

Dementia-friendly heritage visitor attractions: a case study of the National Trust

Dementia is an umbrella term for a number of brain disorders that progressively impacts a person's cognition, behaviour, perception and the ability to perform daily tasks, which eventually becomes severe. Symptoms include memory loss, confusion and issues with speech and understanding. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, with around 75% of dementia cases being Alzheimer's. However, other types of dementia include vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and frontotemporal dementia. Dementia is considered a global epidemic, with over 54 million people currently living with the condition, though many go undiagnosed (Alzheimer's Society, 2020). Indeed, this figure is likely to increase drastically over the coming decades. In the UK it is estimated that around 850,000 people currently live with dementia, a number that will rise to around 1.6 million by 2040. In 2021, alone in the UK, over 209,000 people will develop dementia, costing the economy £34.7bn. Further, unpaid carers supporting someone with dementia, typically consisting of family members, currently save the economy £13.9bn. With the number of people living with a disability and seniors amounting to 20% of the global population, issues such as ageing and dementia have become some of the greatest economic and societal challenges today (Connell & Page, 2019; Duedahl et al., 2020). The global population is ageing and with disability a typical accompanied reality of ageing, visitor attractions need to reconsider their modus operandi (Connell and Page, 2019).

Research indicates that leisure activities have a positive impact on quality of life for those living with dementia, including carers and family members (Connell and Page, 2019). Indeed, it is believed that up to 40% of dementia cases could be prevented by maintaining a healthy and active mind, of which leisure is key. However, dementia is one of the main causes of disability in later life and is considered a hidden disability, similar to autism (Connell and Page, 2019; Dominguez et al., 2013). As with many other disabilities, stigma and barriers to access and participation are common, due to inaccessible environments caused by attitudinal, physical and informational barriers (Lam et al., 2020), which therefore leads to social exclusion and causes a stay-at-home mindset for those living with dementia (Connell and Page, 2019; Gillovic et al., 2018). Access issues for people living with dementia include mobility, memory-loss, visual perception and spatial awareness, information provision (including websites), interaction with the environment, accommodation and paying for goods and services, as well as in regards to the design and colour of the infrastructure, including transport and signage (Connell and Page, 2019; Klug et al., 2017).

As such, access issues are numerous. These can have severe negative consequences with regards to quality of life, resulting in depression and anxiety as a result of social exclusion (Sedgley et al., 2017). Yet, tourism experiences, such as visiting attractions, can alleviate social exclusion, contribute to wellbeing and quality of life, personal development, improving the ability to cope with stress, improve health conditions, self-esteem and satisfaction, which can be achieved through the removal of barriers to participation (McCabe, 2009; McIntosh, 2020; Tutuncu, 2018). As such, the benefits of leisure participation for people living dementia are seemingly endless. However, and perhaps equally important, people living with disability are protected and guaranteed full and equal access by legislation in many countries, such as the UK's Equality Act (2010), whereby it is prohibited to deny someone access due to their disability, and visitor attractions are included under such legislation. Yet such legislation is rarely enforced with regards to dementia and other hidden disabilities. Indeed, access issues for people living with disability are in fact common (Nyanjom et al., 2018).

Many service providers, today, struggle to comprehend the meaning of accessibility and what it means to provide accessible services, seemingly assuming that by being wheelchair accessible they are thereby disability friendly (Nyanjom et al., 2018). However, this is as a result of a lack of awareness and education. Predominantly, focus within society in general, as well as research, has been on visible disabilities, such as physical disabilities, as opposed to the wider disability spectrum, including hidden disabilities, such as dementia (McIntosh, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that service providers struggle with the delivery of accessible and inclusive experiences. Nevertheless, the benefits of leisure experiences, such as tourism, remain inaccessible to people living with dementia and other disabilities, despite the seemingly obvious relevance to a demographic typically deprived of opportunities to develop their physical, intellectual and social capacities (Kastenholz, Eusébio & Figueiredo, 2015). As a result, some people living with disability unfortunately see leisure and tourism activities as an unlikely reality (Sedgley et al., 2017).

Yet, the desire among people with disability to participate in such experiences are equal to those without a disability (Tutuncu, 2018). Evidently, this demographic has largely been ignored by service providers, such as visitor attractions, yet it also presents a market opportunity, potentially critical for development from the service providers' perspective (Connell & Page, 2019). With experiences key to visitor attractions, creating and delivering memorable experiences is critical and becoming dementia-friendly could provide a route to achieving a competitive advantage and alleviate issues of seasonality. Stakeholder collaboration, beyond the individual visitor attraction, is however needed to raise awareness and educate service providers (Nyanjom et al., 2018).

Spurred on by the Prime Minister's 2012 Dementia Challenge, the UK is considered at the forefront of dementia readiness, where focus is not solely on curing the condition, but also on improving life with it. The concept of dementia-friendly originates from the UK, has inspired responses elsewhere, such as in the US, and revolves around overcoming barriers to participation for people living with dementia (Connell and Page, 2019). Arguably, becoming dementia-friendly has both legal and moral implications for visitor attractions. In fact, service providers, such as visitor attractions, have largely ignored this demographic, including people living with dementia (Connell and Page, 2019), although this is beginning to change. As an example, the National Trust entered an agreement with the Alzheimer's Society in 2019 to make over 500 visitor attractions dementia-friendly.

Dementia-Friendly National Trust

The National Trust was founded in 1884 by Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, though it was not until 1895 it became a registered company. They had a shared belief in the importance of preserving historic places and green spaces for all to enjoy. Today, the National Trust is one of the UK's largest charities and Europe's largest conservation charity, managing and maintaining over 500 historic places, such as historic houses, castles and gardens, as well as areas of natural beauty, including over 780 miles of coastline. It is independent of government and has powers granted by government through the National Trust Act of 1907, which is continuously updated and effectively acts as the organisation's constitution. Supported by over 65,000 volunteers, the National Trust has 5.6 million members and aims to care and protect places, enabling nature and people to thrive. Further, 2020 saw the charity hit the half-way mark of its ten year 2025 strategy: For everyone, for ever. Through this strategy, their ambition is to meet the needs of the environment, whilst also meeting the challenges and expectations of an ever-changing world and society.

As part of their 2025 strategy, the National Trust has committed to diversity and inclusion as well as creating a fair and equal society free of discrimination. A critical step in this direction has been its, initial, three-year relationship with the Alzheimer's Society, which began in 2019. Evidently, the National Trust is at the very early stages of becoming dementia-friendly, though this resembles the research findings of Connell & Page's (2019) seminal work, which found destinations and visitor attractions in Scotland at a similar stage. The purpose of the relationship between the National Trust and the Alzheimer's Society is to create dementia-friendly heritage visitor attractions across the entire organisation and all its 500 historic and countryside locations. This has been deemed the largest collaboration of its kind, with over 74,000 staff and volunteers expected to be upskilled and trained as Dementia Friends. This is a critical element for the National Trust, with one of the key barriers to access for people with disability being a lack of awareness and education among service providers and front-line staff (Nyanjom et al., 2018). The accessibility of the trust's locations will also be improved in line with dementia-friendly requirements, with infrastructure a recognised barrier to access (McIntosh, 2020), whilst internal policies and procedures will be improved to support members of staff and volunteers who may be affected by the condition. Further, the relationship sees the creation of a community outreach programme, highlighting the need for stakeholder collaboration (Nyanjom et al., 2018), in which the National Trust brings heritage to local hospitals, care homes, day centres and community groups in an effort to improve environments for those living with dementia and raise awareness among communities. The hope is to build a case for more dementia-friendly communities, beyond the National Trust. As such, the organisation is leading the way for visitor attractions in becoming dementia-friendly and creating experiences promoting independence, equality and dignity. Further, the community work carried out by the National Trust may also help eliminating the stigma surrounding dementia.

Heritage visitor attractions, such as those managed by the National Trust, provide ideal environments for those living with dementia to prompt and encourage conversations, outdoor exploration and may provide a critical connection to the world around them, thereby removing barriers and stigma, which are currently promoting a stay-at-home-mindset for those living with dementia (Connell and Page, 2019). Heritage visitor attractions are particularly popular among people living with dementia, with them being considered safe and familiar, whilst day trips are one of the most common and regular activities. With around 150,000 of National Trust supporters over the age of 65 believed to live with the condition, becoming dementia-friendly is critical for the National Trust, and may very well create a competitive advantage. As such, this relationship between the National Trust and the Alzheimer's Society could provide a critical element in improving quality of life and wellbeing for people living with dementia.

Websites accessed for the case study

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<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/our-history-1884-1945>

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/about-the-national-trust>

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/working-together-for-a-dementia-friendly-future>

<https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/documents/for-everyone-for-ever-strategy.pdf>

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