



Evaluation report: The role of the sensory garden in dementia day care provision

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Executive Summary

Introduction and purpose

This report presents an evaluation of the sensory garden at the Metcalfe Centre. The centre provides daytime support for adults with moderate dementia. The evaluation's purpose was to assess the garden's impact on clients, with the stated intent of the garden being to foster social interaction, reduce agitation, stimulate cognitive function, and encourage physical activity.

Methodology

The evaluation involved 'go along' interviews with 9 clients and 2 staff members. Researchers asked participants to show them around the garden while they discussed what they liked and disliked about the space. To ensure views of people with dementia were included, ethical considerations were paramount, with researchers using ongoing and verbal informed consent processes.

Key findings

The garden is a significant asset for the day centre. No negative feedback was received from participants. The key findings are summarised under three themes; activity and use, sensory elements, and meaning.

Activity and use: The garden is a hub for social interaction, conversation and activities, including gardening 'jobs' which clients often initiate themselves. It provides a sense of freedom and movement and has a calming effect that can reduce agitation. Staff have observed some gender differences in how the garden is used.

Sensory elements: Clients actively engaged with the sensory elements of the garden, particularly the colour, texture and smell of the plants in the accessible raised beds. While the sensory wall was commented on for its colours, clients were sometimes unsure of its purpose and often required staff encouragement to interact with its features.

Meaning: The garden acts as a conversation starter, prompting clients to share memories and stories. It is also seen as a nurturing space where clients expressed pleasure in caring for plants, watching them grow, and observing birds at the feeder.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are proposed to build on the garden's success:

1. Make use of the garden as a space for social interaction.
2. Continue to encourage and support clients to undertake jobs within the garden.
3. Make use of the garden for reminiscence work.
4. Ensure staff facilitation.
5. Prompt use of the sensory wall.
6. Improve physical access and safety.
7. Mitigate weather-related challenges.
8. Enhance wildlife features.
9. Continue to maintain a diversity of activities.

10. Consider introducing sensory gardens into centres where they are not currently in place.

Conclusion

The sensory garden is a space for meaningful activity and sensory engagement that facilitates social interactions and support the identity and wellbeing of the centre's clients. While challenges remain, the garden has met its intended aims and has become a space that clients increasingly feel a sense of belonging and ownership over.

Introduction

Purpose of the evaluation

This evaluation was requested by Age UK Sunderland to provide an independent assessment of the impact of the newly renovated sensory garden at the Metcalfe Centre, Houghton-le-Spring. The Metcalfe Centre provides daytime support for adults with a diagnosis of moderate dementia and is open Monday to Friday. The centre consists of a dedicated premises and outdoor space, which now hosts the sensory garden.

Funding for the garden was granted by National Lottery Awards for All. The stated intent of the garden is to foster social interaction, reduce agitation and anxiety, stimulate cognitive function, and encourage physical activity for adults attending the centre. The garden is intended to be a serene environment that promotes emotional well-being and a higher quality of life. Previous evaluations of sensory gardens have suggested that access to a well-designed outdoor space is valuable to people living with dementia. Outdoor spaces such as sensory gardens can reduce agitation, low mood, and the risk of falls (Collins et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2023; Menegheti et al., 2023). Family carers and staff supporting people living with dementia often see the value of gardens in promoting social inclusion and providing opportunities for meaningful activity (Giebel et al., 2022). There are, however, few qualitative evaluations of sensory gardens and few studies about the impact of day centre gardens that directly involve people living with dementia. This evaluation is aimed at providing feedback to Age UK on what works well and what might be developed in the new garden, but also to capture the views of people living with dementia who have experienced the new garden.

Sensory garden overview

The garden is a small space, accessed via a door at the back of the Metcalfe Centre. Figure 1, below, shows the layout of the garden.

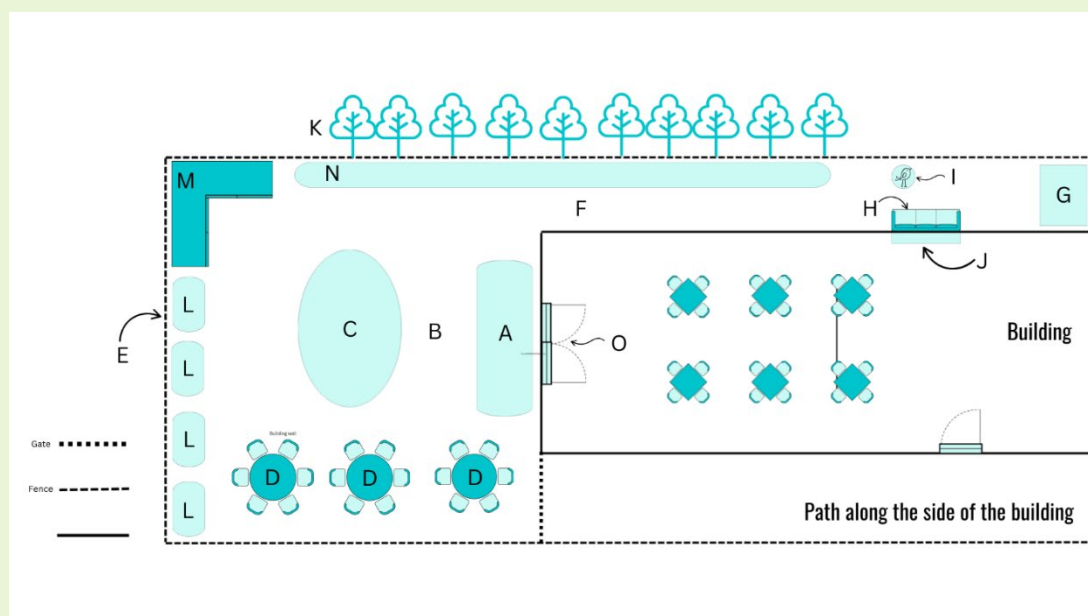


Figure 1, showing the garden layout

It is accessible via a ramp (A), which leads to a flat path (B). The path flows around a small, oval, patch of grass lawn (C). On one side there is a patio area with tables, chairs and parasols (D). The fence directly opposite the wall is hung with small colourful pots and hanging baskets (E). Along the side of the building there is a path (F) which leads to a garden shed (G). Near the shed is a bench (H) and a bird feeder (I) which is viewable from the window (J), allowing the day centre clients to bird watch from inside the centre, as well as from the bench. There is a poster with common British birds pinned inside the window to aid identification. The garden is bordered by a fence on all sides. Alongside the side facing a public road, positioned just outside of the garden, are a row of trees (K).

The Awards for All funds were used to add raised planters (L), a sensory wall (M), and a ground level flower bed (N) which have been constructed along two of the fence lines. The raised planters are positioned along the fence line opposite the door to the garden (O). These are high enough to be wheelchair accessible and clients who are mobile can also interact with the plants without bending down. There are 4 large, raised planters which hold aromatic plants, flowering plants, and vegetables (see figure 2, below).

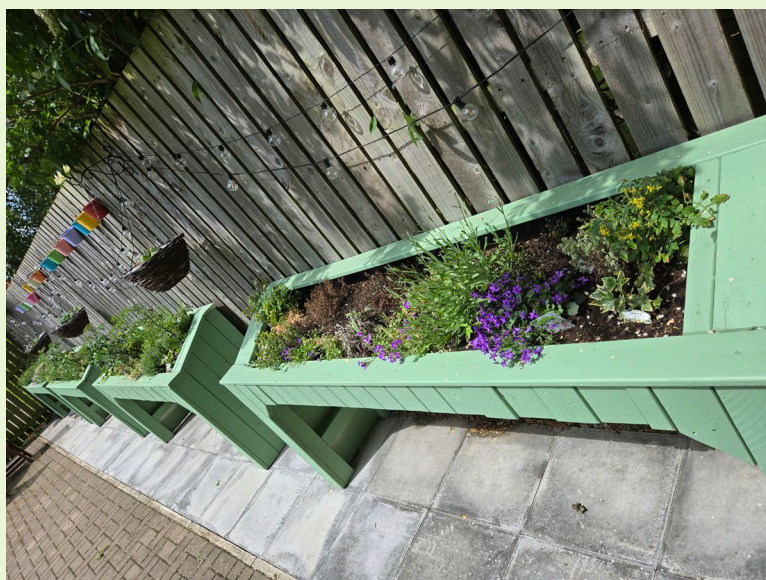


Figure 2, showing the raised planters

In the corner of the garden is a large sensory wall (M) (figure 3, below). This includes the following:

- Nuts and bolts – large, wooden
- Moving cogs
- Plug sockets with plug
- Door handles
- Rotary telephone
- Light switches
- Beads (shown in figure 4, below)
- Bolts, latches and chains
- Sequin swatch
- Buckles

Some of these items are enclosed in small cupboards to protect them from the elements and to provide an interactive feature as clients can open and close the doors (figure 3 and figure 4).



Figure 3, showing the sensory wall



Figure 4, showing the interactive beads, contained within a small cupboard

Next to the sensory wall is a ground-level flower bed (N) (figure 5, below), with various brightly coloured, textured, and aromatic plants and bushes.



Figure 5, showing the ground-level flower bed

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this evaluation were 9 clients (5 women and 4 men) who attend the day centre. One additional person indicated that she wished to participate, but the data was not included within the analysis as she did not have capacity to consent to involvement (see ethical considerations below). 2 staff members also participated.

Method: Go-along interviews

'Go-along interviews' (Bartlett et al., 2023) were used with all participants. Go-along interviews (sometimes called 'walking interviews') are a research method where the participant leads the researcher in exploring a topic and a physical space, in this case the garden. Participants were asked to show the researcher around the garden and were prompted to show and/or discuss the things they liked or disliked about the garden. Participants could choose whether to sit or walk during the interview, and if they chose to walk, they chose the route and the researcher followed.

Interviews were not recorded to maintain privacy and confidentiality, but the researchers made notes immediately after each interview, and compared their notes to identify common or important findings. Any quotes given in this report are paraphrased to the best of the researchers' recollection.

Ethical considerations

We were particularly keen to capture the views of attendees because people living with dementia are often excluded from research about them and their lives due to their cognitive impairment. We complied with the requirements of the *Mental Capacity Act 2005* and made sure that all participants gave informed consent to participate. We minimised the cognitive burden of this informed consent by providing verbal information before the conversation,

checking understanding throughout the conversation, and repeating verbal information supported by a simple written information sheet at the end of the conversation. All but one of the participants was able to understand, retain, and use the relevant information - that we were researchers from a local university, that we were interested in the garden, and that we would write down some of what participants said and would share this information with other people who might be interested. The one participant who could not retain this information was not included in the final analysis and no notes were made about this conversation. All participants were able to communicate their agreement verbally. Staff who participated were provided with a full information sheet and gave written informed consent to participate. Consent was also provided by the day centre manager and from the research and funding manager for the evaluation to take place.

Analysis

The notes that were made immediately following the interviews were thematically analysed and discussed between the researchers to identify common or important themes.

Limitations

The overall sample size is small, and the final analysis concerns information from 9 attendees and 2 members of staff, collected across two visits to the centre. We were unable to include more participants due to the time-limited nature of the evaluation, the fact that not all willing participants had capacity to consent to participation, and the number of volunteers. The views of clients who could not consent to participation were captured to a degree through interviews with staff; however, these views are filtered through the perception of the staff in question.

Evaluation Findings

Overall findings

The key findings can be summarised under three themes: Activity and how the garden is used, sensory elements, and the meaning that the garden holds.

Activity and how the garden is used

Gender differences

One staff member felt that there are some gendered differences in the way the men and the women who attend the centre like to use the garden, and the researchers also noticed some differences in the features that appeared to draw the attention of men or women more as we moved through the garden. The staff member reported that men tend to look for 'jobs' in the garden, while women are more drawn to the garden as a social space in which they can chat to each other or play sports such as beanbag throwing. Both staff members also commented on gender differences in relation to use of the sensory wall; that the men were more interested in the 'functional' sensory elements, for example, the nuts, bolts, and plugs, while the women paid more attention to the fabrics, beads and colourful items, perhaps reflecting the gender roles with which participants may have grown up in 1940s-1960s Britain. While the researchers did not notice such clear distinctions along gender lines, the men did tend to focus on functional features in the garden overall, for example, one male participant

commented about he liked to sweep whilst in the garden. The women focused more on nurturing the plants, removing dead stalks as they walked around and discussing the colours and smells of the plants.

Jobs

A staff member observed that many people, when they start attending the centre, have not been out of their homes for *'weeks or months'*, and the staff's job is *'to make them smile'*. She felt that the garden helps with this job because there are many activities that attendees enjoy when they are outside. This gives more choice than just relying on indoor activities.

Clients are not given roles or responsibilities in the garden but often assume them under their own motivation. For example, the staff mentioned that some of the clients like to sweep the path and this was also expressed by the clients, some of whom spoke about enjoying watering the plants, weeding, and sweeping. This was also demonstrated, for example, several of the client participants were concerned with the health of the plants and pruned dead leaves as they walked around with the researcher.

Social and relational elements

The staff commented on how the garden promoted social interaction, such as instigating conversation, as whilst out in the garden clients would chat and comment on what they saw. The garden had thus become a focal point for social activity. This was also visible in the go-along interviews with clients who spoke about how they enjoyed the garden as a social space, with one person commenting on how she liked to sit at the tables and chairs and how everyone "got along" in the garden. Two of the clients chose to show the researcher around the garden together, and when the conversation was finished, they chose to sit at one of the tables to continue their conversation between themselves. Another asked the researcher to sit with them on the bench and chatted about other gardens he had visited previously. One staff member also spoke about the calming impact of the garden; that it could help people to relax at periods of higher arousal, for example, when the bus arrives. In this sense the garden also helped to impact positively on behaviour by reducing agitation.

Movement and freedom

The garden as a place of movement and freedom was evident. Staff noted this, and clients also commented on how they liked to be free to go into the garden when they choose. However, the staff also noted that they needed to be alert to individual clients as some would occasionally try and climb the fence. This necessitated staff being present in the garden with clients to notice and distract from any harmful activity, such as fence climbing. However, this observation was intended to be as non-intrusive as possible and another client commented on how much she enjoys having freedom of movement in the garden: "you can just go where you like and nobody stops you".

Sensory elements

Colour, texture, and smell

The colours of flowers, fittings, and the sensory wall, interested participants. Touch appeared to be especially important. Several participants pruned dead leaves from plants as we moved

through the garden but also felt the different textures of leaves and enjoyed smelling aromatic plants such as lavender and basil. The raised beds worked well to enable participants to interact with the plants without the physical barrier of needing to bend or stoop to a ground-level bed.

Sensory wall

Some participants seemed unsure about the purpose of the sensory wall, suggesting that it might be a toy for children to play with, and others bypassing it altogether in their journey through the garden. However, even when it was bypassed it was often commented on, particularly around the colours and how much these were enjoyed. One participant, commenting that he was unsure what it was, walked up to the wall and began to explore the different elements, seeming pleased to discover that he was familiar with these (particularly the switches and plugs which attracted his attention). Others who interacted with the board also appeared to find it interesting, touching and moving parts, opening some of the doors, or engaging with the items inside when the researcher opened the doors. The staff members reported a lot of engagement with the sensory wall, and that they often had to open the cupboard doors for clients who were unlikely to do this for themselves.

Meaning

Family and life experience

Many participants used the garden as a conversation-starter, and elements in the garden prompted them to tell the researchers about family, their lives, and their histories. These stories about themselves concerned their current lives for some, and reminiscence about the past for others, for example, one client spoke about how he used to grow carrots and beans in his garden. The stories were often focused around gardens, either their own currently or those of family members, shown by another client who said *"I love growing plants, I have plants in the house, but my husband mostly does the garden"*. One participant asked the researcher to sit down on the bench with him and recounted stories of a garden he used to have and of his daughter's garden. Several participants were interested in the rotary telephone, for example, one client observed that not many people would own a phone like that nowadays, as mobile phones are so common.

Nurture

The final meaning held by the garden was as a nurturing space. Many participants mentioned enjoying watching plants grow and flourish. One participant was pleased to find some small green tomatoes starting to grow on the tomato plants, and he and another client showed the researcher how the yellow flowers would grow into fruit. This client remarked that what he liked best was the opportunity to spend some time outside, looking at the trees, as he reported not having many opportunities in his life to just enjoy the natural world.

Another client was particularly enthusiastic about her role in nurturing the garden.

You buy a tiny plant at the shop, you take it out of its... the round... pot, and you put it in [touches the soil] and you look after it, then [big gesture with her arms, seemingly indicating leaves growing] - it's something to look after, like a baby! -

Her pleasure at seeing plants growing, under her care, was evident in her tone and her smile as she indicated leaves growing. The bird feeder also attracted attention, and clients spoke about how they enjoyed watching them from inside the centre.

Strengths, challenges and opportunities for development

Overall, the garden is an asset to the day centre. It is used for many different activities, such as games, walking, interaction with plants and other features, purposeful activity such as maintaining the garden, a social space, a conversation starter, and a memory prompt, evoking past experiences. No participant had any negative feedback about the garden, and staff remarked that participation in the research was higher than they expected, as some attendees who do not usually express an interest in speaking to visitors to the centre were very keen to go out into the garden and show us around. All the features of the garden were of interest to some, if not all, participants, but the key features that seemed to draw the most interest were the seating area, plants in the raised beds (particularly flowers, vegetables, and aromatic plants), and the sensory wall and the features designed to attract wildlife. The participants appear to curate a social life in the centre, and the garden in this instance was a way to instigate social contact. This links their seemingly felt roles and identities to how the garden supports socialisation and a meaningful life.

The greatest challenges to the use of the garden are the weather and meeting the support needs of the people attending the centre, particularly as staff facilitation is crucial for safe engagement with the garden. Some clients expressed an initial interest in participating in a go-along interview, but then changed their minds because they felt it was not warm enough outside. One staff member noted that staff do not plan activities for outside, but rather use the space spontaneously, because activities cannot take place in the rain, and often clients will stay outside for only a short time before complaining that it is too cold, too hot, or too windy.

The physical and cognitive needs of attendees also need consideration. The ramp into the garden seemed quite steep for some attendees, who negotiated the ramp with a very firm grip on the railings, and the slight lip between the ramp and the door may pose a tripping hazard for some less mobile or visually impaired attendees. Staff are particularly alert to the risk to clients who have more significant cognitive impairments but relatively good mobility, for example, because they may be more likely to try and climb on the fence. Whilst staff are aware of the needs of individual clients, measures such as reducing the purchase on the inside of the fence may decrease the cognitive load for staff trying to support several people at the same time.

In summary, the sensory garden is a space for meaningful activity for staff and clients alike. While there are challenges related to its use, including the weather and access, it presents opportunities for development. The garden facilitates social interactions, supporting clients to maintain their identity, with the potential to contribute significantly to their wellbeing. Furthermore, the desire expressed by many clients to do 'jobs' and maintain the garden suggests a wish to take ownership of the garden and make it their own.

Recommendations

Based on this evaluation, several recommendations are proposed:

1. **Make use of the garden as a space for social interaction.** Being in the garden prompted conversations and there was also an increased willingness to speak to the researchers where it involved being in the garden. This could be further explored with other visitors and with staff to see if it consistently promotes engagement.
2. **Continue to encourage and support clients to undertake jobs within the garden.** Ensure that appropriate tools and equipment are available to support this work.
3. **Make use of the garden for reminiscence work.** The sensory experiences of the garden acted as a prompt for memories and storytelling. This should be built upon as it supports identity and contributes to quality of life.
4. **Ensure staff facilitation.** Staff presence is crucial for ensuring safe access and use of the garden and for monitoring the fences to prevent climbing.
5. **Prompt use of the sensory wall.** Encourage clients to make use of the sensory wall in an exploratory and non-directive manner.
6. **Improve physical access and safety.** Modifications to the garden could be considered to reduce potential risks in accessing and using the garden. For example, reducing the purchase on the fence to make it harder to climb.
7. **Mitigate weather-related challenges.** The weather was the main barrier to making use of the garden so consideration could be given to features which extend its usability, for example, a covered area on the patio.
8. **Enhance wildlife features.** The bird feeder was popular and is placed well to encourage viewing from inside the centre. Additional features to attract wildlife in other parts of the garden could also be added.
9. **Continue to maintain a diversity of activities.** Overall, the garden provides a wide range of features and activities and this should be maintained.
10. **Consider introducing sensory gardens into centres where they are not currently in place.** Given the findings from this evaluation, it is proposed that the introduction of sensory gardens elsewhere would be beneficial.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the garden confirms that it is a significant asset, enhancing the daily experience of the adults with moderate dementia who attend the centre. The space successfully meets and expands on its intended goals to foster social interaction, reduce agitation and anxiety, stimulate cognitive function, and encourage physical activity. The garden's value was evident; it has become a place of purposeful activity where clients spontaneously assume roles, such as weeding or sweeping, thus it supports the autonomy of clients. The sensory elements of the garden, including colours, scents, and tactile elements, provide gentle stimulation and are clearly enjoyed. The garden also operates as a space of personal meaning, acting as a catalyst for reminiscence and providing an opportunity for clients to nurture living things.

While the garden's use is subject to practical challenges, primarily the weather and the need for staff to facilitate use, its positive impact is evident. The consistent desire to tend to the

plants and maintain the space suggests a developing sense of ownership and personal investment. Furthermore, it was clear that the garden was not just enjoyed passively, but was actively inhabited and cared for by clients. In facilitating these opportunities for purpose, the garden appears to be valuable in achieving its overall aim; to promote wellbeing and quality of life for the clients of the Metcalfe Centre.

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