

Notes from Christians on Ageing Conference Call

A Care Homes Update

This was a Zoom conference held on **20 October 2020**. We were: Marion Shoard (leading), Janet Hopewell, Jim Sharpe, Satwant Rait, Tina English, Albert Jewell, Helen Coates, Isabel Woodrow, Joseph Cortis and David Jolley (host)

Marion confirmed that Care Homes - the lives and deaths of residents and staff, and restrictions placed upon them - have become and remain major concerns within the Covid 19 crisis. Our first Conference Call on 16 June 2020 had heard people describing ways of living with the restrictions, which were impressive and ingenious. We came together again on the topic to see what progress has been made.

Marion reviewed the setting by reference to **changing guidance** on arrangements for visiting care homes from the government in England, and the different rules for Scotland

The **guidance in England** was updated on 15 October 2020

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visiting-care-homes-during-coronavirus>

In this guidance, the Department of Health and Social Care points out that ultimate decisions on access for visitors rest with the provider/manager of each Care Home, after having taken advice from the local Director of Public Health. Homes should continue to draw up policies of 'limited visiting' as infection levels have come down over the summer. Essentially, homes must weigh up the risks to the physical health of their residents in accepting visitors as against the risks to mental health and wellbeing in not receiving visitors. Other factors should come into play, including whether the prospective visitor is a carer, whether the configuration of the home lends itself to visiting (perhaps outdoors or at windows), and whether social distancing would be difficult for particular residents (who, perhaps because of lack of understanding, might breach social distancing guidelines). Within any home, there can be different visiting policies for different residents. There had been strong objection to the restriction in guidance in July that visiting should be restricted to one nominated visitor per resident; this was later changed and the 15 October guidance says, "Visitors should be limited to a single constant visitor per resident, wherever possible, with an absolute maximum of 2 constant visitors per resident".

John's Campaign, established originally to improve the care of people with dementia in general hospitals, has widened its focus to include people in care homes

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54007273>. Together with other organisations including the Alzheimer's Society, it has urged government to tell Care Homes to treat family carers of people with dementia as key workers, thus giving them automatic access to weekly testing to allow them greater freedom to visit. <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/news/2020-07-09/open-letter-secretary-state>

Helen Whately, the Social Care Minister, announced on 14 October 2020 that a **pilot scheme** would be set up to examine the feasibility of giving **designated relatives or friends** key worker status to allow for greater frequency of visits. She had not yet explained when the pilot would start, the criteria for designation of any prospective visitor, how the scheme would be assessed, nor any timetable for roll-out were this considered desirable. Watch this space!

Alongside this approach of 'limited visiting', the government told care homes from the start of the pandemic that they must **permit 'essential visits' or visits in 'exceptional circumstances'**. <http://www.amaranthbooks.co.uk/latest/> Thus in its Adult Social Care: Our Covid-19 Winter Plan 2020/21, the government says "For avoidance of doubt, in any area listed by Public Health England as an 'area of intervention', the Director of Public Health should immediately move to stop /care home/ visiting except in exceptional circumstances such as end of life". <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adult-social-care-coronavirus-covid-19-winter-plan-2020-to-2021/adult-social-care-our-covid-19-winter-plan-2020-to-2021>

Marion asked **participants** for their **experience** of how all these arrangements had been working on the ground.

- Although the definition of essential visits includes the words 'such as', so could presumably take in circumstances other than when a resident is dying, we had not heard of any other situations in which essential visits had been permitted.
- Janet said she had been able to offer The Lord's Prayer in German to a member of her congregation who was dying; while the home had permitted the resident's son to visit his dying mother, it had refused access for his long-time partner, who was much cherished by the resident.
- Marion observed that she did not think that any government guidance had mentioned a limit on the numbers to whom essential visits would be permitted.
- Helen McCormack reported that a small home in her area of North Yorkshire had allowed three people to visit a resident who was dying – their two adult children and a minister of religion.

Marion explained that **guidance in Scotland** has been far less restrictive in several respects. The definition of 'essential visits' has embraced many different circumstances in addition to end of life, while the Scottish Government has set out a framework of social contact for care home residents setting out the sort of visiting in terms of frequency, duration and type of visit risk and residents' access to peripatetic entertainers, hairdressers and so on which homes should permit according to the infection levels. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-adult-care-homes-visiting-guidance/>

Many reported that they had had great difficulty in keeping in contact with homes with which pre-Covid they had held services.

- Isabel said she had been unable to have contact other than by phone with residents in homes in which she had provided 'Stories for the Soul' (a version of Godly Play for care homes);

- Jim could no longer provide singalongs and services;
- Helen Coates could no longer bring in young children for intergenerational engagement; and
- Tina’s project Care Home Friends (an element of the charity Embracing Age) could no longer send in volunteer befrienders.
- Helen Coates reported that she had broadcast a service in a home from a speaker outside which was conveyed inside the home using Bluetooth technology.
- Marion reported that Elizabeth Bryson, an Anna Chaplain in Maidstone, Kent, provides a twice-monthly, themed video service for residents gathered together in the home’s lounge. This includes hymn-singing;
- Elizabeth sings from home to a background of recorded music and the residents, gathered together as a social bubble, can also sing as well as talk via Skype to Elizabeth. At two other homes, she leads shorter, weekly services one-to-one for up to about twenty residents. The home’s activities organiser passes a disinfected phone to individual residents with whom Elizabeth sings, prays, talks and reads the Bible, as well as leading those who used to receive Communion in an act of spiritual communion with the words, ‘O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee’.
- Marion also reported that another Anna Chaplain, David Cooke in Chichester, had been holding services in the grounds of a home for people with dementia. She noted that meetings outdoors have the added advantages of fresh air and closer contact with nature, but the colder and wetter weather now upon us make outdoor activities less feasible. <https://www.annachaplaincy.org.uk/the-team>
- Joseph said that in the Leeds diocese, Roman Catholic Churches had been streaming mass every day since March 23rd and that there have also been organised prayers groups, facilitated by video which have gone into care homes.
- Albert confirmed that Methodist Homes treats its chaplains as ‘staff’, so that they have been able to continue their work in homes. Methodist Homes had been hit hard by Covid, with 400 deaths or 8 per cent of residents since the start of the pandemic.

Elsewhere the situation on **clergy visiting individual residents** seemed to be uneven. Marion explained that the English guidance seems to fudge the question of clergy access, suggesting that they may not be included in the number of nominated visitors any resident can receive. However, the Scottish guidance (12 October 2020) says that spiritual care visits should take place at all infection stages of the pandemic, indoors or outdoors, while those offering spiritual care should not be classed as designated visitors (the Scottish equivalent of England’s nominated visitors).

Marion wondered whether Church bodies in England should urge the adoption of a similar approach in England. However, in view of the potential, if small risk to physical health of such visits, she wondered whether a home should give residents or their representatives a democratic vote before any group such as this were granted enhanced visiting status. Janet agreed, pointing out that such privileged access would fly in the face of diversity and inclusion.

There was the observation that it is often ‘batted back to staff’ to make any decisions about visiting.

A new **government initiative** asks Local Authorities **to identify designated care homes** to receive patients with Covid 19. This raises all sorts of questions on risk to resident, staff and families, stigma and segregation. Visions of a new cohort of leper colonies for untouchables come fearfully to mind

<https://www.carehome.co.uk/news/article.cfm/id/1635076/designated-care-homes-need-to-prepare-to-take-elderly-covid-19-patients-by-end-of-october>

Reflection

- Despite all the energy, passion and devotedness being exhibited in the sector, **many people are feeling overwhelmed** by the combination of fears and changing, restrictive rules.
- There are **good examples** where churches and care homes have found a way toward compassion and humanity within the rules.
- In a complex, closed environment such as a Care Home, people – especially people with dementia – do wander and to control interactions absolutely is not humanely possible.

There is need to **respect and value** the views and fears of all parties.

Practical Issues and Support

Marion mentioned the **issue of banning visits by named individuals** – a practice known before Covid.

- No formal means of appeal to an independent body existed for such situations, nor did it exist now if a resident or their prospective visitor consider that a home is applying restrictions more tightly than the government guidance provides.
- Jim pointed out that anyone could appeal against restriction to the local authority in the case of a local-authority-owned home.
- Our attention was drawn to The 3 Nations Working Group on Dementia <https://www.3ndementiawg.org/> - a group run by people with dementia. They have things to say about Care Homes and the Covid 19 crisis. They share ideas via webinars.

In a discussion on the **BAME experience** we were greatly helped to have Satwant amongst us. She is **Sikh** and working to try to improve the lot of older people of the Sikh and other ethnic minority communities. With her we reflected on the isolation and difficulties encountered when language and culture of an individual are different from those of other residents in a closed community. She described her own feelings of aloneness in such an environment. Her experience is of not feeling welcome or understood or valued.

She drew attention to her book on Sikh chaplaincy <https://lcileeds.org/a-guide-to-sikh-chaplaincy/> She is conducting a survey to learn of Sikh people's experiences during the pandemic

Marion noted that **Christians on Ageing was about to publish two booklets:**

- *Reflections During a Pandemic*, which had arisen largely from earlier Conference Call discussions; and
- *Making a Start*, to which Helen McCormack had contributed and which examined various approaches to pastoral care.

Marion had recently published an article in The Church of England Newspaper entitled 'How Churches Can Help Older People During the Covid Pandemic'
<https://www.churchnewspaper.com/85301/archives>

Isabel told us of an **intergenerational initiative by Age UK Sheffield** whereby school children are invited to send cards to residents of care homes – within sensible rules – very well received by everyone <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/sheffield/get-involved/gift-a-smile/>. Isabel had approached a care home in her area which had said it would like to receive gifts and cards, whereupon she had asked church children initially to prepare cards and also contacted the vicar, who had been in touch with other groups. If too many cards were produced, these were sent to people shielding at home. The home in question had also said they would like twiddle muffs and activity boards, which Isabel was busy preparing. It is important to check safety requirements before preparing and delivery items such as cards.

Joseph asked us to **stand back and reflect: do care homes approach us?** Is it within the culture of homes to seek involvement with churches and the faith communities? Tina pointed out that, pre-Covid, homes had approached Care Homes Friends in the locations in which it was active to ask for volunteer befrienders. The key issue was trust – homes trusted her organisation. They were also pleased when it was able to meet specific requirements, such as a volunteer who could speak a particular foreign language.

This led to observations that with the pressures of this time, **creativity has been suffocated** in some care homes. Only basic care activity has been designated 'essential' and therefore allowed and valued. It is now more widely appreciated that this is not good thinking. People need to have activities to look forward to and to engage in to make life worth the living. So attempts to re-establish contacts and to provide and generate activities are essential (key word).

Albert brought us to remember that in many Care Homes, **those providing care** are from backgrounds, faiths and cultures which differ from those of the residents and their families. This is a big issue in the provision of care and in the mutual appreciation of resident/staff needs

Related is the worry that a **government determination to reduce immigration** by allowing admission to this country only of people guaranteed a relatively high income (£25,000 pa) threatens to leave care homes cut off from their established sources of staffing.
<https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/care-sector-staff-shortages-brexit/>

A number of organisations and individuals have encouraged government to rethink on this matter. We believe that Christians on Ageing should consider its position

We began to think of life during Covid 19 for people living in retirement and sheltered accommodation and then turned briefly to other support such as day care and care at home, noting that the suspension of day centres and day-care centres would be putting family carers under great pressure.

These are topics for another day

We had covered a lot of ground, learned a lot and realised there is more to know and do

The next Conference Call – November 17th will be led by Julia Burton-Jones and supported by Albert Jewell: The topic is the support of carers of people with dementia

David Jolley

With many thanks to all who attended the seminar and have provided improvements to the draft notes, particularly to Marion Shoard