



How to do an access audit.

Making buildings easier for people with dementia.

Most of us will have had experiences of buildings which are easy to find, easy to navigate within, and which make us feel safe and comfortable.

Which is great.

Unfortunately many of us will also have experiences of buildings which are hard to find, in which you can't work out where you are going when you get there, or which make us feel unsafe, uncomfortable or disoriented.

If so, you will remember how it made you feel.

.....so if badly designed spaces make those of us without dementia feel anxious, lost and disoriented - the impact upon people with dementia can be profound.

Luckily, there is a lot that can be done to make environments easier for people with dementia to use

Unsurprisingly, environments which are accessible to people with dementia also tend to be easier and more pleasant for everyone else as well.

This guide contains a basic checklist to help you to look at your own buildings, and identify changes you might make to make them easier for people with dementia to use.

The checklist below will help you to identify features of your environment that might have an impact on people with dementia. Again, many of these features also make a big difference to people without dementia as well.

What kind of things might be people be experiencing?

People may be having difficulties because of their dementia that have an impact on how they experience the environments in which they find themselves.

These include:

Difficulties with memory and concentration can, for example, 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.

....and, of course, many people with dementia by virtue of their age also have sensory or physical impairments which bring challenges of their own, and which can act a “multipliers” - for example, someone with dementia that causes their brain to struggle with problems interpreting visual input, who also has a visual impairment is likely to experience difficulties greater than the sum of their parts.

So what does this mean for our buildings?

In general 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 generally need light levels significantly higher than those needed by 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 disorienting and make concentration difficult. In some cases it can also cause visual or auditory distortions.

Increasing helpful stimuli

Is the function of a space or building clear? - some people with dementia can lose track of why they are in a space, or what they are doing.

So, for example, dining areas might have pictures of food, or on the theme of food or eating on the walls, tables might be set, and menus clearly visible.

Comfort

Providing comfortable and peaceful spaces where people can sit, alone or with others can make a big difference to everyone, but especially for people with dementia who might feel overwhelmed by large busy spaces.

A quiet room or other space can be a welcome respite for someone who might be feeling overwhelmed or confused. Sometimes a few minutes “out” is all a person needs.

Small changes can make a big difference in the environment.

Many of the more detailed checklists and resources listed at the back have much to offer those in a position to influence large-scale development, redevelopment or infill.

However, there are a number of changes that could be considered at much smaller scale and cost, especially in the indoor environment, that can have a major impact on improving accessibility for people with dementia

The checklist below will help you to look around your environment and identify features that might help or hinder people with dementia.

These tips are focused on mainstream and generic settings, not on health or social care settings.

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 here?”

	Yes	No
Is it clear where the building is?		
Can you see the signs to the building?		
Are the signs pointing you 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

	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 to the toilets from the reception area if there is one, or from the entrance?		
When you look around, is it clear what this building is for?		
For your notes		

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.

Signs - checklist

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

Lighting.

It's important for everyone that buildings are well lit.

We all generally 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 in public areas 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 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?		
For your notes		

Flooring

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

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 some people with dementia as a barrier, or a change in depth.
- Patterned flooring can cause problems for some 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 floor which are strongly patterned, like carpet or floor tiles?		
For your notes		

Seating and quiet areas

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

Things to consider:

- People can get tired and need a sit-down, especially in areas where people are waiting.
- Seating can help if people are feeling a bit overwhelmed - especially in large or very busy environments.
- Seating does need to be easy to use though - 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 the seating be seen against the colour of the floor?		
Do the chairs have arms?		
Is there a quiet area where people can sit either alone or with others?		
For your notes		

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.

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?

Toilets - checklist

	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?		
For your notes		

For more help.....

If you want to go deeper, there are a number of very thorough environmental checklists and other resources available online, many of which are free of charge.

These include:

Neighbourhoods for life – designing dementia-friendly outdoor environments produced by Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development

This is aimed primarily at planners, designers and developers and covers all scales from urban design to street furniture, on the criteria to consider in developing dementia-friendly urban areas.

It also has much of interest to those thinking about the outside environment at any level.

<http://www.dementiaaction.org.uk/assets/0000/8252/NfL-FL.pdf>

Stirling University Dementia Services Development Centre is perhaps THE centre of excellence for issues around the design and dementia - it produces a wide range of publications in the theme of design for dementia and also provides training and auditing services:

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

The Virtual Care Home is an online resource from Stirling DSDS that demonstrates key features of dementia friendly design in a care home setting.

<http://dementia.stir.ac.uk/design/virtual-environments/virtual-care-home>

Alzheimer's Australia WA

Alzheimer's Australia WA, in partnership with the NSW Dementia Training Study Centre at the University of Wollongong, have developed a national project focusing on translating research into practice in the area of enabling environments for people with dementia. There are lots of free resources here, including an audit tool for gardens.

<http://www.enablingenvironments.com.au/About.aspx>

Checklist of essential features of age- friendly cities

The checklist was produced by the World Health Organisation. Age-friendly environments have much in common with those for people with dementia. This is aimed at those working at a strategic level, and is intended as a tool for measuring dementia-friendliness across a wide variety of domains including housing and social inclusion.

http://www.dementiaaction.org.uk/assets/0000/8253/Age_friendly_cities_checklist.pdf

Housing LIN

Housing LIN have produced a comprehensive resource list around housing and dementia

http://www.dementiaaction.org.uk/assets/0000/9077/Housing_LIN.pdf

The King's Fund - Developing Supportive Design for People with Dementia

To support clinical and care staff, managers and estates colleagues, The King's Fund has produced a range of resources to enable hospitals, care homes, primary care premises and specialist housing providers to become more dementia friendly

<http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/enhancing-healing-environment/ehe-design-dementia>

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

SCIE have detailed online resources looking at dementia friendly design in every room. These resources have been mapped to specific Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) units.

<http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/dementia/dementia-friendly-environments/environment/index.asp>