

Small, unique, personal, and quirky. These attributes commonly describe the 'boutique' hotel experience. However, in recent years they have also been applied to an emerging trend in older people's care.

Boutique care homes are on the rise. While currently there are no statistics available to pin down just how popular this approach has become, the word 'boutique' frequently appears in online marketing materials describing what residents and families can expect from their care home of choice.

A boutique care home can meet the needs of those families looking for somewhere small and personal that mirrors as much as possible the home life of loved ones requiring full time care. But for smaller providers struggling with the aftermath of the pandemic, this approach can be a means to rebrand and expand their appeal. And being 'boutique' also opens up opportunities to build care home communities that are united by similar professional backgrounds and interests, from actors and artists to gardening enthusiasts and retired seafarers.

This approach is nothing new. For years, care homes have catered to the needs of residents attracted by an interest or former career, such as Brinsworth House, the famous care home for theatre and entertainment professionals in Twickenham (see case study). Some have been created for a specific community, while others have evolved by chance, or through word of mouth, into care homes that cater for niche markets.

Whether or not these care homes call themselves boutique, what they offer is based on boutique characteristics – fairly small, personalised, intimate and individual - just like the boutique hotels that began appearing in the 1980s as an alternative to large hotel chains.

Now, boutique care homes are emerging as another option for residential care. "What worked for hotels - why not for care homes?" says Debbie Harris, founder and managing director of Autumn, the largest UK online directory of care services.

Harris says there is a "real need and market" for this kind of care home.



# The rise of the boutique care home

Like hotels, boutique care homes could be a means for smaller providers to rebrand and expand their appeal. But this quirky, individual approach is also an opportunity to offer personalised care and build communities with shared interests, reports **Kathy Oxtoby**.

"When people who contact Autumn to enquire about care homes are asked: 'Are you looking for a modern, purpose-built care home – which often tend to be larger – or for something a bit smaller, a bit more intimate - 50% say the latter.

"I'm speaking to families every day that are interested in beautifully presented care homes that offer good care in a smaller environment, so there is an opportunity for boutique homes," she says.

Turning bespoke could also be a way for the small to medium sized independent providers hit hard by the pandemic to turn their business around. These providers, that make up more than 80% of the UK care home market, have had a difficult year, dealing with many thousands of deaths, and now many have vacant ➤

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► beds. In 2020, global property adviser Knight Frank estimated that over the next five years, some 6,500 care homes totalling 140,000 beds, could close.

However, demand for beds is set to rise. The post war Baby Boomer generation is now reaching a pensionable age, while globally, the number of older people who require care is expected to nearly treble in the next fifty years. With rising demand, smaller homes could choose to rebrand, and like hotels, go niche and boutique. “For smaller homes this could be a useful way to emerge from the pandemic,” says Ms Harris.

Nadra Ahmed, chair of the National Care Association, says that having been through a “challenging time”, during the pandemic, smaller providers should be encouraged to “look at what is their niche, and their unique selling point”. What these providers discover about their businesses could enable them to market them as ‘boutique’.

### Playing to strengths

A care home may be a listed building, situated in extensive grounds, or have a distinctive décor. Its owner may have a particular interest in music, art, or gardening. By playing to their strengths, providers not only have the chance to boost their business, but to also improve the quality of residents’ lives, through encouraging stimulating activities and enabling them to share common pursuits, in an environment that suits them.

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Nadra Ahmed

as gardening, that will also bind them together,” says Ahmed.

Boutique homes widen the choice available to those needing live in care and their families. “Family members may be looking for a home that has a personality that matches their mum’s. They may not want a big care home – they might find it intimidating. Some people prefer the smaller care home that’s branded as boutique, where they feel more comfortable and supported, and like that it’s a bit different,” says Harris.

A boutique approach can also be beneficial for staff, because it can instil a sense of belonging and pride. “When you’re working at a care home, you want to be able to belong to, and support something that people admire, respect and praise. You want to feel proud to work there,” says Harris.

Of course, boutique care homes are not without their potential drawbacks. A concern about care homes that only cater to specific communities is “a lack of diversity of interests”, says Ahmed. “What enriches people’s minds is their ability to adapt and learn new things, and what we don’t want to do is to curb that,” she says.

The small, boutique care home may not have the financial backing and support to remain economically viable in contrast to

large care organisations. Earlier this year, it was reported that elderly residents said they were being “pushed out” of a historic care home after it was sold on. The Mary Feilding Guild in Highgate, whose residents have included literary and political retirees, was said to have been “financially unsustainable over a long period of time”. Following a review of its existing business model, the home’s new owners, concluded that “unfortunately it is not possible to continue to provide care in the same way”.

### The superficial and the visual

Harris says that when it comes to marketing a care home as ‘boutique’, outside of the importance of care and CQC ratings it is “the superficial and visual” that matters. “This is something a lot of care homes really let themselves down on. It’s about the quality of the food, the bedding, the general décor”, she says.

The superficial and visual doesn’t have to be expensive. “Families who are looking for a care home for their mum who has lived in a three-bedroom semi all her life, and who doesn’t want to go into a large purpose built care home, don’t want flash. They want small, comfortable, welcoming and warm,” she says.

Ms Harris advises that providers need to present their boutique homes so that ►





► they look visually appealing in photographs in videos and online. And she stresses the importance of a “good online presence, as this is now how people are finding and making decisions about care homes”.

The potential for scalable opportunities is limitless, Harris believes. “If you’ve got a small group of residents who are, say, ex dancers, and you market yourself along that theme, why shouldn’t someone else find that of interest to their mum who is an ex dancer? It seems obvious to me,” she says.

Harris would “love the boutique care home market to become more common”. What is needed, she says, is for providers to consider “what are you interested in, use your imagination, what does your building lend to you, and start working on that”.

### “Everyone is top of the bill”

“A paradise for old pros” is how Brinsworth House, Middlesex, is commonly referred to. And while this home for retired performers and entertainers may not be marketed as boutique, it has all the qualities associated with the label.

Quirkiness was a part of the care home’s ethos from when it started out in 1911 to care for the former music hall artists whose seasonal work wasn’t enough to enable retirement savings. Owned and run by the Royal Variety Charity, Brinsworth House, a Grade II listed building, is set within over three acres of land, and has room for 40 residents.

While the landscape of the entertainment industry has changed over the years, one aspect has remained

constant. “People who work in entertainment continue to operate on a job-to-job, season-to-season basis, and some aren’t able to put money aside for pensions or health. So the need is still there,” says Giles Cooper, chairman of the Royal Variety Charity.

That need is reflected in the long waiting list for a place at Brinsworth House, which has been a home to retired artists for over 100 years. Its walls reflect its colourful history and are decorated with actors’ portraits, and many household names have spent their retirement there.

Celebrities often visit the home to perform – and receive critiques from a discerning audience – while the residents themselves regularly put on a variety show, “and you can hear them competing about who will be the director!”, says Mr Cooper.

But these shared activities are about more than entertainment. “As a niche care home catering to a group of people from the same industry, there’s a commonality that leads residents to bond and to lead more fulfilling lives,” says the home’s matron, Tatree Preece.

The home, Cooper says, is “lucky to have so much support within the entertainment industry”, which has enabled ongoing work on a £3.5m refurbishment.

For the smaller care homes who may currently be struggling during the pandemic, Cooper suggests that a change to a boutique approach for a specialist community could be achieved through getting support from a relevant industry, “where people will volunteer to help and reach out to people to make donations”.

Being boutique also means more than providing basic care. Ms Preece recalls how during lockdown one of the care home staff with a hairdressing qualification volunteered to be hairdresser to the residents every week. “They love to look glamorous and well turned out,” she says.

As Mr Cooper says: “People feeling great about themselves - that’s the recipe of our success. Everyone’s top of the bill at Brinsworth House.”

### “It’s comforting living with like-minded people”

While some homes have developed links with people with similar careers or interests, others’ associations have happened by accident. Compton Lodge care home in north London, has, through word of mouth, become a home of choice for people with an artistic background.

“It’s important for these residents to be able to maintain their love of art,” says Julia Ashley, CEO of housing and care organisation Central and Cecil (C&C), which runs Compton Lodge, one of its four London based homes. “It’s a fantastic way for them to express themselves.”

She says one resident’s bedroom walls are covered with paintings from around the world. Another, the brother of a famous painter, used to have his own art studio and, “he’s always painting – his wife takes his paintings home and puts them on her wall”. Then there’s the sculptor living at the home whose work has been exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery. Opera singers, art teachers, authors and TV broadcasters also form part of the home’s community. “It’s comforting living with like-minded people,” says Ashley.

She likes the boutique care home term to describe life at this “quirky” 32-bed Edwardian property. “We can understand what a boutique hotel experience feels like. ‘Boutique’ helps people to connect with,

and have some understanding of what the offer is."

'Boutique' also fits with the home's 'Out Not In' approach to care, designed to encourage residents to engage with society, arts and nature. During the pandemic, life has been restricted to online activities, but normally includes visits to live performances, and the home has longstanding partnerships with, for example, the Royal Albert Hall, The Old Vic and the British Museum.

The 'Out Not In' strategy is also associated with encouraging residents, including those living with dementia, "to express themselves and do the things they love", says Ashley. For one resident this means playing the piano, while another who moved in during the pandemic was able to make the transition from home to care home by bringing her drawing materials with her.

Interests and activities are not restricted to a timetable, which gives residents the freedom to be themselves - an ethos that also applies to the care home staff, says Ashley. "Being a care worker is a really specialist job, one that's very underplayed. We give our staff the license and freedom to be creative, and to try new things," she says.

Staff consistently say life at the home "feels like family". "And that's what we're trying to create here for residents," says Ms Ashley. "You may have moved out of your home, but at this home you're still part of a family".

### "Promoting the home as boutique was my plan"

Glenn Trotman managing director and owner of Elliscombe House in Somerset, is actively marketing the 35-bed nursing home as 'boutique'. When he purchased the care home in 2016, set to open this

Spring, "promoting it as boutique was my plan", he says.

Since then, this Edwardian country house has been restored and extensively refurbished, with rooms featuring luxurious fabrics and furnishings sourced from India - some with private conservatories - overlooking seven acres of grounds, and there's a large newly-built orangery where people can sit to view the gardens.

"The home is a bit like a boutique hotel, a bit quirky, and different, but it also screams luxury," says Carla Bowman, registered manager of the home.

After roles in large care home organisations, Bowman decided to step away from being "a more corporate member of staff", and to work as part of a small team "with more of a family atmosphere".

The nursing home, she says, aims to be as "person centred" as possible, from the nursing through to the menus, with ingredients sourced locally.

Bowman explains that one of the aims of Elliscombe House is for it to be as involved as much as possible with the local community, from garden fetes to mother and toddler groups meeting with residents.

Key to all of the home's ambitions, says Trotman, will be "offering a high quality of nursing and residential care in wonderful surroundings - somewhere where staff really enjoy working, and feel passionate about what they're doing. If we can develop that internal ethos I believe that news will spread pretty quickly for us to be able to attract residents."

### "It feels like home"

Some homes are effortlessly boutique, like Tabley House nursing home in Cheshire, whose stand out qualities are set

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in stone. The home, run by Cygnet Health Care, is situated in an eighteenth century Grade I-listed Palladian country house in Cheshire that has its own museum and chapel, a tearoom, two acres of grounds, and a lake.

The house and its grounds have been a TV and film location for various productions, and recent credits include *Peaky Blinders*, *The Black Prince*, and *The Forsyth Saga*.

Within the nursing home, almost all of the 51 en-suite bedrooms have their original fireplaces, and no two rooms are the same. "Once a person has their bedroom that becomes their home. They can adapt their room to meet their needs because it's all about making their quality of life special," says Karen Lynskey, resident manager.

Care, she says, is focussed on the personal, and most of the team delivering that care have been at the home for more than a decade. Both staff, residents and families are "wowed by the home", Lynskey says

"They love the building, and its uniqueness, and the views. And whatever the weather, when you come down the drive to the home and see the views, the sheep and lambs and rabbits at play, it's so special. It doesn't feel like a nursing home. It feels like your home." ct

