

Making buildings easier for people with dementia

DAA Dementia
Action Alliance



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Many buildings are hard to find with confusing layouts, which might make us feel uncomfortable, disoriented or unsafe.

If badly designed spaces make us feel anxious, the impact upon people with dementia can be profound.

Our checklist will help to identify features of the environment of your building that might have an impact on people with dementia. This concept is also helpful for those with poor eyesight, in fact we would all benefit from it's use.

What kind of things might people be experiencing?

Difficulties with memory and concentration can make it harder for people to remember where they are going, and so can get lost more easily if signage suddenly deserts them at a key junction in the building, or is hard to understand or ambiguous.

It can also mean that people can forget why they are there, and so will be particularly sensitive to the “clues” a space gives out about its function.

Difficulties with perception can mean that some people with dementia might experience visual or auditory distortions which can increase the risk of falls, present imaginary barriers, or cause distress or confusion.

Some people with dementia have sensory or physical impairments which bring challenges of their own, and which can act as “multipliers” - for example, someone with dementia that causes problems interpreting visual input who already suffers from visual impairment will experience even greater difficulties.



So what does this mean for our buildings?

We need to consider a number of key factors:

Navigation

Signage can play a big role here - and signs and maps are something we all rely on in unfamiliar environments to find our way around.

We also use landmarks to navigate our way around, both inside and outside. The more attractive, interesting or arresting the landmark (which could be anything - a painting, a plant, or sculpture) the easier, and more useful it is as a landmark.

This is especially true for people with dementia who are having difficulties understanding the meaning or relevance of signage, or if their concentration is being disrupted.

- Is it easy for people to find their way around?
- Is the location of the toilets and exits in particular, clear from all public areas?
- Are the facilities easy to use and well signposted?

Visibility

Can the important features of the environment actually be seen? Older people need light levels significantly higher than younger people. We can also consider line of sight - in particular can toilets and exits be seen from areas where people sit or congregate?

Removing unhelpful stimuli

Unnecessary “clutter” in an environment can make life difficult for everyone - and this applies to noise levels as well as objects. This can be disorientating and make concentration difficult. In some cases, it can also cause visual or auditory distortions.



FOR YOUR NOTES

Things to think about as you approach the building

The first question to ask when considering accessibility of a building or space is, “can people get to it and find it when they get there?”

	YES	NO
Is it clear where the building is?		
Can you see the signs to the building?		
Are the signs pointing in the right direction?		
Is there parking?		
If you came by car - was the building signposted from the car park?		
If you didn't come by car - was it easy to get to by public transport?		



FOR YOUR NOTES

Now you are inside the building

The first question to ask when considering accessibility of a building or space is, “can people get to it and find it when they get there?”

	YES	NO
Was it easy to get in?		
Is it clear where you should go now?		
Does it feel welcoming?		
Is there someone around to welcome you or tell you where to go?		
Can you see the signs for the toilets from the reception area if there is one, or from the entrance?		



Signs

Signs are important - they tell us how to find our way around, and can also remind us why we are here.

Here are some things to consider:

- Place signs at key decision points
- Signs should be clear, in bold typeface with good contrast between text and background
- The use of highly stylised or abstract images or icons as representations on signage should be avoided
- Signs should use plain English, not jargon or acronyms
- There should be a contrast between the sign and the surface it is mounted on
- Signs should be fixed to the doors they refer to – not on adjacent surfaces
- Signs should be at eye level and well-lit wherever possible
- Signs for toilets and exits are particularly important
- Ensure that glass doors are clearly marked



FOR YOUR NOTES

Signs - checklist

	YES	NO
Can you see signs for the way out?		
Can you see signs to the toilets?		
Can you understand the signs?		
Whenever you make a choice about which direction to take - are there signs to help you decide which way to go?		
Are there signs or clues to help you remember what the building is for?		
Are there other things in the building that help you find your way around?		



Lighting

It's important for everyone that buildings are well lit. We need higher levels of light as we get older.

Here are some things to consider:

- Dimly lit areas can cause confusion
- Strong reflections can cause disorientation
- Pools of bright light and shade should be avoided
- Try and make as much use of natural light as possible
- Lamps and up-lighters can be very effective at breaking up what can sometimes be harsh lighting and help create a softer and more relaxed feel, while also raising the general level of light

Lighting - checklist

	YES	NO
Is the lighting bright enough for you to see clearly in all areas?		
Is there natural light from outside as well as indoor lighting?		
Are there areas which are in the shade?		
Are there small areas – ‘pools of light’ which are very brightly lit?		
Are there any places that have strong reflections – like large areas of glass?		



Flooring

Flooring is important and can be a significant barrier to people with dementia, especially those who might be experiencing perceptual or spatial difficulties.

Here are some things to consider:

- Avoid highly reflective and slippery floor surfaces
- Changes in the colour of flooring, or even a contrasting floor-strip can appear to people with dementia as a barrier, or a change in depth
- Patterned flooring can cause problems for people with dementia - plain or very lightly mottled flooring is preferable

Flooring - checklist

	YES	NO
Are there any slippery areas?		
Are there any floors which are shiny?		
Are there areas where the floor colour changes suddenly?		
Are there floors which are strongly patterned, like carpet or floor tiles?		



Seating and quiet areas

Having somewhere to sit is important for all sorts of reasons.

Here are some things to consider:

- People can get tired and need a sitdown, especially in areas where people are waiting
- Seating can help if people are feeling a bit overwhelmed - especially in large or busy environments
- Seating does need to be easy to use - so things like chairs with arms really help.
- It also helps if people can see the seating - for example blue chairs against the background of a blue carpet can cause problems
- It also helps if seating actually looks like seating – so for example a wooden bench rather than an abstract metal Z-shaped bench that people might wonder whether they are meant to sit on it at all

Seating - checklist

	YES	NO
Are there enough places for people to sit?		
Can seating be clearly seen against the colour of the floor?		
Is there a quiet area where people can sit either alone or with others?		



Toilets

Many of us will have had the experience of needing to go to the toilet and not being able to find it. Making sure that people can find the toilets and use them easily is really important.

Here are some things to consider:

- Some people can't see the toilet basin because it blends into the background
- Contrasting toilet seats make a huge difference
- Too many mirrors can cause confusion especially if they are badly placed, creating a "tunnel" effect or multiple reflections
- Is it clear how to get in, and out?
- Is the sign on the toilet door confusing?
- Some people struggle with the "stick man" images, or with "amusing" signs. For many people with dementia the word "Toilet" or even a picture of a toilet would be better, especially for people with more advanced dementia
- Is there a toilet which is large enough to allow someone to have assistance without causing them or other people embarrassment?

	YES	NO
Were the toilets easy to find?		
Was the sign on the door easy to understand?		
Are toilet seats a different colour from the toilet basin?		
Are there lots of mirrors?		
Are hot and cold taps clearly marked?		
Is it clear how to get out?		



Colours

Research has shown that dementia changes a person's perception of distances, objects, and colours. Dementia can reduce or remove the ability to see colours from the blue to purple end of the spectrum. Those with dementia may experience difficulties with perception caused by no contrast in colours.

I.E.: If you put a white mug of tea against a white wall or places it on a white table – we will only see WHITE

Colours - checklist

	YES	NO
Doorways. Are the door surrounds a contrast to the door & wall?		
Door handles. Can these be found easily; do they blend into the door?		
Switch plates. Are light switches & plug plates a contrast to the wall?		
Hand rails. Are they obvious?		
Cupboard handles & knobs: do they blend into the cupboard door?		
Crockery. Do you have colourful cups, saucers, mugs & plates?		
Table & table clothes. Are they the same colour?		
Support rails & other toilet fittings. Do they blend into the tiling colour?		
Sinks. Are your sinks a contrast colour to the basin surround / worktops?		



This document was pulled together by Andrew Morgan-Watts, who cares for his wife and together they are living with a diagnosis of dementia. Andy is a driving force within the Forest of Dean Dementia Action Alliance and is passionate about supporting our communities to become more dementia friendly.

In conversations with other people living with dementia, at a local memory café, one of the key issues raised by people was their access into public buildings and the difficulties they experience..

Our internet research highlighted a number of checklists produced by organisations but these were in clinical settings or in other geographies. Andy used these as his baseline when putting this together. Before going to a local designer to josh it up he ran though is outline with people in the local Memory Café he sometimes goes to with his wife..

We then started working with a local designer, Squiff Creative Media, who transformed our draft into this document which is available to download and can be completed online via an Ipad.

This document has been designed as a tool to support and empower communities to become more dementia friendly.

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