

# Is it nice outside? Consulting people living with dementia and their carers about engaging with the natural environment

In 2016 Natural England carried out a consultation for people living with dementia and their carers to consider how they engage with the natural environment.<sup>1</sup> In September 2016 Richmond Council Parks Department carried out a consultation looking at how people with dementia living in Barnes and elsewhere in the borough make use of Barnes Green as part of the development of “Friendly Parks” in the borough. This consultation was in part modelled on the Natural England consultation in order to act as a reference point and baseline for the Richmond consultation. This report aims to compare the conclusions and recommendations of both consultations in order to ensure that the local outcomes reflect the recommended outcomes of the government research.

## Background to Natural England Study

The research aims to investigate what the key benefits are from engaging with the natural environment for people living with dementia; what the barriers are to them doing this and what changes could be brought in to make the natural environment more accessible for people living with dementia. The objectives of the research were to obtain the views of 50-60 people living with dementia and 100-125 family carers in the following areas:

- Levels of knowledge and awareness around the role of nature in helping people with dementia to live well;
- quantifying current levels of outdoor activity, or disengagement with activity postdiagnosis;
- identifying specific motivations/reason for engaging/not engaging with outdoor activity and nature;
- What would make local nature spaces more dementia-friendly for this group?
- identifying specific barriers and challenges for this group around staying active.

## Key findings

The three methods of consultation:

- focus groups with people living with dementia,
- an online survey of carers,
- and interviews with a small sample of carers, led to the following key findings:

## Generic Findings

The findings of the national consultation are given in the boxes below.

### i. Where people go

- Where people with dementia go (or want to go) and what they do there (or want to do there) is heavily influenced by where they live (e.g. city or countryside) and their conceptualisations of nature. The majority of people with dementia who participated lived in urban areas. Public parks and gardens were popular places to visit, but the countryside was mentioned much less often. However, over 50% of carers who participated lived a mile or less from farmland or countryside and for these people the countryside was reported as being a popular place to visit. For people with dementia their concept of the natural environment was also an important factor in influencing their preferred visiting locations. For example, outdoor spaces with water were very popular visiting destinations.
- Only 20% of the people living with dementia cited their dementia as a barrier to using outdoor spaces, whereas 83% of carers believed that dementia limited the person’s ability to use outdoor spaces.

The Richmond consultation looked at the use of local parks and open spaces, focusing in particular on users of Barnes Green. People with dementia confirmed that they visited the parks that were local to them, but some people also visited larger destination parks such as Bushy Park and Richmond Park on a regular basis. Everyone, with one exception, could name the park local to them and there are a significant number of people who make regular visits at least once a week to parks. The pond on Barnes Green was mentioned for the wildlife value.

In line with the national consultation, some people with dementia recognised that their dementia was a barrier to using local parks – in particular they cited a fear of getting lost or confused as high on the list of concerns. More people did not see this as a barrier than those that did. Carers who took part in the consultation and the support group users all said that the diagnosis acted as a barrier to using parks.

### ii. Activities

- Informal walking was the most commonly cited activity by people living with dementia and carers. Informal walking was mentioned by 38% of people with dementia and 33% of carers, as something the person they cared for did at least several times a week. What walking meant to the person living with dementia came up strongly during interviews with carers, several of whom talked about the calming effect that this had on the person they cared for. This was vitally important to some as an escape from the pressures of being indoors, and could be as important to the carer as to the person with dementia.
- Wildlife watching, usually bird watching, is very popular amongst people living with dementia. In the survey 25% of people were said to take part in it several times a week or every day. 25% of people living with dementia had an interest in encounters

<sup>1</sup> Natural England Commissioned Report (NECR211) Is it nice outside? Consulting people living with dementia and their carers about engaging with the natural environment  
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with wildlife, one specifically with birds of prey. In the interviews with carers, six of the ten people interviewed talked about the person they cared for enjoying spending time watching – and sometimes listening to birds.

In the Richmond consultation looking at nature and watching wildlife particularly on Barnes Pond was the most popular activity mentioned. Walking (including walking dogs) was also very popular with many people taking part in this activity either in organised groups or with their carers. Five people said that they have other health conditions which limits their use of parks and outdoor spaces. This may take account of some people not taking part in walking as an activity. Another popular activity was sitting outdoors “enjoying the fresh air”, one lady talked about sketching in the park and other people talked about going for a drive in Richmond Park.

Other exercise or active sport was a less popular choice of activity. A few people said that they sometimes played informal games in the park, and 2 said that they did so often. Almost all consultees did not make use of gym equipment, three people said that they ran in parks, one person often, and two people cycled. It is not clear why active exercise is a less popular choice of activity, although 5 people did report other health conditions which limit their access to outdoor spaces. It is also possible that those consulted did take part in other exercise but not in the park. One lady in a discussion group said that she did exercises at home on a daily basis with family members.

### iii. Places

- Places associated with water (inland, coast, natural, artificial) were the most popular places to visit for people with dementia (45%) and in the carers' survey over 25% of people living with dementia visited rivers, canals and waterways, or seaside, beach and coastal areas, at least once a month. For others, however, proximity to water could instil fear due to bad memories. Thus the picture that emerged overall from carers was far less positive than that coming from people living with dementia.
- City parks or public gardens were also places that were very popular to visit among people with dementia. About 30% of people with dementia talked about visiting city parks and gardens. 46% of carers said the person with dementia visited one or the other at least once a month with almost two thirds (63%) living less than one mile away from a park or public garden. Several people with dementia talked passionately about the role their local park played in providing them with somewhere to go, and as somewhere to enjoy watching other people taking part in activities.

Most of those consulted visited their local park, but other parks were also mentioned, notably Richmond Park and Bushy Park. The consultation did not ask about other outdoor destinations as this was thought to be beyond the remit of the consultation. One carer noted that all parks should be dementia friendly as people with dementia were likely to visit their local park.

### iv. Key factors helping or hindering engagement with nature

- Transport and mobility were the most important factors for both people with dementia and carers; availability, ‘someone to take me’, or personal attributes (limited physical mobility).

The Richmond consultation supports these factors as a barrier to visiting parks and open spaces. The following were all thought to be major barriers to the use of parks: getting to the park; accessible transport options, parking places near parks, accessibility within the parks and in particular wide flat pathways, a lack of seating and resting places, someone to go with and the bad weather.

People with dementia recognised that other health conditions were barriers to using parks and open spaces, many were frail and elderly and concerned that just getting to the park was a challenge that would wear them out and limit the enjoyment of the visit. Additionally in Richmond a lack of information about appropriate activities held in parks was also identified as a barrier to visiting parks.

## Conclusions

The conclusions of the Natural England study are in line with the conclusions and recommendations of the Richmond consultation to develop “friendly parks”.

### i. Lack of information

Many local outdoor spaces are underused by people with dementia. The reasons for this were not always clear, although factors such as perceived danger were highlighted, but a simple lack of awareness and information about what those spaces have to offer may have contributed as well.

**Recommendation 1:** Local directories of dementia-friendly open spaces and facilities should be developed by local dementia action alliances, perhaps using a ‘trip-advisor’ approach to encourage greater use of natural spaces by people living with dementia. Managers of natural environments and organisations providing activities in outdoor spaces should be encouraged to develop and follow the principles of dementia-friendly communities.

The Richmond consultation highlighted a lack of information as a major barrier to the use of parks and open spaces. Those who responded were not aware of the events that are run by the environment sector in the borough in local parks including on nearby Barnes Common. Methods of disseminating information effectively to people with dementia and their carers through care organisations should be developed. A means of identifying events that are suitable for people with dementia should also be developed. South West London Environment Network (SWLEN) who have an extensive events calendar [www.swlen.org](http://www.swlen.org) are crucial to the development of this role. Ongoing liaison between SWLEN and organisations such as the Alzheimer’s Society, the Carers Centre, Age Concern and other similar groups who disseminate information about events to their clients is important.

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## ii. Appropriate activities

The findings of the consultation suggest strongly that activities are the main motivating factor for engaging people with dementia with the natural environment. The project found that people living with dementia were motivated to take part in social activities such as guided walks and listening to the birds and music in outdoors spaces, and enjoyed informal walking as an activity and as a means of calming down and relaxing, but also slightly more ambitious activities such as community gardening or farming.

**Recommendation 2:** Organisations planning or providing activities for people living with dementia need to take account of the importance of social activities as a key factor in stimulating engagement. Local services responsible for outdoor public spaces should consult with relevant groups and individuals with dementia (through local DAAs, where they exist) to gain an understanding of how best to ensure the inclusion of people with dementia in the activities they provide.

A strong recommendation of the consultation in Richmond is that SWLEN will work with the environmental sector and activity providers to identify appropriate activities for people with dementia in parks. Friends of parks groups will be encouraged to become dementia friends through the work of the dementia action alliance and appropriate activities will be highlighted on the SWLEN events calendar. There was also some support for activities held specifically for people with dementia to attend, these could be led or self-guided. Activities that respondents suggested that they currently enjoy are: looking at and being in nature, guided walks, exercising pets, informal games and walking.

## iii. Appropriate places

Place was also important and clear views were expressed about the preference for people living with dementia and carers visiting locations with access to water (inland, coast, natural or artificial), closely followed by public parks and gardens. The strength of this association appears to combine an emotional concept of nature (positive, soothing, aesthetic qualities associated with water) with the practical reality of many people's day to day engagement with nature which may be limited by geographical location or factors such as transportation, support, physical mobility, or the impact of dementia.

**Recommendation 3:** Organisations planning and providing activities for people living with dementia should take into account the type of place that motivates people living with dementia to be engaged.

Barnes Green is currently being developed as a "Friendly Park". Many of the consultees commented on the value of the pond and wildlife that can be found there. When discussing what it is about the park that people liked they commented that they liked the "sense of freedom" and that they were "part of the world". There were things other than the wildlife which were attractive – "being out of the house", "It is an opportunity to meet other people" and it offers "the opportunity to talk to other people". Someone else commented that "It's relaxing and not stressful which reduces symptoms", "I don't have to remember anything to have a wonderful experience". Those that were consulted felt that it was important for all local parks to be accessible to people with dementia and their carers not just one or two parks. It is the proximity of their homes to that was the important factor as much as the place.

## iv. Transport

Significant barriers to participation by people living with dementia were a lack of transport and inadequate support both to get to locations, to use facilities and to participate in outdoor activities.

**Recommendation 4:** Collaborative working between organisations providing services to people with dementia, organisations managing outdoor spaces, local transport organisations and through local dementia action alliances, for example, could generate innovative partnerships and solutions to enable people with dementia to access public spaces outdoors.

This was identified as a significant barrier to visiting parks and open spaces for people with dementia. The availability of disabled parking spaces near to Barnes Green was recommended as was the marking of public transport routes within and from the park. Pedestrian safety training was also recommended in order to allow carers to visit parks and cross roads in safety. English Nature's recommendation for collaborative working has been noted.

## v. Dementia Friendly Communities

Linking this activity with the movement towards 'dementia friendly communities', and the work of local DAAs, increases the potential for positive engagement, impact and sustainability. These could significantly enhance the potential for people living with dementia to feel part of the community and to enjoy their local nature spaces.

Carers tend to be more cautious than people with dementia about what the latter can do outdoors and have concerns about issues such as safety when in natural environments.

**Recommendation 5:** Carers 'organisations and the providers of support to people with dementia have a role to play in encouraging family carers and paid staff to be more ambitious in their expectations of what people with dementia can do. This could be achieved through the sharing of innovative good practice highlighting the positive outcomes, and how concerns and practical difficulties have been overcome to enable someone living with dementia to participate in outdoor activities safely.

In Richmond the Friendly Parks are being developed as a part of the Dementia Friendly Villages working closely with the Dementia Action Alliance and the Alzheimer's Society.

## vi. Accessible Environments

The findings of the consultation allied to previous research evidence indicates that people with dementia often suffer multiple disadvantages in accessing and using structured environments such as parks. Problems with mobility, tiredness and disorientation can have a significant impact on the ability of people living with dementia to enjoy them. The availability of accessible signage, toilets and cafes, places to sit and relax located in spots with even ground that are easy to find, and the presence of someone trained in dementia awareness to offer support and information.

**Recommendation 6:** Organisations designing and managing outdoor spaces should ensure the availability of accessible signage, facilities such toilets, cafes, places to sit and relax which are easy to find, walkways located on even ground, and the presence of someone trained in dementia awareness to offer support and information.

**Recommendation 7:** Greenspace managers should fulfil their obligations under equalities legislation to make reasonable adjustments and to consider the specific needs of people with dementia. They should form local alliances with groups and individuals with experience of dementia, or join existing ones (such as local dementia action alliances) to assist in planning, training and quality assurance in the delivery of services.

Comments – Recommendations 6 and 7

Some providers of managed outdoor environments may already be working towards this and some may be aspiring to make these changes but don't know how to implement them. Undertaking dementia-accessible audits involving people with dementia, providing 'dementia friends' awareness sessions, offering more specialist training and becoming part of a local dementia action alliance (where one exists) are some of the ways in which these change processes can be put into effect.

The outcome of the Richmond consultation is to develop the concept of "Friendly Parks" in Barnes Green that makes it accessible to people with dementia and others. Dementia Friendly Parks includes the availability of accessible signage and facilities, places to sit and relax which are easy to find, paths on even ground, improved access to the pond and informative interpretation. Activities within the park designed for this group will also be developed.

Most responses to the consultation stress the importance of other people using the park or businesses/ community groups based in the park having an understanding the needs of people with dementia. One of the volunteers at a discussion group suggested that "friends of parks groups" could have a role to play in providing this. Friends of parks groups potentially have a positive role to play in welcoming people with dementia and other groups to their activities and in ensuring that their activities are accessible.

### Conclusions and comparisons

The Richmond consultation found that all those who took part in the consultation were supportive of developing Barnes Green as a "Friendly Park". Some of those who took part in the consultation said that they already make use of the park on a regular basis and enjoy the experience. Most were interested in any future opportunities to make use of the open space.

The main issues that should be addressed to make the park "friendly" are also reflected in the conclusions and recommendations of the national consultation conducted by Natural England. The recommendations from the consultation fall into 5 different categories:

1. Physical improvements to the park including pavement improvements
2. Way marking and interpretation
3. Transport
4. Activities within the park – both self-led activities for people with dementia and highlighting community activities organised within the park that are suitable for people with dementia.
5. Additional support – other suggestions included befrienders who could take people to the park, accessible toilets with room for 2 people, help points within the park, and wheelchairs and walking frames to borrow which would allow access to the park for people with mobility problems.

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