



University of Worcester
Dementia Study

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THE HOUSING AND DEMENTIA RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

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Green dementia care in accommodation and care settings – opportunities, barriers and good practice



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Introduction

This pilot study explored the opportunities, good practice, enablers and barriers relating to green (nature-based) dementia care for people living with dementia in accommodation and care settings, particularly care homes and extra care housing schemes or villages.

There is growing interest in the impacts of engaging with nature on the physical, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual health and wellbeing of people living with dementia. Green dementia care refers to indoor and outdoor experiences and activities that aim to promote health and wellbeing through interaction with nature for people living with dementia. It includes a range of health-promoting interventions encompassing living organisms (plants and animals) and natural elements (e.g. the weather). Green care links traditional health care to gardening (horticultural therapy), agriculture (green care farming), animals (animal assisted interventions) and exercising in the natural environment (green exercise).

Increasing numbers of people with dementia are supported in care homes (residential care homes or care homes with nursing), while extra care housing is now widely viewed as an alternative form of accommodation that can provide opportunities for maximising independence. Many people living with dementia in such settings have limited opportunities to connect with the natural world often due to organisational concerns about safety and security and outdoor spaces that are not fully accessible. For people with dementia the loss of nature in their lives is often sudden and occurs when they move from their own home into accommodation and care settings. Due to fears about the physical risks involved, residents living with dementia are often discouraged from going outdoors, which means that they can quickly lose confidence to go outdoors with or without support. This puts them at risk of losing their nature relatedness (personal connection to nature) and the benefits engaging with nature may bring to their health and wellbeing.

It is hoped that the findings of this pilot study will inform the development of a large-scale multi-site, multi-provider research project involving in-depth evaluation of the impact of nature-based interventions on the health and wellbeing of people with dementia in care settings. This research theme is one of the top research priorities of the Housing and Dementia Research Consortium (the HDRC is a UK wide network of around 100 housing and care providers and commissioners and other interested parties including academics, architects, advisors, researchers, policy makers and third sector organisations committed to research and knowledge exchange across the sector). High quality, large-scale research in this area is necessary in order to inform policy and practice concerning green dementia care, including any impacts on

the health and wellbeing of individuals and the cost effectiveness of care. This pilot study was an important step in developing an understanding of the opportunities for people living with dementia in residential care and extra care housing to engage with the natural world, to explore what works and why, and to identify the main barriers and enablers to engagement.



Key findings

Impacts on people living with dementia

There are numerous ways in which people with dementia can connect with nature in these settings, such as gardens and gardening, horticultural therapy / therapeutic horticulture, care of indoor plants, walking in nature, green exercise, animal assisted therapy and nature-based arts and crafts.



wellbeing outcomes for some people living with dementia, which can be summarised as follows:

In terms of evidence for an improvement in behaviour and emotional health, the evidence of reduction in agitation is the most convincing.

Interaction with nature appears to act as memory trigger for activities that people with dementia used to enjoy in the past and, for those living in long-term care settings, a connection with life before moving into such a setting.

Being in the natural environment can have a calming, relaxing and restorative effect on some people living with dementia.

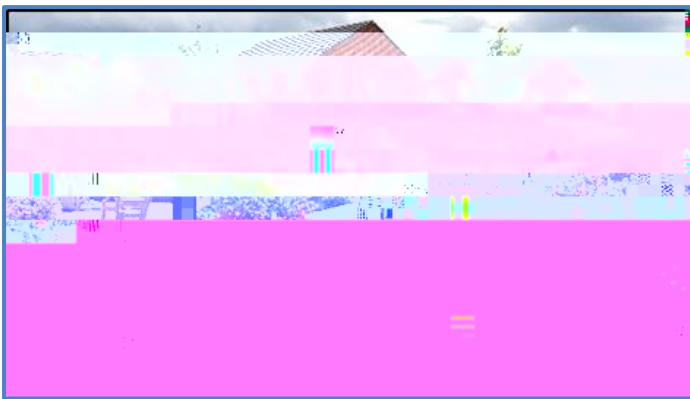
People living with dementia are at risk of losing independence and a sense of self and this risk is intensified for long-term care residents living with dementia.

Engaging in productive green or animal-based activities or, for some, just still being able to go outdoors, can give people with dementia a sense of achievement, pride, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, freedom, independence and a confirmation of self.

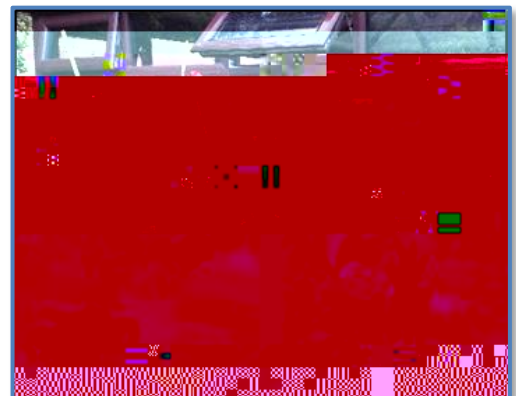
Productive nature-based activities, such as growing food or keeping hens, provides meaningful activity, which is especially important for long-term care residents living with dementia, and can be an empowering experience.

Taking part in nature-based activities with other people appears to improve social interaction and communication.

Involving local communities in the nature-based activities at a care setting is a means of providing inclusion in the community for the residents and can result in a reduction in the social isolation of the care setting's residents and the stigma experienced by people living with dementia.



Raised flower beds at Extra Care housing scheme



Potting table at Extra Care housing scheme

The beneficial impacts of engaging with nature as found in the survey and case studies can be summarised as follows:

Mental and emotional benefits

Offering a feeling of normality, peace and wellbeing

Giving a feeling of freedom and a change from the confinement of the care setting indoor environment

Improved mood and raised spirits

Feeling happier and more motivated when carrying out activities

More settled, relaxed and less stressed

Feel-good factor, having fun and enjoyment

Spontaneous reminiscence / triggering memories and providing a connection to the past



Social benefits

- Encouraging social interaction and cohesion among residents
- More interaction and participation
- Improved socialisation
- Feeling like a part of the community
- Triggering memories, spontaneous communication and subjects for conversation
- Improved/increased use of language
- Involving family



Behavioural benefits

- Encouraging prolonged engagement in a task
- Residents are busier and more engaged during the day
- Reducing agitation
- More motivated
- More alert



Physical health and wellbeing benefits

- Improved sleep patterns
- Improved core strength and balance
- Less medication required
- Fewer falls
- Improves motor skills when participate regularly
- Improved eating and drinking (stimulating appetite before a meal)



Care home resident planting beans

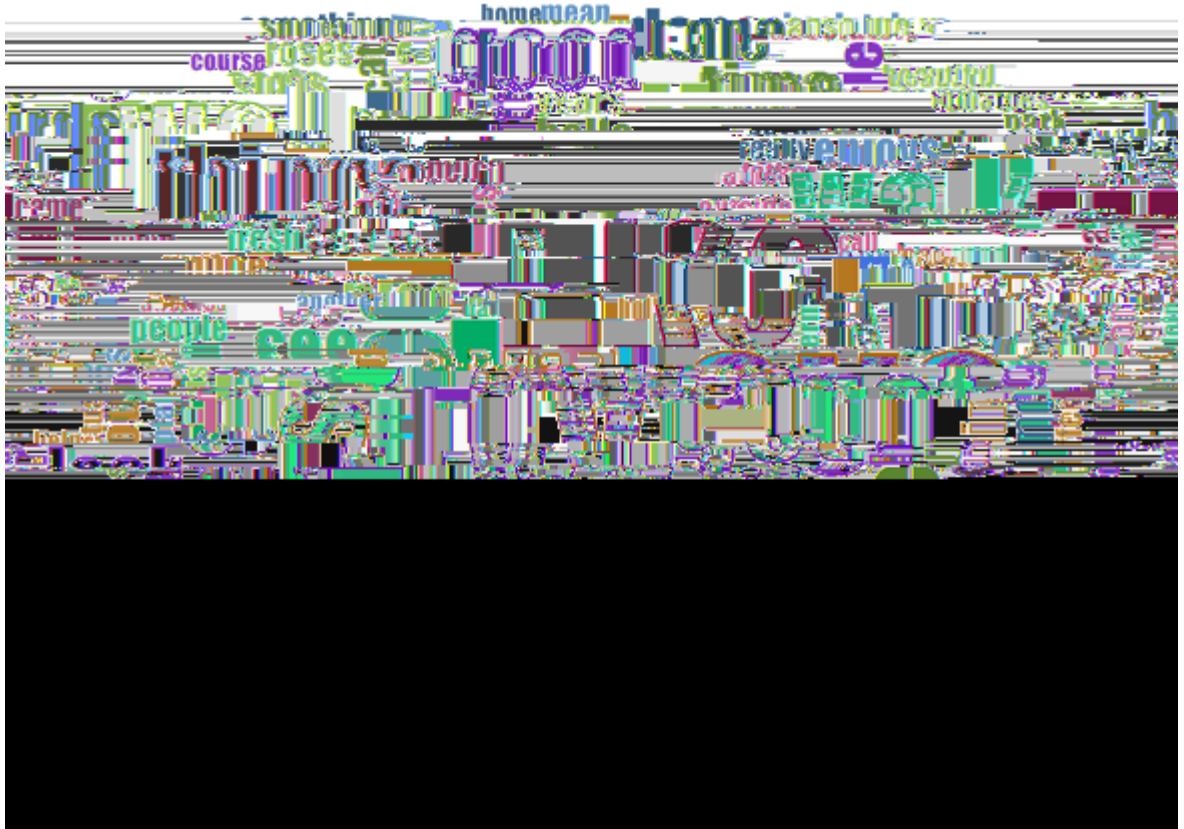
There is evidence in the literature and some evidence from the staff interviews at the case study sites that the benefits of engaging with nature may be sustained for hours or for the rest of the day, for example, in terms of reduced agitation for the rest of the day or improved sleep that night. Longer-term effects are difficult to establish scientifically for people living with dementia due to the fluctuating and progressive nature of the disease. The attitude of several of the staff interviewees was that an activity is a success if the resident had enjoyed it at the time and it had contributed towards them having a good day – it was a positive outcome if the resident had engaged in meaningful activity, experienced pleasure while doing so and was happy and calm that day as a result.

Bird feeder on outside of window to enable bird viewing from indoors.

The only negative impact of engaging with nature found in the literature, survey and case studies related to self-identity or the sense of self: the confirmation of self that can be gained from carrying out nature-based activities can be a negative experience when people living with dementia discover that they are no longer able to carry out activities they used to enjoy.

Word Cloud

All of the relevant residents' quotes relating to their past experience with nature, nature-based activities they are currently engage in, their reasons for engaging in them and how engaging makes them feel were collated in a qualitative data analysis software package and a word cloud of the 100 most frequently used words was created (see Figure 1).



While some survey respondents said that family members do not get involved, the majority indicated a positive effect of nature-based activities on family members in terms of engagement with the resident, engagement with staff and emotional wellbeing. The staff and family members participating in the case study interviews also felt that green care activities had a positive impact on family members. This arose from their pleasure at seeing their relative engaging in activities that they



Recommendations for successful provision of green dementia care

Using the evidence gathered from the three stages of this study – the literature



and to understanding the potential benefits of green dementia care, w



Be aware of local charitable organisation that offer nature-based experiences and activities, explore the potential for joint working with these organisations and make use of their expertise and experience.

Staff and volunteers

Address staff attitudes and training needs in green dementia care. Provide training to address negative perceptions and risk averse attitudes among staff around green dementia care and encourage them to identify opportunities for residents living with dementia to engage with nature. Such training can be crucial to successful provision of green dementia care. The training should:

Provide understanding of the potential benefits and risks of engaging with the natural environment for residents living with dementia;

Provide understanding of how to encourage and support residents living with dementia to engage with the natural environment (see below);

Provide information on how to incorporate nature into everyday care as well as ideas for different activities;

Recognise that engagement with nature and nature-based activities do not need to be complicated;

Recognise and focus on the potential benefits of green dementia care and understand that for every challenge there is a least one solution;

Recognise the importance of good staff teamwork and preparation but also the need to be flexible and adaptable when organising nature-based experiences and activities for residents living with dementia.

Have a team of staff dedicated to provision of activities and meaningful occupation.



In the case of providing animals, it is important to have staff who know how to care for animals and have creative ideas about other activities that relate to the animals but do not necessarily directly involve them;

High levels of staff morale, feelings of empowerment and job satisfaction can mean that staff are willing to volunteer to help out with activities in their spare time. Their family members may also volunteer too.

Encouraging and supporting residents living with dementia to engage to (v) 125 (r) 2 (s) 1 (n) 7 (l) 3 (p) 4 (e) 7

Careful planning. Introducing green dementia care to an accommodation and care setting requires careful planning to ensure individual interests and capabilities are appreciated and respected. However, managers also need to be flexible and willing to change the plans and allow the project to evolve once the residents have started the activities and they have seen how it works in practice. During the planning stage staff need to:

- Plan for variety and individuality;

- Research possible experiences and activities for residents with dementia;

- Try to develop experiences and activities that residents with dementia and staff are able to participate in and enjoy together;

- Match the experiences or activity to a resident's preferences and interests, based on their life history and on their current preferences and abilities, but at the same time be aware that residents may be willing to engage in activities they had previously shown no interest in;

- Consider the residents' abilities and what they will need to enable them to carry out the green care activities;

- Offer a variety of one-to-one and group experiences and activities throughout the year (these could be linked to the changing seasons);

- Understand that short experiences and activities can work well – just a short dose of nature can be enough to lift mood – and you don't need to have longer activities to have an impact;

- Acknowledge that people have personal preferences and not everyone may appear to like nature, but there may still be a way to



Be flexible and adaptable with residents living with dementia and recognise that what works well one day might not work the next day as people's preferences and moods can change.

Be persistent. Staff need to take an active role in getting residents to engage in nature by asking, encouraging or actually taking the resident outside or trying the activity with them and then judging from their behaviour whether they want to take part. While no one should be forced to engage in an activity against their wishes,



