COMMUNITY HOUSING INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION NSW

MODULE 3.1

Making Buildings Easier

FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA AND OTHER COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS

Working with Older Tenants

A TOOL KIT FOR THE NSW COMMUNITY HOUSING INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

Making buildings easier for people with dementia and other cognitive impairments

In 2018, there is an estimated 436,366 people living with dementia in Australia. Without a medical breakthrough the number of people with dementia is expected to increase to 589,807 by 2028 and 1,076,129 by 2058. [1]

Dementia is the single greatest cause of disability in older Australians (aged 65 years or older) and the third leading cause of disability burden overall.[2]

Housing is an essential component of the support and care model in place across Australia to maintain the independence of those living with dementia and assist their carers.

Community housing providers, working with partners, are well placed to lead meaningful change in the way people live with dementia while improving community understanding and acceptance. Preventative tenancy sustainment keeps people living at home safely for as long as is possible.

Whilst many of us will have experience of buildings which are easy to find, easy to navigate within and which make us feel safe and comfortable, many will also have experience of buildings which are hard to find, where you cannot work out where you are going when you get there or which make us feel unsafe or disoriented. Unsurprisingly, environments which are accessible to people with dementia also tend to be easier and more pleasant for everyone as well.

Dementia is the single greatest cause of disability in older Australians

1 Dementia Australia (2018). Dementia prevalence data 2018-2058, commissioned research undertaken by NATSEM, University of Canberra
2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) Dementia in Australia

People with dementia or other cognitive impairments may be having difficulties that impact on how they experience the environments in which they find themselves. Difficulties with memory and concentration can make it harder for people to remember where they are going so they can get lost more easily if signage is hard to understand, ambiguous or not present at a key junction in a building. It can also mean that people can forget why they are there and so will be particularly sensitive to the "clues" a space gives out about its function.

Difficulties with perception can mean that some people with dementia might experience visual or auditory distortions which can increase the risk of falls, present imaginary barriers or cause distress or confusion.

Work undertaken by the Housing Learning and Improvement Network has identified a number of key factors to consider when we think about our buildings [3].

Signage and the level of lighting, as we have already identified in making buildings easy to navigate, is also significant for tenants with dementia or other cognitive impairments. For landmarks, the more attractive, interesting or arresting the landmark (which could be anything such as a painting, a sculpture or a plant) the easier and more useful it is as a landmark. This is especially true for people with dementia who are having difficulty understanding the meaning or relevance of signage.

Unnecessary clutter in an environment can make life difficult for everyone, and this applies to noise levels as well as objects. This can be disorienting and make concentration difficult. In some cases it can also cause visual or auditory distortions.

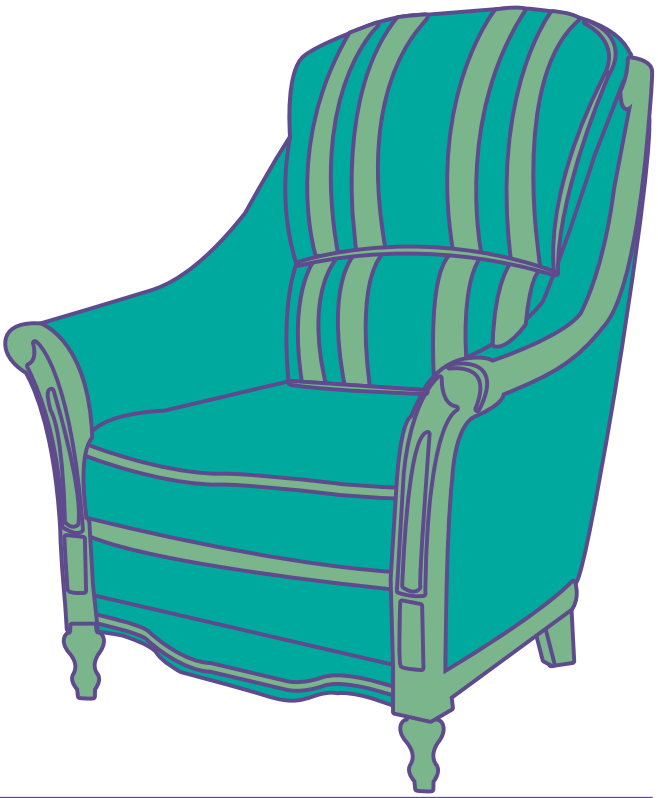
The physical environment can have a major impact on a person living with dementia. Creating a dementia-friendly environment that maximises the wellbeing of people living with dementia at home and increases opportunities for their participation in activities is important and something that might be considered by community housing providers as they assist older tenants to remain at home.

Research has found that the environment can have a positive or negative effect on a person with dementia and can help a person with dementia hold on to their world by maintaining ties with familiar and comfortable surroundings.

A dementia-friendly environment is one that promotes independence and supports wellbeing. It also:

- Draws on familiar surroundings
- Allows for easy access and orientation within the person's home environment
- Provides support for doing things that the person enjoys
- Provides support for participation in daily activities
- Provides aids to support safety, security and independence

The Dementia Services Development Centre based in Stirling, United Kingdom, is an international centre of knowledge and expertise dedicated to improving the lives of people with dementia. They have undertaken significant research focused on improving the design of housing to assist people with dementia. They have identified the following design principles that can enhance the living circumstances and wellbeing of people living with dementia.[4]



3 https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/How-to-make-buildings-easier-for-people-with-dementia/
4 Dementia-Friendly Environments – Adapting your home. Dementia Australia https://www.dementia.org.au/files/helpsheets/Help-sheet-Environment01_AdaptingYourHome_english.pdf

Care by design principles

COLOUR AND CONTRAST

Strong colour and contrast can facilitate independent living as older people may experience colours as 'washed out' – different tones of grey, blue, green and purple are harder to differentiate. Using colour and furniture that contrasts can highlight hazards and improve safety. Contrasts between floors and walls, and walls and doors must be considered.

LIGHTING

Maximising natural light is a key design feature that can help visual stimulation and movement. Appropriate lighting can promote independence and help sleep patterns.

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Fixtures and fittings have a significant impact on independence. Handrails and grab rails are important near stairs and steps and should be in contrasting colours. Rugs and mats should be avoided as tripping hazards. Appropriate controls and switches are important for tenants to operate them safely with larger screens and controls easier to use. Light switches and electrical sockets need to be clearly visible and easily accessible.

SIGNAGE

Clear, easily seen signage can help mobility and independence. Meaningful visual representations can help locate key amenities such as the bedroom or toilet more easily. Photographic signage and labels can also help. Signage as a way finding tool can reduce distress in people who wander. People wandering can become distressed and their resultant behaviour can impact on neighbours.

SAFETY

Alarms and other technical systems must be easily accessible, with those featuring audible confirmation when keys are pressed as being easier to use. Intercoms that can be accessed anywhere in the house and an audible warning when the door is opened can enhance a feeling of safety.

OUTDOOR SPACES

Easy access to gardens, with minimal door thresholds, make it easier for people to go outside. Well-defined paths can minimise trips and falls. Handrails in gardens together with appropriate lighting and contrasting colours help people negotiate potential hazards.

Factors to consider for the person

Before discussing making changes in the home with the person, think about some of these things:

- What physical or thinking changes is the person experiencing? For example, difficulty finding familiar items around the home
- How can I help the person continue to feel valued and included in daily life?
- How can I help the person continue doing things they enjoy at home?
- What can I do to help the person continue to feel valued and included in daily life?
- When is the best time of day to discuss making these changes in the home?
- What aids, cues or prompts such as clocks, signs or a message board may help the person manage daily tasks?

How to improve lighting

- Replace current globes with brighter globes to support good lighting within the home
- Open curtains and blinds fully to maximise daylight within individual rooms
- Position seating for reading or hobby activities to take advantage of sunlight
- Consider using additional lighting such as floor or table lamps when performing tasks such as reading
- Consider using sensor lighting which can reduce the risk of falls at night

LOUNGE ROOM

- Create an opportunity for a quiet space to sit, relax or read
- Ensure opportunities are available to perform meaningful activities or favourite hobbies or pastimes
- Place personal photos and items around the room to provide pleasant memories and opportunities for reminiscence
- Use different textures and colours in living rooms to provide sensory engagement e.g. knitted blanket or throw, soft cushions
- Reduce clutter and remove potential hazards such as loose electrical cords or rugs, and provide storage for items to ensure sufficient space to move around
- Use contrasting colours for floors, walls and furnishings for visual identification

KITCHEN

- Ensure there is sufficient room and lighting (overhead and under cupboard lighting) to perform tasks in the kitchen
- Place regularly used items in the line of sight and group common items together
- Use labels and clear canisters to help locate items
- If necessary, use labels on cupboards or replace some solid doors with see-through ones to easily view items
- Replace appliances that are not working with ones similar of design to support familiarity
- Use flood detectors, monitors and thermostat controls to reduce hazards or risks
- Utilise whiteboards and calendar clocks for orientation and important reminders
- Use taps that are familiar and easy to use

DINING ROOM

- Consider using contrasting colours for tableware settings – plates, tablecloth and glassware to improve the visibility of each item
- Ensure that there is adequate lighting during meal times such as using overhead lighting, side lamps and wall lighting or opening curtains

BEDROOM

- Ensure there is adequate lighting; for example, sensor lighting can reduce the risk of falls at night time
- Use block out curtains or blinds to regulate sleeping patterns and stop shadows appearing on the windows from outside trees and shrubs
- Remove clutter within the bedroom to ensure clear pathways, e.g. chairs, tables, clothes, shoes, rugs
- If necessary, use labels to identify items in drawers and cupboards in the bedroom
- Display a selection of daily clothing and shoes on a stand or a section of the wardrobe for easy access, as a way of prompting and supporting independence

BATHROOM

- Consider warmer colour tones for floors and walls and ensure that the room temperature is comfortable when using the bathroom
- Place regularly used items in a group within the line of sight and at a height that is accessible
- Use anti-flood devices, devices for releasing excessive water in the bath, floor and fall detectors and ensure the drainage holes are clear to reduce risk
- Use taps that are familiar and easy to use and install thermostat or hot water cut-off devices to regulate and monitor hot water temperature
- Use colour contrast to highlight items such as bath rails, door handles and toilet seats
- Consider covering or removing mirrors. Some people lose the ability to be able to differentiate between what they see in the mirror (themselves or you) and reality
- Use devices for releasing excessive water in the bath

GARDEN

- Ensure safe and clear pathways within the garden by considering overhanging branches, plants with thorns, moss, mould, uneven or broken pavers or loose gravel
- Use clearly defined pathways around the garden that do not lead to dead ends
- Make careful selection of plants to avoid varieties that are poisonous when in contact with the skin
- Ensure there are shaded places to sit and relax in and look at the garden from either inside or outside the house
- Create an opportunity to grow a vegetable or herb garden

Dementia Enabling Environments provides some useful tools to explore the adaptions that can be made to a house to assist a person with dementia to maintain their ability to live at home for as long as possible.

Factsheets for each room are available.