



# Care homes and relationships

Discussion material

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## How you can use this discussion material

This discussion material is based on evidence from research, lived experience and practice knowledge. You can use it to reflect on your current services and to open up conversations with people, families, colleagues and partners about ways to make evidence-informed changes to what you do.

This discussion material summarises an existing review of the evidence produced by [Dr George Palattiyil](#) for the [Care Inspectorate](#) on '[Meaningful Connection](#)' for people living in care homes - with other people who live in and staff that work in these settings, with other people in their lives and local communities. The review summarised in this discussion material is part of the 'Anne's Law' Project. This project aims to protect the rights of people who live in residential care settings, particularly how they can form meaningful connections and be involved in communities.

We also included some information on the different policies across the four UK nations related to visits to care homes - just one way people can form and maintain relationships. The material also includes some 'ideas worth sharing' (Armstrong and Lowndes, 2018), or examples of different approaches to support good relationships with and within care homes.

### Summary

- 'Meaningful connections' are relationships and interactions that make us happy.
- People living in care homes will want to make different kinds of connections with different people - a person-centred approach is a good way to work out what suits each person.
- Relationships and connections that support wellbeing can be with their peers; family, friends and carers who live elsewhere; staff; and the wider community.
- Without meaningful connections, people can become lonely, and loneliness has implications for mental, emotional and physical wellbeing and health.
- With the right support, people with different impairments (sensory, cognitive, physical) can make meaningful connections.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the meaningful connections people living in care homes had, or were able to make, due to restrictions around visits.
- Some ideas about what can help include: creating an understanding between care homes and unpaid carers, intergenerational activities and using technology to support interaction.

## What is the issue?

Social isolation and loneliness are harmful. They can reduce older people's life expectancy and damage their health and wellbeing, including their quality of life (Annear et al., 2017; Lem et al., 2021; WHO, 2021). Studies have found that loneliness can be an issue for people who live in residential care settings, linked to shifts in social connections as people move or due to other changes, such as poor health and sensory, cognitive or physical impairments (Gardiner et al., 2020; Annear et al., 2017; Lapane et al., 2022). Conversely, forming and maintaining social relationships is important for wellbeing, and this includes for people living in residential care settings (Kang et al., 2020).

Dr. Palattiyil's [review](#) explored different types of relationships in residential care settings and how these could help with people's wellbeing. **Friendships with peers** in care settings help to create a sense of belonging and a feeling of being 'at home' (Kang et al., 2020; Lovatt, 2021). **Relationships with staff** were also identified as central to supporting wellbeing. Important factors highlighted included "staff who were friendly, genuine, and open; treated them with respect and dignity; had a positive and encouraging approach; were patient; and made them feel comfortable about needing assistance" (Palattiyil, 2023: 19). The review also emphasised how much people in care settings value and benefit from **relationships with family, friends and carers**. These relationships are a source of support that extends beyond the role of 'visitors' to being key 'partners in care' (Hindmarch et al., 2021; Palattiyil et al., 2020; Puurveen et al., 2018; Sweeney et al., 2022), providing emotional support, insight, information, advocacy and assisting with physical care (Barken & Lowndes, 2018; Hovey & Shropshire, 2021; Puurveen et al., 2018). **Connections to the wider community** was also highlighted in Dr. Palattiyil's review as central to supporting people's wellbeing, but sometimes are hard to maintain when people move into a care setting, particularly if it is located in a different area.

## What are the barriers to forming and maintaining social connections for people in care homes?

Research has highlighted the **impact the COVID-19 pandemic** had on people living in residential care settings in terms of their social isolation and in turn their health and wellbeing (Sweeney et al., 2022). People were emotionally distressed by loss of connections with those living outside of care settings resulting from restrictions around visits (Hovey & Shropshire, 2021; Kusmaul et al., 2022). Even when arrangements were made for visits within 'social distancing' guidelines, the loss of touch was important to people and had a negative impact on wellbeing for both those living in care settings and those caring for them (Palattiyil et al., 2020).

Other barriers and challenges identified in the review included:

- "Partnership is difficult when power dynamics are uneven and family carers are not regarded as, or feel valued as, equal partners in care" (Barken & Lowndes, 2018 in Palattiyil, 2023: 26).
- Physical distance between the care setting and where family and friends may live.
- Recruitment and retention issues in care can make it difficult for people living in care settings to form strong relationships with staff.



### Box 1- Policy in the four UK nations: Visits to Care Homes

In **Scotland**, the issue of care homes and relationships is on the policy agenda. The ‘Anne’s Law’ campaign by Natasha Hamilton, the daughter of 63-year-old care home resident Anne Duke, led to the announcement by the Scottish Government after a consultation period in 2021-22 that they planned to introduce legislation to give people in care homes in Scotland the right to safe and supported visits, even in the case of future pandemics. Although two new Health and Social Care Standards were created in March 2022 (Scottish Government, 2022), Anne’s Law has yet to be introduced into legislation. The two standards state:

- *“If I am an adult living in a care home and restrictions to routine visiting are needed to prevent infection, I can nominate relatives/friends (and substitutes) to visit me. My nominated relatives/friends will be supported by the care home to see me in person day-to-day and to be directly involved in providing my care and support if that is what I want.”*
- *“If I am an adult living in a care home, I can nominate relatives/friends (and substitutes), who will be supported by the care home to be directly involved in providing my day-to-day care and support if that is what I want.”*

Although in **England** there is currently no specific legislative requirement for care homes to allow visits into care homes, guidance published by the Care Quality Commission (the regulator of health and care services in England) states that “*care home providers should enable a resident to see their family and friends if the resident wants to*”. Failure to do so could mean a care home is breaching regulations related to dignity, respect and person-centred care. A review by the House of Commons Library (2022) also highlights that visits can be related to human rights, including the right to life (Article 2), the right to liberty and security (Article 5) and the right to respect for private and family life (Article 8), but that only publicly-funded residents in care homes are able to raise arguments based upon the Human Rights Act 1998 directly against providers.

In **Wales**, people living in care homes must have space other than their bedroom to be able to meet with visitors. Visits can be restricted at times when there are infections within the home, but any measures must be proportionate to the level of risk (Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, 2022).

The Department of Health in **Northern Ireland** issued an updated version of its visiting guidance for care homes in 2022 - [“Visiting with Care -The New Normal”](#). The guidance states that there should be no restrictions on visiting if there is an outbreak of an illness in a care setting “*so long as the care home has capacity and visitors are aware of the ongoing situation there should be no restrictions on visiting*”; when there is widespread community transmission, action should be taken in proportion with the nature of the disease and level of risk to people living and working in the care setting.

### What can help people in care homes to create and maintain relationships?

Dr. Palattiyil’s review highlighted a number of examples of things that can help people in care settings to form and sustain good relationships:

- The physical environment, with spaces indoors and outdoors that invite socialisation and interaction.

- “Partnership, trust, and collaboration is supported by an ethos which values, welcomes, and supports family inclusion and collaboration, and is demonstrated by open and transparent, jargon-free communication; listening to and valuing family perceptions and expertise; ensuring avenues for and being responsive to concerns” (Backhaus et al., 2020; Barken & Lowndes, 2018 in Palattiyil, 2023: 27).
- Policies, procedures, and staff training that are clear about everyone’s contributions, roles and responsibilities, including friends and families.
- Ways of working which encouraged people living in care settings to be independent, make their own decisions and express their own uniqueness also facilitated positive relationships with staff (Scheffelaar et al., 2018).
- Consistency of staff was also a factor, but this was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Giebel et al., 2022a; Hanna et al., 2022; Sweeney et al., 2022)
- Communication technologies can be used to support ‘virtual visits’ (though these require good digital connectivity and staff available to support people).
- Opportunities to go out or ‘bring the outside in’ were ways to develop these connections (Annear et al., 2017; Ciofi et al., 2022).
- Group activities were identified as one way to help people develop good relationships with others living in the same setting (Kang et al., 2020; Nygaard et al., 2020).
- Introducing people to those who had a shared interest could also help, requiring a person-centred approach and staff engagement and knowledge (Abbott et al., 2018).
- Intergenerational contact, including student placements in care settings were highlighted as a good way to create a sense of connection (Abbott et al., 2018; Handley, 2021).

### **Box 2: Example- Recognising family and friends as ‘partners in care’**

The review by Dr. Palattiyil highlighted that valuing the expertise of family and friends, recognising them as ‘partners in care’ as a way to support good relationships with care settings. The [Care Partners](#) programme in Northern Ireland applies to care settings such as care homes, hospitals and hospices and are designed to be in addition to regular visits. Care Partners take an active role in care, supporting people with things they need help with, such as interactions to support good mental health or encouraging them to eat and drink. The role is complementary to care staff in care settings, and ideally people have two Care Partners to share the visits.

In Wales, [Age Cymru and Carers Trust Wales](#) have developed materials for unpaid carers to help them navigate important issues when the person they care for moves into a residential care setting. An area they highlight is unpaid carers recognising themselves as experts in care, including practical advice on how to contribute to care plans.

### Box 3: Example- Using technologies to make connections

In [South Devon and Torbay](#), England a network of champions in smart digital technology across care homes support residents to use technology to stay connected with friends, family and their local community. Digital Health Devon supplied an introductory pack of technology including smart speakers, mobile phones and Wi-Fi extenders, with training provided to staff.

There are also examples of technology being used in activities that can help people living in care homes to create connections with their peers. Arts activities, such as those organised by [Bright Shadow](#) and exercise sessions by companies such as [Motion Exercise CIC](#) can be joined by residents online.

### Box 4: Example- Intergenerational Relationships

There are ways different care settings are working to support people to develop intergenerational relationships.

In England, [Care Home Friends and Neighbours \(Care Home FaNs\)](#), a partnership project between [My Home Life England](#) and [The Linking Network](#) linked over 4,000 young people aged 5-14 from schools and youth organisations with approximately 2,000 older people living in care homes across England between 2019-2022. Local 'community brokers' supported schools or youth groups to engage with local care homes over a period of 18 months. An [evaluation](#) found positive outcomes for both the older adults and children and young people in terms of wellbeing.

Bringing different generations together around a specific activity is an approach used by Spa Nursing Home Group in Belfast and Ballynahinch, Northern Ireland. Their '[Food For Life](#)' programme created a programme of activities around the topic of food for local residents and their nursing homes, such as a 'Teddy bears picnic', cooking sessions (e.g. soup, butter-making), and making healthy snack boxes for local community groups.

Sharing space is another way to foster intergenerational relationships. In England, [Belong Chester](#) includes a fully integrated nursery within a residential care setting, with children and older adults encouraged to mix and engage. The idea was recently covered in an article in the [Guardian](#) newspaper.

### Having read this discussion material:

#### Your experiences...

- Does the material reflect your experiences or ways of working?
- What do you think helps or hinders people creating and maintaining relationships when they live in care homes?

#### Thinking about this discussion document...

- Were there any ideas in this document that you think could be helpful?
- Anything in the document you didn't agree with, or didn't match your experience?

**A note on the review this discussion material uses:** In the literature review this material summarises, [Dr George Palattiyil](#) also looked for publications that used the words ‘Social connection’, ‘Meaningful connection’, ‘Social contact’, ‘Meaningful contact’, ‘Visiting’, ‘Visitation’, ‘Visits’, ‘Engagement’, ‘Meaningful engagement’, ‘Social engagement’, ‘Social support’ and ‘Connection’. Dr Palattiyil also focused on the following settings: care homes, older people’s facilities, older person facilities, residential homes, residential care, nursing homes, long term care, old people’s homes, elderly care homes, and care facilities. A total of 52 publications were reviewed and summarised.

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### Other resources

- The Care Inspectorate materials on Meaningful Connection and Anne’s Law: <https://www.careinspectorate.com/index.php/visiting-meaningful-connection-annes-law>
- The Care Inspectorate self-evaluation tool for Meaningful Connection: [https://www.careinspectorate.com/images/Meaningful\\_Connection\\_Annes\\_Law/Self-Evaluation\\_Tool\\_Meaningful\\_Connection\\_-\\_latest\\_version.docx](https://www.careinspectorate.com/images/Meaningful_Connection_Annes_Law/Self-Evaluation_Tool_Meaningful_Connection_-_latest_version.docx)
- House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights (focused on care home visits during the pandemic) <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5747/documents/65438/default/>
- Information on legal rights and care home visits:
  - UK: <https://www.carehome.co.uk/advice/care-home-visits-legal-rights>
  - England: [https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20191017\\_visiting\\_rights\\_information\\_2019\\_update.pdf](https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/20191017_visiting_rights_information_2019_update.pdf)
  - Northern Ireland: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/guidance-hsc-staff-healthcare-workers-and-care-providers/questions-and-0>
  - Northern Ireland: <https://thebeechesltd.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Visiting-With-Care-the-New-Normal-December-2022-update.pdf>
  - Wales: <https://olderpeople.wales/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Living-in-a-care-home-in-Wales-A-guide-to-your-rights.pdf>
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- Age Cymru and Carers Trust Wales guidance on ‘Making relationships count’: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-cymru/documents/care-home-guide/good-practice-guide-v4.pdf>

Cover image – SHVETS production: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/elderly-man-and-a-woman-having-fun-8899975/>

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