



Holiday homes review proposal

November 2017

Review of holiday homes

The MS Society has 9 holiday homes which are managed by local groups, 8 in England and one in North Wales. In spring this year we began a process to review our approach to this activity.

To inform this review we commissioned BDO, our internal auditors, to conduct an independent review of the management, oversight and risks of our current approach to managing holiday homes.

Our review also considered our organisational focus, the availability of other similar services, the cost of providing these services and the impact for people affected by MS. We also collated usage for the last two years to try to understand how many people were using our holiday homes.

This document sets out the findings of our review and the proposals we have developed as a result.

It's important to note at this point that no final decisions have been made. We have invited the groups with holiday homes, their members and users of the holiday homes to feedback on the proposals and this feedback is being collated and considered before we make a final decision. We'll be able to share our final decision early next year.

The review findings

We know that many of the holiday homes are well run, and that a lot of hard work goes into delivering this valued service for people affected by MS.

However, there are a range of risks involved in holiday property, and a lot of associated legislative and regulatory requirements. The review brought to light the health and safety risks inherent in delivering this service through volunteers who live a significant distance from the holiday homes and only visit periodically, leaving us reliant on local cleaners. These issues include things like Legionnaires disease, fire regulations, and the safe storage of hazardous cleaning products.

We have put in place risk assessments, checklists for cleaners to use and annual health and safety audits to help to mitigate these risks. However the BDO audit found that some volunteers were not aware of the weekly checks required and that not all cleaners have had health and safety inductions.

We are very aware of the responsibility and stress placed on volunteers delivering these activities, particularly in relation to fulfilling the requirements of our health and safety system. As an organisation, we've been struggling to manage these properties in a sustainable way for some time. If volunteers who are currently maintaining properties leave, we don't have the structure to continue the safe running of them whilst trying to recruit new volunteers. This leaves us and holiday home users open to risk.

As part of our review we considered whether putting in place additional oversight or central support to help to mitigate these risks could be a potential solution. However over recent years the number of holiday homes has reduced significantly. The small number and dispersed nature of these properties means the cost of putting in place appropriate management would be high, and we feel this wouldn't be the best use of our charitable resources.

In addition to the health and safety risks we considered the service being provided and the number of people benefiting. We know that many of the holiday homes are well used and the service is highly valued by those who access it. However as an organisation we want to focus our resources on those activities that will have the biggest impact for most people affected by MS. There are other organisations that offer a better range of accessible holiday options and we already provide information and support, including financial support through our grants programme, to enable people affected by MS to book appropriate breaks.

Our proposals

For the reasons listed above, we are proposing that our current holiday homes are closed, with any proceeds from the sale being used by the group to provide support to people affected by MS in their local area, including financial support for short breaks.

Whilst we understand that this proposal may not be popular, we believe that by refocusing our activities we can provide more support for people affected by MS, whilst reducing the burden we place on volunteers.

We know that many people locally may have been involved in raising money to purchase our holiday homes and that some volunteers and people with MS who use the homes may be upset by these proposals. Our suggestion to close the holiday homes isn't in any way a reflection on the work of our volunteers – many of whom have dedicated a great deal of time and effort to managing them over the years – but instead a response to how we think we can best meet the needs of people affected by MS.

Next steps

We met with each group with a holiday home during October and invited them to provide feedback on the proposals, we also contacted their members and where the group were happy for us to do so we contacted users of the holiday homes.

We are currently collating all feedback we receive and it will be considered when making a final decision. We'll be able to share our final decision in early 2018. If this final decision will result in changes to our approach to holiday homes, we will also be able to share our timetable and process for implementing any changes.