

Finding care – a personal perspective

In our Need to Know series, we hear from Julia Hallawell whose mother Gillian, had a series of falls before moving into a care home.

Interview by Alexandra Davis

Julia shares her experience of managing the social care system, choosing the right home, and how her mother is doing now.

When did you first start thinking about care for your mum?

Mum was diagnosed with Cognitive Impairment Disorder in 2014 and although she managed well for several years, driving began to be more difficult and others noticed a change in her. Lockdown in 2020 had a big impact, causing confusion, and, after a fall down the stairs at home in May that year, life in her lovely Victorian cottage became difficult. In February 2021 she moved into a sheltered housing scheme with carers onsite who were wonderful, but who became concerned for Mum's safety. A few months later a further fall made it impossible for her to go back.

While she was still in her house, an Occupational Therapist spoke with us about what Mum wanted and encouraged me to think about a longer-term solution. I hadn't really wanted to think about Mum "going into a care home" and it felt a bit like a death sentence, somewhere that we knew she'd never leave.

“There is a bewildering array of care options when you first start exploring this. It was hard trying to working out what would make her the happiest and also meet her developing and complex needs.



What were some of the challenges you faced?

We had got into the social care system after my mum's first fall in May 2020. There's an appalling lack of "joined-up-ness". The relationship between the hospitals and the social workers can get really frayed with social workers trying to do their best and with hospitals trying to protect their beds and resources. Care teams and social workers are always changing, and they can be hard to contact so you don't always know who you'll speak to.

After one fall, the council agreed that Mum could go home and that they would put falls sensors in her flat. But none were put in place, and she had another fall 10 days later and that's when I ended up in A&E, with the social worker ringing around to find a local care home that would take Mum.

Mum has a particularly complex property ownership and financial situation, and as she didn't have the funds immediately to pay for her care, the situation wasn't straightforward. Months later, I am

still working with the council to put in place a “Deferred Payment Agreement” which basically means that the balance of Mum’s care will be paid for from the sale of her house. This has also cost several thousand pounds in legal and other fees – all of which comes out of her diminishing savings and pension income going towards Mum’s care.

How did you choose the home where your mum now lives?

It was recommended to me by the social worker when Mum was in hospital. I did look to see if there was a Pilgrims’ Friend Society home near us, but sadly there wasn’t. I visited a different home but didn’t think it was right for Mum, so I got in touch with the home she’s now in which the social worker suggested. I visited and could see that it was clean and bright, I saw the room that Mum would be living in, I also looked at the home’s Facebook page and could see that they did lots of activities which I liked. Mostly, I had a good feeling about it. Once she’d been there a few weeks she was assessed as needing full-time specialist dementia care (she left the hospital on a “Discharge to Assess” basis – a four-week period during which the council paid for her care) as being looked after in the home meant that she’d not had any more falls and was eating and drinking more.

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‘For we are
God’s handiwork,
created in Christ Jesus
to do good works, which
God prepared in
advance for us to do’

Ephesians 2:10

How is your mum doing now?

Mum is now happily settled in the care home. When we ask her if she is happy, she always says yes. She likes the food – hot buttered toast! – and gets her hair done in the little in-house salon. Because Mum used to be an artist, she really enjoys the art and crafts activities when they happen, and she is comfortable with the other residents, although it’s harder to make real friends without being able to share history, especially as Mum now finds communication quite difficult. ns 2:10

We have made her room look very homely, with her precious things around her and her beautiful paintings on the wall. And I am happy she is there as I know the carers really care about her and she can still make them laugh! It can be hard to see some of the other residents, but my lovely Mum is safe, warm, well-fed and watered and it means I can just concentrate on being with her.

What would you say to others thinking about care?

Don’t be afraid of care homes! They really aren’t the death sentence we fear and it’s important that the whole family appreciates that. I wish I had looked around ahead of time so I knew where I wanted her to go – one home that I’d seen I thought would be good as it was local but when I looked into it, the reputation for care wasn’t very good and it was expensive. Ask around your local community too – word of mouth is always the best recommendation.

If you can, have conversations with your loved one about their care, and try to visit the homes with them. It makes all the paperwork and admin much less complicated if you have Lasting Power of Attorney in place. Age UK do have resources, and there are solicitors who can advise in this area as well if there are property and financial issues to consider.

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