

BRIEFING:

HOW SOCIAL WORKERS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES CAN SUPPORT OLDER PEOPLE WITH PET/S WHO ARE MOVING TO A CARE HOME

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

Social workers often play a crucial role in supporting older people whose care and support needs will be met in a care home. This briefing highlights some of the challenges that older people who wish to move with their pet/s into a care home often experience and the ways in which social workers provide vital support, advice and assistance.

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:

- Fostering a reciprocal bond and a continuous relationship
- Encouraging physical activity
- Reducing social isolation
- Encouraging the maintenance of skills
- Promoting tactile and sensory closeness
- Preserving individual identity and maintaining biographical continuity

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- In common with many people, older people form close emotional ties with pets, which may become even more important if an older person's social life and networks reduce or are restricted because of loss/bereavement and the implications of long term illness and disability
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that older people will avoid or delay accessing much needed care and support because they fear it will mean being separated from their pet/s
- Moving to a care home is a major transition. Evidence suggests that when a person has not been fully involved in decision making and when the move ruptures important emotional ties and relationships, the challenge of settling into the care home is difficult
- Evidence suggests that older people who feel forced to move into a care home at the expense of important relationships are at risk of experiencing severe loneliness, poor mental health and depression
- The rights of an older person to self-determination and control over their lives are fundamental principles which should underpin decision making about meeting care and support needs
- 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
- Care Act Guidance (2015) includes establishing the welfare of and care arrangements for pets if the person is being cared for away from their home
- Where an older person is deemed to lack capacity to make decisions relating to their care they may still benefit from the company of their pet/s. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 s.1(5) requires that decisions made on behalf of a person lacking capacity must be reached in their best interests.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT? (CONT)

- **Best interests are not defined in the Act, but past and present wishes and feelings must be considered. In one District Court decision a judge ruled that various factors were relevant to determining the best interests of a woman who had lost capacity as result of a stroke. These included that a financial deputy, who had been appointed to deal with her affairs, should have ensured that she maintain contact with her dog after her move to a nursing home. (*Mrs. P v Rochdale Borough Council and NHS North, Central, and South Manchester Clinical Commissioning Groups 2016*).**
- **If the care has been arranged or funded by a public authority, care homes must also comply with legal obligations imposed by the Human Rights Act 1998, which enshrines the rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. These include the protection of private and family life under Article 8. This area of law is complex and evolving, but Article 8 protections have been interpreted broadly and, arguably, a blanket policy excluding animals would potentially breach the Human Rights Act, although care homes clearly have obligations to protect the interests of other residents, staff and carers.**
- **The Animal Welfare Act 2006 s. 9 places a duty on the person responsible for an animal to ensure that they take reasonable steps to meet the welfare needs of their animal/s. An older person with complex care and support needs may need assistance to ensure that the welfare needs of their pet/s are supported, including the potential for their pet to move with them into a care home.**

MOVING TO A CARE HOME

'He (cat) was a major consideration when she was looking into care options...She was absolutely categorical that she would not go into a care home if she had to be separated from him...She likes the idea of him being with her in a care home, as he has always been an indoor cat. She thinks he could just happily stay in her room. She wouldn't expect it to be possible for him to go into communal areas of the home' (25)

Social workers are familiar with the potential disruption and personal significance of pets for older people who move to a care home. Older people may need to move at a time when their personal resources and resilience are depleted by changing health, loss and bereavement and rapid and unpredictable change. While moving to a care home can be a very positive choice, it is often difficult to create the time to maximise opportunities for the older person to consider care options, plan, prepare, try out various options and decide. Discharge to assess guidelines state that people should not have to make decisions about long term residential care while they are in crisis, but, in practice, people may feel that they are

expected to make important decisions about care when they are in crisis or a state of great uncertainty. Research strongly suggests that the impact of a sudden and unplanned move adds to the stress and strain of leaving one's home and adds to the challenge of settling well into a care home.

Older people with pet/s may face additional worries when they move into a care home. For example:

- Finding a suitable care home that will allow older people to bring their pet/s with them to the care home
- Older people and families may assume that pets are not allowed in any care home and that separation of the older person from their pet/s is an inevitable outcome of the move
- Older people with complex needs, including cognitive impairment, may be (wrongly) assumed to be past worrying about their animal/s and no longer able to take a role in their care
- Older people may have already been separated from their pets because they are being cared for away from home (for example, in hospital). Discharge to assess practices may mean that an older person moves from hospital to a care home for up to six weeks for ongoing assessment, reablement and to make decisions about future care and support. While good practice guidance highlights the importance of ensuring the older person is involved in decisions and able to express preferences and choices, the reality of urgent admission to hospital or to care homes may mean that an older person has been effectively excluded from discussions and decision making about future care and living arrangements for their pet/s. Older people without available family or friends may be especially vulnerable to losing touch with decision making about the welfare and location of their pets
- Moving to a care home is a complex decision and older people or their families may have to focus on other priorities when searching for a care home including: availability, affordability, type of care provided and if the home has a vacancy – which may, in the pressure to find a suitable home, take priority over maintaining a relationship with the older person's pets
- People living with cognitive impairment or who, for whatever reason, lack decision making capacity may be especially vulnerable to being excluded from decision making. Risk aversion, assumptions about an older person's lack of capacity and organisational pressures may all act against supported decision making
- 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.

ASSESSMENT OF NEED

'I know a lot of people who would resist it to the end as certainly I would. I would not let anybody take my pet away.' (27)

Underpinning the Care Act, the 'wellbeing principle' highlights the importance of supporting people to maintain domestic, family and personal relationships and to promote physical, emotional wellbeing and good mental health. Given the importance of the human/animal bond and overwhelming evidence of the depth and intensity of human animal relationships, it is critical that pet/s are included in assessment. During an assessment, social workers can encourage older people to talk about their pet/s and support them to discuss and share their concerns about their animal's welfare in the context of their own care and support needs. These conversations can also create opportunities for older people to express their preferences about their continued relationship with their pet/s – regardless of the ways in which the older person's care and support needs may ultimately be met. Asking about pets may be even more critical when assessment takes place away from the older person's home environment and it may not be obvious that there are animals on the scene. Older people without relatives or friends may be especially vulnerable to not being able to have a say about care of animals but paradoxically, may be among those most in need of preserving their relationship with their pet/s. Advocacy may be a crucial way of supporting older people to express their concerns and preferences for the future care of their animal in conjunction with their concerns and preferences for their own care and support needs.

PET FRIENDLY CARE HOMES

'We need to know that they've got their vaccinations and have a record of everything. They would have a care plan, that animal, the same as what a resident would...it's all about (the animal) and who's responsible for what and a record of his injections and fleas and worm tablets and stuff like that' (2)

Social workers often have extensive and comprehensive knowledge about local care providers and are often well placed to identify care homes who will support people to bring pets to live with them when they move into a care home. Telling older people and family members about them need not constitute making a recommendation but, instead, may help people focus their energies on considering care homes that are more likely to be suitable for pets.

Involving family members in assessment and discussions about an older person's pet/s will encourage them to air concerns and ask questions about possible care options for the older person and their pet/s. It may also create an opportunity for family members to think about the kind of support they may be able to give to their older relative's pet/s should they move to a care home with their animal/s.

Pet friendly care homes told us that, sometimes, family members tried to avoid talking to an older relative about their pet/s, especially if they were living with dementia.

Their reluctance was often grounded in concern and a desire not to upset the older person. Sometimes, care homes said that family members assumed that living with dementia would mean the older person would 'forget' about their animal/s. Social workers can play a vital role in helping family members to understand that while a person living with dementia is likely to experience memory difficulties, it is wrong to assume that a person will not experience distress, upset and confusion about a separation from their animal/s exacerbated by separation from their home.

In our project, care homes which accepted pets with older people appreciated having as much information about the pet/s to help them decide how they could meet the needs of the older person and their pet/s. For example:

- The older person's preferences about keeping animals with them in the care home or deciding to make alternative arrangements; for example, the pet/s going to live with a family member and visiting them in the care home
- The animal/s in question (size, behaviour, care needs, health - including ongoing medication or treatment)
- The availability of additional support (for example from family members, friends, voluntary services) who could assist with the care of the pet/s coming to live in the care home
- Financial implications and ability of the older person to pay for veterinary bills, vaccination, pet insurance
- Any discussions or decisions about the future care of the pet should the older person predecease their animal/s.

Social workers may also play an important role in encouraging the older person and/or their family to ask for a written agreement with the care home about the future care of the animal. This could include, for example, the kinds of circumstances in which the pet could no longer be cared for and establishing the security of the arrangement to care for the animal in the care home if there was a change of Registered Manager or care home owner.

CARE AND SUPPORT PLANNING

In the course of our research we came across examples of excellent social work practice which ensured that an older person's pet/s were included in an assessment, efforts had been made to find a 'pet friendly' care home and individual care and support plans for the older person's pet were developed between the older person and social worker. The care and support plans addressed all aspects of the pet/s care, welfare and health needs as well as identifying additional resources to help care for the pet/s (for example, family involvement).

Given the emphasis on family and friends' role in supporting older people to remain with their pet/s, we are concerned that older people without family and friends may be disadvantaged in their efforts to keep their pet/s with them. Social workers may be able to offer valuable support in, for example, identifying local voluntary groups who could dog walk or negotiating with the care home to

provide necessary support.

Our research found that some older people made the decision not to attempt to bring their pets with them to the care home on the grounds that the care home would not suit their pet/s needs:

'Well I wouldn't want them to go wandering in a strange garden. I couldn't be absolutely sure that they couldn't escape in some way because there are a large number of areas which are hedged as opposed to fences, and little dogs are very good at getting through little hedges' (3)

In this situation, care homes who took part in the research highlighted the importance of discussing arrangements for ongoing contact. For example, whether the pet/s can visit the care home and identifying the person who is responsible for the animal's welfare. This information can be included in the person's care and support plan.

NO PET FRIENDLY CARE HOMES AVAILABLE?

Our research suggests that care homes often do not define themselves as 'pet friendly'; but it does not always mean that they would not consider inviting an older person to move into the home with their pet/s. In our informal conversations with social workers they told us that it was worth asking as, sometimes, care homes were not averse to taking in a pet but had simply never been asked.

The Care Act includes a duty to 'shape the market' which means developing services which meet the needs of all people in their area with care and support needs and which promote their wellbeing. While social workers may not be directly involved in these activities, their experience of care services in the community, suitability of available care for older people and gaps in care provision can provide vital information for Commissioners. Identifying, for example, the importance of increasing the numbers of care homes which positively encourage older people to move in with their pet/s may be an important aspect of provision to develop.

Under the Care Act Local Authorities are also obliged to consider how they identify unmet need. If an older person is forced to separate from their much loved pet simply because there is not a suitable service to support them to live together, this constitutes an unmet need. Recording unmet need should be crucial in the development of longer term planning of services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **All assessments of need should establish whether the older person has pet/s who should be included in discussions with the older person about their care and support preferences and options.**
- **Assessments carried out away from home should be particularly sensitive to the possibility that an older person has pet/s. The animal's whereabouts and care arrangements should be established if it is not already known.**
- **If care and support needs are to be met via a move to a care home, older people with pets should be**

supported to take an active role in discussions and decisions about whether they want to find a home where they can take their pet or make other arrangements.

- **Assessments which provide information about pets and their needs is welcomed by care homes who are considering taking a pet into their home with an older person.**
- **Social workers should support older people who want to move into a care home with their pet/s in a number of ways: identifying care homes which are known to take pets; approaching homes not identified as pet friendly but which may take pets; including the pet's care and support needs in a care and support plan; discussing any potential top up to cover costs associated with pet care.**
- **If an older person would benefit from an advocate to support them in decision making, social workers can highlight to the advocate the presence and importance of pets in the person's life.**
- **As part of their duty to provide advice and information, Local Authorities could provide information about 'pet friendly' care homes and voluntary agencies and services who support older people with pets (for example, a local branch of the Cinnamon Trust). This may be especially important to self-funders who are currently less likely to approach Adult Social Care services and/or access or be offered an assessment of need.**
- **If an older person decides not to take a pet/s with them to the care home, social workers should encourage the person and their families to establish how the older person will stay in touch with their pets. This should include, for example, establishing that the animal/s may visit the care home on a regular basis and any arrangements that need to be in place to support contact.**
- **Local Authorities should have an accessible system which supports social workers to identify gaps in current care provision as part of their market shaping activities and future commissioning. This could include identifying gaps in care provision in order to recognise that people with care and support needs may have pet/s.**
- **Local Authorities should have a system in place which allows unmet need to be recorded and which is used to feed into future commissioning. This should include, for example, registering incidences of an older person having no choice but to move to a care home without his or her pet/s.**

FURTHER RESOURCES

www.cinnamon.org.uk/pet-friendly-care-homes/

www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss

ACADEMIC ARTICLES:

Fox M, Ray M. (2019) 'No pets allowed? Companion animals, older people and residential care' *Medical Humanities*; 45:211-222.

Freedman, S., Paramova, P., & Senior, V. (2021). "It gives you more to life, it's something new every day": An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of wellbeing in older care home residents who keep a personal pet. *Ageing and Society*, 41(9), 1961-1983.

Rook, D. (2018) 'For the Love of Darcie : recognising the human-companion animal relationship in housing law and policy.' *Liverpool Law Review*, 39 (1-2), pp. 29-46.

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