



Volunteering in Care Homes

A quick guide to help you settle into
your volunteer role at a care home

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Alive's aims

Alive is the UK's leading charity enriching the lives of older people in care and training their carers.

Alive:

- Engage older people creatively through meaningful activity sessions
- Train and support care staff to enhance older people's wellbeing and deliver outstanding care at every opportunity
- Reduce older people's social isolation by connecting them to their local communities
- Speak up for the rights of older people in care to those with the power to improve their lives
- Depend on charitable donations to deliver our work.

Alive's Vision

Our vision is a world where older people live lives full of joy, meaning and opportunity.

Alive's Mission

Our mission is to put older people's mental health and wellbeing at the heart of care across the UK.

Alive's Ambition

Our ambition is to provide meaningful engagement for older people, and inspirational training for those who support them, in care settings right across the UK.

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About this guide

This guide has been produced to help volunteers prepare themselves for a role in a care home. It covers topics that Alive has identified as useful for volunteers to understand before they begin their role.

To accompany this guide, we have produced two other booklets:

- **Managing Care Home Volunteers** – aimed at care homes who are looking to find out more about how they can use volunteers to support their activity provision.
- **The Volunteer Handbook** – helps both care homes and volunteers know what they need to do to when a volunteer starts their role in a care home.

Face-to-face training is available from Alive in ‘Managing Care Home Volunteers’ and ‘Volunteering in Care Homes’ to complement these guides. If you would like to know more about how to book this training please email info@aliveactivities.org.

Why volunteer in a care home?

Studies have found that the average amount of social interaction for people in care living with dementia is just two minutes a day, far below the minimum needed to keep a person healthy. This has many knock-on effects including loneliness, agitation, depression and decline of physical health. Care home staff do an amazing job but often they just don't have the hours in the day to spend regular one-to-one time with residents or to find ways to connect the care home with its local community. That's where you come in!

Sharing your hobbies, skills and time could significantly brighten an older person's day, helping them to feel more excited by life and connected to the world around them. Volunteering in care homes isn't just beneficial for the residents, you'll be amazed at what opportunities are on offer and how much you'll get out of it.

Build friendships, take part in creative activities, learn a new skill or hobby from an older person, help organise and take part in interesting day trips all over Greater Bristol or simply spend time sharing stories with older people about their amazing lives.

What to expect in a care home

Care homes are busy places, so when you first approach them, you may need to be patient when waiting for a response, or even remind them a few times that you are looking to volunteer.

When you arrive, introduce yourself to the care staff you meet, they may be unsure of your role and think you're visiting a family member.

When you do enter a care home you need to remember that you are a guest in someone's home and you should behave accordingly. This means making sure you make contact and talk with any residents you come across as you would if you were visiting friends or family.

Care homes can sometimes be noisy, residents may shout out and could seem distressed. This can sometimes be as a result of the symptoms of conditions that people are living with and should not always be seen as a safeguarding or care home issue. However, if you see something you are concerned about you should always contact a member of staff at the care home and your relevant safeguarding team.

Before you start your role

You will need a DBS check if you are to spend any time alone with residents. However, most care homes will expect you to have a DBS check as standard regardless of what activities you will be doing.

As you are a volunteer the small cost of your DBS check will usually be covered by the care home.

When you start volunteering you should be introduced to someone who is your point of contact, they should show you around and talk you through what you need to know. Alive can provide a 'Volunteer Handbook' that has step by step instructions of what you need to know and what should be taught before you begin volunteering. For a copy of this please visit our website or email info@aliveactivities.org.

What is and isn't your role

It is important to remember when entering a volunteer position of any kind that you should not be expected to do anything that might replace or be considered a paid role.

You should not be left in a position where you are responsible for residents, a member of staff should always be with you or nearby. You will never be asked to provide personal care, and you should never help move a resident or support a resident who is unsteady on their feet. Care home staff need to be specially trained to do this. You are there to help and support activities, you should not be left responsible for caring for residents.



A person-centred approach

Person-centred care is about ensuring the resident is at the centre of everything you do with them. This means that you need to take account of their individual wishes and needs; their life circumstances and choices.

If you take this into account when you think about what you may choose to do with a resident, your activity will become more meaningful to both you and the resident.
Meaningful activity:

Gives a sense of self

Does the activity give the resident the opportunity to express themselves and their opinions?

Draws on the nature of the person

Does the activity fit with a person's hobbies, interests, skills and knowledge?

In context

Does the activity work with the location, time and resources you have?

Feels right

Any activity that feels forced or is difficult to keep people interested in is usually not the right one.

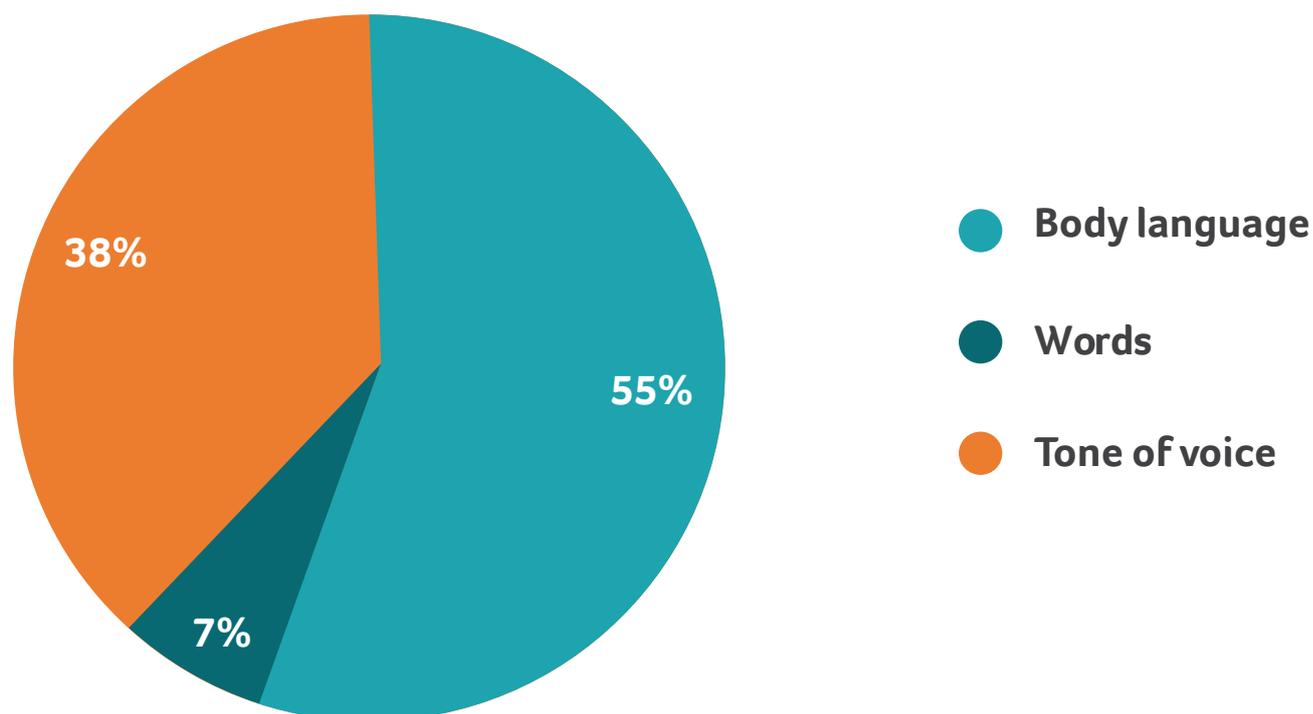
Must make sense

Taking time to properly explain what you are doing and why will allow you to get more out of the time you spend together.

Communication

Conversation is only a very small part of how we communicate. Our tone of voice and body language have a much bigger impact on the way we respond to each other than the words we use.

How we communicate



There are a few things you can do to connect with a person without using words:

Be on the same physical level

Mirroring if someone is sitting or standing makes it easier for people to hear and see you. It also shows a person that you are open to communicating with them. It can be unsettling for people if they are sitting to have someone standing over them.

Eye contact

Eye contact is very important especially when a resident finds it difficult to communicate verbally. Looking someone in the eye shows you are dedicating your time to them and paying attention to the moment you are in. Knowing what a person is looking at will help you make the conversation or activity more person-centred.

Open body language

Sit with your body facing the person you are speaking to with your arms and legs uncrossed.

Offer touch

Gentle touch is the quickest way to strengthen a relationship with another person. However, some people are more comfortable with touch than others. Offer the resident the opportunity to take your hand or arm to see how they react before touching them.

When communicating with people verbally there are also several things to consider:

Introduce yourself and use people's preferred names

Before any interaction you should introduce yourself using your preferred name and say that you are a volunteer. You should ask what a person's preferred name is. Even though a member of care staff calls a resident by their first name do not assume they are happy for you to do the same. They may prefer to be called by a more formal name until they get to know you.

Use clear language

Jargon and acronyms are confusing at the best of times but for someone who is living with dementia, they can be especially confusing. Try and steer clear of these and use plain language. Avoid double negatives, complex sentences and asking lots of questions all at once.

Make sure you can be heard

Talk at a reasonable volume, care homes can be noisy and residents can be hard of hearing. Some people who find it difficult to hear may be able to read lips to help them understand what you are saying, so make sure you are well lit and residents are able to see your face clearly.

Tone of voice

Think about your tone of voice. A person living with dementia may interpret more from your tone than from your actual words.



Active listening

It can be quite a challenge to actively listen. Everyone does things that may unintentionally make the person they are speaking to feel like they aren't properly being listened to. Below are five top tips to help you listen actively.

Pay attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Don't forget that non-verbal communication also 'speaks' loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal – try to be spontaneous.
- Try to avoid being distracted by outside factors.
- 'Listen' to the speaker's body language. Watch for cues.

Show that you are listening

Use your own body language and gestures to show that you are engaged.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Make sure that your posture is open and interested.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal cues like “yes”, and “mmm”.

Give feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener your role is to understand what is being said. You may need to think about what is being said, and then ask questions.

- Reflect on what has been said. “What I'm hearing is...” and “Sounds like you are saying...” are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions. “What do you mean when you say...” “Is this what you mean?”
- Summarise the speaker's comments, to clarify.

Tip:

if you are finding it difficult to interpret/understand what someone said try asking for more information. “I may not be understanding you properly. What I thought you just said was 'XYZ'. Is that what you meant?”

Defer judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of what they are saying.

- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.
- Don't interrupt with counter-arguments.

Respond appropriately

Active listening is designed to encourage respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective.

- Be candid, open and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person how you think they would want to be treated.

Dementia

Dementia is a progressive cognitive disability which can affect:

- Memory
- Communication
- Perception
- Orientation
- Mood
- Physical health
- Wellbeing

Sometimes it can seem difficult to engage with people living with dementia, but there are a few actions we can take that can really make a difference. We can reach people living with dementia if we can be prepared to:

Learn about people as individuals

The more you know about a person's background and interests the easier it will be to engage with and understand them

Try different things

The effects of dementia are different for everyone so it may take you trying a few different ways of engaging with someone before you find what works.

Not be scared of failing

It takes a little time to get to know people and longer to get to know how to really connect with them. So don't be put off if the first time you talk to someone it doesn't go quite as you planned.

Try to see the world from their point of view

Some people may believe they are in a different location or a different stage in their life to where they are currently. Try to understand their perspective and step into the world they are in. Try not to tell them they are wrong, or that they are not in the place and time they believe they are, as this may distress them.



As their dementia progresses, people may be less able to enter our world. We may need to enter theirs and enjoy it with them.

Barbara Pointon, carer



Give people time to respond. Don't rush them.

Someone living with dementia may not seem to have heard or understood you but if you give them time they will usually be able to give you some response. Be patient and observant for an answer.

Listen and acknowledge. Give them time and space to express themselves. Allow them to talk, actively listen and encourage them to continue talking about subjects they have chosen. Do not try and change the subject and allow longer for them to think about what they would like to say next.

Focus on feelings / emotional responses more than facts.

Specific facts like ages, dates and names can be difficult to remember for people living with dementia. Asking for this information can distress a person when they are unable to answer. Focus on feelings and emotions instead, e.g. “how did you feel on your wedding day?” not “when did you get married?”

Further reading

There are a few useful websites you can visit if you would like to learn a little more:

- <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/types-dementia/what-dementia>
- <https://www.scie.org.uk/dementia/>

Sensory impairments

Carers in the home should introduce you to residents and make you aware of any extra needs they may have including any sensory impairments.

However, it is difficult to remember everything you are told when you first arrive at the home. So, it is recommended that every time you visit the home and spend time with a new group or individual, you ask the care staff if anyone you are interacting with has any extra needs.

If they do there are several quick and easy things you can do to help make the time you spend with a resident more enjoyable for you both.

If someone has poor or no eyesight:

- Always introduce yourself using your name and let them know who is talking when someone talks.
- Let them know what you are doing when you are moving around the room.
- Touch them gently on the hand to signify you are trying to pass them something.
- Use music and audio to stimulate discussion.

If someone has poor or no hearing:

- Make sure they can see your mouth and that you are well lit, so they are able to read your lips and see your facial expressions.
- Sit close to a resident to improve their chances of hearing you.
- Find out if they use hearing aids. If they do, make sure they are fitted and turned on.
- If possible, move to a quiet space as background noise can be confusing, especially for people using hearing aids.
- Speak as loudly and clearly as possible without shouting.

Knowing what you're doing is working

It can sometimes be hard to know if you are having a positive impact on a resident. Some residents may not be able to verbally communicate that they are enjoying an activity.

There are several things you can look for to help reassure you that the resident is enjoying your company.

Involvement – are they trying to get involved with what you're doing?

Curiosity – are they showing an interest in you or any activity you might be doing?

Awake – are they looking around and paying attention to what is happening?

Active - is their body language animated and are they making eye contact with you?

Contribution – are they contributing to the conversation or activity?

Happy/contented – are they content to sit quietly around what you are doing, even if they may choose not to contribute?

Supporting frail older people

As people get older they become more frail, this means there are a few things you need to consider when you are spending time with them.

Do not help people move around

The person you are spending time with may ask for help to move across the room or to go to the toilet. It is important that you find a member of care staff that can help with this. They will be trained in how to do this safely.

Be careful

Injuries that may be fairly minor for younger people, like a bruise or a cut, can develop into big problems for people who are older. Be careful, especially if you are bringing in pets or children.

If you have a sniffle

If you have a cold or have been unwell in any way do not enter a care home. A small illness to you could be much more dangerous to the residents of the care home you are visiting.

Trips and falls

When you arrive make sure you put your bags and coats away, off the floor. People who have limited sight may not see them and trip over. If you are with a person one-to-one, try to ask a member of staff if they are able to walk and if so, what walking aids they need. They may not be able to remember themselves.

If a resident falls when you are present, you should not attempt to help them up. Call for a member of staff immediately.

Dietary requirements

It is likely most people living in the home have a dietary requirement. If you would like to bring in treats when volunteering please do go ahead but check with the staff who is able to eat them before handing them out.

Be positive

If you can see someone is frail or confused, think about what you can do to support them to take part in things. Focus on what they can do, more than what they can't.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is protecting the rights of adults to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect.

People and organisations working with vulnerable adults have a responsibility to ensure that their wellbeing is promoted. This includes (where possible) considering people's views, wishes, feelings and beliefs before deciding on any course of action.

A vulnerable adult is a person in need of community care services because of their mental health, other disabilities, age, illness, inability to care for themselves and/or inability to protect themselves.

To report a safeguarding incident

www.bristol.gov.uk/social-care-health/report-suspected-abuse

www.southglos.gov.uk/social-care-health/report-suspected-abuse

www.northsomersetsafeguarding.co.uk

www.bathnes.gov.uk/social-care-health/report-suspected-abuse

(0117) 922 2700 Bristol

(01454) 615 165 South Gloucestershire

(01275) 888 801 North Somerset

(01225) 396000 Bath and North East Somerset

To report concerns about a care service or provider: www.cqc.org.uk



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