



**Wellbeing for Life  
Dementia Friendly  
Environment**



## Learning Outcomes

- To understand why environment is so important for a person with dementia.
- To know what a good dementia friendly environment is.
- To be aware of the different steps to creating a dementia friendly environment.
- To recognise how to make the environment personal and relevant for the person.
- To appreciate the need to create an environment that works for everyone.



## Why does Environment Matter?

It is commonly understood that well-designed environments which are accessible, with good natural light and good insulation to improve warmth and reduce noise, promote health and wellbeing for everyone.

When thinking about supporting a person with dementia, the design of the environment (whether it's their home, place of work or somewhere they go to learn or access recreation) becomes even more important.

The person's environment is one of the key factors in how well the person will live with their dementia (by promoting their independence and safety), and can help to mitigate against some of the disempowering symptoms of dementia (like disorientation and confusion).

**For more information, please see our Modules on:**

- 'Living well with dementia' in Theme 5
- The Dementia Pathway, 'Promoting Independence and Safety' in Theme 4
- Good Support, 'Signs and Symptoms' in Theme 5
- The Dementia Pathway and 'Changed Behaviour' in Theme 5 The Dementia Pathway



## Why does Environment Matter?

An environment planned, discussed and designed with the person in mind, that is enabling and adaptable to their changing needs, will give the person the best chance of living well with their dementia, and support staff in providing the very best care and support possible.

*“Age-related changes and impairments can make it more difficult to understand and navigate the built environment. These can be sensory, mobility or cognitive impairments, and sometimes a combination, which can affect functioning, behaviour, independence, and ultimately, quality of life. Understanding such impairments is the first step towards creating living environments which support the needs of older people and those with dementia, keeping them safe from dangers such as falls, which can have a devastating effect on an older person; allowing the freedom and confidence to use their abilities to the fullest extent, in all things from the mundane to the creative; aiding memory in day-to-day living; and reinforcing personal identity.”*

**- Dementia Services Development Centre (DSDC), Stirling University**

<http://dementia.stir.ac.uk/design>



## Why does Environment Matter?

### A place called home

People with dementia **can** thrive in many different types of 'home', including their own home or family home, specialist housing or residential service, but when we think about where people with dementia **want** to live, the evidence is clear:

*“85% of people would choose to live at home for as long as possible if diagnosed with dementia”*

**Alzheimer’s Society with YouGov (June 2014) as part of the ‘Fix Dementia Care – Homecare’ Report**

[https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/download/downloads/id/3234/fix\\_dementia\\_care\\_homecare\\_report.pdf](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/download/downloads/id/3234/fix_dementia_care_homecare_report.pdf)



## Why does Environment Matter?

Part of the reason for this is the natural comfort we feel with our own home environment, the way this environment is often intensely personalised, and the association with safety that our own home has.

However the 'home', wherever this is for the person, can become more alien as the person develops dementia, and adaptations or additional features are often needed to help the person feel that comfort and safety again.

If the person needs to move to a different 'home', being aware of how to optimise that environment for the person and make it as personalised as possible will be a key factor in how well the person settles and adapts to their new environment.



**85% of people** would  
**choose to live at**  
**home** for as long as possible  
if diagnosed with dementia.



## What does a Dementia Friendly Environment Look Like?

One of the myths about dementia friendly environments is that they are all about signage and red toilet seats! Whilst these elements have a role to play, there is a lot more to dementia friendly environments than just these features.

Of course every environment will be different depending on the function of the building, but some general elements to be mindful of when creating a dementia friendly environment are:

- The layout of the environment
- Visuals, pictures and signage
- Fixtures and fittings
- Lighting and Sound
- Colours and tones
- Risk management and security
- Appropriate use of technology
- Design of outdoor spaces

All of these can be adapted to ensure that homes, workplaces, learning environments and recreation venues are as dementia friendly as possible.



## What does a Dementia Friendly Environment Look Like?

### First Considerations

Making environmental changes can seem daunting. Taking a step-by-step approach is often the best way to break the process up and ensure no elements are missed.

To begin with you should:

- Enhance your own knowledge – look at the expert resources available from the world-leading dementia design experts - Dementia Services Development Centre (DSDC), Stirling University <http://dementia.stir.ac.uk/design>
- Involve the person, their family and friends as well as your colleagues and visiting health professionals – you are aiming for a dementia friendly, person centered environment and achieving this depends on bringing together everyone's thoughts and expertise. It is important we support the person to have a life which makes sense to them. For more information, please see our Module on 'Person Centred Care and Support' in Theme 2 Person Centred Approaches.





## What does a Dementia Friendly Environment Look Like?

- All changes should promote the person's independence, supporting them to move about freely and safely. For more information, please see our Module on 'Promoting Independence and Safety' in Theme 4 Good Support.
- The environment needs to be meaningful and recognisable for the person; consider their life story as you plan your changes. For more information, please see our Module on 'Life Story' in Theme 2 Person Centred Approaches.

Creating a dementia friendly environment can be simple and easy to do - there is no need for builders and costly structural changes to the building.

As you work through the following step-by-step approach bear in mind that each element is not mandatory. Some steps may not be relevant to the environment you are adapting, and others may be beyond your control. Do not let barriers that you cannot change put you off changing what is within your control.

## Step 1: The Layout of the Environment



*A good example of furniture which contrasts against the walls – shows clarity of furniture to help confirm the function of the room*

- Allow people to see where they are in the environment and have a clear view of rooms and other people.
- Check the room's purpose clearly reflects what it is meant to be.
- Leave in clear sight everyday objects and try to keep those items in the same place.
- There should be an unobstructed view of the outside to provide orientation as well as promoting conversation.

## Step 2: Visuals, Pictures and Signage

- Use signs that are clear and easily recognisable, at a height that the person can see and in primary colours. Good practice with signage is to have both an image and word(s) on a sign.
- Signage is particularly important in kitchens and bedrooms, that often have multiple cupboards and drawers. Good signage for bathrooms/toilets are can help a person to maintain their continence for longer.
- Remember that signage is not just about orientating a person. Simple instruction guides as signs on walls or cupboards can be helpful (like a step-by-step guide (or pictorial sequence) on how to make a cup of tea that is placed near the kettle).



Top: *Example of Good signage and tone contrast.* Bottom: *Examples of signage*





## Step 3: Fixtures and Fittings

- Ensure furniture, fixtures and fittings in a room give a strong clue to the purpose of room.
- Use objects or pictures rather than colours to define areas.
- Be aware of reflective surfaces – windows, mirrors, glass doors and the surfaces of kitchen appliances – as the person may no longer recognise themselves and believe a stranger is in the room with them. It may be necessary to remove or cover these surfaces (if safe to do so).
- Keep flooring plain and consistent from room to room. Mats or rugs can look like a hole to a person with dementia and, as a result, they may not want to step on them.
- Avoid bold and distinctive patterns which may be perceived as a change in level or as actual objects - for example a flowery table cloth that the person believes is actual flowers, or a striped carpet that may be perceived as moving.



## Step 3: Fixtures and Fittings

- Grab rails and ramps aid mobility, maintain independence and minimise the risks of falls. Use handrails and grab rails in a colour which contrasts with the background to make them easier for the person to locate and to use.
- Walk-in showers maintain independence. Consider the colour of tiles and fixtures, making make sure the difference between the floor and wall is clearly defined.
- Having furniture in colours which contrasts with walls and flooring helps people with dementia to recognise where they are and to find their way around.
- Use open-fronted chests of drawers and cupboards to see at a glance what is in them, or replace drawer and door fronts with clear plastic (or use signage if modification isn't possible).
- Meaningful objects of reference can help people to locate particular rooms and items more easily. For example, a sponge or facecloth on the bathroom door acts as a prompt as to the room's purpose.

## Step 3: Fixtures and Fittings



*Dementia Clock: An example of one of many clocks available in the market.*

- Avoid purchasing new (overly technical) equipment – kettles, microwaves or TVs which may be too complicated for the person to use can cause anxiety and marginalise their current abilities.
- Consider installing a specialist dementia clock if the person is struggling to orientate themselves to the day/time. Using items like picture boards illustrate what is happening each day, which staff are on shift and what is on the menu.



## Step 4: Lighting

- Try to ensure a sufficient and consistent level of light throughout. People with dementia are much more sensitive to their environment and appropriate and sensible lighting can aid independence.
- Use as much natural lighting as possible to help the person to be awake during the day and to sleep at night.
- Artificial lighting can be varied in intensity to reflect natural light patterns which helps people to maintain good sleeping patterns.
- Install glare-free lighting - glare can distort visual perception and make it difficult for an object to be recognised.
- Consider the positioning of lighting and possible shadows that may be created. Shadows to someone with dementia may seem like a hole in the floor and they may try to avoid it.

## Step 4: Lighting

- Reduce glare and reflection from surfaces, windows and mirrors; also think about sunlight and whether some surfaces need to be covered.
- At night, you may need blackout curtains or a blind to remove unwanted street lighting from the person's room.
- The person may need a nightlight or some subtle low-level lighting at night to show them the way to the toilet.
- People's preferences and needs for lighting differ. It is important that homes are designed or adapted to be flexible in terms of lighting provision, and that people are regularly consulted to identify any changes in their individual preferences and needs.



Nightlight – *an example of a motion sensor nightlight available on the market*





## Step 5: Sound

- Think about how rooms sound. For example is there an echo? This may distort how the person hears themselves or others, creating additional confusion.
- How sound-proofed are rooms? Noise coming from another room could disorientate or distract the person.
- Be aware that even everyday sounds, like the kettle or the vacuum, may become upsetting for the person if the changes in their brain are affecting how they hear these sounds.
- If you can set a maximum volume for the TV or stereo, that may help to avoid the sound accidentally being turned up very loudly and startling the person.

## Step 6: Colours and Tones

- Use different colours and tones to improve understanding of the environment. This can be to draw attention to something or to disguise an item or doorway. Contrast of tone refers to the lightness or darkness of something. This could be a shade or how dark or light a colour appears e.g. **dark blue** against **pale blue**.



*A good example of contrast so that person can see handrail*

- Pay particular attention to bathroom/toilet doors or door frames – make these a different colour to the doorways of other rooms to help draw the person's attention to the bathroom/toilet and enable the person to maintain their continence for longer.
- Have a coloured toilet seat to highlight where the toilet is – red or yellow are good colours to use.
- Using contrasting tones or colours to make switches and objects more easily visible.



## Step 7: Risk Management and Safety

- Risk assess and manage all environments, making sure your plans are up to date and reflect any changes that you make to the environment.
- Ensure smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors are in place and working at all times – these must be tested regularly.
- Use coloured tape (be careful to make sure tape does not become loose and a trip hazard) or secured coloured stair edging going up and down the stairs as these can be a useful guide.
- Think about additional security features on front doors to prevent unwanted callers gaining access to the property or the person being disturbed by cold callers.



## Step 8: Appropriate Use of Technology

**Assistive Technology (AT)** - Assistive Technology is any item, piece of equipment, software programme, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of someone with a disability. Benefits include helping to ensure that the person is able to stay as independent as possible and remain safe with the least intrusion or monitoring.

### Some examples include:

- A fall detector, fitted on the person's waist band, can instantly alert the response centre if the person has a fall. Staff could also be equipped with specialist emergency lifting cushions to assist with lifting individuals who have fallen, so no manual handling is involved. This may mean that an ambulance does not have to be called out unless the individual has an injury from the fall and requires medical assistance.



## Step 8: Appropriate Use of Technology

- Alert systems that tell staff when the person gets out of bed at night for long periods or starts running the bath, which ensures quicker intervention.
- Flood detection systems, gas shut-off systems, pagers and medication alerts.
- GPS systems – A GPS may help the person to feel more secure when out and about if staff are able to track their whereabouts. Be mindful, however, that GPS systems must only be used with the person's consent.
- If it is affordable, the person may also benefit from other forms of technology, like a smartphone or tablet device, to help them organise their life, keep track of what is happening and when, communicate with peers, friends and family, and look at photos and videos that are part of their life story.

## Step 9: Design of Outdoor Spaces

- Think about how you can incorporate improving the person's wellbeing into your use of outdoor spaces. A garden can be a great place to be more active and take notice. For more information, please see our Module on 'Wellbeing' in Theme 1 Fit for the Future.
- Work with the person to choose their favourite plants. Plants can provide auditory and visual stimulation and can help the person to relax, e.g. bamboos and grasses that rustle, or seed pods that pop, and/or those that have pleasant or interesting smells and textures to provide people with additional sensory stimulation.
- Also think about growing edible plants – fruit, vegetables and herbs from the garden may help to stimulate a flagging appetite.





## Step 9: Design of Outdoor Spaces

- Check fences and boundaries in the garden to ensure they are appropriate and safe.
- Fitting handrails next to garden paths and providing well-lit seating areas outside are useful for the person to be able to sit and have time alone to relax.
- Fit property exit sensors: These detect when someone leaves the building which ensures quick staff intervention and can prevent people with dementia getting lost in the surrounding neighbourhood.
- Ensure walking areas are clear and consider having raised beds for ease of access.
- If you have a suitable area for sitting and eating, plan some alfresco meals and teatime treats to give the person a change of scene at mealtimes.



## What about Personalisation?

Whatever changes you make, ensuring they are as reflective as possible of the person's personal tastes and reminiscent of happy times in their life, is vital to how the person is likely to feel about and accept their environment. For more information, please see our Module on 'Life Story' in Theme 2 Person Centred Approaches.

As well as having lots of environmental life story resources in the person's environment you might want to consider retro-decorating. The concept behind retro-decorating is that people with dementia can often remember the distant past more easily than recent events.

### Some of the benefits of Retro-Decorating

Surrounding someone with fixtures, fittings, furniture and fabrics from their past can help them to remember their daily routine, such as:

- Preparing a meal
- Getting dressed
- Making a cup of tea
- Sitting down for a meal
- Knitting
- Listening to favourite music on a record player
- Washing themselves
- Doing some housework



## What about Personalisation?

When retro-decorating is successful, it can help to trigger happy long-term memories, and the person may become more animated and interested in participating in activities and tasks of daily living.



However, always be mindful that not everyone enjoys reminiscing about the past. There may be unpleasant aspects to the person's earlier life that they would not want to be reminded of, and this must be respected.

## What about Personalisation?

### Retro-Decorating in Practice

If you want to take a retro-decorating approach, look out for vintage furniture and older looking items that bring back memories of happy times, such as:

- Telephones relevant to the person's era
- Armchairs which the person recognises - consider fabric styles too
- Ornaments relevant to the person's younger life
- Gramophones or records players relevant to their era
- Posters of old pop and film stars
- Vintage household items, like sewing machines or typewriters
- Crockery relevant to their younger days





## Making a Dementia Friendly Environment that Works for Everyone

When the person with dementia lives, works or socialises with others who do not have dementia, it is important to bear in mind that the communal areas need to work for everyone.

Most dementia friendly environmental changes can be positive for people who are not living with dementia, and may even be welcomed, but there may also be objections, or elements that bother or upset the person's peers, friends or workmates.

### Best practice for communal environments includes:

- Remember that everybody has different capabilities and needs, and we must be respectful of each person's needs and abilities and any changes to these in the future.
- We should ensure discussion and collaboration, and provide information to each person in a format which meets their needs.
- If someone really dislikes something – like signage on cupboards – it may cause them significant distress, or lead to them ripping down signs. Try to find other ways of making the environment dementia friendly – for example, if signage is a problem, fit clear plastic doors or drawer fronts to assist the person with dementia.
- Having regular conversations about how each person is managing and anything that is starting to cause them difficulty can help to detect problems before they become a bigger issue.



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