Dementia Adventure in a Box
Final report

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1. What we achieved

1.1 Summary

Dementia Adventure led a successful three year partnership project funded by the National Lottery Community fund commencing in April 2017. The main aim of this project was to give people living with dementia the opportunity and support to access the natural environment, with the associated benefits to health and wellbeing. This was achieved through delivering a tailored package of training & support called ‘Dementia Adventure in a box’ for partner organisations to help them deliver outdoor adventure activities for people with dementia locally. This included both making existing activities more inclusive (and dementia friendly) and developing some exclusively for people with dementia. Dementia Adventure worked with Methodist Homes Association, The Conservation Volunteers, Social Farms & Gardens and Abbeyfield.

The evaluation was led by the Association for Dementia Studies (ADS) at the University of Worcester, with specialist support from the Green Exercise Research Team at the University of Essex. This evaluation confirmed the importance of connecting with nature for people living with dementia and concluded that the project achieved the overarching project outcome of ‘People living with dementia are given opportunities and support to access the natural environment, leading to improved health and wellbeing’.

1.2 The training and support

The training and support was positively received, highly rated and considered very effective in many ways, including the ability to promote a positive approach to risk taking.

- A total of 64 delegates were involved across 44 locations.
- 100% of delegates* said they would recommend the days they attended.
- 100% of delegates* said that they felt the training day had met its objectives
- 100% of delegates* said that they felt the content was relevant on each day
- 87% of delegates* rated the trainers as excellent.
- 69% rated the training aids (e.g. handouts, slides, resources) as excellent
- The training resulted in increased understanding of dementia and confidence about working with people living with dementia.
- The ability to do practical outdoor exercises during the training was appreciated.
- Opportunities to share ideas and experiences and learn from each other were valuable. This was achieved through training sessions together with delegates from other organisations and a private Facebook group. “It’s been really good to get together with people running either very similar projects or different projects because it’s got them to think about different ways of delivering activities”.

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Involving people living with dementia directly in the delivery made the training and support more impactful. They were involved in audits of locations, developing and delivering training and answering delegate questions.

The bespoke support from the team at Dementia Adventure through phone, email and on site meetings was invaluable in supporting people with problems or issues they are facing in their particular location.

The main suggestion given about improving the training course indicated that the delegates wanted the training days closer together and to be completed before they started delivering activities.

*delegates who completed the evaluation. On average across all training days.

1.3 The activities for people living with dementia

Activities were set up for people living with dementia as a direct result of the training and support. Despite Covid-19 impacting substantially upon the ability of the partners to continue delivering their activities, the targets are met or near:

- For those organisations that didn’t previously work with people affected by dementia, the project enabled them to access a whole new client group. For those organisations who did, it allowed them to expand and improve their provision, while also offering new types of activities.
- A wide range of activities took place. The majority of these were nature-based, including nature walks, gardening, farm activities, visit to garden centres, visit to gardens, visit to the beach, woodland activities, gardening. Some were nature-based activities indoors (e.g. donkey visit to care home, making bird feeders at a ‘chit chat’
Dementia Adventure in a Box

group, flower arranging at a café group) while others had an intergenerational element.

- 913 activity sessions were held (164 one-off sessions and 779 sessions as part of 33 different activity series) against a target of 1152.
- 2490 activity attendances were recorded by people living with dementia and 582 by carers.
- 3072 people attended activities against a target of 2034.
- The average age of people with dementia attending was 80 years and 8 months, 64% were female.
- The average age for the carers was 60 years and 2 months, 83% were female.
- Where given, all the attendees were White British.
- Participants enjoyed the activities for a number of reasons, particularly the fact that they took place outdoors and were relaxed and informal. The personalised nature of the activities was also valued, which meant that they were meaningful and helped maintain a sense of identity.
- Attendees gave positive feedback on the activities: “…this is the highlight of my week”.

1.4 The outcomes for people living with dementia and their carers

There was strong evidence of positive impacts for people living with dementia and carer:

- Taking part improved overall wellbeing and mood for people taking part. There was a significant improvement in the mental wellbeing of people following the attendance at a session (16% for family carers, 18% for participants with dementia).
  “Green therapy is a winner, in most cases. We can calm people down with autism, we can help people with mental health, and we can certainly help people with dementia ‘cause we’ve proved it”. (Delegate)
“We can see the looks on their faces. I see, the lady that’s shaking and nervous and doesn’t really want to be there, and you know, within no time at all she’s sat down and she’s enjoying the activity and she’s chatting to someone next to her, and she’s fine”. (Delegate)

- There is already lots of evidence that shows that engaging with nature can help to dampen down symptoms of dementia and slow the progression. There was some qualitative feedback during this project:
  
  It’s been a godsend...I swear blind I don’t think I’ve got Alzheimer’s anymore. I couldn’t remember all this stuff a little while ago...I think I’ve...cured meself (sic) like you know. I seem to remember things like that I didn’t before...I did used to forget things. But I think some of it could be the fact that because I wasn’t doing much, as my son says to me like “if you don’t use it you lose it”.
  
  (Attendee)

- Taking part provided greater opportunity for physical activity. The activities formed an important proportion of weekly physical activity for people with dementia. Physical activity monitors indicated that Participant A was over twice as physically active on a day where an activity was attended. Weekly activity levels increased by 0.5 days, to just over 2 days.

- Taking part provided greater opportunity for social interaction
  
  “He was sitting at home before, quite isolated or he’d just go out on his scooter and drive around he wouldn’t speak to anybody”. (Carer)
  “It’s like I’d forgotten how to chat”. (Carer)

- The activities often gave people meaning and purpose. “His wife burst into tears and she was like, this is (husband), this is what he is passionate about that this is what makes his heart sing and look at him; he is smiling. There was no dementia, there was no issues or vulnerability….it was just beautiful”.

- The project helped them to reconnect with their past lives and identities through activities such as farming and cooking.

- There was also some evidence that the project had a longer-term impact beyond attendance at the activities.
  
  “…he comes back happier than when he went. So when I get home he’s full of what he’s done whereas, if he hadn’t been there, he’d just sit there with nothing to say, and probably miserable”. (Carer)

A film highlighting the positive impact of the project on both delegates who have taken part in the training and support and those living with dementia and their carers who have experienced nature based activities. You can view a film here.
2. Key learning

2.1 Project management, training and support

**Involving the right partners in this type of project is key.** A robust partner selection process helps identify partners with not only shared values base and vision, but appropriate resources and organisational priorities.

**Dedicated and appropriate resources are required to successfully coordinate and deliver the project.**

**Appropriate evaluation tools and support are required.**
Delegate support around the evaluation tools is vital. Time should also be allowed for the administration of the evaluation. People needed support to understand the value of the evaluation. We would look to use different tools in future and make evaluation a key element of the training.

**Involving people with dementia directly in the delivery of the training is invaluable.** Therefore we have been capturing the real life experiences of our Special Interest Group on film so we can use this content in our future training.

**Providers might benefit from more structured support in getting the project started.**
This could include template documents for delegates to use to approach potential partnership organisations; role descriptors for co-ordinators and delegates, etc.

**More bespoke support.** We have already moved away from the modular approach and are developing much more tailored support based on the needs of each organisation.

**Funding for organisations is required to make the activities happen.** During the project, we identified that the lack of funding for the delivery of the activities was a key barrier. We also provided fundraising webinars and individual support for delegates.

2.2 Delivery

**Beneficiaries were predominantly White British** and we need to find ways to reach a more diverse audience.
Organising the activities requires resources. Delegate selection and support is key, the right delegates need to be chosen. They need to have the capacity to join the training and to organise and deliver the activities. The marketing of the projects also requires dedicated resources in terms of time and money.

Offering activities that were meaningful and purposeful for participants were impactful. Delegates described how they felt it was important to support a sense of identity for participants, partly by enabling them to continue using the skills they had developed over their lives. Many of the positive impacts of the project appeared to be based on a flexible approach that recognised individual preferences and abilities. It was felt that undertaking ‘real’ tasks was fulfilling for participants.

“He was up here he was painting this wall, erm and we had someone else doing the high bits and the low bits and he was doing all the middle bits and, at the end of it he was covered in paint. And at the end of it he said ‘I love that’. He said “I haven’t done that for years, I felt like a man”. (Delegate)

“Activities are not created for the participants, they are what needs to happen at the care farm on a daily basis to make sure it runs smoothly. People enjoy being outside, feeling useful, and knowing that what they are doing has a purpose”. (Delegate)

Consider whether to brand the activities as ‘dementia friendly’. Some delegates felt that highlighting the fact that the activities were aimed at people with dementia might put off people. Feedback from some people with dementia and family members was that it felt like they were being labelled. Participants didn’t want the activities to remind them about their dementia. However, part of our training discussed ‘what's in a name’ and how that makes people feel - each person is different and we will never get it right for everyone. We also made it clear not to exclude someone because they did not have dementia.

Transport can be a challenge, particularly in rural areas, and many delegates suggested that this had an impact on levels of attendance. Some organisations had sufficient resources to collect participants from their home and take them back afterwards. Others had encouraged carers to bring the person with dementia and stay for the duration of the activity.

The appropriateness of the facilities should be considered including the amount of seating, suitability for wheelchair access, disabled toilet facilities. This was included as part of our training.

Many people with dementia require the support of an informal carer to attend activities. This was particularly an issue in rural areas where transport options are often
Giving carers the confidence to participate is therefore important. We ran Family Carer events at some of the project locations offering both support to those caring for people living with dementia and an opportunity for delegates to more widely publicise activities they have available at their locations.

“It’s partially getting the carers or the relatives to buy into the idea, more than getting the person themselves”. (Delegate)

**Work in partnership to recruit people to take part in activities.** Recruiting participants was a bigger issue for those provider organisations who have less contact with people with dementia as part of their core services. Those that do, already have access to a potential pool of participants through their existing services (e.g. care homes, extra care housing schemes). A good way to recruit participants was to collaborate with other groups and activities that already involved people with dementia, for example, Memory Cafes. Part of the project was looking at how different organisations with different aims could link together to provide support for each other.

**Marketing and promotion.** Newsletters appeared to be the most popular way of advertising activities. Posters and handouts or leaflets were also used, including in public locations. Social media, in particular Facebook, also proved popular, with delegates promoting activities on their own work-related pages and also those of organisations that they work with. Some delegates also made use of existing opportunities for promoting activities including during talks to local groups.