

# Vital work with the elderly is taking off

**Our bishop's vision is to have Anna Chaplains in every part of our diocese. We found out what difference that could make**

AS Anne Powell started to lead the informal service in the care home, some residents were standing up and walking around, shouting out, or even asking for a cuddle. Several seemed confused about what was going on.

Then, as Anne started to lead them in the words of the Lord's Prayer, something amazing happened. Long-term memories kicked in, and many of them started faithfully reciting the words they'd learnt decades ago.

Something similar happened as they started to sing 'All things bright and beautiful'. Some of the residents at Westview House in Totland Bay might be struggling with dementia, but they could remember the words to a hymn they'd sung in their youth. It ended with a solo by an elderly man who used to be a choirboy.

This is the kind of ministry that Anne Powell offers regularly. As Anna Chaplain for West Wight, she leads informal services and extended Communion services in up to nine care homes in the area, and visits other elderly people at home. She was the first in what we hope will be a network of Anna Chaplains across our diocese.

Anne had visited Westview with three other volunteers, who helped residents to engage with what was happening and guided



**Anne Powell leads an informal service in Westview House in Totland Bay**

them through a service on the theme of 'flowers'. They used an Amazon Alexa to play songs and hymns.

**'I hope we can provide safety, dignity and some joy in their lives'**

"It's the third time we've visited and I think the residents are getting used to us now," said Anne. "The first time I went I set up a small table with a Bible, a lit candle and some flowers on. By the time I turned around, I found them scattered across the

room, so now I just take the hymn sheets!

"I think every time you make a connection with someone in that situation, it is special. I had one person who had had no spiritual input for two years say to me: 'I have such a special feeling inside me now', and it makes a huge difference when you get that kind of reaction.

"I enjoy everything that I do, and it's so rewarding when a service has gone down well. It doesn't need to be incredibly deep, and it's better not to talk for too long. You just need a little message for them to take away. It's a privilege to be able to do that.

"It was actually Covid that seemed to convince some of the local care homes that they might need some more spiritual input. We had a few introductory meetings, explained what we could do, and we've been welcomed with open arms.

"And when you visit people in their own homes, you have to let them set the agenda. They can talk about what's on their mind, which might be a bereavement, or an illness, or an anxiety – or something they want to celebrate or remember. One lady had lost her husband and brother within a month, and she needed someone to listen and support her.

"I do believe that I'm in the place that God has called me. Having the label as 'Anna Chaplain' does allow you to be slightly more direct about spiritual things than being a pastoral visitor from the local church. The one thing I think I'd love is some 'Anna Friends', people who feel called to work alongside me for a small number of hours each week."

Anne was commissioned as Anna Chaplain by her vicar, the Rev Leisa Potter, last October in her home church – All Saints, Freshwater. She works across the West Wight area, with a particular focus on the Freshwater and Totland Bay area. Having worked in the hospitality industry, and then spent 12 years volunteering with the chaplaincy team at St Mary's Hospital, Newport, she felt called to the role.

Like other Anna Chaplains around the UK, she offers spiritual input and ministry to elderly people in the community, in care homes and in their own homes. Some older people are referred by health professionals.

The role had been pioneered by former TV presenter Debbie Thrower, in the Alton area of



**Top: Anne Powell sings along with Beryl, one of the Westview residents; middle: Anne with resident Betty and her daughter Joyce; bottom: volunteer Cathy encourages residents to join in**