

Supporting a person with washing and dressing

Factsheet 504LP
January 2021



As a person's dementia progresses, they will need more help with everyday activities such as washing, bathing and dressing. For most adults, these are personal and private activities, so it can be hard for everyone to adjust to this change. You can support a person with dementia to wash and dress in a way that respects their preferences and their dignity.

This factsheet is written for carers. It offers practical tips to help with washing, bathing, dressing and personal grooming.

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Supporting a person with washing and dressing

How dementia affects washing and dressing

The way a person dresses and presents themselves can be an important part of their identity. Getting ready each day is a very personal and private activity – and one where a person may be used to privacy, and making their own decisions. As dementia progresses, they will need more help with everyday activities including washing, bathing, dressing and personal grooming.

The person may also need you to make choices on their behalf, such as what to wear, or when to wash their hair. This is because memory loss can affect a person's ability to remember how to do tasks, as well as whether to do them. They may struggle to carry out a sequence of activities in the correct order, such as the steps required to take a shower. Dementia can affect a person's ability to orientate themselves in time and physical place. They may also have difficulty with perception and understanding the objects around them. This can make washing and dressing confusing or distressing – for example, if they do not understand why they need to remove their clothes, or how to remove them.

Personal care activities, including washing and bathing, can be a source of anxiety for people with dementia and their carers. Needing help with something so personal can be difficult to accept, and the person you care for may feel self-conscious or embarrassed. It is important to respect their privacy as far as you can.

Supporting a person with dementia to wash, bathe and dress can be emotionally and physically challenging. Even if you've been close to the person for many years, looking after a person's personal care can be a big step in your caring role. It is common to need extra emotional and practical support at this stage.

You could consider arranging a professional carer to take over this side of their care. You can arrange a needs assessment through your local authority (council) to see what support can be put in place. See booklet 600, **Caring for a person with dementia: A practical guide** for more information.

Focusing on the person

Many people with dementia have a professional carer come into their home to help them with washing and dressing. This should be thoughtfully planned to make sure the person with dementia is comfortable and can express themselves. For example, the person may prefer their carer to be the same gender as them, or to have experience working with people of the same cultural or religious background, or the same sexual orientation.

As a carer, you should support them to express themselves. Help them to make their own choices for as long as they can and, if they do need help, offer it tactfully and sensitively. For example, if they like to wear a sari or turban, you will need to know how to put these on. Understanding which outfits the person feels are appropriate for activities such as prayers or worship should help them to express their faith more comfortably. If the person with dementia is transgender, they may prefer someone who understands identity issues in dementia care.

A person with dementia should be supported to continue with their personal care routine for as long as possible. This can be reassuring and can help to maintain their skills and independence. Changing their routine, (for example, by asking them to shower when they are used to bathing) can be confusing and uncomfortable.

Allowing enough time

When you're helping someone with dementia to wash, bathe, dress, or get ready, allow plenty of time so that neither of you feels rushed. They may take longer to process information than they used to, and this may affect their ability to make choices. They may also find physical activities more difficult. If you can make these an enjoyable activity, and are relaxed yourself, the person you care for will feel more relaxed and confident.

Choose the time of day that works best for the person – try to match what has always been their preferred routine, or find the time of day where they are most relaxed. If the person resists your efforts to help and you are unable to find out why, try leaving them for a while. Sometimes it can be easier if you try again a little later.

Making washing and dressing a positive experience

Washing, bathing and dressing, although personal and private, can be a positive experience for a person who needs support. Focus on what they can still do, rather than what they can't. This will keep up their confidence, as well as skills.

You may have to simplify some choices so that they can make decisions, but try to support them to choose, rather than choosing for them. For example, instead of deciding what the person will wear, ask them to choose between two tops that you've picked out. You may need to communicate in a different way than you're used to – for example by showing them the two tops and asking them to point to the one they like, rather than relying on only spoken communication. Try to keep choices simple, so the person does not feel overwhelmed. You may find that different approaches work depending on the person's mood or how clearly they can think, which may change throughout the day.

Making light of any mistakes or awkwardness may help you both to cope better with the situation. If the person is feeling frustrated or embarrassed, think about what might make it a more pleasant and relaxed experience. For example, nice-smelling bubble bath or relaxing music can make washing feel like a luxury, rather than a chore. Be encouraging about the activity – for instance talking about how nice an item of clothing looks, or how warm the bath water feels. For tips on how to help a person wash see page 7. For tips on how to help them with dressing see page 14.

Being organised can help reduce stress. Consider the following:

- Where does the person prefer to get undressed?
- When do they like to get changed, for example before breakfast or after?
- Do they prefer a bath or a shower?
- What toiletries are they used to?
- What dental care do they need? What is their preferred style of dress and how do they wear their hair and make-up? Are they usually clean-shaven?
- Get everything you need ready to hand before you start (including the clothes they will change into after washing).

Creating the right environment

Creating a relaxed atmosphere and a safe environment will make the person feel more comfortable. You can do this by giving the person as much privacy as you can. The room should be warm before the person undresses. It should also be warm after the person has washed, before they get dressed. Making sure the room is well lit and clutter free will help the person with dementia find what they need. To create a comfortable environment, try to:

- make sure another person will not walk in while they are washing or getting dressed
- close blinds or curtains for privacy
- cover mirrors before the person enters the bathroom. Some people with dementia find mirrors confusing.

Supporting the person with washing and bathing

By supporting a person with washing and bathing, you can help maintain their confidence, independence and sense of wellbeing. Instead of doing things for them, try to be guided by their pace and preferences. This can make washing and bathing easier for both of you. For example, consider installing taps that are easy to use and clearly marked 'hot' and 'cold'. If the person with dementia can more easily find and use taps for themselves, they may be able to continue with tasks without too much help from you.

Communicating clearly and calmly is essential to supporting the person. Talk through what you are doing at each step, and give the person time to understand each task. This also gives them a chance to say no to anything they are not comfortable with. Be encouraging, and don't dwell on things that did not go well.

Some people may be unsafe or become anxious if they are left on their own. Make sure you will not be disturbed or distracted, and can stay with them if you need to.

How to help the person with washing, bathing and showering: tips for carers

These tips can help you to make washing, bathing and showering safer and easier.

- Don't forget your own safety. If you help the person get into the bath, make sure you don't strain your back. If this is becoming a problem, talk to an occupational therapist about equipment that can help you.
- Check the water temperature is not too hot or too cold. You can buy a heat sensor or special plug that changes colour if the bath water is too hot, which can prevent scalding. These plugs can also empty the bath if the water level gets too high.
- The person may feel reassured if they can feel the water with their hands before getting into the bath or stepping into the shower.

- Deep bath water can make some people feel worried. You can reassure them by making sure the bath water is shallow, or by setting up a bath seat for them to use.
- Some people find the rush of water from an overhead shower frightening or disorientating. A hand-held shower attachment may work better and will make it easier to clean all over.
- Make items such as towels and dressing gowns easy to see by choosing colours that contrast – a green towel will be easier to see than a white one if the walls are white.
- You may need to remove locks from the bathroom door, or replace them with locks that can be opened from the outside. Someone with dementia may lock themselves in and be unable to get out.
- Lock away cleaning products, medications, nail scissors and razors. The person may not be able to recognise that these are potentially harmful.
- Before washing, discuss and put out what the person will wear after they wash, either nightwear or their outfit for the day. This means they can change more quickly, so they spend less time in a damp towel.
- Visual prompts can also be helpful. For example, you could hand the person the soap at the point when they would normally wash, put the toothpaste onto the toothbrush for them or hold out a towel when it's time for them to dry themselves.
- If they seem shy, embarrassed or reluctant, think about their personal space and privacy. Try uncovering only the part of their body that you are washing. A towel or robe can be useful for this.
- Try to use toiletries that the person is used to and avoid any that are unnecessary.

Aids and equipment

When washing or bathing becomes difficult, the following products and equipment can help:

- grab rails, to help with getting in and out of the bath
- handrails, which can be attached to the wall near the shower, washbasin or toilet
- non-slip mats for the bath or shower
- seats to go in the bath or shower, if the person would prefer to sit or is unsteady on their feet
- bath boards and powered bath seats that can help a person get in and out of the bath.

The right equipment can help the person be more independent, and to be more relaxed when they are washing, showering or bathing. An occupational therapist can give you more information about available products. You can contact them through your local social services, the GP or health professional. See booklet 819, **Making your home dementia friendly** and 1502, **Keeping safe at home** for more ideas.

Larger changes, such as installing a walk-in shower or wet room, might mean the person can stay independent for longer. Involve the person with dementia as much as possible in decisions about any changes that need to be made to the bathroom.

For more information see factsheets 429, **Using equipment and making adaptations at home**, and 437, **Using technology to help with everyday life**.

Skincare and nails

Looking after a person's skin and nails is an important part of their personal hygiene. As a person gets older their skin becomes thinner and drier. Dry irritated skin may lead to discomfort in someone with dementia. While the person is undressed, check for any changes to the skin, redness or sore areas. Mention anything you're concerned about to the GP or another health professional. After showering or bathing:

- make sure the person is thoroughly dried, especially in the skin folds. This will prevent the skin from becoming chafed
- use the towel to pat skin dry, rather than rubbing
- take the opportunity to apply moisturiser to the person's skin.

Keep toenails and fingernails clean and tidy. Trimming nails after a bath or shower can be easier, as nails are softer. If this isn't possible, soak the fingers or toes in lukewarm water for a few minutes, before trimming. This is also an opportunity to routinely check for marks or spots which might indicate a foot problem, such as calluses.

Handwashing and dental care

A person with dementia may not wash their hands, or brush their teeth as often as they should. Try to work out which is the most likely reason for this. For example, if they forget, a written reminder above the bathroom or kitchen sink might prompt them. If they are struggling with the task, talk them through handwashing or toothbrushing one step at a time.

Make handwashing easy and pleasurable, for instance by asking the person to choose their favourite soap type and scent. If they prefer a bar of soap, use one that is a different colour to the sink so they can easily see it. It can be a good idea to use a moisturising hand cream after handwashing to keep their skin in good condition.

A person with dementia may need prompting or reminding to continue brushing their teeth as part of their daily routine. Towards the later stages, you may need to help them with this task, or carry it out for them. Teeth or dentures need to be cleaned twice a day to maintain oral health. For more information see factsheet 448, **Dental care and oral health**.

Washing, drying and styling hair

While many people enjoy the feeling of having their hair washed, and feel better when it is done, others don't enjoy it at all. Some people with dementia can find it distressing and confusing. If possible, try to wash the person's hair at least once a week. The following tips may be helpful:

- When you're washing the person's hair, a hand-held shower attachment or large plastic jug may work best.
- Use a shampoo that will not cause stinging if it gets into the person's eyes. Use a hair wash shield to prevent water running onto the person's face. Alternative options include a 'no rinse' shampoo that can clean the hair without using water, or dry shampoos.
- Be mindful of the person's post-washing routine. Respect their preference for certain haircare products (for example a particular brand, or scent of conditioner or hairspray). They may also cover their hair or wear a turban. If so, make sure you know how they like to wear these.
- Be aware that the person may begin to find hairdryers distressing due to the noise so close to their ears and the sensation of the warm air blowing. Ask them if they prefer their hair to be towel dried instead.
- If the person prefers to have their hair washed by a hairdresser, either arrange regular trips to the salon or find a hairdresser who will come to the house. This may be a time when you can have your hair cut too.

Hair removal

In the early stages of dementia, a person may need to be reminded to shave. As their dementia progresses, it is likely they will need more help. If the person uses a straight edge or double edge razor, they are likely to need help much earlier than if they use a cartridge-style razor. If they begin to cut themselves with any type of razor you will need to supervise, or shave for them. Some razor blade manufacturers now sell razors specifically for carers to use on another person, which include a built-in safety comb and specially designed handle.

If a person uses an electric shaver then they will be able to shave independently for a longer time. If they use tweezers to remove hair, an electric trimmer can remove hair much more easily.

The person should continue using wax, hair removal creams and devices such as epilators for as long as they can safely do so, although they may need support. If using hot wax becomes too unsafe, cold wax strips can be used instead. If the person usually goes to a salon for hair removal, then this should continue as long as they feel comfortable and are safe to do so.

Using the toilet

Try to make sure that the person cleans themselves properly after using the toilet, or help them to do so, if appropriate. You should:

- be mindful that the person may prefer to use a bidet rather than toilet paper, or uses a preferred hand to clean themselves
- wipe from front to back (which helps to prevent infection), rather than back to front
- use moist toilet tissues, as they clean better than dry toilet paper. They are available from most chemists and supermarkets, and can be useful to keep around in case the person has an accident
- remind the person to wash their hands after they have used the toilet.

Incontinence is not an inevitable consequence of dementia, however if it happens, it can be a sensitive issue for both of you. If the person has an accident, they may feel ashamed. They may refuse to admit that it has happened, or to wash afterwards. Try to be reassuring. A matter-of-fact approach, or gentle humour can work well.

Talk positively and be sensitive towards the person when bathing them or helping to clean up after an accident. Reassure them that, despite it being a very personal activity, you are happy to help. For more information see factsheet 502, **Continence and using the toilet**.

Dressing

Helping someone with dementia choose what to wear is important. You will be helping them to make their own choices, make sure they are clean and comfortable, and to express their own identity and personal style. Wherever possible, ask the person what they would like to put on. Someone with dementia can still choose what they would like to wear. Too many options can be confusing, so you could offer them the choice of only two items of clothing at a time.

Speak to the person about what clothes might be most suitable for what they are doing later, and what the weather is like. Is what they plan to wear suitable? If not, gently suggest alternatives. Respect the person's choice of what to wear. As long as it doesn't harm them, you should accept the person dressing in an unusual way, or wearing clothing that may be viewed as out of place. If the person is determined to wear clothing that does not 'match' for example, respect their choice.

People with dementia may have difficulties dressing. As well as making choices, physically putting on clothing can be more difficult, especially if they have any mobility issues. It may help to look for clothes that are easy to put on and take off. This may be clothes with larger neck and arm openings, front fastenings, Velcro fastenings, magnetic buttons or poppers rather than buttons or no fastenings – or to make some adaptations to the clothes they already have.

You could use photographs of outfits to give the person a prompt of what goes with what, or make choices about what they wear, which will help them to feel like themselves. What a person with dementia wears may help them understand where they are and what they are doing. For example, if they are dressed formally they may think they need to go to work. If they are dressed in clothing they usually relax in, this will remind them that they are not at work. Similarly, wearing nightwear may make the person think that it is time for bed. It is good to change into day-wear even if they are not going out or having visitors, to maintain a sense of routine.

If someone is not enjoying wearing something it may cause them distress or discomfort. This could be because it is physically uncomfortable, they are sensitive to certain textures, they don't like it, or it is new and seems unfamiliar.

Helping a person dress and feel comfortable: tips for carers

Helping the person feel comfortable while getting dressed, and in the clothes they wear, is important. Remember that the person may no longer be able to tell you if they are too hot or cold, or if clothing doesn't fit correctly, so watch for signs of discomfort.

Think about the comfort of their clothing, and how easy it is to put on and take off. For example, boxer shorts are usually easier to put on than Y-fronts. Wearing an ill-fitting bra may be uncomfortable, and going without a bra or wearing one that gives too little support can cause back pain. If the person has lost or put on weight, they may need a different size. Many shops offer a bra fitting service, which you can arrange in advance. The person may have a preference for underwired or non-wired bras. Sleep bras also offer light support at night or in the evenings, and front fastening bras can be easier to put on.

While comfortable, slippers shouldn't be worn for more than a few hours, as they may not support the person's feet enough. Slippers also encourage shuffling, which doesn't allow the leg muscles and joints to work correctly.

When helping a person with dementia choose comfortable clothing, you should:

- make sure that items are not inside out, and that buttons, zips and fasteners are done up
- try well-fitting slip-on shoes, or shoes with Velcro fastenings, or replace regular shoelaces with elastic ones. Shoes with laces may be difficult for someone with dementia to manage
- try buckle-free belts, which fasten with Velcro, and clip-on ties, which are safer and easier to use
- try several thin layers of clothing, particularly in cold weather, rather than one thick layer, as they can then remove a layer if it gets too warm
- avoid self-supporting stockings, as they can cause circulation problems
- try specially designed trousers, with a drop-down front, to make using the toilet easier for men.

There are practical things you can do to make getting dressed a more positive experience for a person with dementia. For example, if the person seems shy, reluctant or embarrassed, you could turn around and let the person put on their own clothes as much as they are able to, turning back to help them. Helping the person to dress may mean supporting them to make choices, or allowing them to dress themselves as much as they are able to, at their own pace. Here are some tips to help a person feel more comfortable while dressing:

- Provide a chair with arms if the person has poor balance, so they can sit if they need to.
- Ask the person if they would like to go to the toilet before getting dressed.
- If the person is able to dress themselves, place labels on drawers where particular items of clothing are kept, or store whole outfits together. This will help them to find outfits. If using labels, a combination of pictures and words may be clearer than words alone and easier to understand.

- If the person has lots of clothes, put the things they wear most often somewhere easy to reach. This will make it simpler for them to choose.
- Lay out clothes on a non-patterned background in the order the person will put them on (starting with underwear and ending with a cardigan or jumper, for example). If they need prompting, remind them which item comes next or hand them the one that they need.
- If the person is confused, give instructions in very small steps, such as, 'Now put your arm through the sleeve'. It may help to use gestures to demonstrate these instructions.
- If mistakes are made – for example, by putting something on the wrong way round – be tactful. Try to find a way for you both to laugh about it.
- Compliment them on the way they look and encourage them to take pride in their appearance.
- The person may like to wear accessories such as jewellery or a watch. These can have sentimental value and the person should be supported to wear these.
- If the person's clothing choices are causing a problem (such as a long dress or coat that may cause someone to trip and fall), you may want to consider putting away these items so that the person is not tempted to wear them. For more information see factsheet 525, **Changes in behaviour**.

Shopping for clothes together: tips for carers

If you're buying clothes for the person with dementia, try to take them with you, so that they can choose the style and colours they prefer. If shopping and trying on is difficult, you can order online or from catalogues, so the person can try on the clothes they like at home. Here are some tips for shopping together.

- Shop in places that are familiar to the person and which match their style and preferences.
- If shop staff know the person, they should be able to help make the experience more enjoyable.
- Remember that large, busy shops with lots of choice may feel overwhelming.
- Check the person's size before buying. They may have lost or gained weight without realising.
- Buy from retailers who accept returns. The person can then choose the clothes they like and try them on at home. Trying on clothes in an unfamiliar changing room can be disorientating and difficult.
- If the person with dementia needs help trying on clothes, ask for an accessible changing room, which will have enough space for two people.
- Look for clothes that are machine washable and need little ironing, as this will save time. Easy-fasten clothes can also be helpful, see 'Helping a person dress and feel comfortable: tips for carers' on page 14.
- The person with dementia may not recognise that new clothes belong to them. If they have no memory of buying them, they may not want to wear them. It may be better to buy more of the clothes that the person likes and is familiar with, rather than something different.

Personal grooming

If the person with dementia usually styles their hair, wears make-up, aftershave or perfume and wants to continue doing so, they may need help putting them on or with styling.

It is important to be aware of the likes and preferences of the person with dementia, and not to make assumptions about how they would like to look or what others think they should wear. Outfits, accessories, or make-up that they choose may have religious, cultural or sentimental importance to the person and be an important part of their identity.

As long as they are not at risk of harm, it is important that you allow a person with dementia to express their identity through choices about their appearance. Photographs are a good way of remembering how the person likes to wear their hair, make-up, clothes or accessories. You could also photograph complete outfits to give the person a prompt of what goes with what.

Personal grooming: tips for carers

Some people find personal grooming such as manicures or pedicures, massage, or hair appointments very relaxing and may enjoy this as a social and pleasurable activity. The person might be used to going to the beauty salon, hairdresser or barber and may want to continue to do this. Some people may prefer to have a haircut or treatments at home. As a carer, you might find the following tips helpful:

- After washing, the person may have a favourite way of drying and styling their hair, which you or a hairdresser or barber can help with. It might be as simple as brushing it through once their hair has dried.
- Support the person to continue using their preferred deodorant. If they have difficulty using their usual deodorant try finding the same scent in a different form – for example using a smaller size which may be easier to hold, or using a roll-on instead of a spray.

- If the person is having trouble applying make-up, suggest ways that you could help them or ways that they could simplify things. For example, they could use less make-up or use the same product for different purposes, such as using an eyebrow pencil as eyeliner too. Extra wide pencils and lipsticks can also be easier to hold.
- If the person doesn't recognise themselves in the mirror or finds reflections confusing, consider covering the mirror.
- If the person has always worn contact lenses, they may be able to continue doing so as long as they are able to maintain good hygiene. It is important to regularly check this, to make sure they do not damage their eyes.
- If the person wears glasses, make sure these are cleaned every day.

When a person doesn't want to change their clothes or wash

If the person with dementia doesn't want to change their clothes or wash, it can be very frustrating. Try to remain calm and find a way around it. Think about what the person's routine was like before they had dementia, and encourage them to maintain that level of cleanliness.

Sometimes people with dementia are reluctant to undress, even when they go to bed, or will refuse to change their clothes. It's important to make sure the person changes their underwear every day and the rest of their clothes regularly, and to find ways to do this without upsetting them. Here are a few ways you could help someone:

- Remove dirty clothing and put clean clothing in its place when the person is in the bath or shower, or when they go to bed. If the person always wants to wear the same clothes, it can be helpful to have a number of the same items.
- Encourage them to change for certain occasions, for example because someone is coming to visit, or they are due to go to a formal group event.
- Tell them how much you'd love to see them wearing something new.
- If they want to wear the same outfit, you could buy multiples of the same items.

The person you are caring for may not choose to wash as often as you would wash, and you should respect their choices. However, you will need to make sure that they are washing enough to prevent ill health. To prevent infection, their bottom and genitals should be washed every day. Their face should be washed every day to keep the skin clear. If the person you care for is reluctant to wash you could:

- try to work out why the person is refusing to wash. For example, do they think they have already had a bath or shower, or have they forgotten the steps needed to wash themselves?
- check if there may be physical problems which are making washing difficult. For more information on identifying difficulties and helping the person, see factsheet 525, **Changes in behaviour**
- try a sponge bath at least twice a week, if they refuse a bath or shower. You can wash them with a wet sponge or cloth, but without them getting into a bath or under a running shower
- think about the timing of your request, or the way you phrase it. A person may refuse to wash when you suggest they should, but may decide to wash themselves later in the day – try to be flexible
- persuade the person to wash by giving them a reason – such as if they are going out or expecting visitors
- speak with the GP about any health concerns you have about the person's hygiene
- consider arranging external carers to carry out personal care. A needs assessment with social services is a good way to see what care and support might be available.

If the person becomes aggressive when you suggest washing, change the subject or distract them and try again later. See factsheet 509, **Aggressive behaviour** for more information.

Other useful organisations

Alzheimer's Society online shop

0300 124 0900 (8am–8pm Monday–Saturday, 9am–6pm Sunday)
trading@alzheimers.org.uk
alzheimers.org.uk/shop

Alzheimer's Society's online shop offers a wide range of products to help with everyday life for people with dementia and their carers.

AlzProducts

024 7642 2224
www.alzproducts.co.uk/contact-us (contact form)
www.alzproducts.co.uk

AlzProducts is a shop that stocks specialist dementia aids and equipment.

Disabled Living Foundation

0300 999 0004 (helpline, 10am –5pm Monday–Friday)
info@dlf.org.uk
www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk

The Disabled Living Foundation provides information about finding simple solutions, such as mobility aids. Their website includes a web tool offering advice on health, home and daily activities (asksara.livingmadeeasy.org.uk).

NRS Healthcare

0345 121 8111 (8.30am–5pm Monday–Friday)
productadvice@nrs-uk.co.uk
www.nrshealthcare.co.uk

NRS Healthcare provides products and services designed to support independent living.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

020 3 141 4600

hello@rcot.co.uk

www.rcot.co.uk

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists is the professional, educational and trade union body for occupational therapists. It provides details of independent occupational therapists in your local area.

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Our information is based on evidence and need, and is regularly updated using quality-controlled processes. It is reviewed by experts in health and social care and people affected by dementia.

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This factsheet has also been reviewed by people affected by dementia.

To give feedback on this factsheet, or for a list of sources, please contact publications@alzheimers.org.uk

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For support and advice, call us on 0333 150 3456 or visit alzheimers.org.uk



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Registered charity number 296645.

