



The Care Home Designer Ltd

Dementia Care Environments – The Key Elements

Seven basic elements and why they matter

- Colour Schemes
- Themes
- Wayfinding
- Personalisation
- Destinations / Places of Interest
- Lighting
- Toilets and Bathrooms

This is a no-frills over-view of seven basic elements that are fundamentally important to how well a care home will function from the perspective of the surroundings and the roles they fulfil.

Whilst not a comprehensive, these elements should be addressed as minimum requirements for every dementia care home. They bring profound benefits to residents and have a positive impact throughout the business of a care home, contributing significantly to its general success.

1. Colour scheme

One of the simplest ways to improve a dementia care environment is to introduce an appropriate colour scheme. Every home needs to be decorated so it's just a case of thinking differently about how colour can be employed.



1. Contrast – refer to light reflectance values to ensure appropriate colour contrast whilst providing an attractive and broad colour palette to work with.

2. Different colour combinations for different corridors and areas of the home provide support for better orientation.

3. A well designed colour scheme can achieve the dual purposes of being functional and attractive. It's vital for the business that the surroundings have broad appeal. It's an all-too-common misconception that achieving 'contrast' requires the use of primary colours so let me make it clear – it doesn't. There's great value in employing professional help from someone who understands colour as well as the unique demands of dementia.

4. Choice of wall and floor colours directly affect the amount of light in a space. Dark colours absorb light rather than reflect it so lighter colours should be used on the larger surface area's to maximise light reflection with darker colours used to pick out detail such as skirting boards and door frames.

What are the benefits?

An appropriate colour scheme will aid orientation, make the environment light and attractive, prevent falls, encourage movement, support independence, reduce stress and anxiety, reduce the need for anti-psychotics....and so on.

Skilfully chosen colour combinations can be employed consistently throughout an interior design scheme such that all the elements of the surroundings including bedding, chairs, curtains, signage and so on, work together making makes a truly attractive space which is also highly effective in supporting dementia related issues – an ideal combination for a great care home business!

2. Themed Surroundings

Creating meaningful themes within a home is the next level of effective differentiation. The key objective is to make the space easier to engage with when residents are affected by dementia, and a significant consideration here is facilitating regression such that surroundings don't contradict what a person expects to see.

I believe 'we are our memories'. They're perhaps the one thing we truly own and make us who we are and this is why reminiscence is so valuable, it reinforces personhood.

Incorporating themes that relate to the memories of experiences the residents hold, both respects and recognises the thoughts and feelings that mean the most to them and validates their emotional selves.

Using images and destinations that are familiar to the home's population is a powerful and grossly under-valued means to influence psychological and physical well being.

What are the benefits?

Introducing familiarity to the surroundings with familiar themes reduces anxiety and encourages activity. The environment becomes less daunting and the objects and images stimulate conversation and memories. Themes also provide effective, reliable way-finding landmarks because the memories they are associated with are reliable ones. Mental conflict and boredom are reduced because the surroundings are more stimulating and relevant. Health and well-being are supported.

There's one additional factor I've observed through a recent project that I haven't been aware of before, makes perfect sense and is really significant. Because the population of the care home is typically from the immediate locality, introducing locally-relevant images and themes is also introducing something residents will likely have in common. What I've found recently is that the images prompt reminiscent conversations between residents because they discover they have things in common. I think this is an extremely positive outcome that I've never heard or read about before yet is a very strong reinforcement for this strategy.

3. Wayfinding signage

On the assumption someone with dementia may usually feel their care home surroundings are unfamiliar, way-finding strategies become crucial in helping make residents feel more 'at home'. The strategies I've already described provide valuable support to way-finding and orientation, but we can further compliment these with effective signage. There are various design elements which must be incorporated to make an effective sign for a dementia care setting and it should be installed no higher than eye-level to ensure it will be in the resident's natural field of vision.

Within an effective interior design scheme the colours can be incorporated within the design of the signage without any loss of effectiveness.

To be fit-for-purpose the sign requires specific visual content and must be extremely durable. Stick-on signs simply won't do. They are too easily removed or damaged making them unreliable, and reliability is a really important factor.

What are the benefits?

Appropriate signage alone can provide a significant boost to residents confidence and their ability to find their way around independently. Signage only becomes more effective when used as part of a cohesive design strategy.

Knowing where you are, especially if you're looking for a toilet or your own room, is vitally important. The consequences of not being able to locate these important places are numerous and negative, impacting dramatically on health, well-being, self-confidence and self-esteem and increasing demands on carers. Also, let's not forget that even for residents who are not independently mobile, effective signage is essential too, as they still benefit from knowing where they are going when being escorted around the home.

4. Personalisation

In a care home setting, a person's room is their home, so appropriate support for locating and identifying their home is essential.

Personalisation in this context concerns supporting residents in finding their own room. Within the context of a well-designed dementia care home this needs to be effective, safe and in-keeping with the themes and schemes of the interior design.

There are three solutions which are tried, tested and appropriate for this purpose;

- **A personalised door design** – a door of a distinctive design that is distinguishable from other doors around it. This can be achieved by painting doors different colours and incorporating a door number too. Another quick and cost-effective way to do this, especially if your home is full of flat, brown fire doors is to use Door-cals which can be applied and in use within 20 to 30 mins. However this is achieved, the design should reflect the residents choice of course to ensure it is based on something which is familiar to them.
- **Personalised signage** – a durable, interchangeable product can be incorporated in an interior design's colour scheme whilst maintaining the essential visibility afforded by good design and colour contrast. These signs need the facility to incorporate words and images. These can be their name and photo (the obvious choice) but must be something the owner consistently and confidently recognises, which may be the words Rose Cottage and a picture of a rose perhaps. It doesn't matter what it is providing it is consistently recognisable.

- **Memory Boxes** – A well assembled Memory Box should be filled with readily identifiable items that tell a story about the owner. The Memory Box will then be a reliable, personal landmark as well as an attractive, interesting display. This can complement the environment and provide valuable an insight into the owner and their history and background.



What are the benefits?

These products are all proven, effective solutions that can be employed separately or collectively to orientate residents with dignified and highly effective personalisation. The ability to locate and enter one's own home within the care home setting is vital for supporting confidence and personal identity.

Having familiar items on display provides stimulus for conversation through reminiscence and provides valuable cues for carers to initiate relevant conversation. Personalisation reinforces the beneficial sense of 'home' that we should seek every opportunity to promote.

5. Destinations and Point of Interest - Places to go and things to do.

Boredom is the enemy!

A common feature of a poorly performing homes is that residents are bored and have nothing to do. An inactive, unstimulated existence impacts comprehensively on residents' health and well-being. This also impacts negatively on the carers role and leads to more rapid deterioration of the environment resulting in a very unpleasant place with increased repair and renewal costs.

This inevitably impacts on everyone concerned as the quality of care and performance of the business will decline.

In the context of a well-designed dementia care home there should always be plenty of things to engage and stimulate. Both physical and mental activity should be promoted and destination points – a reason to go somewhere and do something – can play a lead role in this. Destination points can be anything from a well-stocked hat stand to a full blown Café, Hair Salon or a Sensory Garden for example. With some effort The Dining Room and Bathroom can also become valuable destinations associated with enjoyable experiences. Destination points should provide opportunity for engaging activities whilst also creating reliable, attractive landmarks.



What are the benefits?

Increased activity and a sense of purpose provide healthy, mental and physical stimulation through engagement with other people and engagement with comforting surroundings. Carers benefit with activities-on-tap that residents will often engage with independently as well as with carers supporting and participating. A care home team should strive to create a sense of community with relevant focal points supportive of a community strategy.

6. Lighting

In the simplest of terms, but worthy of note - we can only see something if there is light bouncing off it! So making things more easily, visually interpreted in a care setting is profoundly affected by the quality of lighting. There are no exceptions. LED lighting is the perfect illumination (ignoring natural light for a moment), especially if you're prepared to invest in a Circadian system, but even if you're not, standard flat panel LED's will provide huge improvements over any other form of illumination and have a positive effect on the people who live and work in the home.

Quality and levels of illumination can be easily and cheaply improved by swapping out older lighting for new LED flat panel lamps. They distribute the light tremendously well with greater amounts of reflected light from wall surfaces (which we've now painted in appropriate colours of course) helping to reduce troublesome shadows. The right lamps will reliably deliver the recommended amount of light and without glare. LED lamps are cost-effective to buy and running and replacement costs are lower than any alternatives.

What are the benefits?

Improved levels of illumination make surroundings more visible and easier to interpret. This impacts positively on fear and anxiety, falls, depression, confidence, independence, appetite and activity.

Light is essential to good health and profoundly affects mental and physical well-being!

For the greatest health benefits from light, the sun is the best source of course, and people should be given every opportunity to safely enjoy natural daylight as much as possible.

For further not-too-technical information on the effects of light on our health and well-being I recommend reading Hammond Care's new publication, 'Enlighten' which explains how we react to different types of light and the effect it has on us. It also provides some useful recommendations on levels of light in various parts of the home depending on their function. Whether or not you think the lighting in your home is adequate, I'd recommend getting yourself a cheap light meter and walking around your home. If my typical experiences are anything to go by, I suspect you may be in for a surprise...

7. Toilets and Bathrooms

Of all the things any person will want to manage independently, using the toilet and bathroom are top of the list and there are two aspects to this – finding it and using it.

Let's start with an effective door sign so the facilities can be more easily located. Often, even in new buildings, the entrances to these vital facilities are set back and effectively hidden from view from any distance. (How silly is this?) To overcome this a toilet or bathroom may need two signs to help locate it – one on the nearest visible wall surface, or even a double sided projecting sign if it's sited down a corridor, and the second sign on the door itself.

Successfully located, the features within the toilet and bathroom should be high-contrast and well lit to minimise hard and dangerous shadows. Toilet seats, grab bars, frames etc, should all contrast clearly with the surroundings.

Bathrooms need to be functional, but there are greater benefits if they are presented in such a way as to be relaxing and therapeutic too. Just think Spa!

What are the benefits?

Creating toilets and bathrooms that are easy to locate and safe to use independently, are important from the perspective of dignity, confidence, self-esteem and much more. Losing any of these is detrimental in so many ways it would warrant an entire article all to itself. Correctly presenting toilet and bathroom facilities is a small price to pay for dignity and self-esteem.

Most people severely underestimate the influence the environment has on physical and mental well-being.

In a dementia care home the environment directly influences the habits and behaviour of the people who live there, who work there and who visit the home, all of which significantly reflects on the success of the home as a business.

These basic elements are commonly not addressed because of uncertainty about *what* to do and how to go about it. Some operators and managers with great aspirations fail to achieve them and are put off by misconceptions over cost and a lack of appreciation for the magnitude of the returns. Others acknowledge the importance of the environment but don't really deliver.

In the next few years the environment will be recognised as the single most effective, non-chemical means to improve the quality of dementia care, reduce costs and help homes remain, or become viable.

It's only my opinion of course, but the operators willing to make the leap of faith necessary to fully embrace a comprehensive resident-focused design strategy will lead the way in achieving the highest quality of care.



The Care Home Designer exists to develop and deliver this initiative providing all the products, services and expertise to realise the potential of the environment and raise the bar of professional dementia care.

If you want to know more about developing your environment to fulfil its potential in delivering a higher standard in dementia care please get in touch, we'll be delighted to hear from you.

Click here for my 10 second biography.



enquiries@tchd.co.uk
0113 2685018/ 07974 645296