

Arts in care homes

Reading and writing in care homes



Discussing books, writing poetry, reading and writing all offer opportunities to engage care home residents.

Doing it yourself

Participation from individuals may vary vastly, from observing and listening to the activity to full participation. It is important to discover what genre of literature each individual has an interest in, and to deliver sessions which respond to these preferences.

You can discuss books, write poetry and explore creativity in both reading and storytelling. Writing down the words that someone speaks can be a way to engage an individual who is reluctant or unable to engage in other ways.

The host of a creative writing group must be aware of factors such as the level of education that may have shaped the role of words in an individual's life. Ask questions about writing a person may have done but not acknowledge, such as letter-writing, storytelling or technical writing. Ask participants if they read to a child.

The following suggestions can be adapted to suit the needs of all individuals, regardless of their physical or mental health and wellbeing. A risk assessment should always be completed.

Practical tips:

- Deliver sessions in a creative, imaginative and enthusiastic manner
 - Encourage staff, volunteers and family members to join in
 - Create an appropriate atmosphere using books, posters and other decorations
- Provide advance notice to participants so that a potentially new experience is offered in a non-threatening way

- Consider naming the group imaginatively, i.e. Book Club, or Reading Club, which may be less daunting
- Structure the time of the session appropriately
 - Forty-five minutes is regarded as a good length of time for participants to feel that they have been active without becoming over-tired
- Remove distractions that can break up the flow of the session
 - Participants may have a regular routine and may become anxious if tea-breaks don't happen at the same time.
 - Pre-warning about a change of routine or planning the session times to coincide with the breaks may be wise
- Ensure that the sessions are held in an accessible space where people can watch at a distance initially
- Ensure that sufficient staff support is available to assist with the care aspects such as helping participants to join the group, providing refreshments, going to the toilet and other personal needs
- Don't underestimate potential achievements
 - Always display any finished short works decoratively, for example in frames, these can be sourced cheaply from charity shops

Points to consider:

- Making the group accessible for all
 - Ensure that the print is legible for individuals with vision impairments
 - Large print type should be used, preferably 18 point, but at a minimum 16 point
 - Use easily recognisable fonts, a good choice is Arial
 - Use bold type because the thickness of the letters makes the print more legible
 - Avoid using italics or all capital letters
 - Text should be printed with the best possible contrast. For many older people light lettering – either white or light yellow – on a dark background, usually black, is easier to read than black lettering on a white or light yellow background
 - Avoid using glossy finish paper such as that typically used in magazines and some journals
 - Audio books are an option for those with impaired vision or for listening in a group
- Different approaches to poetry

- Use a broad definition of poetry rather than limiting it to the academic or classical canon
 - Make sessions lively and balanced and include a variety of genres, voices, eras, styles, moods (i.e. serious or comic)
- Include popular songs that have strong and relevant lyrics – including pop, folk, famous musicals
 - Song has always played an important role in our culture and taps into personal and collective memory
- Organise the sessions into themes. For example in February, around Valentine's Day, have love poems
- Create poetry. Have an object. List six words about it and then another six 'doing' words. Create a poem using these 12 words as the starting point
- Creative writing suggestions
 - Short story writing
 - Consequence – where each participant follows on from the last person to write the next line of a story
 - Have a picture of people or animals and use this to inspire the writing of a story about the picture
 - Calligraphy – use special pens to write script
 - Trace a decorative letter and use this as a trigger for a story or poem
- Other ideas
 - Books of images are likely to appeal to people living with dementia and may stimulate reminiscence
 - Discuss famous authors, poets or specific texts
 - Read aloud from books and newspapers
 - Invite others to join in, i.e. family members

Working with others

Here are some ways in which other organisations can support the art activity. Start by searching locally for what's available.

Reading is one of the first skills we learn in school and for many care home residents it will remain a treasured daily activity. Specialist websites bring together titles including novels, poetry and non-fiction which have been recommended by readers and reading groups for older readers. Books with pictures, likely to appeal to people living with dementia, will stimulate reminiscence. Audio books are an option for many including those with impaired vision. Book 'creator' apps which allow sound, photos, drawings and text to be put into a book format are useful in creating a 'life story'. If people are no longer able to read themselves, reading out loud is an enjoyable option for an individual or in a group. Discussing books adds interest; perhaps a local author or bookshop

manager could be asked to give a talk at the care home book group? In some care homes, school children come in and residents listen to them reading.

There are organisations which will work with residents to release their creativity via writing and storytelling. Using visual stimuli or music, an arts worker will help to stimulate memories. In one project, stories were collected and then performed back to the care home as a play. In another, each resident talked one-to-one to a student about their life. The young person wrote down what they'd been told and asked questions to stimulate more memories. Poets have worked collaboratively with residents to capture their stories, later expressing their stories in poetry. Poems written or spoken by people living with dementia have been collated and published.

Examples of good practice

Here are some examples of how the art activity is used in practice. Search locally for what's available in your area.

[Active Minds Living Words](#)

'Living Words' work in care homes includes the co-creation of poems with care home residents with dementia, and reading aloud the poems and thoughts of those in the room.

[Creative Kernow Home Service Project](#)

The Story Republic bring writers poets, musicians and performers into care homes to work with residents to collect their stories, and rewrite them for performance by The Story Republicans.

[Imagine iPad Engage \(uses digital technology\)](#)

Uses iPad Technology and a range of apps to bring a range of creative activities such as storytelling and poetry to care home residents.

[Tangible Memories Story Creator App \(uses digital technology\)](#)

This intergenerational project involves school children supporting digital storytelling using the Story Creator App to create life stories for care home residents.

[The Courtyard – In the Pink](#)

Poets and writers work collaboratively with residents with dementia to form their words into poems – sometimes based on stories and memories, sometimes in response to visual stimuli such as paintings and photographs.

[The Reader Organisation Lead Read Programme](#)

Volunteers and care staff in some care homes are trained to carry out their Lead Read Programme, which is a shared reading model.

[Scottish Poetry Library Living Voices](#)

A programme of interactive sessions with care home residents involving poets, storytellers, musicians and volunteers

[University of Exeter Exeter Care Homes Reading Project](#)

Reading project student volunteers are trained and sent out to a large number of care homes across Exeter. They visit residents regularly, reading poetry, plays and short stories, or simply spend time chatting.

[Wyldwoods Arts Write On](#)

This writing project produced by Wyldwood Arts and facilitated by poet and artist Caleb Parkin, is a series of intergenerational sessions themed around the elements: earth, water, fire and air. The new pieces will be developed for performance.

Resources

Evaluation of the Living Voices pilot

[Final report Executive summary](#)

Living Voices is an innovative national pilot programme run by the Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) and Scottish Storytelling Centre (SSC) with the aim of developing and delivering a model of practice for working with older audiences, particularly in care homes, using spoken word (storytelling, poetry and song) and reminiscence to improve quality of life. (Blake Stevenson)

[Jagged pieces of truth](#)

This article reports on a poetry project run in dementia care homes in Herefordshire. In the pilot project, the 'Dementia Poet in Residence' mentored 4 local poets, aiming to pass on and develop his method of working with people with dementia. Following a day-long training session, the 4 poets were assigned to 3-month placements at 4 care homes around the county. The article describes the role of the mentor, the views of the poets, and future plans for the project. Feedback from the pilot has been overwhelmingly positive from all sides including the residents and staff at the homes, residents' families, and the poets themselves. (Abstract only) (Journal of Dementia Care)

[Benefits of a creative writing group for care home residents](#)

This article describes how a creative writing group was set up in a nursing home in Scotland, with benefits for residents, staff and families. (Nursing Times online)

[When I am old I shall wear purple: a qualitative study of the effect of group poetry sessions on the well-being of older adults](#)

There is increasing evidence that participation in various art forms can be beneficial for health and well-being. This paper examines the impact of participating in a poetry reading group on a group of older residents of an assisted living facility. Six poetry sessions, each on a different theme, were conducted with a group of volunteer participants. This paper confirms the impact of poetry reading for older people. The challenge is to explore this impact in more detail and over community as well as residential settings. (Abstract only) (Working with Older People)

[Read to care: an investigation into quality of life benefits of shared reading groups for people living with dementia](#)

This study examines the impact of a shared reading group on older people living with dementia in care homes. Areas examined included memory and emotion, interpersonal relationships, behavioural symptoms of dementia, quality of life and costs. Four care homes on Wirral participated in the study. The report provides qualitative feedback from staff, relatives, residents and the project workers involved. It also includes case studies of residents participating in the reading groups. The evaluation found that the shared reading group significantly improved the wellbeing and quality of life of people living with dementia (University of Liverpool)

[Reading Well](#)

Reading Well promotes the benefits of reading for health and wellbeing. The programme has two strands: Books on Prescription, and Mood-boosting Books. [Reading Well for long term conditions](#) has just been launched (July 2017)

[Reading Well – books on prescription](#)

Includes a list of books for living well with dementia

www.scie.org.uk/person-centred-care/arts-in-care-homes/