

IN DEPTH

CASE STUDY

MAKING A SPLASH WITH DEMENTIA

*Swimming is an activity many people with dementia find soothing and remember with fondness. **Caroline Roberts** investigates the benefits of swimming and physical activity in general for people in this group*

With our rapidly ageing population, dementia is set to be one of the biggest challenges facing society in the future. Currently 850,000 people are living with the disease in the UK, including 40,000 under the age of 65. And the numbers are projected to double over the next 30 years.

Research by the Alzheimer's Society has found that many people with dementia feel isolated from their local community, and find it harder to access activities they once enjoyed, such as going swimming or taking part in other sports or leisure centre activities.

However, there's a strong case for promoting physical activity in this group, says Dr David Reynolds, chief scientific officer with Alzheimer's Research. "One of the key things that lots of different studies have shown is the importance of getting out there and making your brain tackle new things. That could involve learning to salsa at 70, or doing some kind of swimming or aerobics class. It's about social interaction, learning new movements, concentrating and keeping in time with other people – all those things keep your brain functioning well."

In patients with vascular dementia caused by mini strokes, lowered blood pressure and weight loss may help to prevent further damage. And improved muscle tone, strength and co-ordination

will help prevent the falls and mobility problems that can lead to isolation and lack of social stimulus – another risk factor for cognitive decline.

All this means that operators need to take steps to ensure that leisure facilities are as accessible to people with dementia as possible.

A major barrier is a lack of appropriate changing facilities, says Emma Bould of the Alzheimer's Society. "Many carers of people with dementia are of the opposite sex to the person they care for and worry about leaving them to use the changing facilities alone. Providing a unisex changing facility, even if it's just a room, can be really helpful."

Mixed changing areas is a dementia-friendly feature of the new Crewe Lifestyle Centre in Cheshire. The £15m centre, opened in April 2016 and run by Everybody Sport and Recreation, is a community hub that combines a sport and fitness facility with day care and family services functions, as well as the new town library and a cafe.

"We got the Alzheimer's Society on board when it came to fitting out the centre," says Richard Jones, general area manager. "They pointed out a lot of basic things we hadn't thought of. There was a type of flooring on the cards to go in but they advised us against it, as the pattern might make the floor appear to be moving to some people with dementia. We ended up changing it to big tiles in grey and cream."



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SWIM ENGLAND

The Dementia-Friendly Swimming Project was launched by Swim England (formerly the ASA) in January 2015. The three-year initiative aims to provide more swimming opportunities for people with dementia and improve their experience by working with local leisure centres and other partners to create a network of dementia-friendly swimming facilities across the country.

• Find out more about the project and how you can get involved at swimming.org/dementiafriendly/

“For the sports hall floor, we were thinking of a blue vinyl, and that was changed as some people might view it as water and be frightened of slipping. We now have a green floor so, at worst, it will look like grass.” Consistency is important for people with dementia, so the toilet doors are the same colour throughout the whole building, he adds.

Training is also key so that staff have a greater awareness of the problems people with dementia face, such as disorientation, difficulties using payment systems or counting out money, and inability to find the right word to ask for something. The Alzheimer’s Society’s Dementia Friends training (see box, p25), which the Crewe centre’s staff have undertaken, emphasises the need for patience and suggests ways to help without making the person feel stigmatised.

The Lifestyle Centre has trialled dementia-friendly Swim and Social sessions in partnership with the Alzheimer’s Society. These involve dedicated swimming time for people with dementia and their carers, supported by extra staff poolside. The swim sessions are followed by socialising in the café.



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“The social side is really important for the carers, as well as the people with dementia,” Jones says, “as they get the opportunity to engage with people going through the same thing.”

Other operators are also experimenting with dementia-friendly activities. The K2 Leisure Centre in Crawley has been offering dementia-friendly swimming sessions through the project since May 2016. Operator Freedom Leisure has now extended this to its Woking centre and is looking to roll it out to other facilities.

There’s no set formula for dementia-friendly swimming and the model you offer depends on the nature of your facility, says Freedom Leisure’s aquatic business manager Alyson Zell. “Crawley has a 50m pool that can be boomed off into different areas. The co-ordinator has had nervous participants in the

shallower area and done some one-to-one work with them. Woking has the whole of the teaching pool for an hour. Some people just want to come in and walk about in the pool, while others want to plough up and down lanes, so you might need a dementia-friendly lane so they don’t get in the way of other swimmers if they just stop.”

The benefits to participants have been obvious, she says. “Some of the ladies at Crawley were incredibly nervous about getting in the water but two weeks in, they really started to enjoy it. Often their long-term memory is still good and it brings back memories of happy family times. We’ve also held a couple of pool parties where we’ve sectioned off part of the pool and whole families can join in.”

It’s important to prepare your centre before you start offering the sessions to ensure people have a positive experience from the outset, advises Zell. An environmental audit has led to improved signage at both centres, and all staff have undergone Dementia Friends training. “Getting everyone trained up can take quite a time and with staff turnover it’s an ongoing process, so we’re aiming to make dementia-friendly training part of our induction process.

“For us as an industry it’s about making sure we have the right level of customer service. If we can deliver customer service that is caring and has time for people, it may make their journey through our centres easier.”

Another example is the I CAN project piloted at Concord Sports Centre by SIV, the operational arm of Sheffield City Trust, in partnership with the Alzheimer’s Society. As members of Sheffield Dementia Action Alliance, the partnership secured a £10k grant from Sport England to set up activities aimed at people with early onset dementia and their carers. Most participants are drawn from a local Alzheimer’s Society day centre and pay £3.75 for the hour-long session, with carers coming free.

The project started with a rolling programme of structured sessions but found participants preferred something less formal, explains Rob Womack, SIV’s health partnerships manager. Now they can pick and choose from activities in the sports hall, which includes badminton, table tennis, a walking route, rowing machines, stationary bikes, and low intensity circuits to improve balance and co-ordination. “You don’t need to come in your sports

kit; it’s more of a social relaxation session,” he says.

The benefits are plain to see, Womack adds: “There’s one participant who’s spinning the badminton racket round in his hand like he’s played all his life. He’s completely engrossed in the game, but his support worker says at other times he has no attention span whatsoever and his behaviour can be quite challenging.

“Initially we provided one member of staff to lead sessions but quickly learned that it wasn’t enough due to the high levels of support needed.”

Now the centre provides one leader and an assistant, who are supported by volunteers from the Exercise Referral Scheme, staff from the day centre and student volunteers from Sheffield Hallam University, which will be evaluating the project. SIV now has plans to replicate the programme in two other centres in the city.

The project has given Adrian Smalley, who was diagnosed with early onset dementia four years ago, an opportunity to rediscover his passion for sport. “He really loves the sessions,” says his wife Karen. “He was always involved in sports in the past. Now he can’t communicate very well and he doesn’t remember the session afterwards but he’s clearly enjoying it at the time.” ●

RESOURCES

A walk through dementia (awalkthroughdementia.org) is an Android app created by Alzheimer’s Research UK, which uses virtual reality to allow you to see the world through the eyes of someone with dementia.

Dementia Friends (dementiafriends.org.uk), is an Alzheimer’s Society initiative, which provides information sessions in person and online, and offers a special package for organisations.

Dementia-friendly checklist

Whether you’re planning a new build or just giving an existing facility a facelift, there are ways to ensure it’s more dementia-friendly, says Emma Bould. The result often means it’s more accessible for people with a range of other needs too.

- Have a drop-off area close to the entrance and make sure the reception looks like a reception and is clearly signed.
- Provide a unisex changing area.
- Ensure staff uniforms stand out and are consistent so staff are easy to distinguish from members of the public.
- Avoid overly arty design – a chair should be immediately recognisable as a chair.
- Ensure signage to key areas is clear and signs are on the things they relate to, not on a wall next to them.
- Use contrasting colours to make things stand out. A changing room door, for example, should contrast with the wall around it.
- A maintenance door, however, should be the same colour as the wall, so people are less likely to notice it and use it by mistake.
- Aim for consistent use of colours to indicate use, ie. make all toilet doors one colour throughout the building.
- Dementia can affect visual perception so a highly reflective floor can appear to be wet; very dark, matt tiles can look like holes in the floor; and a swirly pattern can make it appear to be moving. Keep flooring plain and neutral.