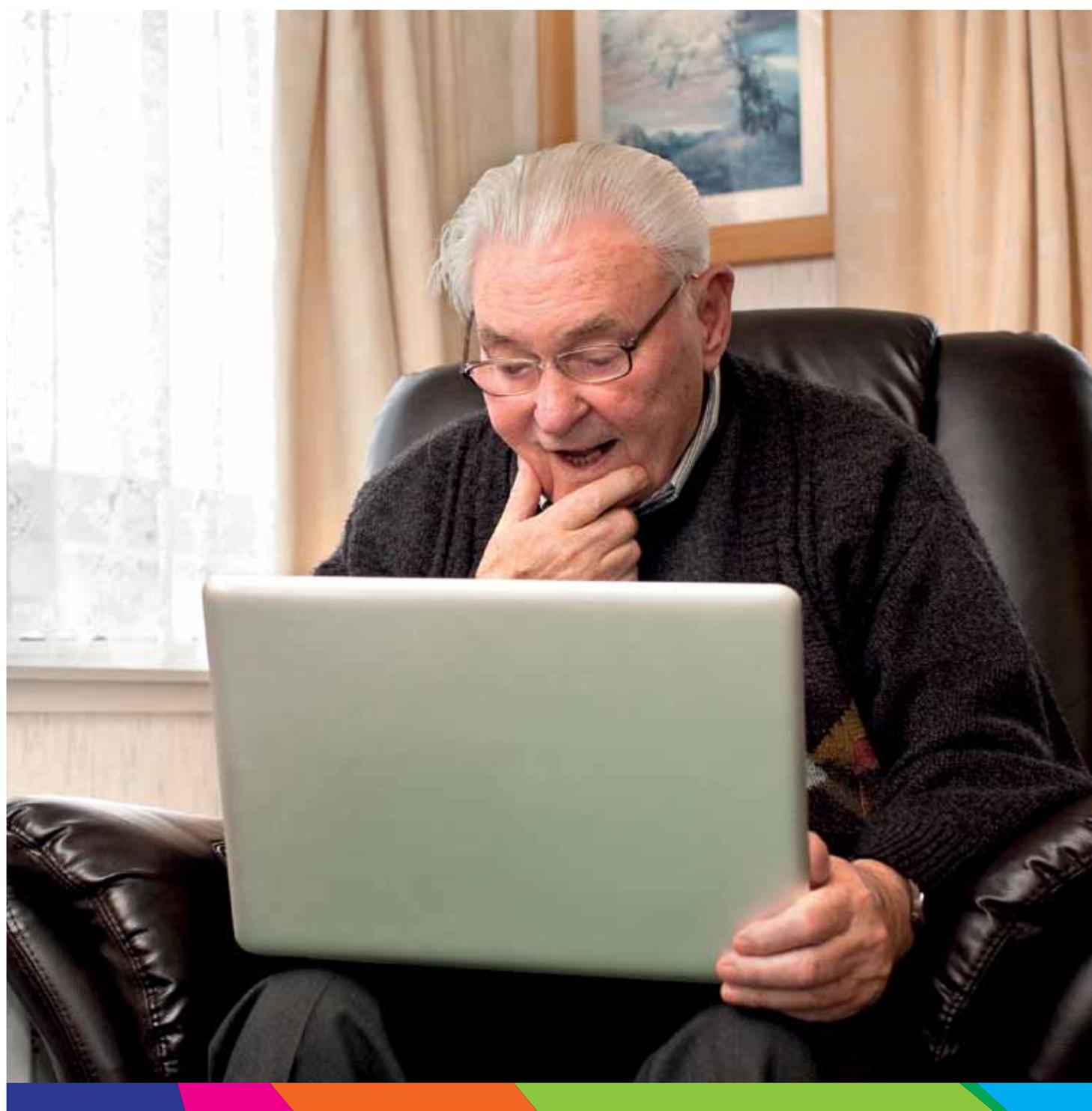# The digital inclusion of older people in care homes

Learning and good practice from Reach for IT

'We all know that it's the people that surround us who are important; a phone call, a visit filled with laughter, a chance to chat about the things that matter. It's tragic to think of older people in care without any of these things in their lives.'

'Working in the care home sector, I personally witnessed the dwindling number of letters and photos that my residents received. They would come down to pick up the post in the morning only to find bills and circulars. I think we all have to ask ourselves when was the last time we wrote a letter to a loved one, or took our recent photos around to chat over a cup of tea with them.

The world has been moving online. The internet has taken over from letters, the computer is where we keep our photographs. Isolation not only happens in care homes but also at home. The internet can provide us with a fantastic opportunity to increase the interaction with our parents and grandparents, to engage the whole family socially, especially the younger grandchildren.'[1]

Chief Executive of the The Relatives and Residents Association

Contents

1

Who this good practice guide is for

This guide is designed for organisations wishing to support the implementation of a digital inclusion initiative in care homes. It aims to support those who practise person-centred care and who understand that the internet can be an empowering tool that provides older people with more of a voice, choice and control.

Introduction to the Reach for IT programme

Digital exclusion plays a significant part in the wider problem of older people being socially excluded. It exacerbates the tendency for them to be disempowered and disadvantaged. This trend increases dramatically for those who live in care homes, leaving far too many socially excluded.

In 2010 Age UK developed the Reach for IT project to tackle the digital exclusion of older people in residential care homes. The project was delivered by five community-based organisations that built relationships with local care homes during 2010–11. Reach for IT engaged with 20 care homes, where 34 volunteers delivered a broad range of IT training sessions to 234 residents.

The initiative was funded by Nominet Trust, which aims to promote the digital inclusion of older people, improve their understanding of internet security, reduce their fear of technology and reduce social isolation.

The five organisations that delivered the programme were:

• Age UK Northwest Cumbria (now Age UK West Cumbria)
• Learning for the 4th Age in Leicestershire (L4A)
• RECOM in Solihull
• VISTA in Leicestershire
• Age Concern Slough and Berkshire East

Digital exclusion plays a significant part in the wider problem of older people being socially excluded.

These organisations have described the operational benefits to their organisation of working in partnership with care homes as follows.

• Increased ability to develop new projects and services in the future because it has given them the experience and confidence to develop them.

• Ability to replicate the model in other settings, for example, sheltered housing.

• Ability to go on to offer other projects in care homes.

• Greater choice in volunteer placements, making their organisation more attractive to volunteers.

Digital inclusion in care homes – why it matters

We know that the number of older people who use computers, with all the advantages they provide, is proportionately lower than the younger generation. This digital exclusion plays a significant part in the wider problem of older people being socially excluded. As a result, older people are often disempowered and disadvantaged and their quality of life is diminished. This trend increases dramatically for those who live in care homes.

There are around 18,000 care homes, housing approximately 397,000 older people. Roughly 60 per cent of older residents have never used the internet. There is an added challenge of internet access in care homes. One survey showed that from a total of almost 18,000 care homes in England only 2,835 provide internet access.[2]

Yet, there is increasing evidence of the value of the internet to older people in care homes, as a life-enhancing activity and as a means to supporting person-centred care. Work in care homes has also highlighted the potential for its positive impact on staff, volunteers and care homes as businesses. The *Get Connected* final evaluation report found that 'after only a few months, most sites were able to identify the positive impact that *Get Connected* has already had on both service users and staff, which in turn has enabled sites to offer an improved level of care.'[3] A high quality of life in older age means having a sense of purpose and full inclusion within the community. It means strong social contacts and networks, physical activity and mental stimulation.[4] Care homes should not be failing to address 'the growing gap [that] exists between those who are online and those who are not, as the Internet becomes more of an essential utility for consumers.'[5]

Engaging with the care home

Preparation

Care homes vary hugely in terms of their culture, ethos, ownership and the kinds of people who live in them. You'll need to build up an understanding of the particular care home you are targeting. The basic information you need to gather, either beforehand or in early conversations, includes the following.

- Who owns the care home? Is it an autonomous single unit or part of a chain? If it is part of a larger group, you'll need to be clear on the extent to which local managers can make their own decisions about aspects of the project and the extent to which they are obliged to refer matters to 'head office'.
- The extent to which the care home is already running activities for residents. If staff are already well accustomed to finding ways to support or help out with these, then introducing digital inclusion activity is likely to be easier.
- Assessing the IT infrastructure position – is there existing internet connectivity and how extensive, up-to-date and reliable is it and what internet speeds are typical?
- How are digital technologies currently used – can residents access them, or indeed can staff?

Getting across the benefits of digital inclusion

It might be necessary to make the case for why it is in the care home's interest to undertake such a project. Reach for IT showed the following.

- By being able to offer a new and innovative service, a care home can receive positive publicity that will improve its reputation and make the home more attractive to potential new residents and their families and representatives. Additionally, more people assessing the merits of different care homes are looking to maintain their IT skills and will want to reside in an IT-friendly environment.
- Digital inclusion is an enriching experience that can increase the quality of life of the residents (as discussed above) and this in turn can make for a happier home and a better working environment for staff. The evidence for this is contained in the social return on investment analysis of the project.[6]

This report also aims to give you information to make the case, including some inspiring stories in Appendix 1.

Developing and agreeing a plan

If the care home decides to go ahead, you will need to set out clearly exactly what will happen, when and who will do it. But before attempting to draw up any kind of a detailed plan, carry out a consultation and fact-finding exercise. You'll need to determine all aspects of the care home environment, including the range of people with different roles and responsibilities – volunteers, care workers and managers – and their respective views, attitudes and levels of support for the new project.

If the project is assigning roles and tasks, you will need to appreciate how these fit with people's current responsibilities. It's important to agree with them and the care home management how any extra tasks are to be balanced with existing duties. Linked to this, you need to understand the internal policies and procedures of the care home to ensure that the activities of the project (and any new volunteers) are able to comply with them. At this point you may need to factor in extra time/resources for training and orientation.

Of equal importance will be an assessment of the internet status and functionality within the home and whether it will be able to cope with the new activities that are planned. This is absolutely crucial, as a failed internet connection can completely undermine a project. See more in 'Equipment and facilities' (page 8).

Tips

• Try to involve someone with proven independent IT expertise to make an assessment of the home's IT status – the care home staff may not themselves appreciate any shortcomings their set-up has.

• There is great value in establishing clear service level agreements at the outset to ensure:

 – a clear plan about the aims and parameters of a service, along with an understanding of the likely benefits to the care homes and residents

 – commitment from staff in the care home

 – prevention of unrealistic expectations (clarity about roles will be part of this agreement).

• Delays can occur if care home staff do not prepare residents for their training. Everyone in the home needs to understand their part in co-ordinating the learners to be ready on time and their role in making sure that equipment is working.

• Finding a way into the care home's resident and family meetings is a useful strategy, since families can be an important part of the success of working in care homes and maintaining a resident's enthusiasm.

Building in sustainability

When setting out your plan, it is important to consider the longer term ambitions and capabilities of your project. If you were unable to maintain the project after its set-up and initial run, this would very likely result in a negative outcome. Early closure might leave the residents in a worse situation than before you started – taking away a range of opportunities and communication channels that they were starting to become accustomed to. There are measures you can take to mitigate this eventuality:

• exploring longer-term funding/partnership options at the start of the project

• exploring low-cost continuation models, which might include:

  – ensuring that some key equipment/infrastructure is put in place

  – training staff to facilitate IT use, so that residents can still make some use of their skills in the absence of volunteers

• securing commitments from the care home, staff and volunteers over a medium- to long-term timeframe.

Planning the training activity

Make sure that you build sufficient time into your programme delivery schedule to get your activity up and running. Typical reasons for delays on the Reach for IT programme were:

• the setting up of internet connectivity for the first time

• installing specialist software (for instance, for visually impaired people)

• equipment and connection failures

• ill-health of residents.

Tips

• Patterns of activity within the care home can change significantly around times of seasonal festivities and holidays. Ensure that you appreciate the changes that will occur and factor these into your delivery schedules.

• A good understanding about the care home residents and their physical and mental capacities is crucial in helping you to decide what kind of interventions are suitable and achievable.

Getting staff on board

Essential to the whole process of engaging residents is the attitude of staff in the care home. Without their positive support and involvement, the residents will not be engaged. Creating positive relationships with care home staff is key to the success of an initiative, from the attitudes they demonstrate to the practical assistance they provide during and between sessions.

Staff need to view the project as being a meaningful vehicle for increasing their job satisfaction with residents and not just another 'task' or 'activity' they have to fit in to an already crowded day. One of the challenges of working within a care home structure tends to be around the limited time that care staff have to spend with residents. They need to see and understand that supporting residents to engage with technology is as important as other key elements of care, as it is part of a person-centred approach.

IT training in care homes raises the issue of the confidence of care home staff with digital technology. Some care staff are not IT-literate and therefore lack the ability or the confidence to support residents between sessions. Older care assistants in particular have often not acquired IT skills at school or subsequently. As a consequence, it may be necessary to work directly with care staff on their IT skills for the mutual benefit of staff and residents. The aim is, as noted in the first Get Connected report, to get to a point where staff adopt more of a mentoring and coaching role as opposed to a typical caring function. It can help to break down formalised barriers that have historically existed between carer and resident.

Reach for IT partners concluded that where staff lacked adequate IT knowledge it was necessary to improve their IT skills, so they were better able to support and promote the scheme to service users. Staff were invited to group sessions. One partner set up one-to-one training to improve the skills of care staff. This kind of approach can ensure the continuity of the support and help to embed the initiative within the care home.

Tips
- Encourage care home managers to build IT skills development into recruitment, induction, training and appraisals.
- Involve the care home activities co-ordinator, who can be a useful link between staff and the project.

Equipment and facilities

Equipment and connectivity proved to be a far greater challenge to the Reach for IT programme than had been expected. The lesson the delivery partners learned was that this aspect of project set-up and delivery requires serious, early attention.

Some of the Reach for IT projects found it difficult to get authorisation to have wireless technology (wi-fi) installed. One local care home manager did not have the passwords to restart the wi-fi if it crashed.

An important lesson learnt from the Reach for IT programme was that residents need sufficient time with the technology to familiarise themselves with and become confident in using computers. Most residents did not have their own computers. Initially, the project's computers were often only available during the weekly session held by the volunteers and this hampered progress. Persuading care homes not to lock computers away for the remainder of the week was a major challenge. The issue of access to equipment needs to be raised and negotiated with the care home manager at the outset.

Diverse technology was involved in the Reach for IT sessions, including Wii, laptop, tablet and digital camera. It was offered based on the wishes of the residents and the skills of the volunteers.

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Tips

- Invest sufficient time and build in a generous contingency.

- Seek advice from an IT specialist for assessing and improving the connectivity of the care home and purchasing any equipment. Contact a specialist support organisation such as LASA (www.lasa.org.uk) that specialises in providing community advice and has an approved knowledge-based list of ICT suppliers.

- Use the interests and capabilities of the residents to determine the right kind of equipment for them.

- Ensure that the right routers and wi-fi are supplied so people can connect to the internet anywhere in the building.

- The wi-fi network needs to be secure, but easy to access.

- Train staff on a range of topics, including the technical use of the kit, understanding the use of the internet, and user security.

- Use the expertise of staff, families and friends to help deliver the plan.

- Incorporate an element of 'training the trainer', so the staff member feels confident and empowered to train and empower residents.

- Encourage an approach that gives the resident access to equipment outside training sessions.

Engaging with residents

Resident profiles

It is important to get a sense of the age, gender and physical and mental capacities of care home residents, as this will aid planning.

It is clear that very old people make up the majority of care home residents, with more women than men, especially in the 85-plus age group. It is estimated that there are nearly a quarter of a million people with late onset dementia in care homes in England, making up about a third of the total care home population. A 2005 survey of care home admissions found that only 15 per cent had no cognitive impairment.[8] It is likely that 40 per cent of care home residents have clinical depression.[9] There are regional variations, with the north-east of England having a higher number of care home residents with dementia and the south-west the lowest.[10]

Data on the incidence of physical disability among older people in care homes is not easy to find, but a study in 2003 for BUPA[11] found that 22 per cent of their residents required care following a stroke. Stroke is the largest single cause of severe disability – the range of disabilities varies greatly, but may often be severe with a need for a high level of care.

A large proportion of people in care homes will have some hearing loss – for example, 82 per cent of people aged over 80 have, or would benefit from, a hearing aid.[12]

Serious sight loss can contribute to an older person being admitted to a care home.[13]

The Reach for IT care homes residents typified the descriptors above.

Some of the engagement issues experienced by the projects reflect this, with:

- trainers having to repeat the lessons because residents had forgotten what they had learnt previously, due to memory loss and dementia
- hardware frustrations such as laptops being unsuitable, or too small for residents to see details properly
- some residents dying during the project, which upset the volunteers who had become close to them (bereavement counselling was offered to those affected).

Tips
• Build as much flexibility as possible into training sessions
• Use a holistic approach and have realistic expectations
• Find accessible equipment that suits the residents
• Match the residents carefully with volunteers

Learning approaches

The way in which the training is delivered will depend on the local situation, in particular and on the capabilities and preferences of the residents and the volunteer tutors.

Involving people in groups or working one-to-one depends very much on the stage that the work in the care home has reached, what the aims of the sessions are, the available space and access to technology, and the residents themselves. Group approaches can be used in a variety of ways:

• as a taster to show residents what technology is all about and its potential benefits
• using Wii sessions and computers connected to a large-screen TV in a communal lounge to involve residents in a group activity
• internet security group discussions using residents' own off-line experiences, which can help to frame one-to-one work later on.

One advantage of group delivery is that residents are able to observe group sessions and be drawn in and get interested in something they wouldn't have considered trying on their own. This is more likely to create a self-sustaining, self-teaching digital community within the home.

The limitation to group work is that it is likely to mean less individual computer time and this can result in a limited amount of skills transfer.

The use of one-to-one tuition to equip residents with basic skills may be followed up with more advanced group sessions after residents have reached a basic level of competency. One-to-one support was generally found to be the best way of ensuring that a resident learnt the necessary skills to carry out a particular activity.

Learning plans

Individual learning plans can help residents chart their progress and aid communication, indicating which technologies the learner is familiar with and which topics have been covered.

The use of individual and flexible learning plans is an important element of a teaching approach, as people can find themselves drawn into new experiences by watching others in the care home. They might start out with an observational stance and find their interest stimulated. The direction that this might take is not always easy to predict, but providing multiple entry points to the learning experience seems to work well.

Inspiring topic areas

Finding ways to inspire people to learn while they acquire basic skills can sometimes be a challenge and this is why it is especially important not to overlook the fun, enjoyable elements of digital technology, computers and the internet. In addition to the range of introductory steps that make up a learner's experience, the Reach for IT projects found the following areas were particularly worth pursuing:

Life story and reminiscence work

One Reach for IT care home introduced Individual Personal Life Story Books for all residents. They found that this gave them opportunities to support residents to:

• use the internet and digital cameras to create their story books

• add their own narratives, and images that recorded major milestones in their lives

• find out more information about the places where they grew up, went to school or used to work and to see how the areas and buildings have changed over the years.

The added bonus was that it enhanced relationships, as volunteers and staff enjoyed learning about residents' histories, and residents enjoyed being able to talk about their lives.

Another project took a reminiscence approach that involved exploring the development and history of the camera, from the old film camera to the modern digital camera.

Communication with family and friends

The benefits of using the internet to communicate with friends and family are well documented. Ofcom's media literacy research[14] reported that 49 per cent of all internet users say that being online has increased their contact with distant friends, and 47 per cent say that it has increased family contact. It does seem that this is reflected in the outcomes of care home initiatives too.

Hobbies

Reach for IT volunteers used interests and hobbies to introduce residents to the internet, showing them sites of interest as a 'hook', a reason to get involved in learning to use the latest technologies. Examples include genealogy, following sporting teams online, researching historical interests, listening to music, and visiting galleries and museums online. One project described a resident who began to talk more to other residents after looking up old war history, old posters on dance halls and information about his football club. Another resident discovered that he could re-live conducting choirs through YouTube (see Appendix 1). This kind of transformational experience is a basis on which to build.

Some hobbies, like genealogy, can involve visiting family members and serve as a useful way to gain their interest too, as well as being an opportunity to learn a range of skills around digital images and internet searching.

As with reminiscence, a focus on hobbies is likely to give the staff, and sometimes the other residents, a better sense of the resident as a fully rounded individual.

Another resident discovered that he could relive conducting choirs through YouTube. This kind of transformational experience is a basis on which to build.
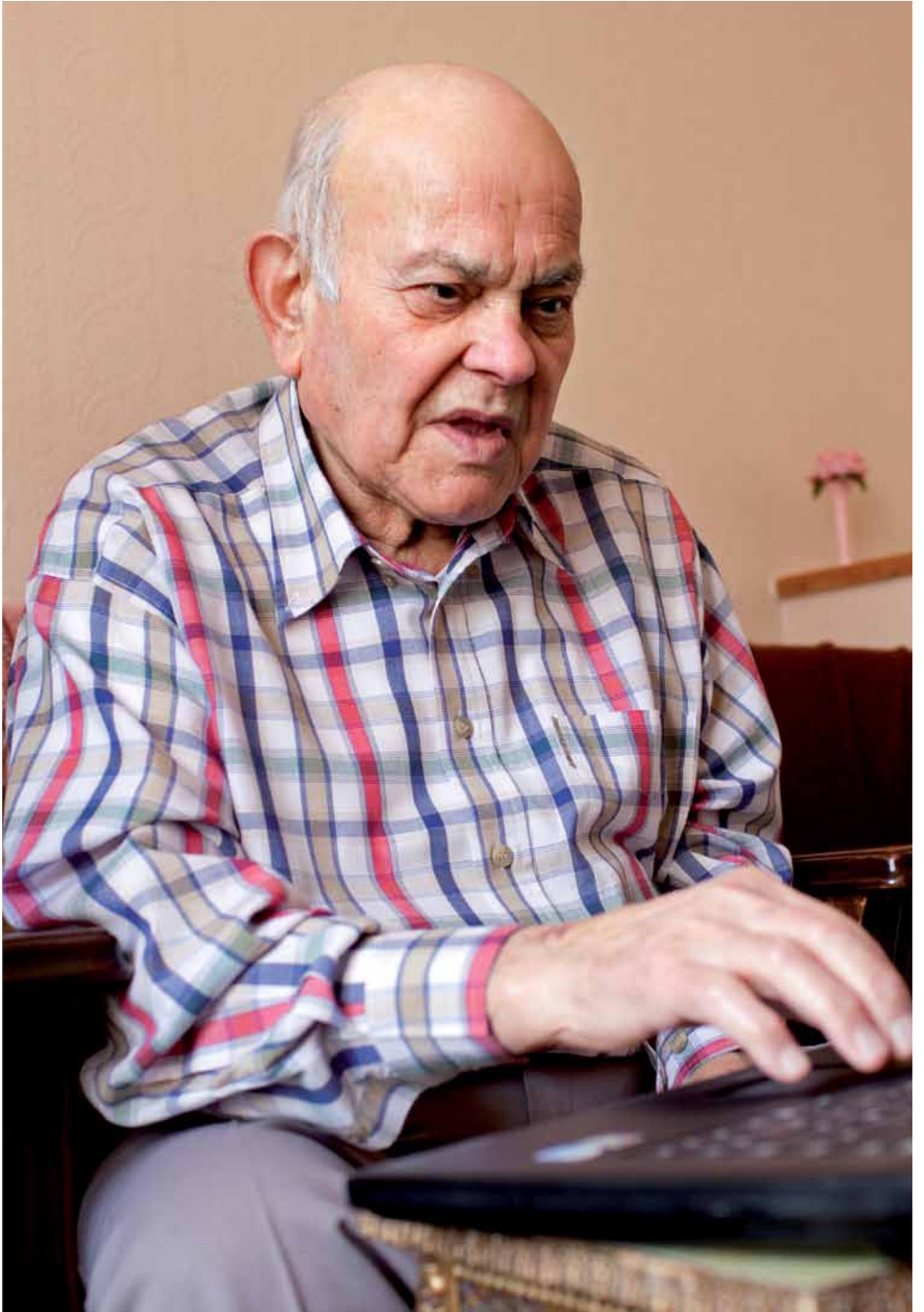
Getting the right volunteers

The experiences of different types of volunteers in care homes seem to indicate that success lies in their preparation and support. The volunteer who can commit and offer continuity is important with this kind of initiative. The need to build sessions round the needs and availability of the resident, care home staff and volunteer may be an issue and have implications for planning timescales for recruitment.

There may be additional training and support needs for volunteers in care homes to take into account, which again might impact on recruitment, where:

• there is a need for more specialist software, for example, for people with visual impairments, or speech software that the volunteer may need to be familiar with

• they may be teaching people who forget much, if not all, they have done by the next class

• the volunteers need to find solutions to make the experience more accessible, for example, finding additional time if the resident is to use text-to-speech software

• there are changes in health or the death of a resident – volunteers need to be prepared for the fact that residents may decline in their abilities and lose previously acquired computer skills as their health deteriorates.

Tips

• Make a volunteer co-ordinator responsible for planning the project with the care home, carrying out train-the-trainer sessions.

• Carry out in-depth induction of volunteers.

• Have volunteers work in pairs to provide mutual support and greater flexibility to change lesson plans.

• Allow plenty of time to recruit the right volunteers with the necessary skills, flexibility and longer-term commitment.

There is a need for more specialist software, for example, for people with visual impairments.

Appendix 1 Inspiring stories from Reach for IT

A whole new world

A dynamic atmosphere was created in the home and staff working there became more enthusiastic about overcoming the challenges of change when residents started to have more contact with others through email or Skype. Their worlds expanded hugely. They found a new source of opportunities to learn new things, which gave them confidence and self-esteem. For example, some started writing stories, others started making films. They gained a sense of achievement through learning new skills that they never expected at their age. They found that computers gave them a huge source of new stimulation and fun, such as games, quizzes and reminiscing activities (music, photos). Many of them said that the computer, especially the tutoring, was breaking up the dull routine and boredom that they were experiencing.

The conductor's tale

A manager described how some of the staff were moved to tears when one of the residents learned to use YouTube. He used to conduct a choir until just before he moved into the care home and missed music and singing terribly. He was really pleased to see that he could search for any type of music online. He started off by searching for YouTube, then searching for Elgar. He found the Last Night of the Proms music and selected to play it. He closed his eyes and was left alone to enjoy this very personal moment. He started singing along and he conducted the online orchestra throughout the whole piece. At the end, he thanked the staff, saying that he had always worried he would never be able to conduct again. They were all incredibly proud of him and he has continued with YouTube.

Making contact

A resident described how every week he had valuable weekly training on a laptop and learnt how to email, keeping him in touch with family and friends. He also made a film about his life before he came to the care home and showed it to the other residents. He felt it had been interesting – it had kept his mind working and had renewed some of his confidence. He was grateful to have had the opportunity.

Appendix 2
Useful links

AbilityNet
AbilityNet is a national charity helping disabled adults and children use computers and the internet by adapting and adjusting their technology.
www.abilitynet.org.uk

Age UK
Age UK aims to make later life better for everyone through information and advice, campaigns, products, training and research. This includes information on care homes, IT training resources and digital inclusion campaigns.
www.ageuk.org.uk

Charity Technology Trust
CTT works in partnership with charities and not-for-profit organisations in the UK to support them in using technology to enhance the way they work and collaborate. CTXchange helps organisations to access donated products from leading technology companies.
www.ctt.org/ctxchange

Digital Unite
Digital Unite is an independent organisation set up to equip people with the right digital skills in the knowledge that this has the potential to transform lives, organisations and wider society.
http://digitalunite.com

Finerday
Finerday is the brainchild of Lilla Harris, a former care home manager, who wanted the residents to be more connected to their families, especially their grandchildren, through sharing photos, messages, memories, special dates, and website links at the touch of a button. Finerday is a social media platform that simplifies this process.
www.finerday.com

LASA
LASA is a support organisation that specialises in providing community advice. It has an approved knowledge-based ICT suppliers list.
www.lasa.org.uk

My Home Life
My Home Life celebrates existing best practice in care homes and promotes care homes as a positive option for older people through the development of resources, events, practice development initiatives and other activities. Person-centred care is embedded through the power of healthy relationships between residents, relatives and staff.
http://myhomelifemovement.org

National Association for Providers of Activities for Older People
NAPA is a charity dedicated to increasing the profile and understanding of the activity needs of older people, and equipping staff with the skills to enable older people to enjoy a range of activities while living in care settings.
www.napa-activities.co.uk

NIACE
The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) aims to encourage all adults to engage in learning of all kinds and manages Adult Learners' Week **www.alw.org.uk** – the UK's largest and longest-running festival of learning.
www.niace.org.uk

SCIE
The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) improves the lives of people who use care services by sharing knowledge about what works. SCIE gathers and analyses this knowledge, translating it into practical resources, learning materials and services. Their work is developed in collaboration with experts, including people who use care services and their carers. See:
**www.scie.org.uk/workforce/getconnected/examples**

The latter is an introduction to learning via the internet, and is written specifically for small to medium-sized organisations and businesses in the care sector. Useful resource for those new to e-learning, as well as those who have some experience.
www.scie.org.uk

Notes

1 www.onefinerday.com (accessed on 3 August 2012)

2 www.carehome.co.uk/care_search_results.cfm/searchcountry/
   England/searchchtype/internet-access (accessed on 3 August 2012)

3 NIACE and IES (2012) *Get Connected Impact Evaluation*

4 Race Online (2012) *Getting On – A manifesto for older people
   in a networked nation*

5 ONS (2012) *Internet Access* Q1

6 Age UK (2012) SROI *Evaluation of the Reach for IT Project*

7 Linda Miller (2011) *First Survey of Get Connected Grant Recipients*,
   Report 485, IES

8 King's Fund (2006) *Securing Good Care for Older People –
   Taking a long-term view*

9 M. Godfrey and T. Denby (2004) *Depression and Older People:
   Towards securing wellbeing in later life*, Help the Aged

10 Care Quality Commission (2011) *State of Health Care and Adult
   Social Care in England*

11 www.bupa.co.uk/about/html/pr/220903_stroke.html
   (accessed on 3 August 2012)

12 www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/
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13 NCHR&D Forum (2006) *My Home Life: Quality of life in care homes:
   A review of the evidence*, Help the Aged

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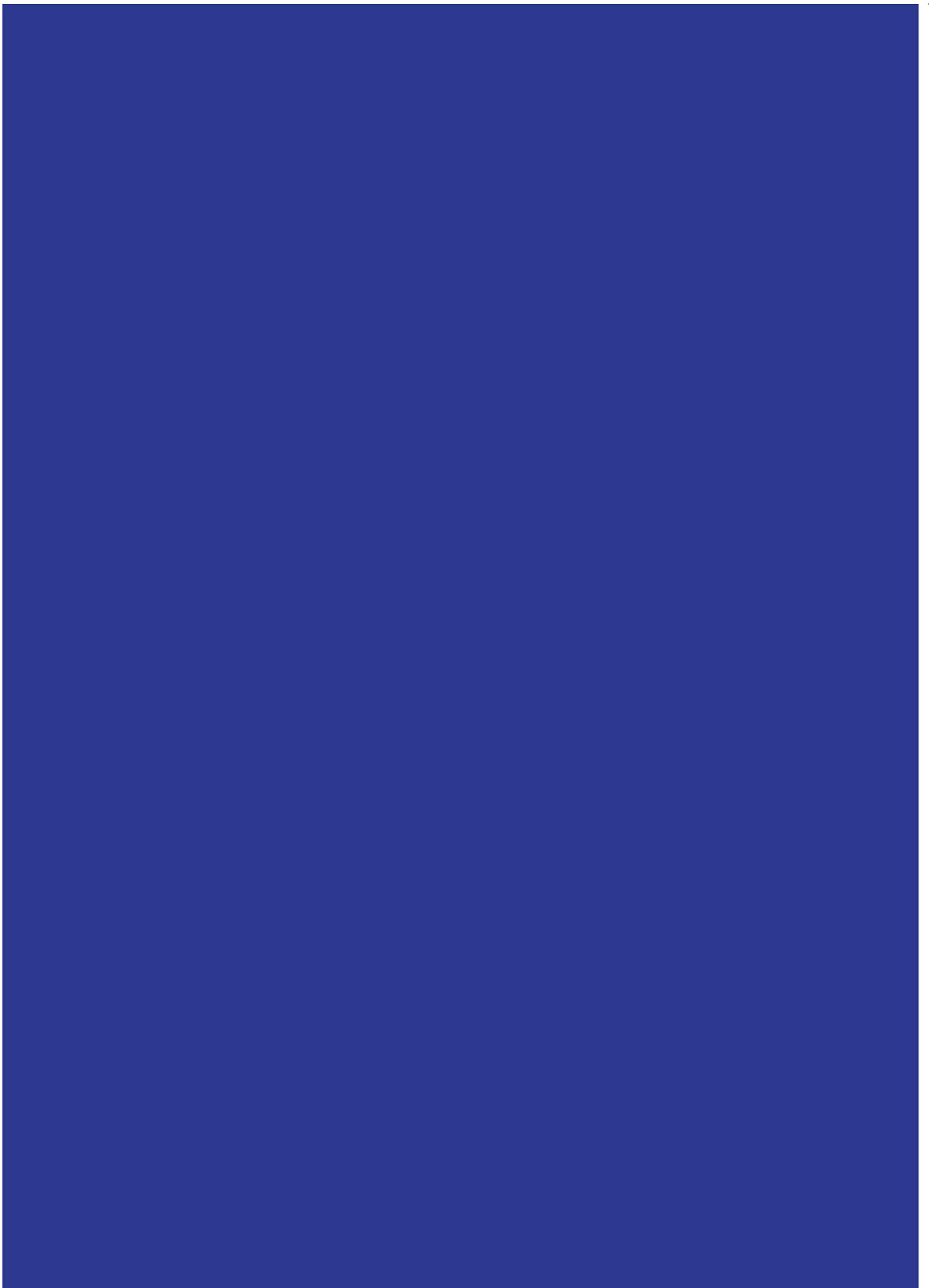
Tavis House
1–6 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9NA
0800 169 87 87
www.ageuk.org.uk