



Heritage with Heart:

A DEMENTIA-INCLUSIVE TOOLKIT FOR CULTURAL VENUES

This free toolkit offers clear, practical guidance to help cultural venues become more accessible and welcoming for people living with dementia. It highlights the unique role that arts and heritage play in supporting the wellbeing and enrichment of this community, as well as the typical challenges these types of venues can present for visitors living with dementia. Based on a career in the heritage sector and first hand experience of the pressures that venues face, this toolkit provides simple, low-cost actions that can be easily implemented with limited capacity.

This toolkit is produced by Laura Cunningham and is based on over 15 years of sector specific experience, academic knowledge and specialist training in this area.

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THIS TOOLKIT?

- A basic overview of dementia
- An outline of the benefits of cultural venues for people living with dementia
- An overview of the common challenges cultural venues present for this community
- A series of quick win, low cost, easy to implement practical improvements
- A comprehensive environment checklist to support a more detailed review
- An example piece of dementia friendly signage
- A summary of the benefits and importance of creating a dementia friendly venue
- Wellbeing advice for those involved in projects such as this
- An overview of additional activities you could offer to support people living with dementia



KEY OBJECTIVE

To make cultural venues more accessible and welcoming for people living with dementia through different stages of the condition



KEY OUTCOME

To increase understanding of the typical challenges people living with dementia can face in a cultural venue and how to overcome them



NEXT STEPS

Suggestions for further development and opportunities for project work are included for venues wishing to take their offer to the next level



What is Dementia?

A BASIC OVERVIEW

- Dementia is a **set of symptoms caused by damage to the brain**. Specific diseases (such as Alzheimer's disease) cause this damage.
- Typical symptoms of dementia are:
 - Memory loss
 - Difficulty in processing information
 - Change in mood/behaviour
 - Problems in communicating
 - Difficulty in carrying out daily tasks
- **Each person with dementia will experience it in a unique way**. This means that some people will fit the typical symptoms and others will not. 'Person centred care' is recognised as the most effective method of support, because it is tailored to a person's unique requirements.
- **A person's symptoms can differ daily and even hourly**, making living with dementia confusing and upsetting. It is also challenging for those who care for/support them, as strategies that have worked previously may suddenly no longer be effective. However, it is completely possible for people to 'live well with dementia' and empowering people to remain independent, active and pursue their interests is very important for wellbeing.



STATISTICS

Dementia is currently the **leading cause of death in the UK**.

1 person is diagnosed with dementia every 3 minutes.

Over 1 million people in the UK are currently living with dementia. This is thought to rise to 1.4 million by 2040.



TYPES OF DEMENTIA

There are currently over **100 identified types of dementia**. Each has different characteristics and associated symptoms.

The 4 most common are:

- Alzheimer's Disease
- Vascular Dementia
- Dementia with Lewy Bodies
- Frontotemporal Dementia



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

Dementia diagnosis is difficult and can take several weeks/months, especially if someone has non-typical symptoms.

Currently, there is no cure for dementia, but **medication can be issued to manage symptoms and slow down progress**. Early diagnosis can significantly improve a person's quality of life.



IS DEMENTIA HEREDITARY?

The **majority of dementia is not inherited** by children and grandchildren. In rarer types, there may be a strong genetic link, but these are only a tiny proportion of overall cases.

Underlying health conditions (e.g. high blood pressure & diabetes) can be inherited and could increase your chance of dementia.

The Value of Heritage

WHY CULTURAL VENUES ARE IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA



INDEPENDENCE

Dementia is a condition that can adversely impact a person's independence.

Cultural venues are **safe, inclusive environments** where a person living with dementia can go by themselves (in early stage) or with support (in late stage) to explore without judgement. Cultural venues encourage reflection and personal responses to collections and exhibitions, which is empowering for people living with dementia as it is not a test of knowledge or recollection.



HOBBIES & INTERESTS

If a person enjoyed cultural venues prior to their dementia diagnosis, it is likely they will continue to enjoy these opportunities - even if the way they engage with them **changes over time**.

Dementia does not need to stop people participating in hobbies and interests they had pre-diagnosis. Encouraging someone to continue is important to living well with dementia. It is possible for people to discover new hobbies and interests after diagnosis.



STIMULATING MEMORIES

Objects, exhibitions and cultural experiences can spark **memories, which may otherwise be difficult to access**. Creative environments provide a different type of enrichment to the usual 'day to day' experiences and may even require use of different parts of the brain that are not impacted by a person's dementia diagnosis.

Many cultural venues have **sensory interpretation**, which is scientifically proven to be a powerful tool to spark meaningful engagement with treasured moments from a person's life.



IMPROVES WELLBEING

Cultural venues provide a range of benefits for people living with dementia, which **contribute to their sense of wellbeing**.

- Creative expression without the need for words
- Reduce feelings of social isolation
- Enjoyable experiences improve mood and reduce anxiety
- Physical activity that encourages movement through exploration
- Interpretation and objects provide material for discussion and/or personal reflection

This list is not exhaustive. A full environment audit checklist is supplied later in this toolkit.

Navigating Visits

TYPICAL CHALLENGES THAT CULTURAL VENUES PRESENT FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA



NAVIGATION

People living with dementia can become **easily disorientated and lose their way** - even in environments they have visited before.

Venues may have too much, too little or insufficient **dementia friendly signage**, which can impact on a person's ability to navigate a space safely and calmly.

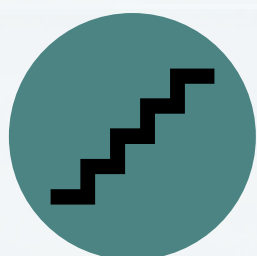
Additionally, some venues may operate with a low staff presence, which places more expectation on directional signage.



LIGHTING

The type of lighting required within cultural venues for conservation reasons differs significantly from what is most dementia friendly.

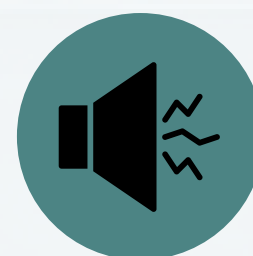
People living with dementia find **natural lighting** easiest to navigate in. Areas that are dark/dimly lit can be visually disorientating and can also create feelings of fear. Conversely, bright artificial lighting can create reflection, glare and shadows - all of which can be confusing and raise anxiety, as they may be misperceived by a person with dementia.



FLOORING AND STAIRS

Historic buildings often include **uneven flooring and lots of stairs**, which are difficult for those whose balance and coordination is impacted by dementia. It is not always possible to have lifts/stair climbers available in venues that have building restrictions/protected status.

Modern buildings may be more readily equipped with accessibility aids, but they may use glass and reflective floorings to make spaces look more spacious. The **lack of contrast** is difficult for a person living with dementia to see and can impact their depth perception.



NOISE

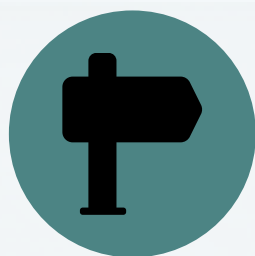
Cultural venues can be noisy at times, due to the quantity of visitors or audio elements associated with interpretation. Loud, unfamiliar sounds can be frightening for a person living with dementia and can quickly heighten anxiety. So too can noises from hidden speakers, as a person living with dementia cannot necessarily identify the source of the sound.

For people living with dementia, audio is an extremely effective as a sensory tool for sparking memories, but it needs to be sympathetically deployed to avoid an adverse reaction.

This section identifies changes that are easiest and lowest cost to implement. A full environment checklist of considerations is supplied later in the toolkit.

Quick Win Improvements

EASY, LOW COST IMPROVEMENTS THAT MAKE CULTURAL VENUES MORE DEMENTIA FRIENDLY



VISUAL SIGNAGE

A person living with dementia may struggle with reading, processing and understanding written information. For some people, this can make signage difficult to understand.

Consider adding simple visual symbols alongside your existing signage, or incorporating them directly into it. For example, place a toilet icon on the doors leading to the facilities, or use a car symbol on signs directing visitors to the car park. Choose high contrast, simple images and print them in a large size.



MEETING POINTS

To assist people in exploring the site safely and independently, introduce visual meetings points to report to and reunite with a family member, carer or access support from venue staff.

These meeting points should be visual, easy to understand and large enough to be spotted at a distance. They can be physical objects or printed images. Where possible, locate meeting points close to seating and toilets, and in a convenient location that staff can pass by to assist anyone experiencing difficulty.



VISUAL MISPERCEPTIONS

It is common for people living with dementia to experience 'visual misperceptions.' This is when they see one thing as something else. It is quick and easy to make improvements by reviewing your site from this perspective.

For example, people living with dementia may see black mats at doors as holes in the ground and speckled flooring/tablecloths as being covered in insects. Removing items or swapping them for something else instantly makes your venue more dementia friendly.



APPROPRIATE LABELLING

Visiting the toilet can be source of anxiety for people living with dementia, as some facilities have 'modern' features that they may not understand. For instance, a mixer tap as opposed to singular hot and cold taps, as well as push button toilet flushes as opposed to a chain or manual handle on the cistern.

It may not be possible to change these features, but labelling them with their intended purpose will make the facilities more dementia friendly, will reduce anxiety and increase independence.

It is not realistic to do everything on this checklist. Instead, it is about doing as much as practically possible to be dementia friendly and welcoming in your venue.

Environment Checklist 1/2

AN EXTENSIVE LIST OF AREAS TO REVIEW TO MAKE CULTURAL VENUES MORE DEMENTIA FRIENDLY

ARRIVAL

- Do you have an accessibility statement on your website?
- Do you have a page/section giving information that will support a person with dementia preparing to visit? Do you have a visual story resource available to download?
- Do you have designated parking/drop off zone for people who struggle to walk, but may not have a blue badge?
- Do you have wheelchairs or other accessibility aids available for hire?
- Do you have clear, visual, easy to read signage at your entrance? Is the outdoor signage visible from a distance or is additional signage required in the wider environment?
- Does your entrance look like a doorway? If not, what improvements could be made to make it more obvious?
- Do you have a member of staff available to welcome people in and give directions?
- Do you have a sensory map available to help people identify which areas are dark/quiet/busy etc?

NAVIGATION

- Do you have a sensory map available to help people identify which areas are dark/quiet/busy etc?
- Do you have visual meeting points around the venue?
- Do you have high contrast, bold, large print directional signage?
- Do you include visual icons on signage to indicate their purpose?
- Do you use non-reflective coating/lamination on signage to minimise glare?
- Do you have plenty of seating around the venue and/or portable seating that people can access when needed? Are the chairs traditional looking chairs or are they modern looking chairs that may need a label to indicate purpose?
- Do you have wheelchairs or other accessibility aids available for hire?
- Do you have a wheelchair friendly route around the venue?
- Do you have stairs marked with high contrast edging?

TOILET FACILITIES

- Do you have visual signage on the toilets to indicate their purpose?
- Do you have labelling on 'modern features' in the toilets, such as mixer taps, push button flushes, automatic soap dispensers etc?
- Do you have differently coloured toilet seats and lids to improve visual contrast and ease of use?
- Do you have mirrors in the toilets and are they needed? If so, could a sink be made available that doesn't have a mirror above it?
- Do you have steps into the toilets and if so, are they marked with high contrast edging?
- Do you have non-slip flooring and is there a regular cleaning regime in place to deal with any spillages?

FLOORING AND STAIRS

- Do you have areas where flooring is uneven? Is there an alternative route that can be recommended or can this be made more dementia friendly - eg with warning signage, high contrast edging etc?
- Do stairs have grab rails/hand rails or is a lift available to the upper floor? If not, do you have an accessible option for people who may not be able to visit the upper floor - eg video/photographs of the upper floor that can be viewed on a tablet or in a folder?
- Do you have plain, matt flooring wherever possible?
- Do you have contrasting colours on the walls and floors? If not, can the join be delineated with edging?
- Do you need additional lighting to make dark/dimly lit spaces safer to walk through?

It is not realistic to do everything on this checklist. Instead, it is about doing as much as practically possible to be dementia friendly and welcoming in your venue.

Environment Checklist 2/2

AN EXTENSIVE LIST OF AREAS TO REVIEW TO MAKE CULTURAL VENUES MORE DEMENTIA FRIENDLY

LIGHT AND NOISE

- Do you have as much natural lighting as possible across the venue?
- Do you have any dark/dimly lit areas? Can the lighting be increased in these areas and if not, do you have these spaces marked in advance with warning signage?
- Do you have any particularly bright areas that use artificial lighting? Can the lighting be decreased in these areas and if not, do you have these spaces marked in advance with warning signage?
- Do you have any objects or areas where shadows are cast? Can adjustments be made in these spaces to reduce the shadows and if not, do you have these spaces marked in advance with warning signage?
- Do you have audio interpretation and/or music in certain areas of your venue? Is this loud or of an acceptable volume? Can you adjust the volume or turn it off if needed? If not, do you have these spaces marked in advance with warning signage?

CAFE/RESTAURANT

- Do you have tables/table coverings that are plain, without visually confusing patterns/textures?
- Do you have a visual menu available for people who may not be able to read a written menu?
- Do you have cups and plates which are a different colour to the tables/table coverings to assist with differentiation through contrast?
- Do you have good lighting and as much natural lighting as possible to illuminate the space?
- Does the area get very noisy? Is there an area that people could be directed to (if needed) that is quieter?
- Do you deliver food and drinks to the tables? If not, are the trays provided non-slip and do they have handles?
- Do you have an easily identifiable place to pay for goods?

GENERAL EXPERIENCE

- Do you have sensory aspects to your interpretation or as part of the general visitor experience?
- Do you ensure that the venue is kept clear of unnecessary objects and clutter?
- Do you have a hearing loop? If so, do staff know how to use it and is it promoted as a service for visitors?
- Do you have staff/volunteers available to assist people during their visit? Have they had any dementia awareness training? Do they understand how to communicate with people living with dementia?
- Do you have glass partitions or walls in your venue? If so, are they clearly marked with edging and/or signage?
- Do your interpretation boards use large print and bold lettering? Are they printed in an easy to read font? If not, do you have a printed guide that people with dementia can use in the space? Does this use non-reflective lamination, large print, high contrast, bold text and visual icons/images?

MISCELLANEOUS

- Do you have clocks available with large faces?
- Do you include people living with dementia in your safeguarding policy (under vulnerable adults)?
- Do you have a quiet space(s) available for people to visit if needed during the course of their visit? If so, are these clearly signposted or featured on a sensory map?
- Do you offer any workshops/interactive programmes for people living with dementia?
- Do you have any attributes that could cause visual misperception - eg black mats (holes), blue tiles (water), speckled floors (crawling with insects)?
- Does your organisation understand why it is important to be dementia friendly? Do you undertake regular awareness raising/training sessions for staff and volunteers?

Example Signage

Toilet

THICK, STRONG BORDER
TO FOCUS ATTENTION

BOLD, LARGE PRINT
WRITING THAT USES A
CLEAR TO READ FONT - IN
THIS INSTANCE, ARIAL

TRADITIONAL IMAGE OF
TOILET - EASILY
RECOGNISABLE. TOILET
AND LID ARE DIFFERENT
COLOURS - DEMENTIA
FRIENDLY



BRIGHT
BACKGROUND
THAT
CONTRASTS TO
THE TEXT
COLOUR

The Value of Heritage

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR CULTURAL VENUES TO BE DEMENTIA FRIENDLY?



CUSTOMER SERVICE

It is not possible to make environmental changes that mean every cultural venue is 100% dementia friendly, but creating a welcoming, supportive atmosphere is completely achievable.

It is essential that staff and volunteers working with the general public have access to dementia awareness training and understand what they can do to support people living with the condition in visiting and enjoying the venue. Going the extra mile will certainly make the difference.



BRAND REPUTATION

Ultimately, every cultural venue strives to be inclusive and accessible for all visitors. Those living with dementia should be considered within this, as excluding them from your approach can impact brand reputation.

Making a concerted effort to improve surroundings and visitor experience for people living with dementia raises your profile and indicates that your venue is committed to inclusivity. This can positively impact people's perception of you as an organisation.



FUTUREPROOFING

Sadly, research indicates that dementia cases are going to grow exponentially over the next 20 years.

As a result, we know that a greater proportion of visitors will be living with the condition. On this basis, investment in environmental improvements, supporting resources and development projects for people living with dementia is a valuable use of funds, as these services will continue to benefit more people as time goes on.



COMPLY WITH THE LAW

Dementia is considered a protected status within the law - notably the Equality Act (2010). This framework states that people living with dementia should receive the same level of care and support as everyone else.

It is a legal requirement for all venues to ensure they are not excluding people living with dementia from experiencing their site. It would be possible for someone who felt this had not happened and they were discriminated against to file a legal claim against the venue.

All of these groups may include people with personal experience of dementia, who can find this type of work and training triggering. Creating space to communicate throughout is essential.

Wellbeing Considerations

EXPLORING IMPACTS UPON THE WELLBEING OF PARTICIPANTS AND STAFF



PARTICIPANTS

In every project for people living with dementia, it is essential to explore the ethical aspects of engagement. Reminiscence tends to be a positive, enjoyable experience, where people can engage with fond memories and feelings from their past. However, it can also lead people to re-live upsetting memories too. Themes of workshops and resources should be carefully considered to avoid obvious triggers, but it is possible for people to react negatively to anything. Staff training will empower people to manage these situations sensitively.



FRONT OF HOUSE STAFF

Although visits to cultural venues have the potential to provide a wealth of benefits, they may not be a positive experience for all. Front of house staff may encounter people who are confused, distressed, emotional and potentially, aggressive. These situations can occur even in the most dementia friendly environments and are a reflection of the unpredictable nature of dementia. Awareness training that includes information on effective communication techniques will support people in handling these scenarios.



MANAGEMENT

Being more dementia friendly seems an obvious path to follow, but it is not always necessarily practical to the level you may wish to deliver it. Budgetary pressures, staffing capacity, accreditation criteria, building regulations and more can hamper improvements and it often falls to the management to make decisions about what to prioritise. It can be challenging for managers to navigate these decisions when staff, volunteers and they themselves are passionate about creating positive change. Lack of or slow change is not necessarily a sign of disinterest or absence of empathy.



PROJECT STAFF

Delivering dementia projects is difficult. Even for those who may not have had personal experience of dementia, it can still be emotionally triggering. Dementia is unpredictable and can lead you to see participants experiencing a wide range of emotions. Training is helpful to raise awareness and equip people with tools to communicate effectively, but even the most experienced staff can find the cumulative toll and individual situations very difficult to process. Create space for people to talk about their experiences and ensure they have a regular 1-2-1 with a manager throughout.

Future Developments

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ACTIVITIES CULTURAL VENUES CAN OFFER TO SUPPORT PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

As a venue, you may wish to consider what additional activities you can offer to support people living with dementia. The benefits of this are extensive and can significantly improve people's quality of life and sense of wellbeing.

As a freelancer specialising in this field, I would be delighted to support you with any project work you choose to pursue. I have extensive experience of delivering all of the items suggested below and can also provide bespoke suggestions for your venue. I am also able to provide environment audits and dementia awareness training.



REMINISCENCE BOXES

Boxes of real and replica items that are loaned out to care homes, community organisations, charities and more to support the delivery of reminiscence activities.

Reminiscence allows people to recall memories from their past and to experience the associated feelings and emotions.



REMINISCENCE WORKSHOPS

Sessions that are hosted in a cultural venue and/or as outreach that use objects and creative tools to spark memories from the past.

Workshops are enjoyable and bring people together in shared activities. It is not a test of how much people can remember and is just as much about creating feelings of happiness and love.



MULTI GENERATIONAL PROJECTS

Multi-generational projects create connections between people or groups of people living with dementia, and younger generations.

There are shared benefits in projects such as these, for both the participants and the organisations leading them. It can lead to lasting relationships between generations and it supplies beautiful content for exhibitions and resources.



SUPPORTING RESOURCES

Bespoke resources can significantly enhance the experience for someone living with dementia at your venue. Resources you could consider are:

- Photo/object discussion packs
- Sensory maps
- Dementia friendly guidebooks
- Visual stories for visit preparation
- Trails and bespoke interpretation
- Hands on, sensory installations
- Specialist, welcoming quiet spaces