Home sharing - how it could benefit you

Feature by Rachel Lacey

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Could you benefit from the schemes pairing those in need of help or company at home with those looking for somewhere affordable to rent?

Pam and Alexandra aren't your typical housemates.

For starters, Alexandra doesn't pay a penny to occupy a floor in Pam's beautiful Georgian town house in Bristol, while Pam can never remember her house guest's name.

That's because Pam Bird, 84, a retired university administrator, has Alzheimer's.

In an arrangement set up by Homeshare West, Alexandra Pickford, 63, has moved into Pam's home to provide company and support to Pam in return for free accommodation.

"My sister saw an article in the paper and it sounded perfect for me," explains Alexandra. The former ballet dancer had just come out of a 20-year relationship and was in need of affordable accommodation as she considered her options.

But Alexandra certainly isn't a full-time carer. "Pam is incredibly physically fit and so a care home wasn't suitable," says Melissa Feeney, Pam's step-daughter, who has taken on much of the responsibility for Pam's welfare since her father's death last year, despite living in France.

"This tops up security for the family and means there is someone there to keep an eye on her and let us know if there is anything we need to worry about."

Pam, who in Melissa's words, is 'fiercely independent', still does her own shopping and housework."She cooks her own meals," says Melissa. "Alexandra is there to be a companion. Without her we'd be more reliant on paid carers, which Pam would hate."

Suitable arrangement

Although homesharing wasn't Pam's idea, the arrangement suits her. "She likes the company at mealtimes," says Alexandra. "We nearly always have breakfast together and sometimes dinner too." Melissa adds: "She was clearly lonely in the evenings, so when we explained there would be someone around every night it wasn't a hard sell."

Alexandra is now in the process of buying her own flat. However, Melissa is keen to find another match for Pam. "We'd like to repeat the process until such a time that it's no longer enough support." Homeshare has the potential to help tackle some of society's biggest problems - it provides help and companionship for the elderly in their own homes and provides free accommodation for those who might otherwise be priced out of the area.

Melissa stresses, however, it's not a 'free ride' or suited to those who just want to save cash. "It's a big responsibility." how does it work? Exactly how much help the homesharer provides will depend on what the householder needs, says Denise Moore, general manager of Draycott Nursing and Care, which operates a homeshare scheme in Central London.

"Each arrangement is unique, depending on what suits each individual, but homesharers are generally expected to provide 10 hours' help a week, guarantee to stay overnight six nights a week and be around three weekends out of four."

Sharers aren't allowed to help with personal care such as feeding, bathing or dressing householders, instead they're expected to provide more informal support around the home. "It might be help cooking, gardening, shopping, dog walking or help on the computer or with admin jobs," Moore adds.

No money changes hands between the householder and the sharer but the scheme operators may charge a monthly fee for setting up the plan. Despite the huge number of people who could benefit from homesharing, arrangements such as Alexandra and Pam's are few and far between.

Shared Lives Plus, the organisation that represents the UK's 11 homeshare schemes, estimates that there are only around 100 matches currently running across the UK. One issue is funding, says Audrey Heard, who runs Homeshare West, unpaid in her free time. "It's so hard to get funding and we need funding to grow."

Help for the young

Homesharing doesn't only help elderly homeowners. Graduate Milena Bottero, was desperate for cheap accommodation in the London during a five-month internship for an environmental organisation. "I realised that people were pretty much excluded from internships unless they lived in London or had lots of money," she says.

This led the 23-year-old to set up Room for Tea, which she describes as a 'new kind of home sharing network' that matches interns and apprentices who can't afford pricey London rents with hosts who have room to spare. Some hosts simply provide a room in return for rent of up to £350 a month (the maximum that can be earned tax-free through the government Rent a Room scheme) or they charge a reduced rent for a bit of help.

It was this latter option that appealed to busy single mum Amanda Maxwell, 50, from Kingston. Amanda, a journalist and consultant who specialises in medical technology, was matched with Helena Marshall a 24-year-old student in prosthetics and orthotics from Southport.

Helena pays just £150 a month in rent, but in return has agreed to look after Amanda's 13-year-old daughter Imogen three nights a week and help out with household chores such as washing, emptying the dishwasher and cooking the occasional meal. Both pay a monthly fee to Room for Tea.

Helena says the arrangement has been a 'life saver'. Had this opportunity not arisen, she admits she may not have been able to accept the work placement she'd been offered at Charing Cross Hospital. "I would have had to shell out money I don't have, or a take a year out." But she says it isn't just about the money. "It's so much more personal than just renting a room and it's nice to come home to a family environment."

Amanda is equally enthused. "It's working out perfectly," she says. "Since my two eldest daughters left home it has become a very quiet house so it's lovely having someone else around."

However many people could benefit from the service provided by Room for Tea, it, like other homeshare projects has funding issues to contend with. The project was awarded funding as part of the Keeping Connected Business Challenge - a collaboration between the Design Council and the Technology and Strategy Board - but that money will soon run out. "We need to find more hosts and more stays to keep it viable," Bottero says.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN HOMESHARING?

USEFUL CONTACTS

Draycott Home Share (Central London): 0207 351 9901 www.*draycotthomeshare.co.uk*
Homeshare West (Bath): 01225 22 00 85 www.*homesharewest.org*
Room for Tea (hosting interns in London): 020 3239 4913 www.r*oomfortea.com*
Shared Lives Plus (represents 11 homeshare schemes): 0151 227 3499 www.*sharedlivesplus.org.uk*