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How do you choose the best residence for an elderly relative, asks **Deborah Dooley**

Happy in her home

Some television advertisements would have us believe that elderly people live out their final years surrounded by an extended family where they are valued loved and cherished to the last.

Sadly, although this may be the case for some, many others while away the autumn of their lives in what is euphemistically referred to as a care home.

Recent media horror stories have shown that some "care" homes can be places of terror and torment for vulnerable old people, staffed and run by unscrupulous individuals. Thankfully, this is not the norm — but

even if a residential home appears clean and comfortable, and the staff kind and capable, how can you tell if this is a place in which your elderly parent or relative — or you — will be happy?

Finding and choosing a retirement home can be exhausting and depressing. Research shows that because of this, people almost always choose one of the first three they visit.

The Care Standards Act, in place since last July, aims to improve the minimum standard of care on offer, but one external accreditation scheme already in place is the RDB star rating (Residential and Domiciliary Care Benchmarking Ltd).



Mollie Wilkinson, 85, was unhappy at her care home, but changed to a better one with the help of RDB

The RDB scheme came into being in 1997, when, in response to a government initiative to keep elderly people in their homes where possible, the local authority in Brighton needed to close 130 of 200 homes. Sue Brand, a former nurse and then chairman of the Brighton and Hove National Care Homes Association, suggested a hotel-style star system to make sure that the best homes were retained. RDB is a voluntary scheme and homes pay for their accreditation.

There are about 20,000 homes for the elderly in the UK, some privately owned, some run by local authorities and some by voluntary agencies. All are in-

spected, approved and registered by local authorities, but Brand says that this system simply isn't working. "The fact that a home is local authority-approved means that it has been inspected to minimum standards — but it is clear that this phrase may mean different things to different people."

Pauline Thompson, of Age Concern, says: "We always advise people not to wait until they urgently need residential care to start looking, because it is when you are feeling frail and tired that you are likely to make the wrong choice."

"Obvious things to look out for are unpleasant smells, and practi-

calities such as choice in areas of food and when you get up and go to bed. Can you take pets in and your own furniture, and what is the attitude of the staff? Do ask if you can visit — for a day or even a week — and if they say that is not possible, give that one a miss.

"Most importantly, be clear on exactly what is included in the price, how much notice either party needs to give, and if you do choose that home, insist on a contract. If you are self-funding, find out how much the local authority is paying for a place — homes will try to charge privately funded residents more."

Blackpool was the first authority to adopt the star rating

system, followed by Brighton and Hove and Wigan. Mollie Wilkinson, 85, from Lancashire, has good reason to be grateful for it. She is a retired head teacher and had become increasingly unhappy with the understaffed home in which she was living and with the staff's habit of smoking while sitting with residents.

"I have osteoarthritis and I need help with dressing and so forth. But I always had to wait for at least half an hour for someone to come and give me a hand," she says.

Happily, a friend spotted an article about Springhill House nursing and residential care home in Accrington, Lancashire, one of only two homes to have received five stars from the RDB. Within three months, Mollie had moved there. The difference, she says, could not be greater.

"Walking in here is like walking into a first-class hotel — and the food is wonderful. And the attitude of the staff is gentle, patient and understanding. In the five months I've been here, I've never heard anyone say 'you will have to wait!'"



www.ageconcern.org.uk

Age Concern produces fact sheets on finding residential and nursing home accommodation (No 29) and local authority charging procedures (No 10). These are available via its helpline on 0800 009966