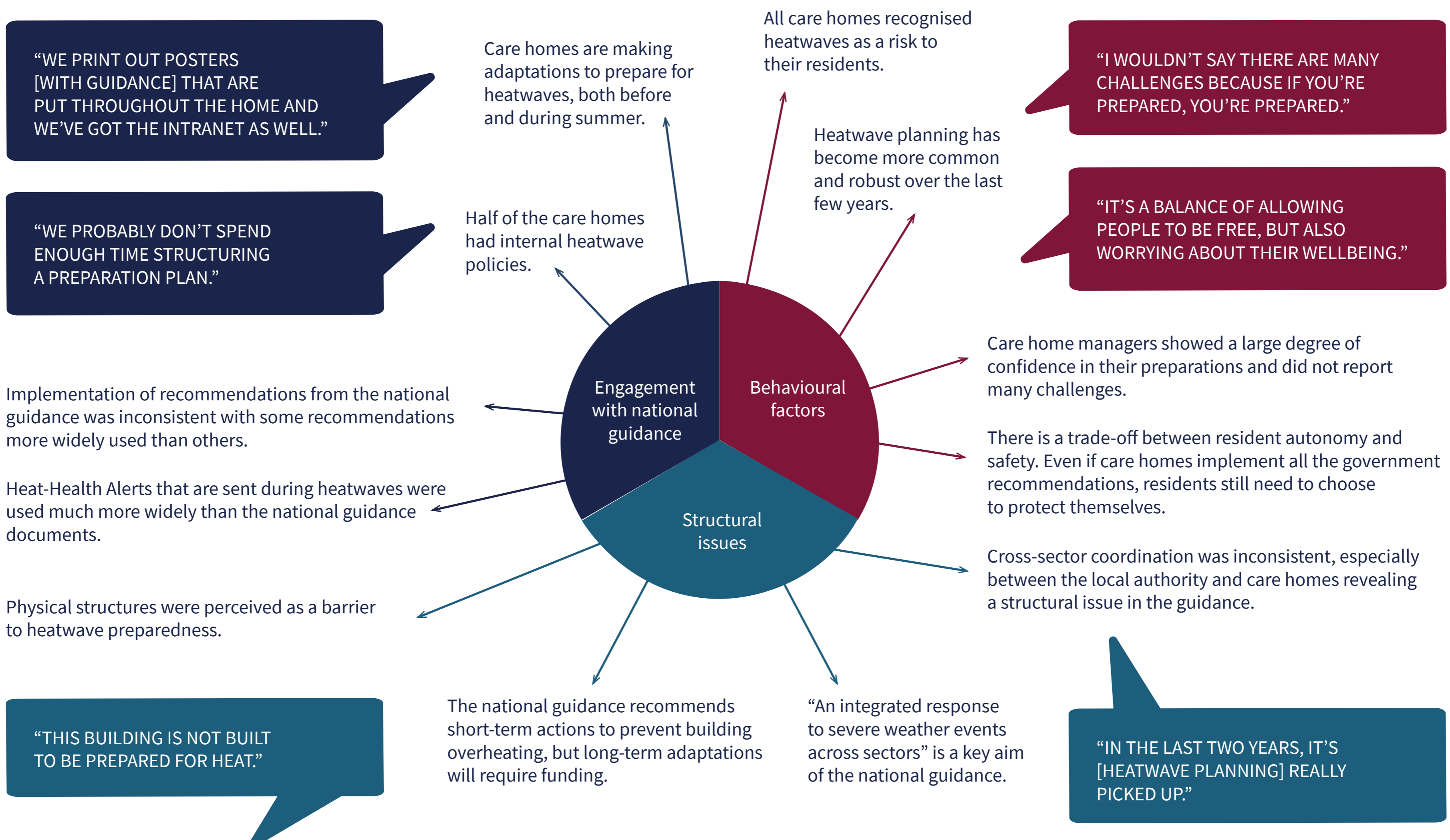
1. How do care homes perceive heat risk?
2. What measures are taken to prepare for heatwaves?
3. How is national policy understood and translated into everyday practice?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a thematic analysis of:

1. 6 semi-structured interviews with 4 care home managers and 2 local government officials.
2. A policy document analysis of the two national guidance documents named above.

FINDINGS



DISCUSSION

These findings largely contrast the current literature on heatwave preparedness in care homes which finds that care homes fail to prepare for heatwaves. This study finds that multiple heatwave adaptations are made, including changes to the building, routines, food and drink. For example, all care homes adapted their menus by providing cold meals with high water content during heatwaves. Nevertheless, it remains unclear if these changes are a result of the new national guidance.

The format of the guidance plays a key role in its uptake, engagement was greater with the Heat-Health Alerts which are shorter and more action oriented than the national guidance. Moreover, the national guidance was found to be short-term in nature, failing to address the infrastructural changes that buildings in England will require as temperatures rise, and although cross-sector collaboration is highlighted as a priority, the necessary systems are not in place to ensure that local authorities are equipped to support care homes during heatwaves.

These gaps suggest that while immediate measures are generally effective, long-term resilience will require different formats, more effective communication and the inclusion of climate change in the care home inspection framework to hold care homes accountable.

References

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