

LIFE CHANGES TRUST
GET OUTDOORS PROGRAMME
EVALUATION

THE ECOLOGY CENTRE 'WIDE OPEN DOORS' EVALUATION SUMMARY

2019/2020

PRODUCED BY



INTRODUCTION

The Get Outdoors Projects, funded by the Life Changes Trust, encourage people living with dementia to enjoy the benefits of spending time outside. Outside the Box was appointed to carry out an independent evaluation of the programme. This is a summary of the Ecology Centre Get Outdoors project. The full evaluation report is [here](#).

The Ecology Centre is an environmental, community-based charity which sits on the edge of Kinghorn Loch in Fife. Their 'Wide Open Doors' project was designed to extend the dementia friendly activities on offer and "provide a safe and warm welcome for people living with dementia and their families". The project was based around activities in the Tool Shed such as refurbishing tools which were then circulated back into use by a range of project partners, or building raised beds where green-fingered shedders work planting fruit and vegetables. Each session finished with a social break time where shedders shared stories over a hot drink, home baking and a freshly made lunch.

WHAT WE DID

To assess the projects we carried out the following activities:

- Participating and observing in activities.
- Holding conversations with people living with dementia, unpaid carers, and volunteers.
- Talking with staff, partners and stakeholders.
- Assessing materials and reports produced by the projects.

MAGIC MOMENTS

From these activities we gathered 'Magic Moments' that showed the differences and impacts in lives. These moments are small but significant. Due to the Covid restrictions we were unable to participate in activities at the Ecology Centre and talk directly with people.

We were looking to see the extent to which the outdoor activities were creating better lives for people living with dementia and for their unpaid carers. We also wanted to contribute and share the learning around benefits of getting outdoors for people with dementia. We found that the project had a very positive impact on the lives of people living with dementia and unpaid carers. These are some of the Magic Moments.

Two participants have been chatting to a third one telling them about a dementia friendly football session they attend every month. The conversations have resulted in phone numbers being exchanged and lifts being organised, cementing friendships and further activities independently of the centre.

"Shedders living with dementia are supported to develop ideas for ways to transform waste wood so that they become useful and beautiful eco-friendly items. People are seen as creators, contributors and producers. Some of these are commissions for local people or organisations, some are displayed at The Ecology Centre's site so visitors can buy them, and some are sold at local makers markets which are also used as ways of promoting The Ecology Centre's activities"

"We had heard that W did not communicate very well; this has not been the case in the shed and he has displayed a good sense of humour, interacting with all the members of the team. After his first week with us W's carer said it was the first time she had seen him smile for a long time. On his second week he arrived early showing us some of his projects."

KEY THEMES: SUPPORTING BETTER LIVES FOR PEOPLE

IMPROVED CONFIDENCE AND WELLBEING

“We ask each volunteer if they feel more confident in participating in outdoor activities as a result of coming to the sessions. So far received a 100% positive response rate.”

“When the barrow was completed, we arranged for 2 members of our shedders to take the barrow to its final position, where photos were taken and stories retold. The partner of one also came and, impressed by his handiwork, took home lots of pictures to show off to friends and family.”

“Thursday is the best day of the week.”

“The wife of one of the 100-hour shedders, who had a certificate presented to him, phoned to thank us, saying 'we were very touched by such a kind and positive gesture.'”

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS AND STIGMA

After participating in the project, one couple living with dementia, who had been hiding the diagnosis because they were ashamed of it, agreed to be part of the publicity material for the Wide Open Doors project for people living with dementia.

“For some people it is a welcome relief to talk openly about living with dementia and not be afraid to use the word.”

“This is the only place I've seen where people don't hide from their condition. It's so much better this way.”



KEY THEMES: SUPPORTING BETTER LIVES FOR PEOPLE

BEING PART OF A GROUP AND COMMUNITY

“Afternoon volunteers at the Shed and in our outdoor activities have started sharing tea and cakes which has promoted cross-group conversation, humour and friendships.”

“Two volunteers from the outdoor afternoon sessions have also struck up a strong relationship and attend social events and dementia friendly activities outwith The Ecology Centre.”



“The shared lunch is based on seasonal produce from our community garden, much of which has been grown with tools refurbished by the shedders and tended by our volunteers which includes the dementia friendly volunteers.”

IMPACT FOR CARERS

“This is a safe place to offload a little and share experiences, frustrations and achievements - it makes a difference”

“The wife of one new volunteer is baking cakes for us each week to show her appreciation”



CHALLENGES

All the projects faced different challenges and worked out different solutions. These are the main challenges the Ecology Centre faced:

Working with Care Homes

Care Homes found it hard to confirm attendance due to staff ratios and transport. There were also misunderstandings about what was being offered. Clear messages were developed around 'supported volunteering', rather than day care or respite care.

Volunteer Recruitment

Recruiting volunteers to develop gardening and cooking activities was initially difficult, even after holding 'dementia friendly days'. Instead plans adapted and two sessions on a Thursday were offered. These proved to be very popular and successfully delivered meaningful opportunities for people living with dementia and their carers.

Weather

The Ecology Centre is in an exposed and windy location. They have a collection of suitable outdoor clothing for people to use when needed. Mostly participants and volunteers have come to sessions well equipped. "It has been positive to see the group provide their own, showing a keenness to be outside in adverse conditions."

Transport

Most volunteers require transport to the centre. To ensure this didn't create additional barriers for people additional funding was accessed.

Change of staff

Changes to the project team and with partner organisations resulted in some delays. However, the continuity of the trio of Tool Shed Officer, dedicated Support Worker and reliable volunteers enable the Tool Shed sessions to have a stability which underpins its success.

Different stages of dementia

The Ecology Centre implemented changes based on their learning throughout the project. Clear messages were given about the suitability of activities and over time a system of informal assessment was developed to ensure a good match for everyone involved.

KEY LEARNING

These are some of the things we learnt from The Ecology Centre that support people living with dementia and their carers to enjoy the benefits of getting outside more:

- Carry out informal capacity assessments over a few sessions so you can gain an understanding of an individual's experience of dementia.
- Regularly review things to check what works well and so you can respond to emerging issues and circumstances.
- Develop relationships that are respectful, trusting and nurturing between everyone - staff, volunteers, people living with dementia and their unpaid carers.
- Respect and nurture the contributions from all participants - everyone has things to contribute and wants to share them.
- Continue to gently challenge stigma and assumptions around individual capabilities.

OVERALL

The Ecology Centre were able to develop a very successful model that enabled people living with dementia, and their carers, to experience the outdoors in ways that were respectful and sensitively thought out. Their strong values of respect, equality and co-production extended the range of benefits that were offered through the project.