

Issue 5: *Out and about in green spaces*

Welcome to *Evidence at a Glance No 5*. This issue focuses on outside physical activities, particularly walking, for people with dementia and their care partners.

The *New Zealand Framework for Dementia Care*¹ highlights the value of outside exercise such as walking groups and gardening. Research evidence on the benefits for people with dementia accessing the natural environment is limited.² However the qualitative and anecdotal evidence available² include findings of reduced feelings of stress and depression; improved physical health, memory and attention; and a sense of wellbeing.

The focus for this issue of *Evidence at a Glance* is an English study³ about the value of spending time in the natural world.

Is it nice outside?

Methods

Natural England funded research into the experience of people with dementia and care partners about spending time in nature.³

People with dementia helped design the research. Fifty people with dementia were interviewed in focus groups and 4 interviewed individually. The care partners completed an on-line questionnaire (172) and 10 were interviewed individually.

Key findings

“What it is, the fact that if you are out in the open area, it brings a whole new perspective to how you feel, you are not in an enclosed space indoors where you are thinking well, this is my world, that’s their world out there. You go out into their world, as one might say, you enjoy walking, swimming whatever, anything which gives you more exercise to the body, actually exercises the mind as well and fresh air is excellent for people with dementia of any sort because mine should be getting worse all the time but it’s not. It is staying stable and as a result I am still walking, volunteer walk leader and I thoroughly enjoy it, I now walk about 60 miles a month on average.”

Participant from the study by Mapes, N., Milton, S., Nicholls, V., & Williamson, T. (2016). Page i.³

¹Ministry of Health. (2013). *New Zealand Framework for Dementia Care*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

²Clark, P., Mapes, N., Burt, J., & Preston, S. (2013). *Greening dementia - a literature review of the benefits and barriers facing individuals living with dementia in accessing the natural environment and local greenspace*. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 137. England: Natural England.

³Mapes, N., Milton, S., Nicholls, V., & Williamson, T. (2016). *Is it nice outside? - Consulting people living with dementia and carers about engaging with the natural environment*. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 211. England: Natural England.

- Where people go is very influenced by where they live. Most lived in urban areas and the areas most frequently mentioned were parks and gardens. People closer to the countryside were more likely to mention the countryside places such as farms or woods. Visiting places with water were very popular.
- A small minority of people with dementia (20%) saw their condition as a barrier to being in the outdoors compared with 83% of care partners and other family and friends who saw dementia as a limitation.
- Informal walking was the most commonly referred as an outdoor activity engaged in several times a week (38% of people with dementia and 33% of care partners). Care partners talked about the calming effect.
- Involvement in social activities was supported by guided walks. Enjoyable outside activities included watching and listening to the birds and other wild life, listening to music, and more active pursuits such as community gardening or farming.
- Over half the people with dementia had other health conditions or health conditions that limited their use of outdoor spaces and nature.
- City parks and public gardens were very popular. They provided a destination point and people with dementia commented they liked watching people taking part in activities.
- Several factors supported or limited outside activities including transport, mobility issues, suitable spaces, and “someone to take me”.

- Local outdoor spaces can be underused for a number of reasons including perceived danger and a lack of awareness about what is offered.

Natural England made a number of recommendations including:

- Encourage managers of natural environments to develop their spaces and activities using dementia-friendly principles.
- Increase awareness and information about natural resources. Strategies include working with local dementia organisations and people living with dementia to develop an understanding of how best to enable inclusion of people with dementia in their activities
- Ensure accessible signage, places to rest, dementia friendly toilets, walkways on level ground and staff trained in dementia awareness.



Questions for discussion

Do you organise outside activities for your members living with dementia?

- If so what feedback do you get on benefits and issues?
- If not think about the barriers and possible benefits of extending your support activities.

What sort of advice do you give people with dementia and care partners and care partners?

- Can you incorporate the findings of the research in your advice?
- Given walking the most common activity how are you incorporating the safe walking package in your education and advice?

Do you raise awareness about suitable outdoor activities provided by other organisations?

- If not what might be the value?

Have you talked with local bodies and other organisations managing natural resources about dementia friendly communities?

Other useful studies

McDuff, J., & Phinney, A. (2015). Walking with meaning: Subjective experiences of physical activity in dementia. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 2, 2333393615605116.

“Walking was something that everyone felt confident to do because it was simple and they had been doing it all their lives. ‘Well, I don’t know. Just, I just seem to, I like walkin’. Why? Just it’s something you more or less do. It’s just, you know, you walk all your life.’ They identified it as an ordinary activity that everyone does and appreciated that it could still be a part of their daily routine” (p.5).

Gibson, G., Robertson, J., Pemble, C., Harrison, R., Strachan, A., & Thorburn, S. (2017). *Dementia friendly walking project. Evaluation report*. Scotland: University of Stirling.

An evaluation of the *Paths for all: Dementia Friendly Walking Project* - supports projects that organise volunteer led walks.

‘Specific benefits of walking groups in terms of social activities were in providing people living with dementia with a relatively safe and secure place to socialise and interact with others, giving carers opportunities for a brief period of respite, and providing a place where future social relationships could flourish” (p.37)