



# Dementia Friendly Village Halls

How I can make a difference



## How I can make a difference?

Right across the country thousands of village halls and other community buildings host events and activities for the people in their communities. Some of those will certainly be people with dementia. It is a harsh fact that unless the organisers of events and activities make sure that they act to support those people with dementia they can feel excluded.

An Alzheimer's Society survey found that 69% of people with dementia said that the main reason they stopped going out is a lack of confidence. Your encouragement and support can give them that confidence so they remain active and happy members of your community.

This booklet shows you some of the things you can do to make that difference.

## The first thing to do is know what dementia is

**The word dementia describes a set of symptoms including difficulties with memory, thinking clearly, problem solving and using language. Someone with dementia may also experience changes in mood and behaviour.**

There are many different types of dementia – Alzheimers disease is just one of those. They are all caused by changes in the brain that although most common in people over 65, can affect much younger people.

No two people experience dementia in exactly the same way but some of the main symptom include:

- ▶ **Memory loss** – particularly day-to-day memory, for example what happened earlier in the day, or why they are at the village hall, which may mean that ask related questions again and again. At the same time some people can remember things from a long time ago very well.
- ▶ **Communication difficulties** – including having trouble finding the right word and describing what the thing does really well while not remembering what it is called. People may also struggle to follow a conversation.
- ▶ **Difficulty thinking things through** – including everyday tasks such as handling money, remembering to bring a ticket, or arriving at an event at the right time.
- ▶ **Confusion about place** – not recognising seemingly familiar places, getting lost for example getting back to the hall having been to the toilet.
- ▶ **Sight and vision problems** – including having difficulty reading or mistaking shiny or patterned things, for example thinking that a dark mat on a light floor is a hole.
- ▶ **Unusual behaviour** – becoming sad or angry or frightened for no obvious reason.
- ▶ **Restlessness** – particularly in unfamiliar situations or noisy environments.

Someone may exhibit some of these symptoms but not have dementia, on the other hand someone with dementia (and their family) may not know. It is estimated that about half of all dementia sufferers remain undiagnosed.



## Communicate clearly

Make sure that what you say and do, and the way you say and do it, helps rather than hinders by following these guidelines:

### Before you speak...

- ▶ Try to get in a good place to talk – quiet, with good lighting and without too many distractions .
- ▶ Get the person's full attention before you start.
- ▶ Listen actively – paying full attention and not finishing off sentences in your mind
- ▶ Position yourself where the person can see you as clearly as possible (eg with your face well-lit) and try to be on the same level as the person, rather than standing over them.
- ▶ Be close to the person (although not so close you are in their personal space) and make eye contact.
- ▶ Make sure your body language is open and relaxed.
- ▶ Give enough time, it may take longer than you expect.

## What can I do to help?

As an organiser or helper at an event or activity you can't be expected to resolve all the problems faced by someone with dementia and make it "all right". What you can do is make things as easy and as welcoming as possible.

So here are some things that you can do. They are not difficult, you just need to think them through and be prepared to take the initiative.

It can be a bit uncomfortable at first, but when you see the difference your approach makes it will be worth it, and it will be a lot easier next time.

### Be understanding and reassuring

Just think, if you were not sure where you were or why you had come then it would be pretty scary so:

- ▶ Try to understand how they are feeling
- ▶ Give them time to ask questions or explain
- ▶ Be friendly and smile – make them feel at ease
- ▶ Respond to their emotions as well as the content of what they say
- ▶ Offer to help, don't wait to be asked



## How to speak...

- ▶ Speak clearly and calmly.
- ▶ Speak at a slightly slower pace, and allow time between sentences for the person to process the information and respond. This might seem like an uncomfortable pause to you, but it is important for helping the person to communicate.
- ▶ Avoid speaking sharply or raising your voice.
- ▶ Use short, simple sentences.
- ▶ Try to communicate with the person in a conversational way, not question after question (it can feel like an interrogation).
- ▶ Don't talk about the person as if they are not there or talk to them as you would to a young child – be patient and have respect for them.
- ▶ Encourage the person to speak – they may be fearful of saying the wrong thing.
- ▶ Don't finish sentences off for people.
- ▶ Write things down if that helps.

## What to say...

- ▶ Try to avoid asking too many questions, or complicated questions. People with dementia can become frustrated or withdrawn if they can't find the answer.
- ▶ Try to stick to one idea at a time. Giving someone a choice is important, but too many options can be confusing and frustrating.
- ▶ If the person is finding it hard to understand, consider breaking down what you're saying into smaller chunks so that it is more manageable.
- ▶ Ask questions one at a time, and phrase them in a way that allows for a 'yes' or 'no' answer (eg rather than asking someone what they would like to drink, ask if they would like a cup of tea).
- ▶ Rephrase rather than repeat, if the person doesn't understand what you're saying. Use non-verbal communication to help (eg pointing at a picture of someone you are talking about).
- ▶ Summarise what they say back to them to check that you have understood.

**Above all treat the person with respect.**



## Be aware of the environment

If the environment is noisy or busy this can make someone with dementia very uneasy. They may misread visual clues or may not recognise people or objects. They may get lost or bump into things. You may not be able to change these things but if you appreciate them then you can do things to compensate:

- ▶ Try to get to a quiet spot to talk or get colleagues to quiet down
- ▶ Explain what things are and where you are, and be happy to repeat yourself
- ▶ Show people the way to go or walk with them
- ▶ Move things out of the way
- ▶ Remember that what is obvious or simple to you may not be to them

## Offer practical support

This will obviously depend on the circumstances but these suggestions may help:

- ▶ If someone can't remember how to do something offer to show them and or do it with them
- ▶ Break down tasks into small steps, supporting each step as they proceed
- ▶ Ask "can I help?"
- ▶ Be very patient over money
- ▶ Tell people "there's no hurry"
- ▶ Be happy to repeat yourself ... more than once
- ▶ Go to someone who is looking confused and don't expect them to come to you.

