



Championing person-centred care: Alison Charles' fellowship journey in social care research



Alison's work has focused on piloting the Adult Social Care Outcomes Toolkit (ASCOT) in older adult care homes across Kent and Surrey, aiming to enhance person-centred care planning and improve residents' social care-related quality of life (SCRQoL). Through this fellowship, Alison has deepened her expertise in applied social care research, played her part in developing innovative tools, and shared insights through conferences, webinars, and digital content. Her commitment to collaborative, impactful research continues to contribute to the future of care home practice and policy.

How long have you been in this role? What does it involve?

The fellowship lasts 18 months and began in October 2024 so I am nearly a year in.

It is linked to the [NIHR ARC NPP 'Wellbeing in care homes' project](#) and primarily involves helping to set up and support a pilot of the [Adult Social Care Outcomes Toolkit \(ASCOT\)](#) care planning tool in a small number of older adult care homes in England, including one each in Kent and Surrey, followed by evaluation of the pilot and communication of the results (and other project activity and resources).

On a more personal level, the fellowship also enables me to undertake a flexible, tailored programme of training and related activities to support my development as a social care researcher, and to explore current and potential future research topics.

What made you apply for the Social Care Fellowship award?

The main reason for applying for the fellowship was to consolidate and catalyse my transition from supporting to undertaking social care research. (I was already working as a social care researcher and had previously been a Research Co-ordinator - Social Care for ARC KSS.) I realised that this was an incredible developmental opportunity at a pivotal point in my career and that undertaking the fellowship would support me to achieve my research career goals.

How easy did you find the process?

This was my first fellowship application, so I'll admit that it was a learning experience but one with a very positive outcome.



Where did you find out about it?

I heard about it from colleagues and via the ARC KSS website and 'Spotlight' newsletter.

What has this award enabled you to do?

This unique and valuable opportunity has:

- widened my knowledge and experience of social care research and practice, especially in older adult care homes
- expanded my understanding of the reality of doing research in complex care settings and the support, people skills, patience and flexibility required to achieve results
- supported my development as an applied social care researcher in numerous ways, including through:
 - tailored training and development opportunities, including conferences and other events
 - working with colleagues with greater experience of social care research.

Do you think this has made an impact in your work? Who is at the receiving end of this research?

Undertaking the fellowship has undoubtedly had a big impact on my current (and potential future) work for the reasons listed above. This is not least as the project is all about developing and piloting approaches to care planning in older adult care homes which focus on residents' Social Care-Related Quality of Life (SCRQoL), i.e. those aspects of quality of life most affected by social care services and support. Our research thus aims to help care homes support residents in ways that reflect what really matters to the residents.

What have been the highlights of the project?

Project highlights have included:

- Working with and learning from colleagues from Kent and the four other universities involved in this [National Priorities Programme Adult Social Care & Social Work](#) project.
- Liaison with colleagues in the participating care homes to train and support them to use the ASCOT tool in their care planning processes.
- Contributing to the development of [new tools for care homes](#) to make care planning more collaborative, consistent and person-centred.
- Creating digital content such as [blogposts](#) and [summaries](#) to communicate project outputs and activity.
- Presenting papers and posters on issues related to or inspired by the project at conferences, including the [British Society of Gerontology 54th Annual Conference](#) and the British Society of Gerontology Emerging Researchers in Ageing 2025 Pre-Conference.
- Contributing to webinars (in the context of [project developments](#) and [research capacity building](#)).



What have been the challenges?

Older adult care homes can be challenging environments in which to undertake research, especially projects which are longitudinal and/or require practice change. (This is because the complex and dynamic nature of care home settings often necessitate changes of plans and/or delays if research activities have to be deprioritised because of on-the-job troubleshooting etc.) As anticipated, this has been the case in this project but the learning from this experience has inspired me (and my colleagues) to engage in the debate about how to respond to such challenges through conference participation and outputs (please see above).

Also, in terms of the fellowship rather than the project, an ongoing challenge has been to manage my time so that I don't take on too much. The fellowship has been such a wonderful opportunity to grow as a social care researcher, but I am learning to be more realistic about what can be achieved in the time available.

What kind of support did you get?

Throughout the application process and the fellowship, itself, I have received amazing support and encouragement from numerous colleagues who have given their time very generously to support me on my fellowship journey. There are too many people to list everyone, but specific shout-outs must go to my project PI, Fellowship Academic Mentor, Line Manager, and the ARC KSS Social Care Capacity Building and ARC KSS Teams, along with my peers in the ARC KSS Fellowship cohort and ARC Social Care Capacity Building Community.

What happens next?

In the last months of my fellowship, I will be completing interviews with care home residents and staff who have participated in the pilots and analysing these, together with data from surveys of care home staff. I will then be writing up the results as part of the project evaluation and co-creating outputs (including journal articles) to communicate this information.

I will also undertake outstanding training relevant to both the project and my research aspirations and will be looking to apply for social care research roles in which I can use the knowledge, skills and experience gained during the fellowship and/or additional funding to support my development and/or own research.

What advice would you give someone looking to take part in research who has never done research before?

If you are even vaguely interested in participating in and/or doing research, especially applied research which can make a positive difference to people's lives, I would encourage you to follow your instinct and take the first step. There are numerous ways you can get involved and I know from my



own experience, and that of the researchers and public involvement and engagement advisors I work with, that engaging with research can be very satisfying and rewarding.

What qualities do you think you need to be a good researcher?

Based on my experience of undertaking research in older adult care homes during the fellowship and in a range of other contexts previously, I'd say the following characteristics are probably the most useful:

- a focused, enquiring and open mind
- the ability to see the bigger picture
- effective organisational, communication and collaboration skills
- flexibility and agility
- perseverance, tenacity and resilience
- patience and respect for everyone involved in the research process.