

BRIEFING:

SUPPORTING OLDER PEOPLE TO MOVE INTO A CARE HOME WITH THEIR PET/S

PETS IN CARE HOMES



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This briefing draws on research findings from the research project, 'He means the world to me: Human rights implications of separating older people from their pets in residential care/nursing homes' project. Conducted over three years and funded by the Dunhill Medical Trust, this research project explored the experience of older people with pets who are moving into a care home. The research was carried out in two areas in England and predominantly focused on care homes in rural areas. Interviews were carried out with older people living in care homes, care home staff, relatives, animal charities, veterinary surgeons and social care staff. If you would like to find out more about the project, please go to: www.petsincarehomes.com/

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing focuses on what we found when we talked to care home managers and staff who stated that their care home was 'pet friendly' and to staff who worked in care homes which did not have a policy about pets. We outline the practice and approach of care homes which encouraged people, whenever possible, to move into the care home with their animals. It also highlights the reasons why other care homes felt they could not accommodate pets.

OLDER PEOPLE AND PETS

The bond between older people and their pets has been shown to be important in a number of ways. For example:

- Encouraging physical activity
- Fostering a reciprocal bond and continuous relationship
- Reducing social isolation
- Encouraging the maintenance of skills
- Promoting tactile and sensory closeness

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The bond between an older person and their pet/s is often very important to the person and contributes to wellbeing

Moving to a care home is a major transition and can bring about unwanted change and loss, including loss of important relationships and social connections

The Care Quality Commission framework for inspection highlights the importance of person-centred care which is tailored to a person's individual needs and preferences

Wellbeing is an underpinning principle of the Care Act 2015. Although broadly defined, it includes: supporting people to maintain domestic, family and personal relationships; promoting physical and emotional wellbeing and mental health; maintaining control over day-to-day life

MOVING TO A CARE HOME

Moving to a care home is a major change in a person's life and is often preceded by unwelcome changes in health, and difficulties managing activities of everyday life. Older people moving to a care home may have experienced recent bereavement and other important losses. It is not always easy for people to plan and prepare for a move to a care home. Often moves happen in a crisis or emergency situation. Research suggests that the impact of a sudden and unplanned move adds to the stress and strain of leaving one's home. Adjusting to life in an unfamiliar environment can be a big challenge when personal resources are reduced by factors such as poor health, stress, cognitive impairment and loss.

Older people with pet/s who move into a care home, face additional worries. For example:

- Care homes often do not allow older people to bring pets with them when they move to the care home
- Even if care homes encourage people to bring pets with them, it seems that older people and families typically assume that pets will not be allowed

- Older people who move into a care home may have already been separated from their pet/s due to being in hospital and may have been excluded from discussions and decision making about the future care and living arrangement for their pet/s
- Families may face other priorities when searching for a home, such as affordability, location, the type of care provided and if a home has a vacancy – all of which may take priority over maintaining a relationship with the older person's pet/s
- Families can sometimes feel they are doing the right thing by discouraging the person from talking about their pet/s and may incorrectly assume that an older person living with dementia will 'forget' about their animals.

CARE HOMES THAT DO ACCEPT OLDER PEOPLE WITH THEIR PET/S

'We have a policy in place to enable them to actually bring their own pet...it's a big part of their life and a decision to come into a care home is massive for someone. To give up their own home, to come into a care home, that's big enough on its own without then thinking, 'My dog' or 'My cat' or something like that.' (CH2)

Care homes which accepted pets with older people thought it was very important to allow this whenever possible. Participants thought that maintaining the older person/animal relationship supported wellbeing and helped the older person to settle into the care home and feel positive about the move. Care home participants also recognised the pain of separation and the long-term effects of separation when older people were forced to let their pets go.

Some care homes had a clear policy about pets and made sure that they included discussion about pets in their assessment with older people. They felt that this opened up a conversation at an early stage with an older person about whether or not they had a pet or pets that they wanted to bring with them to the care home. Other 'pet friendly' care homes tended to leave it to the older person and families to ask if they would consider allowing a pet to move in with the older person.

'Pet friendly' care homes told us about the kinds of things they took into consideration when deciding if they could support an older person to bring their pet/s with them to the care home:

- The older person's preference. In our research we spoke to older people who wanted to keep their animals with them, but also some older people who felt that care home life would not suit their pet and made alternative arrangements (for example, going to live with a family member who visited the care home with the dogs very regularly)
- The animal/s in question (size, type, behaviour, health, care needs)
- The likelihood of the animal fitting in at the care home
- Care home space (the location of the bedroom, shared space, access to garden if needed)

- Other resident needs and attitudes to animals (preferences, likes and dislikes, care needs, allergies)
- The availability of care staff who were willing and able to support the care of the animal
- Family support (arranging and paying for pet insurance, arranging trips to the vet, annual vaccination)

If the care home felt able to take the pet/s with the older person, they generally drew up a care plan to make sure that the needs of the animals were clearly identified, as well as stipulating who was responsible for taking care of each aspect of the animal's care.

Care homes acknowledged that it was easier to encourage care staff to help with animal care if they liked animals and were committed to the importance of keeping pets with older people whenever possible.

The importance of family support in helping to keep pets with older people was highlighted by participants. Families usually provided practical assistance in a number of ways. These included: dog walking, trips to the vets, paying vet bills and for regular treatments (worming, flea treatment, vaccinations), pet insurance and meeting daily needs (bedding, grooming, food).

Some care homes relied on other sources of help, such as the Cinnamon Trust who have a free registration scheme for care homes who are (or want to be) 'pet friendly' (<https://cinnamon.org.uk/pet-friendly-care-homes/>). Being registered entails visits by the Trust every two years, provision of support and advice to the care home and the commitment that, should an older person predecease a pet, the Cinnamon Trust would take care of the animal. In practice, however, a number of the care homes we spoke to kept the animal as the 'care home pet' when an older person died or looked to relatives to take the pet to live with them.

It was important for care homes that they recognised that an older person's needs may change. Participants spoke about older people living with dementia whose view about their animals changed if, for example, they did not recognise them as their animal. This highlighted the importance of sensitive and flexible approaches. For example, one care home spoke about moving a cat to another part of the house if the older person, who was living with dementia, became agitated or upset by the cat's presence.

Participants highlighted the distress that older people felt if they were separated from their animals. This was worsened by family decisions to avoid talking about the animal with the older person. Encouraging good practice with families was an important aspect of practice for 'pet friendly' care homes.

The preference of the older person was very important to 'pet friendly' care homes. They told us, for example, that some older people preferred not to have their pets with them and instead, maintained contact by daily visits with family members who took care of them. This arrangement relies on family support and people who do not have family to help may be disadvantaged if the care home cannot provide or find additional support.

Overall, the 'pet friendly' care homes we spoke to in our study had managed to accommodate pets without any major difficulties. However, the numbers of people living in the home with pets remained small. There was an acknowledgement that care home staff must carefully consider factors such as the welfare of animals and ability of staff to care for animals if numbers increased. There was overwhelming support for keeping pets with older people wherever possible in support of older people's wellbeing.

CARE HOMES WHO DO NOT ACCEPT OLDER PEOPLE WITH THEIR PET/S

'It's a minefield isn't it, I think you can't just take, you can't just take that person's wellbeing into account when in a setting like this you have to take everybody into account some people might fear dogs, some people you know might be allergic to them or there's an infection control issue isn't there.' (CH16)

Most care homes do not accept older people moving in with their pet/s. Sometimes, care homes describe themselves as 'pet' or 'animal' friendly but this does not necessarily mean they accept older people's pets to live with them. 'Pet friendly' can mean that a care home simply allows pets to visit the care home with family members or arranges for animals to visit the home as part of a social / sensory activity.

The reasons that care homes gave for not wanting to support older people to move in with their pets included:

- Risks caused by the animal (trips, bites, disruption by barking, entering other people's private spaces, hygiene; animals fighting)
- Risk of allergies and infection
- Other residents disliking animals
- Lack of staff to care for the animal
- Animals being viewed as unhygienic and unsuitable for a care home environment

Care homes which felt unable to welcome pets with older people also highlighted workload and resources as a major factor in their decision.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Care homes should be clear about what they mean by advertising themselves as 'pet friendly' on their website and brochure. For example, does this include animals living in the care home or does it mean that animals may visit the care home?**
- **Care homes should produce accessible published information that encourages older people and their families to ask about pets moving with the older person to the care home.**
- **Care homes which do accept pets should have a policy which makes clear what they can offer, how they assess the feasibility of an animal moving with an older person to the care home, expectations of families, and, if the older person does not have a family, how they can support the older person to keep their pet/s**
- **Care homes which wish to accept pets with older people should consider getting support/advice from support services such as the Cinnamon Trust and registering with the Trust as a 'pet friendly' care home, which allows them to access practical help and assistance**
- **The care home 'contract' should include provision for accommodating pet/s and spell out the circumstances under which the arrangement may no longer be sustainable**

RESEARCH TEAM:

Marie Fox, Professor of Law, School of Law & Social Justice, University of Liverpool
Marie.Fox@liverpool.ac.uk

Mo Ray, Professor of Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln
mray@lincoln.ac.uk

Dr Michael Toze, School of Medicine, University of Lincoln
mtoze@lincoln.ac.uk

Dr Carol Gray, School of Law & Social Justice, University of Liverpool
Carol.Gray@liverpool.ac.uk

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