

'Shared Lives' schemes, placing older people with families, may offer a good alternative to care homes

These family home schemes seem to work well for vulnerable adults. Our unique research is gathering evidence on costs, outcomes and suitability for extending their use more widely for older people.

It's a chicken and egg situation: councils don't want to invest, unless they are sure it's going to work out, but it's very hard to gather the evidence about that if the service isn't there. But there is interest in it, because it could potentially save money,' comments Lisa Callaghan, research officer at the Personal Social Services Research Unit, University of Kent.

She is referring to Shared Lives schemes, which have legions of fans among those involved in them, and consistently attract high scores from the health and social care services regulator, the Care Quality Commission, but which have a relatively low public profile, including among social workers.

These schemes enable vulnerable adults with physical or learning disabilities, or mental health problems, to live with families as part of the family unit and the local community, rather than residing in care homes. The families are paid a fixed sum to cover their additional costs.

'The key thing about a Shared Lives scheme is that the 'carer' uses the home and the family as a resource, rather than paid staff,' explains Ms Callaghan, adding that often a Shared Life carer has had first-hand experience of living with, or caring for, someone with a disability.

These schemes may not be suitable for all levels of disability, she suggests. For example, it's unlikely that someone with advanced dementia would be in a scheme if they hadn't already built up a relationship with the family concerned, she says, adding that stairs or the lack of a downstairs loo might make some homes unsuitable for older people with mobility issues.

May suit lower level needs

But her previous scoping research indicated that Shared Lives, previously known as Adult Placement, might be ideal for some groups of older people, and provide a cost effective means of delivering truly personalised care.

Her current project aims to explore whether the schemes might offer a viable alternative to traditional care services for older people needing only low level 24-hour support; those who are socially isolated; and those whose carers need some respite from their responsibilities.

So she will survey managers of Shared Lives schemes, of which there are 133 across the country, to find out what type of placements they offer – day or live-in, for example – and for whom, and to gauge current and anticipated levels of demand.

'It's not a job where you think: "Oh, great that's really well paid, and I'll do it for the money". You have to do it because you really enjoy it and want to see people grow.'

Carer in a Shared Lives scheme in the South West of England



'Older people might have had a family member caring for them before they go into a placement. Quite often people are reluctant to let their relatives go into traditional respite care because they fear they might become institutionalised,' says Ms Callaghan.

Depending on the responses, she will follow up by talking in depth to managers and social workers and older users of the schemes and their carers to find out about their experiences of them.

A key part of the research will be the tracking of new placements for older people in Kent, Leeds, and Oxford, to formally evaluate and compare their

progress/outcomes and operational costs/issues with those of people placed in care homes, based on data from the Adult Social Care Survey.

There are other factors to think about too, such as levels of pay and support for the home carers, training and management costs, and cover for respite care.

'The aim here is have some really good evidence to inform commissioners about whether Shared Lives is something they should seriously consider,' says Ms Callaghan, especially given the pressures on local authority budgets. But her findings are likely to be of great interest to those with elderly relatives too.

Project: Outcomes, processes and costs of Shared Lives

Lead: Lisa Callaghan (l.a.Callaghan@kent.ac.uk)

Institution: Personal Social Services Research Unit, University of Kent

Completion: Spring 2014