CHOOSING CARE

Home care vs care home: an honest guide for families

When home care works and when a care home is right, how each is means tested in 2026/27, and what it means for couples and for dementia.

By the JNP Sidona team · 3 November 2026 · 11 min read

Home care works best when your parent wants to stay at home, the home can be made safe, and their needs fit planned visits or a live-in carer. A care home is the better fit when they need a nurse day and night, or home has stopped working even with help. In England the house is ignored in the council means test for care at home, but it usually counts after 12 weeks in a permanent care home place.

KEY POINTS

- Start with what help is needed, at what times, and whether it can be planned. The answer usually points to one option.
- For care at home, the council's means test ignores the house. For a permanent care home move, the house usually counts after the first 12 weeks, unless a partner or a qualifying relative still lives there.
- Someone funded by the council at home keeps more of their weekly income than someone funded in a care home. In 2026/27 that means at least £241.45 a week for a single person over Pension Credit age at home, for food, utilities and daily living, with rent or mortgage and council tax allowed for separately. In a care home, where food and bills are in the fee, the personal expenses allowance is £31.80.
- Couples can stay together far more easily at home. In a care home, ask early whether a shared or adjoining room is possible.
- With dementia there is no single right moment. If your parent has capacity to decide, the choice is theirs.

- You don't have to decide all at once. A short respite stay in a care home, or a trial of home care, lets you test an option before committing.

When does home care work, and when is a care home right?

The most useful test is whether **the help your parent needs can be planned in advance**. Washing, dressing, meals, medication prompts, getting to bed: these happen at predictable times, and visiting carers are built around them. Needs that come without warning, at any hour, are harder to meet at home unless someone is living there.

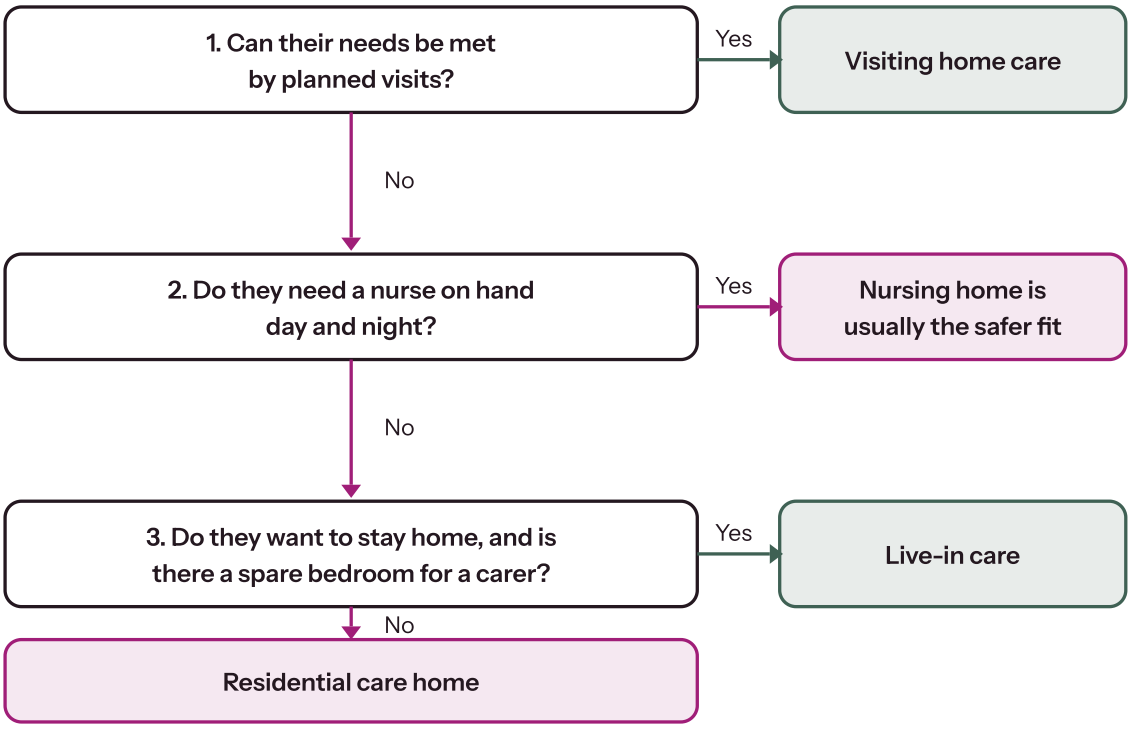
Home care is often the right choice when

- your parent wants to stay at home and can say so, or has said so in the past;
- most of the help they need falls at predictable times of day;
- the home can be made safe enough, with rails, a key safe, a downstairs bed or a stairlift;
- a partner lives with them and wants to carry on doing so;
- they have dementia but are settled in familiar surroundings and routine;
- there is a spare bedroom, if they need someone there day and night (live-in care).

A care home is often the right choice when

- they need clinical care from a registered nurse at any hour. The NHS notes that a nursing home always has one or more qualified nurses on duty;
- they are not safe on their own between visits and live-in care is not possible (no spare room, or the home can't be adapted);
- they are isolated and lonely at home, and would enjoy other people around them;
- the family carer can no longer carry on, and the gaps can't be filled;
- their needs have grown beyond what a home set-up can manage safely.

The NHS describes a care home as an option for people who are struggling to live alone even with help from friends, family or paid carers. That "even with help" matters: if your parent has not yet had proper support at home, try it before ruling home out.



A starting point, not a verdict, and your parent's own wishes come first at every step. Someone eligible for NHS continuing healthcare can have that care funded at home or in a care home, and a needs assessment from the council will look at the whole picture.

What is actually different day to day?

Home care and care homes compared (England)

	Care at home	Care home
Where they live	Their own home, own routine, own neighbours	A room in a shared home, with set mealtimes and communal areas
Who is there overnight	No one, unless there is a live-in carer, family, or arranged night care	Staff on site around the clock
Nursing	Usually no nurse. Carers give personal care; any nursing needed	A nursing home always has a qualified nurse on

	Care at home	Care home
	at home is normally arranged separately through the NHS	duty; a residential home does not
How it is charged	By the hour or visit, or a weekly fee for live-in care. Household bills carry on	A weekly fee that covers the room, meals and care
The house in the council means test	Ignored	Usually counted after 12 weeks, with exceptions
Couples	Stay together in their own home	Depends on rooms and whether both need care
Regulator	Agencies must register with the CQC	Homes must register with the CQC

Is home care cheaper than a care home?

It depends on how many hours of care are needed. A care home charges one weekly fee; home care is charged by the hour, so the answer comes down to hours a week. Two hours of visits a day is 14 hours a week. Care around the clock from visiting carers is 168 hours a week.

Two published figures give a sense of scale. They are context, not our prices:

- **Care homes:** in 2025/26 the average cost of a week of residential or nursing care arranged by councils was **£1,390 in London**, the highest of any region, according to the DHSC adult social care finance report (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/adult-social-care-finance-report-england-2025-to-2026/adult-social-care-finance-report-england-2025-to-2026).
- **Home care:** the Homecare Association (https://www.homecareassociation.org.uk/about-us/research-and-reports.html) has calculated a minimum price for homecare of **£34.42 an hour** for April 2026 to March 2027. It is a national floor built on the National Living Wage, not a London price. London agencies may charge more.

The two figures measure different things, so they don't give an exact break-even point. The pattern is clear, though: a few hours of visits a day can cost less than a care home, while round-the-clock visiting care costs far more. Even at the national minimum, 168 hours of visits would

come to more than £5,700 a week. Live-in care is priced as a weekly fee, and one live-in carer can sometimes support a couple, depending on both people's needs. These figures are what councils paid or a trade body's calculation; what a family paying privately is charged varies, so ask every provider for a written quote based on an assessment. We give ours after a free home assessment, and our guide to live-in care vs a care home (/blog/live-in-care-vs-care-home) compares those two options in detail.

For London homeowners, the bigger difference is often how the council's means test treats the house.

How the means test treats the house (England, 2026/27)

The capital limits for 2026/27 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-charging-for-local-authorities-2026-to-2027/social-care-charging-for-care-and-support-2026-to-2027-local-authority-circular) stay at **£23,250** (upper) and **£14,250** (lower). Above the upper limit you pay the full cost yourself, although for care at home you can still ask the council to arrange it for you (Care Act statutory guidance (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance), paragraph 8.13). The council can charge an arrangement fee for doing this on top of the cost of the care, and must tell you so (paragraph 8.58). Between the two limits, councils treat every £250 (or part of £250) above £14,250 as £1 a week of "tariff income". Someone with £18,250, for example, is treated as having £16 a week of extra income.

- **Care at home:** the NHS says plainly that you won't have to sell your home to pay for help in your own home. Only savings and other capital count, not the house you live in.
- **Permanent care home place:** the value of the home is ignored for the first 12 weeks, then usually counts. If their share of the home is worth more than £23,250, that alone takes them over the upper limit once the 12 weeks end. A share in a jointly owned home is valued at what a willing buyer would pay for that share, which can be much less than a slice of the whole (Age UK factsheet 38 (https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/factsheets/fs38_property_and_paying_for_residential_care_fcs.pdf), section 6.1). During the 12 weeks your parent can pay a top-up from their own money, if the council agrees.
- **The exceptions:** the house stays out of the assessment while it is still the home of a partner or former partner (unless they are estranged or divorced, in which case only if they are a lone parent), a relative aged 60 or over, their own child under 18, or a relative who is "incapacitated" (for example, receiving Attendance Allowance or PIP), as long as that person lived there before the move, according to section 5.1 of Age UK's factsheet on property and residential care.
- **Deferred payment agreements:** if the house does count, the council can pay the fees and recover them later, usually when the home is sold. Lewisham, for example, says you need

sufficient equity and either mental capacity or someone with legal authority, such as a power of attorney.

Our guide will I have to sell my house to pay for care? covers the house question in full.

> Don't give the house or savings away to avoid care fees. Age UK and Lewisham Council both warn that if a council decides an asset was deliberately given away for that reason, it can assess your parent as though they still own it. Get independent advice before transferring anything.

What your parent keeps each week

Many guides skip this. When the council funds part of the care, it must leave the person a minimum amount of income. For 2026/27:

- **At home**, the minimum income guarantee (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-charging-for-local-authorities-2026-to-2027/social-care-charging-for-care-and-support-2026-to-2027-local-authority-circular) for a single person over Pension Credit age is **£241.45 a week** (£184.30 each for a member of a couple). It is meant to cover food, utilities and other day-to-day costs. Rent or mortgage and council tax, and extra costs caused by disability, are allowed for on top (statutory guidance (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance), Annex C, paragraph 49).
- **In a care home**, the personal expenses allowance (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-charging-for-local-authorities-2026-to-2027/social-care-charging-for-care-and-support-2026-to-2027-local-authority-circular) is **£31.80 a week**. Room and meals are covered by the fee, and the rest of their income goes towards it.

Benefits and NHS money that follow each setting

- **Attendance Allowance (https://www.gov.uk/attendance-allowance)** is £76.70 or £114.60 a week in 2026/27. It carries on at home and in a care home your parent pays for themselves. GOV.UK says you can't usually get it in a care home paid for by the council.
- **NHS-funded nursing care (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/money-work-and-benefits/nhs-funded-nursing-care/)** is £267.68 a week from 1 April 2026, paid by the NHS straight to a nursing home for residents assessed as needing care from a registered nurse. It is not paid towards care at home.
- **NHS continuing healthcare (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/money-work-and-benefits/nhs-continuing-healthcare/)**, for adults with long-term, complex health needs, can be provided in

your own home or in a care home.

- **Adapting the home** can be paid for in part by a Disabled Facilities Grant (https://www.gov.uk/disabled-facilities-grants/what-youll-get) of up to £30,000 in England. It is means tested on household income and savings over £6,000.

If the council funds a care home: choice and top-ups

You can choose a care home that meets the assessed needs. If it charges more than the council will pay, someone else, usually family, has to sign up to pay the difference (a third-party top-up). Lewisham's guidance warns that if a top-up goes unpaid, the council may move the person to a cheaper home or pursue the debt. Before signing, be sure you can keep paying for as long as the stay lasts.

Which is safer: home care or a care home?

Each is safe in different ways. A care home has staff on hand at 3am; home care does not, unless a carer lives in. At home, your parent is in surroundings they know.

Questions that help settle it:

- What happens if they fall when no one is there? Could they reach a phone or press a pendant alarm?
- Do they wander, leave the cooker on, or let strangers in?
- Do they need help to the toilet at night?
- Can someone they trust check on them every day?

If the honest answers worry you, that doesn't automatically mean a care home. It may mean live-in care, a pendant alarm, or changes to the home. If the worry is mainly at night, read our guide to overnight care options (/blog/overnight-care-options) before deciding. If you are worried about someone's health right now, call their GP or NHS 111. If someone has fallen and is hurt, or can't get up, call 999.

Can couples stay together in a care home?

This is where home care has the clearest advantage. If one partner needs care and the other doesn't, a care home means living apart. Even if both need care, it is worth asking each home early whether they can share a room or have rooms next to each other, and what happens if one partner's needs change.

At home, carers can support one or both partners. A single live-in carer can sometimes look after a couple, depending on both people's needs; our page on live-in care in London (/live-in-care-london) covers how we provide it. If one partner does move into a care home, the house stays out of the means test while the other lives there.

Home care or a care home for someone with dementia?

Alzheimer's Society (https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/help-dementia-care/finding-care-home) says there is no time that is right for everyone. It lists situations where a move may be needed: the person is no longer managing at home as well as they used to, is no longer safe at home, needs continuous care day and night after a hospital stay, or has needs that have become too challenging for others to manage at home.

It also sets out both sides of staying put. Home "allows them to stay in a place that feels familiar and safe to them", but "having full-time professional carers at home can be confusing for some people with dementia". If a move does come, plan it carefully and visit homes together where you can.

Who decides?

If your parent can make the decision, they must make it themselves (Alzheimer's Society (https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/help-dementia-care/care-homes-who-chooses)). If they lack the mental capacity to decide, an attorney, deputy, family members or professionals, or a combination of these, decide in their best interests. Having a lasting power of attorney for health and welfare in place before it is needed makes this much easier. For support at home, see our dementia care in London (/dementia-care-london) page.

Can you try one before committing?

Yes. You can test either option before deciding:

- **A respite stay in a care home.** For a temporary stay, Age UK says the main home is disregarded if your parent intends to return to it and it is still available. You see how they settle, and the house is not drawn in.
- **A trial of proper home care.** A few weeks of planned visits, or a short live-in placement, shows whether home can work with the right help. Our respite care (/respite-care-london) page explains how short-term care works.

How to decide, step by step

1. **Ask the council for a needs assessment.** The NHS says it is free and anyone can ask for one. Ask through the council's adult social services; the NHS guide to needs assessments (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/help-from-social-services-and-charities/getting-a-needs-assessment/) explains what to expect.
2. **Ask for a carer's assessment (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/support-and-benefits-for-carers/carer-assessments/)** if you or another relative provide care. It is also free. What you can keep doing is part of the decision.
3. **Write down the day.** List what help is needed, hour by hour, including nights. Gaps you can't fill point to live-in care or a care home.
4. **Check the money both ways.** Use the rules above, then get written quotes. Our paying for care in London (/paying-for-care-london) page lists the funding routes.
5. **Check any provider with the CQC.** Care homes and home care agencies must both be registered. Read their inspection reports on the CQC website (https://www.cqc.org.uk/care-services), or note honestly if a provider has not been inspected yet.
6. **Ask your parent, and listen.** If they have capacity, it is their decision. If they don't, their past wishes still matter.

Questions families ask

Can we start with home care and move to a care home later?

The hospital says Mum should go into a care home. Do we have to agree?

Can the council make my parent move into a care home?

Does Attendance Allowance stop if Mum goes into a care home?

How we can help

JNP Sidona is a CQC-registered home care agency based on Lewisham High Street. We were registered in October 2023 and have not been inspected yet, so we don't have a rating. Jackie, our registered manager, will visit for a free home assessment, talk through what your parent needs, and be honest if a care home looks like the safer choice. If home care fits, you get a

written care plan and a quote. We provide visiting care in Lewisham, nearby south-east London and parts of central and east London, and live-in care for individuals and couples across London, including dementia care and respite. A live-in carer sleeps at night, so if your parent needs someone awake through the night, tell us at the assessment and we will say honestly whether we can cover it. We don't give benefits, funding or legal advice; for the means test, ask the council or call the Age UK Advice Line on 0800 678 1602. See what we offer (/what-we-offer), or check the areas we cover (/areas-we-serve).

Sources

1. NHS: Care homes (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/care-services-equipment-and-care-homes/care-homes/), checked 9 October 2026
2. NHS: Homecare (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/care-services-equipment-and-care-homes/homecare/), checked 9 October 2026
3. NHS: Paying for your own care (self-funding) (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/money-work-and-benefits/paying-for-your-own-care-self-funding/), checked 9 October 2026
4. GOV.UK: Social care charging for care and support 2026 to 2027, local authority circular (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-care-charging-for-local-authorities-2026-to-2027/social-care-charging-for-care-and-support-2026-to-2027-local-authority-circular), checked 9 October 2026
5. Age UK: Factsheet 38, Property and paying for residential care (August 2026) (https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/factsheets/fs38_property_and_paying_for_residential_care_fcs.pdf), checked 9 October 2026
6. Age UK: Factsheet 58, Paying for short-term and temporary care in a care home (October 2026) (https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/factsheets/fs58_paying_for_short-term_and_temporary_care_in_a_care_home_fcs.pdf), checked 9 October 2026
7. Lewisham Council: Paying for residential and nursing care (https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/socialcare/adult/paying-for-your-care-and-support/paying-for-residential-and-nursing-care), checked 9 October 2026
8. GOV.UK: Attendance Allowance (https://www.gov.uk/attendance-allowance), checked 9 October 2026
9. GOV.UK: Attendance Allowance eligibility (https://www.gov.uk/attendance-allowance/eligibility), checked 9 October 2026
10. NHS: NHS-funded nursing care (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/money-work-and-benefits/nhs-funded-nursing-care/), checked 9 October 2026

11. NHS: NHS continuing healthcare (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/money-work-and-benefits/nhs-continuing-healthcare/), checked 9 October 2026
12. GOV.UK: Disabled Facilities Grants, what you'll get (https://www.gov.uk/disabled-facilities-grants/what-youll-get), checked 9 October 2026
13. Alzheimer's Society: When is the right time to move someone into care? (https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/help-dementia-care/finding-care-home), checked 9 October 2026
14. Alzheimer's Society: Who makes the decision to move a person with dementia into a care home? (https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/help-dementia-care/care-homes-who-chooses), checked 9 October 2026
15. NHS: Getting a needs assessment (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/help-from-social-services-and-charities/getting-a-needs-assessment/), checked 9 October 2026
16. CQC: Find care services (https://www.cqc.org.uk/care-services), checked 9 October 2026
17. NHS: Carer's assessments (https://www.nhs.uk/social-care-and-support/support-and-benefits-for-carers/carer-assessments/), checked 9 October 2026
18. GOV.UK: Attendance Allowance, report a change in circumstances (https://www.gov.uk/attendance-allowance/report-change-in-circumstances), checked 9 October 2026
19. GOV.UK (DHSC): Adult social care finance report, England, 2025 to 2026 (published 22 October 2026) (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/adult-social-care-finance-report-england-2025-to-2026/adult-social-care-finance-report-england-2025-to-2026), checked 4 November 2026
20. Homecare Association: Research and reports (Minimum Price for Homecare 2026/27) (https://www.homecareassociation.org.uk/about-us/research-and-reports.html), checked 9 October 2026
21. GOV.UK (DHSC): Care and support statutory guidance (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance), checked 9 October 2026
22. GOV.UK (DHSC): Hospital discharge and community support guidance (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hospital-discharge-and-community-support-guidance/hospital-discharge-and-community-support-guidance), checked 9 October 2026
23. legislation.gov.uk: Mental Capacity Act 2005, section 4 (Best interests) (https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/9/section/4), checked 9 October 2026

About this guide

Written by the JNP Sidona team using the official sources listed above, which we checked on 9 October 2026. Rules, rates and thresholds change, usually each April, so always confirm the current position with the source or your council. This guide is general information, not medical, legal or financial advice. If you spot something out of

date, email info@jnpsidonasupportservices.co.uk (mailto:info@jnpsidonasupportservices.co.uk) and we will correct it.