



Shared Lives Better Lives

CARER:

Carol Wright

How did you find out about the Shared Lives service?

I read an article in a local paper about a service offering a home and support to vulnerable adults including adults with a learning disability, mental health issues and older persons, a service today known as Shared Lives.

What is your background?

I have always worked with people. As a military policewoman I sometimes supported families living outside the UK, as a police matron I cared for women in police custody and I worked

with homeless people for over 15 years. Prior to moving to Leicester I worked for 15 months in Corby in a day centre for adults with learning disabilities. It was incredibly challenging but in a positive way. My days were enriched by the diversity of personalities who presented me with those new challenges. It broadened my ability to communicate effectively with those not fortunate enough to be in possession of the sensory perceptions most of us take for granted.

What was your assessment like?

It was quite different to the assessment today but the principles are the same. A social worker in the Shared Lives team visited me at home to explain the service they offered and what would be expected of me as a Shared Lives carer.

Having familiarised myself with the service I completed an application form before being interviewed, although I must say it felt more like an informal chat. I was asked to respond to different situations, some quite challenging, as well as discussing my experience of dealing with people outside the family home.

Presumably my answers were all satisfactory because as soon as I was approved I had my first placement, due to an emergency; a lady came for a week and ended up living with us for 18 months.

What training have you had through the service?

The Shared Lives service is excellent at offering training specific to you in your role as a Shared Lives carer. This means it is more individual and relevant to your home environment than to a residential home.

Training on health and safety plus record keeping is compulsory. Some people might find training courses quite daunting. Let me assure them that the majority of training is done in an informal and comfortable setting and amongst friends who will support them. The training sessions are not tests to pass but help to equip you with the skills and tools you need to feel confident in your abilities as a carer.

Shared Lives support you through, not only the caring side of the role, but also with your responsibilities as a self-employed person.

What type of placement do you offer?

When I started I offered respite and permanent placements. Now I have 3

people who live with me permanently. My permanent placements are out during the day so I also provide regular day care to other service users on a one to one basis allowing a personal service individual to them instead of in a large group setting. Shared Lives are very good at matching you with people who will be compatible with everyone who lives in your family home.

What support do you receive from Shared Lives?

They are absolutely fantastic and have a real understanding of the challenges of caring for vulnerable adults and how to support you. They are not there to support the service users who have their own social workers. They tend to act as a bridge between you and the service user's social worker, helping to put across your points to them.

I get a visit from my Shared Lives worker about every 6 weeks. She talks through any issues I may be having and offers advice if I'm struggling in any way. She'll also check my record keeping and offer advice if I need it.

What changes have you seen in the people who stay with you?

Without exception those

who have lived here become more independent. They are able to make choices and do things for themselves that they may have been unable to do in a residential home. To see a person take on new challenges and grow in confidence is very satisfying, both for them, and for me as a carer.

Living in a residential home, while essential for some, is often quite limiting for many. Although an individual, decisions have to be made in consideration with others or dependant on staff numbers, time and rules within the home. Living in a Shared Lives family gives them a chance to be an individual – it's empowering.

A recent addition to our family, a man of 58, had lived in a residential home for 19 years. He only went out as part of a group or was taken to his voluntary work place by the owner of the home. Two weeks support on a bus accompanied by my husband and he now catches the bus to work on his own. He goes into town on his own on a Saturday with money in his pocket and has lunch at a place of his choice, something he could not do previously.

After 6 months I am still taken aback when he asks me if it's OK to do something. I have to

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remind him that he's an adult and as long as he's aware of any potential risks, and how to either avoid or deal with them, he can do what he wants without my permission.

Another positive in living within a Shared Lives family is the impact on the service user's family members. There is a great deal of guilt felt by parents or siblings of service users over their loved ones going in to care. When they see their loved one cared for in a family environment they find it comforting to visit and see them treated as an individual and as part of the family.

Relatives have told me on many occasions that they wished their loved one had been able to live with me at an earlier stage in their care as their life had been so enriched by being with me and my family.

What do your friends and family think of your role?

Many of them say 'I couldn't do what you do, I think you're marvellous'. I am not marvellous – I love what I do! I am not part of the rat race and in some ways I am a stay at home mum, the difference being I care for adults. As a human being the pleasure is immeasurable when you see your child achieve even the smallest step in life and the same can be said

of those adults who have lived/live with me who can often do many things for themselves but may just need a little extra support and guidance to give them the confidence to try.

Who can complain when part of your job involves a trip to a bowling alley and a stop off at the fish and chip shop afterwards?

One of the wonderful advantages of being a part of the Shared Lives service is the opportunity it has given my daughter, an only child, to meet and understand people who are less able and to engage with a wide spectrum of personalities. It has equipped her with a greater understanding of how others deal with life's challenges. I feel this has definitely helped her to grow into the caring and empathetic adult she has become.

Do you have any advice for a prospective Shared Lives carer?

Being a carer involves a lot of patience, for example being able to tolerate repetitive behaviours.

You also have to show understanding and let the little things go, be creative about managing challenges presented to you and those you support. Accidents can and will happen, you just sometimes need to be a bit more relaxed about the

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presentation of your home or be prepared to put a bit of extra work in.

How would you sum up your life as a Shared Lives carer?

Being a Shared Lives carer is thoroughly rewarding. I support people to enable them to do things that so many of us take for granted and I want them to get as much pleasure out of the stakes that life has dealt them.

There is a saying 'Being happy doesn't mean that everything is perfect. It means that you've decided to look beyond the imperfections.' I can honestly say I am very happy.

To find out how to become a Shared Lives carer:

Visit: leicester.gov.uk/sharedlives

Call: 0116 221 1370