

Choosing a dementia-friendly meeting space

Key messages

- **Appropriate meetings spaces are important. People with dementia are increasingly getting together to work on dementia issues. They are also invited to meetings and conferences.**
- **Choosing an accessible meeting space or venue can be difficult. Many buildings can be confusing for people with dementia.**
- **Understanding what people with dementia may find difficult can help you choose the most appropriate meeting space or adapt an existing space.**

What does a dementia-friendly meeting space look like?

A dementia-friendly meeting space is:

- Easy to find
- Easy to get into
- Not confusing
- Friendly and welcoming.

However, although an accessible building is helpful, people with dementia say that it is the people in the building who make all the difference. Friendly, welcoming staff can override the biggest design problems.

Making some small and cheap changes can make a building more dementia friendly.

A dementia-friendly audit

Before running your meeting, it is a good idea to visit the venue with somebody with dementia. Ask them to 'walk the building' and to talk about how they experience it and what they see. Use this feedback to think about simple changes you could make to improve access for people with dementia.

- Think about the size of your meeting. Is the venue appropriate for the numbers of people with dementia who are going to attend?
- What else is going on in the building? Is it a busy venue with lots of different activities and meetings taking place? Will it be obvious where your meeting is based?
- What kinds of rooms are available? It can be helpful to have different room sizes – perhaps a large room for the main meeting and smaller rooms that people can use for quieter discussions.
- Are the rooms light and airy? What is the sound quality like?
- Are there enough toilets? Are they easy to find?
- Does the meeting space feel warm and welcoming? Will everyone be happy to work in the room? What can you do to make it feel more welcoming?

Location of your meeting

- Try to find a venue that is easy to get to.
- Transport is often an issue for people with dementia. Travelling by car or taxi is often the most convenient form of transport. If possible, a car park should be available at the venue or, at the very least, there should be a prominent drop-off and collection point for cars, taxis and minibuses.
- Not everyone will be travelling by car, so the venue should be close to public transport links.
- Full details of travel options should be given to people beforehand.

Getting into a building

- The entrance to the building should be obvious.
- Make sure there is step-free access, with a ramp or lift if necessary.
- A revolving door can cause difficulties. Is a push door available?

- Do you have to ring a bell so someone can let you in? Is it obvious where the bell is?
- Sometimes a buzzer is pressed by someone inside the building causing the door to open automatically. Will it be obvious to people how to get into the building?
- It can be helpful to have reception area near the entrance, with a receptionist to greet people and direct them to the event.

Signage

Good signage can overcome many design faults.

- Do signs show clearly where the event or meeting is taking place?
- If there are no permanent signs, can you put up temporary signs?
- Signs for toilets and exits are particularly important.
- Signs should be clear and in bold text. There should be a good contrast between the text and the background colour of the sign.
- There should be a clear contrast between the sign and the surface it is attached to.
- Signs should be fixed to the doors they refer to, not to the surface next to them.
- Signs with arrows can help people find their way to a room (eg the toilet). Think about the signs needed at key decision points to help people to find their way. You may need a sign in a car park to help people find their way into the building.
- Signs should be at eye level and well lit.

Lighting

What is the lighting like in the building?

- A light, airy building can feel welcoming but may also create problems with reflective surfaces. This can cause visual difficulty for some people with dementia.
- Well-lit entrances provide a welcoming introduction to a building. Dark corridors and lack of windows can feel depressing and can also cause problems for people who have visual problems.

Clever design

Some new buildings incorporate design features that can be confusing for people with perception problems. Be aware of these issues. Are there things you could do to overcome some of these difficulties?

- Very long escalators, spiral staircases and lifts that blend into the background wall can be difficult for people with dementia to negotiate.
- Mirrors on walls and unexpected places can be confusing for people trying to find their way around a building.
- Highly reflective floor surfaces can present problems for people with dementia.

Setting up a room for a meeting

- Choose a room that is big enough. There should be plenty of space for people to move around.
- Do you need tables? If so, think about the best way of setting them up in the room.
- For a small meeting (up to 12 people), a large rectangular table is often used, known as 'boardroom' style. This can be a good way for people to work together on an issue. But be aware that people at one end of the table may not be able to hear people at the other end, particularly when smaller discussions take place.
- For larger meetings (25 to 50 people), small, round tables are often used, known as 'cabaret' style. This can be good for smaller discussions and means that people have more chance to express their views. Make sure there is enough distance between tables so people can hear the discussion on their own table and aren't distracted by other discussions. The volume in the room as a whole can become quite loud!
- For very large meetings (50+ people), the room may be set up in 'theatre' style. This is usually used where an audience listens to a presentation from the front of the room, not when people want to discuss issues. This can be useful where you want to present an idea to a lot of people and follow it by splitting the audience into smaller groups to discuss the idea.
- Where you have a large meeting, it is a good idea to book a few smaller rooms, known as 'breakout' rooms. These should be located close to the main event room and clearly signposted.

- It is helpful to have a room or space available that people can use if they want time away from the main event. This should be close to the main room.

Sharing meeting space

It might be that other groups are using the same venue as you on the same day. Some facilities, such as a dining room, might be shared. This can create a very busy and confusing atmosphere for people with dementia.

It is useful to check out these arrangements beforehand with the venue. What can you do to make the environment less confusing?

Lunch and refreshments

Catering is memorable for people. Buffets and 'picnic bags' are praised. The eating experience should be pleasurable and not difficult for people to engage in. A separate room gives people a break from the main event. There should be enough seating with tables so that people can sit down to eat.

Confident and supportive venue staff

Staff at the venue need to be aware of the issues that people with dementia may face and be helpful and courteous. They may need to take directive action, such as assisting someone who is lost, and be able to liaise effectively with organisers and supporters.

Sharing information with venue staff about your anticipated needs will help them provide you with good customer service.

Good information before the meeting

Your dementia-friendly audit should help you overcome any difficulties about your choice of meeting venue. However, there may be some things you just can't change.

Give people plenty of information about the venue in advance, such as landmarks that identify the entrance (eg a large pot plant), and whether they have to ring a doorbell for attention.

It may be necessary to have someone waiting at the door to help people get into the building. It can be very reassuring to see a familiar face.

**This guide was created
with the help of the DEEP
reference group**

DEEP guides aim to support the involvement of people with dementia. Some are aimed at DEEP groups, others at organisations wanting to work well with people with dementia. They have all been co-produced with people with dementia and will be updated regularly throughout the project. Suggestions for new guides are welcome – contact Rachael Litherland at Innovations in Dementia: email rachael@myid.org.uk or telephone 01392 420076.

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