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THRIVING IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This study aimed to explore **the experiences of older people living in residential care homes** in the United Kingdom.
- The project is one of the largest qualitative studies of its kind. We spoke to **125 participants**, including 44 older people, 27 family members, 36 care team members and 18 care home managers, from **16 residential care homes** across England, Scotland and Wales.
- We wanted to find out what the **experiences** were of living in residential care, including what mattered to older people, and what were some of the benefits and challenges of living in a care home.
- The interview questions were based around the following topics: The benefits of living in a care home; challenges/difficulties of living in a care home; what life was like before moving into a care home; what life is like now in care; who/what is important; what good care means; the experience of settling into a care home; and alternative options for care provision.
- **A broad range of residential care homes** were recruited to the study, to reflect diversity in terms of location, inspection ratings, size and type of home. We also actively sought a small number of care homes that offered support to those from different cultures and faiths.
- The older people who took part in this study had **an average age of 85** and had spent **an average of two years living in a care home**. We captured the voices of a diverse range of older people in relation to gender, disability, funding status and religion. We sought to recruit those who identified as LGBTQ+ but this proved challenging, however we did capture stories from older people from this community via care teams and managers. We interviewed some individuals who had some level of dementia but who were able to give consent, and they were supported by a trusted companion when participating. We heard the stories of people with more advanced conditions through the voices of the care teams and family members.
- The study took place between June 2023 and July 2024 and was delivered by researchers within the My Home Life England team at City St George's, University of London.
- A systematic scoping literature review was undertaken to identify previous research evidence relating to the experiences of people living in residential care.
- Across the stories we heard, we identified some challenges, but we heard **proportionally many more benefits** of living in a care home. Together, these stories shone a light on the ways in which people were able to **thrive** in residential care.

THE RESISTANCES TO, AND CHALLENGES OF, LIVING IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

- There is already a known body of research around the resistances and hesitations to moving into care homes, including the stigma and negative perceptions of care homes; a strong attachment to home and community, the cost of care, emotional barriers, and the perceived loss of autonomy and physical upheaval (Morgan Brett, 2023; O'Neill et al. 2022; O'Neill et al. 2020; O'Neill et al. 2019). Similarly, some of the challenges of moving into and living in a care home have been extensively reported in the literature (See for example, staffing challenges in Cousins et al. 2016, psychosocial challenges for adult-children in Morgan Brett, 2023, cultural factors in adaptations to care in Sun et al. 2021, loneliness in Slettebø, 2008, and struggling for occupational satisfaction in care homes in Atwal et al. 2003).
- The findings from our study showed that the greatest challenges, identified by participants, primarily revolved around the transition into a care home, including the adjustment to communal living, the loss of home and possessions, and adapting to a new social environment. The challenges of living in a care home included; navigating relationships with others, the perceived loss of independence, and having to conform to the expectations and routines of the home. Additionally, there were challenges identified regarding mobility, which were typically about participants' personal challenges rather than the care home itself.

THE BENEFITS OF LIVING IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

- Care homes have not typically been considered places for personal growth or enrichment. However, amongst our sample of 44 older people, other than one individual participant, all other participants interviewed recognised ways in which they had benefitted from living in a care home. Indeed, older people were typically more easily able to identify the benefits of living in a care home compared to the challenges. For many, there was a sense that rather than simply existing, they were now thriving in a care home. We recognise that not every person benefitted in the same way and hence not all the themes are relevant to every older person that we interviewed.
- The study captured stories and insights that clustered around six dominant themes; Thrive Relationally, Thrive Actively, Thrive Inclusively, Thrive Securely, Thrive with Dignity, and Thrive Healthily.

THE SIX DIMENSIONS OF THRIVING



1. THRIVE RELATIONALLY

Our study recognised that loneliness and social isolation can be a challenge for many older people living in the community. Moving into a care home can provide important opportunities for socialising with new people, building friendships, and restoring or enhancing existing relationships with family members.

The older people we spoke to described one of the greatest benefits of living in a care home as being around others, building positive connections with care team members, and developing meaningful friendships with other older people. We saw examples of love and safe touch (such as a reassuring hand, or a welcomed hug) that brought huge benefit to some older people. Additionally, families described how the care home had helped them restore their relationship with their older relative, which had previously come under strain when they were living in the community.

We recognised that, for some, a challenge to building relationships related to when they felt they were being disturbed by other older people who displayed behaviours related to stress and distress in dementia. We also recognised that loneliness was a challenge for some older people who struggled to form meaningful relationships with others, perhaps due to a lack of shared interests. However, we saw great efforts from care team members in helping to facilitate connections and to help new people to settle in, as well as schemes such as the ambassador's role to help build friendships in residential care.

"[The] enjoyment of saying, 'Good morning,' 'good morning,' 'good morning,' 'good morning.' [Imitating different voices] ...I think a feeling of that you are part of a community. And things go wrong, things go right. Rally round".

Tom, aged 92



2. THRIVE ACTIVELY

Many older people described the importance of meaningful activity in their care home. When living in the community, some older people had not been able to enjoy the things that mattered to them, but once living in a care home and with the right support, they were able to adapt their previous interests to fit with what they could now manage, given their own physical limitations.

We found that well-thought through activities were important for older peoples' self-expression, confidence, building connections with others, and having choice and autonomy. We found that many of the care homes were well-connected to the community, with visiting entertainers, faith leaders, and educators, and in many of the homes they encouraged older people to go out on day trips. It also cannot be underestimated how much the view outside of the window meant to older people, who found that people-watching was an important way of feeling part of the wider community.

The challenges around activities included some people feeling inhibited by their health conditions, especially around incontinence, and feeling like this prevented them from joining in as much as they would have liked. The other significant challenge was around resourcing of the provision of activities, particularly if a home did not have their own transportation.

Some older people made the positive choice not to engage with communal activities that were available in the home, instead pursuing their own interests in their own time, but it was having the choice about what they wanted to do which mattered most. When the conditions are right in a care home, meaningful and person-centred activities can create a sense of purpose, offer opportunities to give back, and help older people to continue to feel valued and respected.

"Instead of being miserable at home and nothing to do, ...plenty of things to do here...Occupy my mind."

Wally, aged 93



3. THRIVE INCLUSIVELY

Our study included some care homes which offered specialist provision for specific cultures and faiths, ensuring that there were culturally appropriate activities and international foods, language support for those of whom English was not their first language, and multi-faith chapels.

Inclusivity involves making someone feel welcome, safe, valued, and respected, regardless of characteristic or background. We saw wonderful examples of support that enabled older people to connect with their identity through embracing their faith or culture, or through validating the experience of those living with dementia. We also recognised the importance of fostering an inclusive environment in which older people could express their sexual or gender identity.

"We have made an environment where somebody feels so safe that at age 82... he's been able to come out [as gay]. At age 82! A secret that you've kept for all those years. I thought my job is done...if this environment is safe enough that somebody feels that they can do that, this environment is correct."

Jay, care home manager



4. THRIVE SECURELY

A sense of safety builds the foundations from which someone is able to grow and thrive. Our study found that older people, families, and care teams alike, all expressed that feeling safe and secure was one of the greatest benefits to living in residential care. Many of the older people we spoke to expressed that living in a care home provided them with a strong sense of security, safety and assurance. This was vital for some who had not felt or been safe when previously living in the community, because of their own physical or mental health and sometimes because of the experience of violence in their homes or challenges around safe housing. Older people were most likely to feel unsafe at nights in their local community, and knowing that help was at hand in the care home throughout the night was a strong emerging theme for both older people and their families.

One challenge we recognised was that some care homes may have a tendency to be overly risk averse, in order to create a sense of safety. What we found was most important was care teams finding creative ways to support people to do the things that they enjoyed, whilst helping them to assess and appropriately manage the risks.

"I've been here a year now...So, this is my home. [Crying]...When I get into that bed at night, I know I'm safe. And I know if I'm not well someone will come in. It's a lovely feeling...And just contentment, really. And they're so kind."

Irene, aged 81



5. THRIVE WITH DIGNITY

We recognise the importance of dignity, which shapes all dimensions of care. However, in this dimension of thriving, we highlighted the aspects of dignity relating to personal hygiene and managing the other aspects of daily living such as household chores. The older people we spoke to told us about the importance of having support with tasks which were becoming increasingly difficult to do themselves. They identified that some of the greatest benefits of living in a care home were having support with personal care and continence. Others emphasised the importance of physical appearance to their self-esteem, for example having access to a hairdresser and having their nails painted.

"The carers are a wonderful bunch. And you can see how dependent I am on them...unfortunately, I have to wear pads. So, they're a big part of me wearing pads, which I didn't want to wear. I hoped I would never have to...so I am very, very dependent on the carers, who, here, I must say do a wonderful job".

Fifi, aged 84

Many older people found that having a 'nice soak' in a bath and access to an ensuite toilet was particularly important to them and helped them maintain their dignity.

Support with household chores such as cleaning and laundry was also important to older people and helped support dignity. However, it was important that older people felt in control of their space and their environment. Opportunities to be involved in tasks around the care home seemed to offer older people a sense of purpose and helped them to feel valued.



6. THRIVE HEALTHILY

For older people, the move to a long-term care home is often preceded by a sudden health crisis, the deterioration of an existing health condition, and the inability for care to be provided at home any longer. Our study clearly identified that an important benefit of living in residential care was that older people could be supported to maintain or even improve their health status. Care homes were shown to provide proactive and pre-emptive medical care, having easier access to other health professionals (than if living in the community) to manage health issues and review medication.

Older people valued having regular and good quality meals and drinks. Care team members and families also recognised the benefits of good nutrition and fluid intake which can be provided in the care home, particularly for those that were previously struggling with this when living in the community.

We heard powerful and transformative stories of how the health of some older people had dramatically improved whilst living in a care home. Our findings acknowledge that feeling well and being reassured about healthcare are fundamental to being able to thrive in a care home.

Finally, we heard examples of the efforts made by care homes to ensure older people can live their best lives, even in the last chapter of life.

"When I was at home, when I was feeling really bad with shortness of breath and feeling weak, I had to get myself something to eat. It used to take me an hour and a half to get a cup of tea and I lived for a fortnight on brown bread, Marmite and oranges... I was lacking good food."

Suzanne, aged 98

CONCLUSION

Despite being one of the largest qualitative studies on the experiences of living in a care home for older people, we recognise that there are approximately 15,000 care homes across the UK and this study focused upon just 16 of them. We did not seek to generalise from our findings, as this is not a feature of qualitative research, but instead we sought to better understand the rich, in-depth, lived experience of what it means to live in a residential care home as an older person.

Our findings do not represent the practices which are happening in all homes, but what we can claim is that we have uncovered, in-depth and on an extraordinary scale, many ways in which older people can benefit from residential care and the conditions under which they can thrive when things are operating well. The study demonstrates that, while care homes may not be right for everyone, when they are delivering to their potential, they can be everything for some.



To see more information and the full report, please visit:
myhomelife.org.uk/thriving or scan the QR code.

Morgan Brett, B., Owen, T., Ryan, A., Hewitt, E., Thompson, S., and Davis, L. (2024)
Thriving in Residential Care, My Home Life, City St George's, University of London.

This study was conducted by My Home Life England, part of City St George's, University of London.
My Home Life England's mission is to improve quality of life in care settings, by empowering confident care leaders and creating sustainable care systems. My Home Life England does this through high-quality professional development, research, and community engagement.
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