

CORONAVIRUS

# Home-sharers are 45 years apart but get on like a house on fire

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Olivia Cornaz, centre, with housemates Robin Moss and Jill Turner  
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From the outside Denise Cook and Katie Wonham are polar opposites.

Denise, 76, is a retired secretary who loves theatre and art; Katie, 31, likes riding and getting muddy on her bike. Katie dislikes TV whereas Denise watches *EastEnders* avidly. Denise is a regular churchgoer; Katie, a vet who works for a charity, is not.

They might not sound like typical housemates, but despite their differences and four-decade age gap, they have become close friends since Katie moved into Denise's home in Nailsea, Somerset, last November.

The women are among hundreds of people who have formed unlikely bonds during the pandemic thanks to programmes pairing elderly householders with younger lodgers. Interest dipped for a while due to fears about the virus but rose sharply in the second lockdown in November, according to Homeshare UK, a network representing 23 providers. Overall, matches through the largest home-sharing organisation, [Share and Care Homeshare](#), were up 40% in 2020, with 67 new matches against 48 in 2019.

When Denise was matched with Katie by Homeshare West, she had been living alone since the death of her husband in 2017: “There was wasted space upstairs; I thought it would be nice to have somebody there.”

For Katie, who is saving to buy a house, it made financial sense. In home-sharing, both parties pay a monthly fee of between £100 and £200 depending on the provider, which is cheaper than renting a room in a traditional house share. But Katie was also seeking companionship: “I thought it would be really nice to get to know someone of a different generation.”

Both were apprehensive. Katie had lived only with housemates her own age; she thought it might be like living with a grandparent; her own had died by the time she was ten. But, she said, “it’s a much more equal relationship”.

Grandmother-of-two Denise worried that Katie “was more intelligent than me. She always has an answer for things in the medical world. But I had more experience with people. We get on very well.”

Katie has been teaching Denise to use WhatsApp and learn the keyboard. Denise has changed Katie’s outlook: “We’re always talking about life. What makes a person who they are? Because she’s reflecting on life, it has made me reflect on how I live my life and what’s important,” Denise said

Olivia Cornaz, 25, has been “smiling all the time” since moving in with Jill Turner, 70, and her partner of 35 years, Robin Moss, 80. “We have the same sense of humour and they have so many wonderful stories,” Olivia said. “I thought it would be awkward but it hasn’t been at all.”

For Jill, it has provided a much-needed boost. The former journalist recently suffered a bad fall. Robin, who used to work in TV regulation, has dementia. “It’s good for us to have someone else in the house,” Jill said. Now she, Robin and Olivia, an international student at Ravensbourne University in southeast London, eat together most nights. “A big misconception is that living with someone older won’t be fun,” Olivia said. “That’s totally not true.”

Olivia pays £150 a month as part of the Share and Care scheme to stay at Jill and Robin’s home in Primrose Hill, north London, where a room can cost £1,000. Jill also pays £150 a month.

Sharers are vetted by the agency and undergo criminal record checks as well as filling in a lengthy form detailing what they want and can offer. A contract is then drawn up setting out roughly how many hours a week — usually ten or 15 — they will spend together and defining boundaries; while sharers can help around the house or run errands, they are not there to fulfil the role of a carer.

It is not for everyone: sharers are expected to be at home most nights and may not be allowed overnight guests. The majority of those signing up are young professionals and mature students aged 25 to 49. At the end of 2020, 104 older people were waiting to be matched with a sharer, according to Homeshare UK.

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Had songwriter Johanna Lundstrom, 55, not arrived when she did — last February — she would have had to move from her London home of 36 years into a care home, or to stay with relatives in the Wye Valley. “They were very willing to have me. But a home is a home and I wouldn’t want to have to leave if I could possibly help it,” she said.

Instead, she and Johanna have spent the lockdowns doing jigsaw puzzles, gardening and cooking meals together. “We seem to be on the same wavelength,” Iris said. “I couldn’t have coped without her.”