

‘Stepping into Nature’ Evaluation Report on Focus Group findings

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CONTENTS OF REPORT

LIST OF TABLES AND CHARTS.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	5
1. BACKGROUND	10
1.1 Funding, aim and objectives.....	11
1.2 Focus of this report.....	11
2. RESEARCH DESIGN.....	12
2.1 Focus groups	12
2.2 Ethical considerations	13
2.3 Data analysis	14
3. FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS	16
3.1 Participant characteristics	16
3.2 Experience and interaction of the natural environment	17
3.3 Barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment	19
3.4 Suggestions for improving access to the natural environment.....	30
4. CONCLUSIONS.....	32
4.1 Strengths and limitations.....	33
5. RECOMMENDATIONS	34
REFERENCES.....	36
APPENDICES	38
Appendix 1: Stepping into Nature: Pilot Study Overview	38
Appendix 2: Information sheet	41
Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form	44
Appendix 4: Focus group topic guide.....	45

LIST OF TABLES AND CHARTS

Table 1: Type and number of participants involved in each focus group..... 16

Table 2: Participant codes..... 17

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Dr Michelle Heward – Liaised with funder to arrange the focus groups, facilitated the focus groups, analysed the focus group data, and co-wrote the report on the focus group findings.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Dorset Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (DAONB) team, commissioned Bournemouth University Dementia Institute (BUDI) to undertake this evaluation by carrying out a series of focus groups in West Dorset. The aim was to understand the current experiences of older people, including people with dementia and their carers, when accessing their local outdoor environment within rural Dorset. This evaluation forms one element of the wider 'Stepping into Nature' project (Appendix 1), which is being developed by DAONB. The project as a whole aims to make use of the outstanding landscape in Dorset to create sustainable dementia-friendly activities and a rich sensory experience that will enhance health and well-being. A selection of taster sessions have already been delivered as part of the development phase for this project, this includes: 'Walks for the Mind', 'Green Wood Club', and poetry and music sessions which have tested different ways of enabling older people and people affected by dementia to experience the outdoors and cultural environments. Dementia-friendly awareness and training has been provided to eight different organisations that lead local organised walking groups, and will be disseminated to others so that they are able to plan and execute walks that are dementia-friendly. The direction of the project as a whole will be guided not only by this evaluation report but also through other information collected by the DAONB team, including information from online surveys completed by older people and local organisations, walking surveys carried out in conjunction with taster sessions, round the table sessions with dementia organisations and the findings from the evaluation of the 'Green Wood Club'.

There were three objectives of this evaluation:

1. To explore current opportunities/activities within rural Dorset that promote access to the cultural and natural environment.
2. To explore any potential barriers to accessing the natural and cultural environment for those living in rural Dorset.

3. To determine any improvements that may be implemented to improve access to the natural and cultural environment of rural Dorset.

An outcome of the evaluation was to make recommendations that would contribute to change, if required, enabling older people, including people with dementia and their carers, to connect with the landscape in a sociable and creative way. In this report we detail the background, methods, analysis, findings and recommendations of this evaluation.

Methods of data collection

Three focus groups were held in Dorset with older people (aged 65 and over) including people with dementia and their carers.

Data analysis

The transcripts of the focus groups were analysed thematically and were managed using NVivo.10 software. An inductive analytical framework was utilised (Boyatzis, 1998). Key research themes were also included in this framework, namely: experience and interaction with the natural environment; barriers to accessing the natural environment; enablers to accessing the natural environment; and suggestions for improving access to the natural environment.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the focus groups was obtained from the Social Science and Humanities Ethics Committee, at Bournemouth University. Principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to. All participants were able to give informed consent.

Focus group findings

Twenty people took part in the focus groups, equating to twelve older people, three people with dementia, three carers or family members, and two support group facilitators/volunteers.

Experience and interaction with the natural environment

Participants spoke about their prior experiences with the natural environment, including walking or camping. Some participants explained that they had always lived close to the countryside, and described walking in the countryside as something they had always done. Others talked about how owning a dog meant that they would take regular walks in the natural environment. Participants also spoke about caring for the natural environment in their own communities.

Barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment

There were six types of barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment identified by the participants: accessibility; seasonality and weather; information; cost; health; and those related to dementia. Barriers and enablers are discussed together to highlight the differing views of participants, for example there were mixed views from participants as to whether poor weather might stop them accessing the natural environment, or not.

Suggestions for improving access to the natural environment

Participants spoke in detail about what might be done to improve access to the natural environment for older people, including those who are living with dementia. Three themes were identified: access; inclusion; and innovation.

Conclusions

This evaluation demonstrates the value and benefit of the natural environment for the participants involved. There were six types of barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment identified by the participants: accessibility; seasonality and weather; information; cost; health; and those related to dementia. The participants identified some changes that could help to make the natural environment more accessible for older people and people affected by dementia (such as improving pathways and replacing stiles and open gates with kissing gates; improve public transport provision; reduce the cost of parking and admission to local attractions). However, the implementation of all changes may not be possible or appropriate to all settings, and the impact that changes may have on the environment is an important consideration for individual organisations and service providers. Participants had mixed views of the abilities of people with dementia, not always understanding how dementia might affect someone living with the condition.

Recommendations

The project recommendations defined below are drawn from the findings.

Recommendations to facilitate access to the natural environment for older people:

1. Where possible, create more accessible routes within the natural environment by improving pathways and replacing stiles and open gates with kissing gates.
2. Explore potential opportunities for public transport providers to include popular locations in their bus routes.
3. Reduce the cost of parking in the natural environment and admission to local attractions for local people who visit all year round.
4. Develop a central resource or website with information about the local natural environment (including information about cafes, toilets, and car parks). This could build on existing work by organisations such as National Trust (map accessibility symbols) and Alzheimer's Society (forget me not symbol).
5. Where possible provide public toilet facilities.
6. Support local existing groups who use the natural environment (such as walking groups) by providing the volunteers with suitable training (i.e. First Aid, Risk Assessment).
7. Ensure that all older people locally have the opportunity to maximise their interaction with the local environment to support their own physical and mental health.

In addition to the above there are further recommendations that will help to facilitate access to the natural environment for people with dementia:

1. Put the person first by allowing sufficient time and co-ordinated support and information.
2. Assess risk individually using a person-centred approach.
3. Where possible create areas, facilities or tourist attractions that are dementia-friendly.
4. Provide dementia training and support to professionals working in the natural environment.
5. Develop groups that foster active participation and social interaction within the natural environment (including walking groups, groups for woodland or

woodwork activities, and groups that build on outdoor education activities designed for younger people such as the Forest Schools¹ initiative).

¹ <https://www.forestschoools.com>

1. BACKGROUND

The Government's Natural Environment White Paper (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2011) focused on the reconnection of people with nature. It outlined the benefits of engaging in activities in the natural environment; although it also acknowledged that opportunities to engage may not be accessible to all. In the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment survey (Office for National Statistics, 2010), the frequency in which people participated in activities within the natural environment were significantly lower than average for those aged 65 and over.

One in three people over the age of 65 develop dementia (Alzheimer's Society, 2013) and there is a current need for innovative community-based initiatives to provide support for people with dementia and their carers to live well within their community (Department of Health, 2009). People with dementia and their carers find activities involving nature to be an enjoyable experience (Gibson et al., 2007), and this may contribute to their sense of well-being as well as their physical and mental health (Bossen et al., 2010; Clark et al., 2013). Furthermore, outdoor activities provide meaningful stimulation and promote social communication for people with dementia as they share experiences with their carers (Swane, 2005).

Despite this, people with dementia and their carers often face barriers when attempting to access their local natural environment which, according to a recent review (Clark et al., 2013), may be due to six broad reasons: (1) issues with the physical environment; (2) lack of education and awareness of what is available and the knowledge of service providers; (3) lack of resources, including availability of support; (4) difficulty with access e.g. geography; (5) attitudes and perception; and (6) avoiding risk. The proposed project would provide the opportunity for people with dementia and their carers living in rural Dorset to share their experiences about engaging with nature, and give their opinions about what aspects are important to them when doing so.

1.1 Funding, aim and objectives

Funding to carry out a pilot study to gather evidence about how people might use Dorset's natural environment and what benefits this might have, was obtained from Dorset County Council Special Projects Fund, Inspired By 2012: Health and Wellbeing Legacy Fund, Dorset Partnership for Older Peoples Programme (POPP) and Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (DAONB). The DAONB team commissioned Bournemouth University Dementia Institute (BUDI) to undertake this evaluation as part of this pilot study.

The aim of this evaluation was to understand the current experiences of older people, including people with dementia and their carers, when accessing their local outdoor environment within rural Dorset.

There were three objectives:

1. To explore current opportunities/activities within rural Dorset that promote access to the cultural and natural environment.
2. To explore any potential barriers to accessing the natural and cultural environment for those living in rural Dorset.
3. To determine any improvements that may be implemented to improve access to the natural and cultural environment of rural Dorset.

1.2 Focus of this report

This report details the findings of the focus groups undertaken and analysed by BUDI.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This section provides a description of how the focus groups were undertaken and analysed, including a discussion of the ethical issues considered prior to and during the research.

2.1 Focus groups

Three focus groups were held in rural Dorset with older people (aged 65 and over), including those who are living with dementia and their carers. Participants were recruited by the DAONB team, who acted as gatekeepers providing information sheets (Appendix 1) to prospective participants and organising the date, time and venue of the focus groups on behalf of BUDI researchers. Participants were invited to take part in any of the three focus groups taking place, however many of the participants took part in the group nearest to where they live and so already knew each other as neighbours, or because they belonged to existing groups who meet regularly. This may have meant that they were more comfortable in the group setting, and were able to express themselves more easily.

All focus groups were conducted in the same way: two researchers attended (one to guide the discussion and the other to take detailed notes) and, following introductions, sharing refreshments, and explanation of the research, all participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix 1) which they were invited to read and had summarised where necessary. Once everyone had read and understood the information sheet and had any questions answered, those who wished for their data to be included in the study were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 2). A topic guide was used at all focus groups to guide the discussion (Appendix 3), and all discussions were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Participants were asked about their experience and current interaction with the natural environment, any potential barriers or enablers to accessing the natural

environment, and to make any suggestions for improving access to the natural environment.

2.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this project was obtained from the Social Science and Humanities Ethics Committee, at Bournemouth University (Bournemouth University, 2009). There are particular ethical considerations when working with older people and people with dementia, notably that of ensuring informed consent. These focus groups were therefore designed on a premise of inclusion and informed consent. It is important to hear about experiences from people with dementia themselves, so as not to assume that proxy reports (from family members or professionals) actually reflect their experiences. The team followed specific and established process consent procedures developed for people with dementia (Dewing, 2008) to ensure that the project complied with the Mental Capacity Act (2005). All participants were able to give informed consent.

Throughout the focus groups the following ethical principles were adhered to:

- Information sheets (Appendix 1) about the project were developed. They explained why the focus groups were being undertaken, what participation would involve for individuals and a description of issues of consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity. Photographs of the researcher facilitating the focus groups, along with their contact details, were also included in case people needed further clarification.
- The information sheets were circulated to potential participants by the DAONB gatekeepers.
- Prior to the start of each focus group, the facilitator distributed information sheets to the participants and talked through the content with them. Those who wished for their data to be included in the study were asked to complete and sign a consent form (Appendix 2).

- Participants were assured that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could leave the session at any time.
- Participants were asked for permission to audio-record the focus group conversations. They were reassured that the data would only be used for this project, that any quotes used in the report to the funders or any publications would be anonymised, and that no-one would be identifiable in any reports or publications.
- The audio recordings were transcribed by a university approved transcription service.
- Interview transcripts were anonymised prior to analysis and participants were assigned a code number in line with confidentiality and anonymity arrangements.
- To comply with the University's records management policy, all project files are stored on password protected network drives and data are not available to third parties.
- A lay summary of the findings will be sent to all the DAONB gatekeepers to circulate to the participants involved.

2.3 Data analysis

The transcripts of the focus groups were analysed thematically and were managed using NVivo.10 software (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The analysis was inductive, in that themes were allowed to emerge from the transcripts as the analysis progressed, rather than imposing a theoretical framework to the data (Boyatzis, 1998). However, to ensure the analysis directly addressed the aims and objectives of the project, an overall framework that drew on the topics set out in the focus group topic guide was also used (Boyatzis, 1998). These were:

1. Experience and interaction with the natural environment.
2. Barriers to accessing the natural environment.
3. Enablers to accessing the natural environment.
4. Suggestions for improving access to the natural environment.

Meaningful phrases of varying lengths were coded and the coding was inclusive meaning that phrases could be coded to more than one code (Boyatzis, 1998). One researcher undertook the thematic analysis of all three focus group transcripts. To enhance the rigour of the analysis, a second researcher read through the transcripts noting down the emergent themes, and then scrutinised the themes and process used to arrive at these themes. Complete anonymity of participants from the DAONB gatekeepers cannot be guaranteed as they have communicated with them prior to the focus groups taking place. However, we have ensured anonymity as far as possible by not providing the DAONB team with access to the full data set collected from the focus groups (instead they are only able to see the anonymised data included in this report, with all identifying features removed).

3. FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

This section outlines the participant characteristics and the key themes that arose during the focus groups. Themes cutting across focus groups are considered the key themes as these are more representative of wider experiences. Linked to the topics on the focus group schedule, the themes can be divided into four distinct areas: experience and interaction with the natural environment; barriers to accessing the natural environment; enablers to accessing the natural environment; and suggestions for improving access to the natural environment. Each area is presented below, following a description of the participant characteristics.

3.1 Participant characteristics

A total of 20 people took part in the focus groups. This equated to twelve older people, three people with dementia, three carers or family members, and two support groups facilitators/volunteers. Table 1 below provides details of the type and number of participants who took part in each focus group. One person with dementia did not want to sign the consent form. We have included this participant in the figures below as they were present in the focus group; however we are unable to report on their views or experiences. All focus groups were lively with most participants eager to contribute their experiences and views. The focus groups duration ranged from 39 to 54 minutes. The participant codes used in the findings section of this report are explained in Table 2.

Table 1: Type and number of participants involved in each focus group

Group number	Older people	People with dementia	Carers or family members	Support group volunteers	Total participants
Group 1	2	1	0	0	3
Group 2	2	2	3	2	9
Group 3	8	0	0	0	8
Total	12	3	3	2	20

Table 2: Participant codes

Participant codes					
Group number	Gender	Participant number	Participant type	(where applicable)	
Group 1 - 3	F = Female; M = Male	Order spoke in the focus group	O=Older person; D = person with dementia; C=Family member/carer; V = Group facilitator/volunteer.		
Examples:					
G1F1O = Group 1 first female older person to speak					
G2M3D = Group 2 third male to speak, living with dementia					

3.2 Experience and interaction of the natural environment

Participants were asked to describe what the term 'natural environment' meant to them, and this sparked a range of responses including:

The countryside... walking, because I walk a lot. Having fun in the country, if you've got children or old people, enjoying it with other people. G1F1O.

Well for me, it's much more about solace and escaping from the world, and appreciating. G1F2O.

Unspoilt. G2F1C.

Countryside... not in a town, in the fields... open spaces. G2F2C.

Green. G2M1O.

Or the sea, coastal, relaxing...views. G2F3V.

Anything that's not an urban area. G2M2V.

Golf. G2M3D.

Picnics. G2F4C.

I think accessibility as well... you don't want to see somewhere beautiful and not be able to park there, or to access it without getting permission, it's nice to have spaces that are open to the public. G2F1C.

Maybe the views, the quietness. G2F4C.

I think the tranquillity and the relaxation that it automatically gives you. G2F2C.

Outdoors.... non-urban areas, with countryside, yeah, beaches and seas and cliffs and things. G3M1O.

Outside. G3F5O.

The open countryside. G3F6O.

Gardens, as long as it is outside it doesn't have to be uncultivated. G3F1O.

When asked about their experiences with the natural environment, some participants spoke about going walking or camping. Other participants explained that they had always lived close to the countryside, and described walking in the countryside as something they had always done.

... we both have [always been interested in the outdoors], you in particular, I think...we used to go camping and out walking and things, so definitely. (G2F4C)

Others talked about how owning a dog meant that they would take regular walks in the natural environment:

No, that's to walk the dog. I take him out twice a day. (G3F5O)

As well as walking in the countryside being a part of their daily routine, or necessitated by having a dog to take for a walk, participants also spoke about caring for with the natural environment in their own communities, for example tending to a small plot of communal land:

We look after the stream and the areas of garden, like the bit by the...just behind here, by the doctor's surgery and bits at the top that are not looked after by the Council. (G3F3O)

Or 'rescuing' land from developers and creating a community garden for everyone to use and enjoy, as this participant described:

And then there's the community orchard which is also not quite as central, but it's central enough to serve the same purpose...We saved it from a residential development, but we had to find a community use for it so we made it into a community orchard, which is used by the schools and the

less abled, as well as, say, for the use of just sitting there and enjoying it. .. but again we've funded a new allotment for people associated with the Memory Café that runs in the town, the first session of that was last week. So there are lots of little bands of people introducing people that have become less able, to give them the stimulation and the triggers. (G1F2O)

It was clear that participants valued and appreciated their ability, and the ability of others, to access the natural environment. They also spoke of potential barriers that might stop them accessing and enjoying the natural environment, as well as what might enable them to access and enjoy it. We will discuss this below.

3.3 Barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment

There were six types of barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment identified by the participants: accessibility; seasonality and weather; information; cost; health; those related to dementia. Barriers and enablers are discussed together to highlight the differing views of participants, for example there were mixed views from participants as to whether poor weather might stop them accessing the natural environment, or not.

3.3.1 Accessibility

Participants discussed accessibility in terms of the natural environment itself (i.e. coastal pathways, forest areas), as well as facilities and places they might visit located within the natural environment (i.e. National Trust buildings). The range of local scenery and places to visit in Dorset was seen as positive, as it gave people a choice in terms of levels of accessibility:

Well, one thing comes to mind, is that only this local Abbotsbury to Portesham old railway line, that's fine, but I mean Weymouth to Portland, along the Rodwell Trail or on across...I mean that's ideal for somebody to take, and even from... You can go right down to Overcombe, walk all along there, very, very easy for walking, walk all the way along, it is about

eight or nine miles, if you want to go that far right into Victoria Square, Portland. And it's all on the flat. (G3M10)

Also there are quite a few outdoor cafes along the way, and people do like to stop and have tea and a bun and chat and there will be a loo there, obviously. (G3F50)

In Abbotsbury itself, you've got some things to do. You know, The Swannery might be very interesting. (G3F60)

However, participants noted that some areas of the natural environment in Dorset are less easily accessible:

It is...kind of what you are saying then, that some of the really, really nice walks, that are a little bit maybe different, with a different view, so they're the ones that are the least accessible. (G3F40)

I mean the southwest coastline is a major long distant walk along the coast, that can be in...after rain, it can be...there is a lot of, lot of people use it, and it can get very, very muddy and slippery and, it has all be kind of damaged and all sorts of things. In many ways, taking somebody with dementia along one of those, apart from the ups and downs, may be very difficult. (G3M10)

Participants also felt that obstacles such as gates and stiles, within the natural environment, could be problematic for older people in general:

Well, the gates and stiles are probably more problematic for everybody, and particularly if you're in a group. Even if everybody's quite able to cope with a stile, just the time it takes for every individual in a group to get over a stile... You have to get over a stile at [name of local facility] before you're into the forest where there's a gate, the other one's been turned into a gate, isn't it? (G2F50)

This was despite some improvements by the local council which had made it easier for them to use the natural environment:

...it is nice to see that since I started walking with [name of walking group] I've noticed a lot of stiles and open gates being replaced by kissing gates and much more accessible routes, yeah, so that's a noticeable

improvement. Some of it is due in no small part to lobbying by some of the members of the [name of walking group], in fact. (G2F3V)

Other barriers to accessing the natural environment that participants identified were a lack of public toilets and limited public transport services in the more remote parts of the county:

So, they are not going to be very many public toilets on some of the really nice coastal walks, is there? Portaloo things [instead maybe]? (G3F6O)

It would be very difficult to live here if you didn't have your own transport..... I mean, if you wanted to go say, to Dorchester from here, there's one bus a week... otherwise you would have to get the bus into Weymouth or Bridport and then get the bus from there into Dorchester.... I think the older residents are probably very used to that. G3F1O.

Transport in fact was seen as either a barrier:

I suppose people without transport, without cars or whatever...it's difficult to get to a bus or if the bus or train doesn't take you where you want to go well that could certainly prevent people going out, if they can't get a lift. (G3M1O)

I couldn't drive last week for several days, so I had to rely on my family to take me where I wanted to go, because the bus only runs once every two hours. And it stops fairly early in the evening. So, if I wanted to go out in the evening, if I couldn't drive, I wouldn't be able to. (G3F2O)

Or an enabler:

And buses we haven't talked about have we, access to places.... [Name of walking group] sometimes have bus walks, so somebody goes and looks...the number ten and number 31 which is just changing its number to a number 51, so we go to...I know we go to Weymouth. (G2F5O)

3.3.2 Seasonality and weather

Participants had differing views on seasonality and the weather. Some stated that they would go out into the natural environment more in good weather (dry and sunny) and less in poor weather (raining and cold):

It depends on the weather.... I haven't done it as much this summer, it hasn't been so good. (G2F4C)

I mean, we try to organise things that will be summer based in the summer and things that might be undercover a bit in the winter. (G2F5O)

I was going to say, as far as the [name of walking group] are concerned, I think in the summer months we tend to be a bit more adventurous, and in the winter there are ones that we say, oh, that'll be too boggy. (G2F3V)

Conversely some participants liked to go out into the natural environment when it was raining:

I quite like it when it's pouring with rain because nobody else is about.... because there is still as much to see whether you are...whether it's raining or not, because there is also something to see by the coast. (G3F2O)

For dog owners, walking their dog was the main reason they would go out in the rain:

No. No, I wouldn't go out in the pouring rain and everything [if I didn't have a dog], but I have to. (G3F5O)

Although others were happy to go out into the natural environment whatever the weather:

We just go out prepared, really.... no, I don't think we've cancelled an outing because of the weather, we've just gone alone, got wet or... or ice is terrible, yes. (G2F4C)

Yeah, you just plan around the kind of...and the other thing is, obviously in wet weather fewer people turn up or you might go upshore and you hit the café quicker. (G2F3V)

But that's what British people do, isn't it [get around the weather]? (G2F4C)

3.3.3 Information

Participants discussed the importance of information about the natural environment, and how without such information it could lead to a lack of participation and disempowerment amongst both older people and people affected by dementia:

But it's also knowing about things and places. I mean, I have never heard of the [name of walking group] before this morning. (G2F1C)

But it's been going for a couple of years. (G2F3V)

Most of the participants gained their own knowledge about the local natural environment from living in the area, and recommendations from friends, family and neighbours:

And a lot of us are local so some people are already aware or have been and then there's recommendations. (G2F2C)

A lot of word of mouth. (G2M2V).

Two groups agreed that it would be useful to have information about the accessibility of places that they might visit such as National Trust venues and other local facilities. Things that would be useful to know about were the availability of cafes, parking and toilets:

Car park...yes, with accessible car park...café information. (G2F50)

Participants also felt that it would be useful to have a central website or resource, with information about all of the local activities/walking groups etc. in Dorset:

But it's all about information, isn't it, you know it's...having websites, having, you know, libraries that have got information, how to get in contact with the groups that do things. (G3F6O)

This could be developed in line with other organisations' work, for example using the National Trusts symbols to denote cafes, toilets and car parks, and the Alzheimer's Society's forget me not symbol to mark places that are dementia friendly:

You know how the National Trust give little symbols as to whether there's a coffee shop there or toilets or car park. That kind of information with those details on each bit, yes.... or easy walk or difficult walk styles or not. (G2F4C)

Are the Alzheimer's using that forget me not symbol, aren't they with their awareness of Dorset. I don't know if we could loan that...I was just saying you know that there's a campaign to make Dorset a dementia-friendly...like everywhere should be, and they use this forget me not symbol. (G2F5O)

This information they felt would be useful to locate in a number of places including the internet, Tourist Information office, public libraries and doctors' surgeries.

3.3.4 Cost

The cost of getting to the natural environment (which would usually mean driving) and paying for things like parking was seen as a barrier by most of the participants:

And also you might have to pay to park your car, if you have driven there. Most places you have to...you would be very lucky to find a free parking space. Wherever you go, so it becomes quite expensive if you were to do that every day. For a couple of hours you would be paying out at least £2 a day in parking fees. (G3F6O)

Participants felt that local visitor attractions (such as Abbotsbury Gardens, Swannery, Rodwell Trail, and Overcombe corner esplanade) would be ideal for older people, especially people wanting to get out but not hike across rough terrain, or people with limited mobility. However, they felt that the cost and seasonal opening hours of such places could be a barrier:

The Swannery might be very interesting and it would have a loo. 'm not sure if the loo is this much of a problem for everybody, but and... and the sub-tropical gardens, and the petting zoo, where again you have got the animal interest and again you 've got all the facilities that you might need. (G3F6O)

But it costs.... those things are not free....yes, and they are closed in the winter. (G3F5O)

3.3.5 Health

Participants recognised the physical and mental health benefits of the natural environment in all three of the focus groups:

For one thing, I've got [a lung condition], so I need fresh air because my lungs have to work. I find it beneficial to go out into the community, so that's my mental health. (G1F1O)

.... and by keeping exercised they are healthier mentally and physically. (G1F1O)

And this is the trouble, if you don't stay active, [my husband] has always been very active, but he's got knee joints playing up now, but all sorts of things, as with age and wear and tear, but if you give into that, just stop moving, you gain weight, it doesn't help your joints, you've just to keep out there and moving again. (G2F2C)

Walking was described as:

... a way too, to forget yourself, to kind of get lost a bit, out of yourself... It is obviously very good for your health, you know, for your fitness, you can if you want to, do very short walks, you can do very long walks. (G2M1O)

One of the participants commented that it was much easier to get older people and people affected by dementia to go for a walk rather than other forms of exercise such as going to the gym or riding a bike:

And that's the thing for all ages, and there are a lot of people who wouldn't be seen dead in a gym and couldn't get on a bike, but it's very...even to encourage them, come for a walk, come and walk with me, very easy, hardly anybody would refuse. (G2F3V)

Participants described the importance of social interaction with others when undertaking activities such as walking:

I, you know, for me, it's good to get out in the countryside and walk along ... with other people, basically with other people it's a good thing, don't like walking by myself. That gives me great enjoyment ..., it's the social aspects of it, we usually go on routes with sometimes five or sometimes twenty five or thirty five [people]. You get to know people; I have known people over here now for twenty years. You know, you build up a lot of friendships, a lot of acquaintances and you can always find something to chat about with different people as you go along. You just walk along and swap between one person and other person, have a chat with them, have a chat with somebody else. So it is very social. It's that opportunity of belonging to various organisations around the county which you can take up. (G3M10)

In one of the groups, participants noted that they felt more relaxed in certain environments such as going out into the natural environment, as opposed to going into town and having a coffee:

It's much more relaxing. One of our favourite areas is the Isle of Purbeck. We like to go to Studland beach several times during the summer or autumn, and as soon as I arrive on that beach I feel the sand, the dunes, I feel really relaxed again. (G2F4C)

One of the dementia support group volunteers also stated that he noticed a visible difference in people with dementia when they visited a woodland environment:

... I visibly notice people [with dementia] relax, particularly in outside environments, particularly last Friday we went to a woodland, which we'd never gone to before, but everybody physically, I saw the carers relax. You could really, really see it, it had an enormous impact. (G2M2V)

Conversely, poor health was noted as a barrier to being able to access the natural environment. One participant shared her lack of confidence following a recent fall:

... unfortunately I had a fall and it's taken my confidence away... I had to have an ambulance, and the police came and all that because we had to shut the road 'cause they couldn't move me you see, because I was bleeding a lot,... so... I no longer walk with them. (G1F10)

3.3.6 Related to dementia

Two out of the three groups were formed of older people and people affected by dementia, whilst the remaining group was formed of older people. All three groups discussed barriers and enablers that people with dementia might have in accessing the natural environment. In terms of enablers, the key themes were social interaction; active participation; and flexibility. In all three of the groups, participants described the social interaction that their relationship with the natural environment facilitated:

It can act as a catalyst. When I said about, you can talk to people about the plants, there's a chance you'll meet other people. When you're in control of the system, you can either just say, hello, or you can speak for five minutes, or you can speak for 20 minutes. And you're on neutral ground, and if the person's uncomfortable, the other party's uncomfortable, or you're uncomfortable, you can break free. (G1F20)

Carers of people with dementia also valued the support they received at groups and activities designed solely for people affected with dementia:

When you've got a person with dementia who is totally harmless, interrupts people's conversations, constantly goes to the toilet, and at times I'm on tenterhooks, who's...because you're worried about upsetting them. Never felt I wanted to be this way, and I thought, hmm, people need to know about this, then the further it goes on you think, oh, not again, so when you are somewhere that's more open and you're with your like-minded friends... (G2F2C)

As well as other groups that included a mixture of local people:

Yes, yes, we do [attend the walking group]. Not absolutely every week, but we try and get there as much as possible on a Tuesday. Yes, we enjoy it, enjoy the walking itself and also chatting to... (G2F4C)

And you feel it's totally accepting, this is the thing, isn't it, that no-one's going to stand in judgement that you've got something going on slightly out of the norm. (G2F2C)

Obviously not many of them have dementia, it's all different... That's the thing, but you don't feel... You don't feel that people don't want you there. (G2F4C)

Participants reported that when people with dementia were occupied or actively participating in groups they noticed positive changes in behaviour:

.... last Friday I saw those folk with sort of dementia actually participating, which at coffee mornings, there's not a lot of participation. We would try and talk with them and do talk with them, but there was physical participation, which once again takes the pressure off the carer. They're achieving something...they don't know they're doing it, but they are doing it. John was sawing a log and definitely enjoyed what he was doing. (G2M2V)

Oh, the smile, it made my day. (G2F4C)

He really enjoyed what he was doing, you could feel it. That was... participation was another key fact to the meeting of the two. (G2M2V)

However, it was the combination of social interaction and active participation where participants saw the most positive differences for people with dementia and their carers:

... But it is also the combination... as John has said, the participation in something, but the combination of the social aspect as well, like we had last Friday, we have coffee and cake, and so we had basically the coffee where we were doing the activities and it was just perfect. (G2F1C)

It was the ideal situation. (G2F50)

And next Friday we're going to light the fire, so someone'll chop the wood, someone'll gather, someone'll light the fire. (G2M2V)

The need for a flexible approach when planning activities for people with dementia was clear:

.... But I think if you plan something and there had been a lot of rain, say you had planned it a week ago and there was a lot of rain between then and the date of your walk, you may have to cancel because to walk, holding somebody perhaps, would be very, very difficult, and climbing the styles, because the styles are slippery. (G3F70)

Perceptions of dementia

Participants had mixed views of the abilities of people with dementia, not always understanding how dementia might affect someone living with the condition. In the group formed of older people, participants had less of an understanding of the journey of dementia and perceived people with dementia as not being able to do the things they used to. This conversation between three participants shows varying levels of understanding:

You've got people living with dementia on their own? With nobody else living with them? (G3F30).

We have in the village got a lady. (G3F50)

The lady I know, you know, yes. She can cook... (G3F40)

Good heavens, terrifying. (G3F30)

I mean, obviously there are degrees of dementia. (G3F40)

Another participant also generalised about how 'someone with dementia' might react if they were approached unexpectedly by a bullock whilst out walking:

... this morning we had a wonderful encounter with young bullocks who all came roaring up to us, because they were very excited about us...people who had dogs and so that was quite exciting and then we had a whole herd of sheep that were being rounded up and they came straight towards us as well, which, to us was fun but I mean to somebody with dementia, actually it might scare the daylights out of them. (G3F60)

This could lead to a barrier to accessing the natural environment before people with dementia even have an opportunity to participate. Another potential barrier included the view that taking people with dementia into the natural environment might be risky

as it may be detrimental to their health, particularly on difficult terrain and if they have physical symptoms associated with their dementia:

I mean the southwest coastline is a major long distant walk along the coast, that can be in...after rain, it can be...there is a lot of, lot of people use it, and it can get very, very muddy and slippery and, it has all be kind of damaged and all sorts of things. In many ways, taking somebody with dementia along one of those, apart from the ups and downs, may be very difficult. (G3M10)

3.4 Suggestions for improving access to the natural environment

Participants spoke in detail about what might be done to improve access to the natural environment both for older people, including those who are living with dementia. These are outlined below under the themes of Access, Inclusion and Innovation.

Access

- If a mini bus is not available, develop a car sharing or buddying scheme so that either the driving is shared, or those without access to transport can be collected. (G2F50, G2F3V, G2F2C)
- Provide a better bus service, particularly for remoter areas. (G3F20, G3F60)
- Wider access to information about what is available, perhaps in GP surgeries. (G3F60)
- More gravel pathways (G3F60) to improve access to the natural environment.

Inclusion

- Involve young people, including people with learning needs, in older people's outdoor groups. (G2M10)
- Offer choice of what to do: singing or listening to others singing, being a part of what's happening even if not able or willing to actually do it. (G1F20)

- Build a workshop that can be used by different groups, with toilet facilities. (G2F2C). Developed along the lines of a forest school. (G2F4C)
- Provide opportunities for one to one activities/groups (G3F7O); and developing facilities to make them dementia-friendly:

Would you be thinking of developing facilities in some of the existing places that tourists would go? So they are more dementia friendly, so that people could either be taken there by a carer or as a group. So, for instance either, the tropical gardens or The Swannery could have a special area, or a special walk way, or facilities for people who have got dementia, rather than having people wandering about the countryside on their own. (G3F2O)

Innovation

- Learn from the success of other initiatives and apply this to new areas. This means not continuing to do the same as before, but finding out what works in other initiatives and why, and try it out somewhere else in the countryside. (G2M2V)
- Include access to animals or a scheme similar to riding for the disabled. (G3F60)
- Build a sensory garden. (G3F10) and involve people with dementia in creating and maintaining it (G3F30)

4. CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation shows that the participants value and benefit from their interaction with the natural environment. In terms of barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment, six themes were identified: accessibility; seasonality and weather; information; cost; health; and those related to dementia. Barriers and enablers have been discussed together to highlight the different views of participants, for example there were mixed views from participants as to whether poor weather might stop them accessing the natural environment, or not. The participants identified some changes that could help to make the natural environment more accessible for older people and people affected by dementia (such as: improving pathways and replacing stiles and open gates with kissing gates; improve public transport provision; reduce the cost of parking and admission to local attractions). However, the implementation of all changes may not be possible or appropriate to all settings, and the impact that changes may have on the environment is an important consideration for individual organisations and service providers.

Participants had mixed views of the abilities of people with dementia, not always understanding how dementia might affect someone living with the condition. There is a need to provide dementia training and support to professionals working in the natural environment to ensure the inclusion of people affected by dementia. This could include information about person-centred approaches so that staff find out more about a person's background, likes and dislikes when identifying the opportunities and risks that are individually available to that person. The findings highlight the benefits of combining active participation and social interaction within the natural environment for people with dementia (chance to participate; be themselves; focus on what they can do rather than what may not be able to do) and their carers (respite; sharing experiences with others in similar situation; sense of belonging). There is a need for a range of groups, activities, and accessible places

within the natural environment to, as far as possible, reflect the individual needs of older people and people affected by dementia.

4.1 Strengths and limitations

The strength of this project is that it draws upon the experiences of older people and people with dementia and their carers to identify barriers and enablers to accessing the natural environment. There are limitations though, as with any evaluation, due to the timeframe and financial cost of collecting such data. This is a small study and as such the findings are not generalizable to all older people, or people affected by dementia. Participants for this project were already familiar with, and using the natural environment. Different or additional access barriers and enablers might be highlighted in a study that explores the experiences of older people and people affected by dementia who are not currently using the natural environment.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The project recommendations defined below are drawn from the findings.

Recommendations to facilitate access to the natural environment for older people:

1. Where possible, create more accessible routes within the natural environment by improving pathways and replacing stiles and open gates with kissing gates.
2. Explore potential opportunities for public transport providers to include popular locations in their bus routes.
3. Reduce the cost of parking in the natural environment and admission to local attractions for local people who visit all year round.
4. Develop a central resource or website with information about the local natural environment (including information about cafes, toilets, and car parks). This could build on existing work by organisations such as National Trust (map accessibility symbols) and Alzheimer's Society (forget me not symbol).
5. Where possible provide public toilet facilities.
6. Support local existing groups who use the natural environment (such as walking groups) by providing the volunteers with suitable training (i.e. First Aid, Risk Assessment).
7. Ensure that all older people locally have the opportunity to maximise their interaction with the local environment to support their own physical and mental health.

In addition to the above there are further recommendations that will help to facilitate access to the natural environment for people with dementia:

1. Put the person first by allowing sufficient time and co-ordinated support and information.
2. Assess risk individually using a person-centred approach.
3. Where possible create areas, facilities or tourist attractions that are dementia-friendly.
4. Provide dementia training and support to professionals working in the natural environment.
5. Develop groups that foster active participation and social interaction within the natural environment (including walking groups, groups for woodland or woodwork activities, and groups that build on outdoor education activities designed for younger people such as the Forest Schools² initiative).

² <https://www.forestschools.com>

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Stepping into Nature: Pilot Study Overview



Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - Stepping into Nature Pilot: investigating, identifying and researching Dementia Friendly activities using the Natural & Cultural Environment.

Dorset and its collection of beautiful landscapes - each with unique histories, different ways of working and interesting stories to tell, offer a fantastic range of opportunities to visit natural spaces, whether it is the beach, heathlands, the coast or a local green space. There are many studies, which show that engaging in these natural assets and living in harmony with them is an important part of securing good health and wellbeing for us all.

Funding secured from Dorset County Council Special Projects Fund, Inspired By “2012 Health and Wellbeing Legacy”, Peoples Partnership for Older People (POPPS) and Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (DAONB) to carry out a pilot study to gather evidence about how we might use Dorset’s natural environment to help people enjoy these benefits.

For this brief “natural environment” is used to describe both the natural and cultural environment.

Audience:

Our target audience is older* people and their carers living in Dorset, particularly those at risk from social isolation: a major risk group for developing and living well with dementia both diagnosed and undiagnosed. (**Older people for this study are those over the age of 65*)

Projects Aims:

To investigate, identify and research current provisions available for the target audience living in Dorset that facilitate access to experience and connect with the natural environment. To identify opportunities currently available, locations, potential barriers and possible solutions to accessing the natural environment. To link, where possible with providers committed to delivering dementia friendly activities using the natural environment for inspiration and delivery of health and wellbeing benefits.

To work to develop stronger links and partnerships to aid delivery of a comprehensive suite of options for older people including those living with early stage dementia pre and post diagnosed or other memory related conditions, fostering a unified message of acceptance and independence for older people living in Dorset.

We will achieve these by:

1. Investigating opportunities/activities currently available in Dorset that provides interaction with or connection to the natural environment for the benefit of health and wellbeing.
2. Exploring if our target audience can access these opportunities to interact & celebrate the natural environment in a safe and appropriate way and if such opportunities are being promoted in a manner that demonstrates the need for understanding, clear communication, patience and support to enable participation by this audience.
3. Conducting surveys to evaluate current provisions available, possible barriers both physical and perceptual and investigate new opportunities for additional activities/sessions to establish if the current needs are being met and that the activities are relevant.
4. Developing collaborative working across organisations to improve or initiate joint partner working where possible and appropriate, enabling multi benefit delivery.
5. Undertaking a training needs analysis for delivering suitable and safe activities by existing providers or new planned activities and the potential development of best practice guidelines steered by National & Local Dementia Organisations.
6. Exploring alternative methods for evaluation including quantitative and qualitative of the engagement of the natural environment for people living with early stage dementia.
7. Investigating potential links with academic research institutes highlighting opportunities to strengthen the understanding and knowledge in our target audience and the interaction to the natural environment.

Outputs

A provision audit investigated existing opportunities available in Dorset that provides interaction with or connection to the natural environment for our target audience. This audit shows that whilst there are many opportunities available that enable interaction with the natural environment many are not suitable for our audience. This is due to a number of factors including difficult access, level of activity and lack of promotion or information for our target audience.

We also identified, through various methods of consultation with organisations, new possibilities/methods of working including collaboration across organisations, establishing an interest in developing and delivering inclusive opportunities for our target audience. This

has shown that there is a need to increase the understanding and support requirements through appropriate training and awareness raising, enabling the development of a more inclusive programme of activities.

A number of consultation methods were used to establish the needs, interests and barriers for our target audience:

1. Online questionnaires
2. Focus groups
3. Walking Interviews
4. Feedback from taster sessions and talks.

All of these highlighted the benefit and value that interaction with the natural environment has for our audience and that there was a wide selection of activities that would be of interest. The barriers experienced included access, information and concerns regarding the understanding of dementia by some organisations.

A variety of taster sessions were delivered, including village walks, poetry sessions, green woodwork and gardening. We have a mixture of numbers of attendees and feedback received highlighted that the language used to promote inclusive activities is important and can greatly influence the number of people taking part.

Conversations with academic institutions and a review of existing research studies in this field has indicated that there is much scope to develop a greater understanding of the benefits gained by our target audience. Topics for further investigation might include the type of quantitative evidence required versus the importance and acceptance of qualitative evidence and what this evidence would look like.

Outcome

By scoping what is on offer for delivering health & wellbeing benefits in the natural environment for our audience, we have highlighted possible gaps of provisions and potential barriers. This information can be used to formulate an action plan with methods and ideas of where resources can be best invested. Working with our target audiences, service providers and the health sector we will develop and deliver a series of training, activities and events that will increase confidence, understanding and information available to promote a more inclusive and safe environment that can deliver health and wellbeing benefits for our target audience.

For more information please contact Julie Turner DAONB Project Officer T 01305 224785 or email julieturner@dorsetcc.gov.uk  @stepin2nature

Appendix 2: Information sheet



Dementia Institute
(BUDI)

Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in an evaluation of the 'Stepping into Nature' project by the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (DAONB) team. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the evaluation is being done and what it will involve.

Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish before deciding whether you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the evaluation?

Stepping into Nature was developed by the DAONB team to enable older people, including those with dementia and their carers (both family and professional) to connect with the landscape in a sociable and creative way.

Bournemouth University Dementia Institute (BUDI) have been asked by the DAONB team to evaluate its Stepping into Nature project. This will provide them with information about the ways in which people currently interact with their natural and cultural environments, for example, their local countryside, and how access to nature may be improved for the future.

Why have I been chosen?

Alzheimer's Society has provided this information on behalf of the DAONB team and BUDI. We would like the opinions of older people, people with dementia and their carers from the local community about their interactions and experience within local natural and cultural environment.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw up to the point where your identity cannot be established from the information you provide (at the point of data anonymisation). Your participation will not affect your access to any services, including those within Alzheimer's Society, or the Stepping into Nature project.

What do I have to do?

If you do decide to take part, you will be invited to speak with two researchers from BUDI in a group discussion. BUDI will not receive your contact information prior to the group

discussions (called 'focus groups'). The focus group will last for no more than 60 minutes and will be held at a venue in your local area. The researchers will ask questions about your interaction with your local natural and cultural environment, what barriers you may face in terms of access, and how access may be improved for the future.

The discussion will be audio recorded so that the researchers do not need to take notes during the session and can listen to your comments later. If you accept the invitation to take part but at any time during the discussion you change your mind, you are free to stop and leave without giving a reason.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

People taking part in group discussions often find the experience enjoyable and find it useful talking about their views. It is also hoped that your participation will help develop the Stepping into Nature project in the future.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

There should be no disadvantages to taking part except the time taken to participate in the focus group.

What will happen to the information I provide?

The information you provide will remain confidential. All data will be stored in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act for five years, after which it will be destroyed. The information you provide will have identifying features about you removed. Names and personal information will not be included in any report or publication. When we have completed our evaluation, a report of our findings will be provided to the DAONB team. They will review the report and make decisions based on its recommendations. The findings may also be used for conferences, presentations and publications so that we may share our findings with the public.

Who has reviewed the evaluation?

Prior to starting this evaluation, the proposed work has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee of Bournemouth University.

Contact Information

If you have any queries, or would like some more information about taking part in the evaluation, please do not hesitate to contact the research team using our contact information below:



Michelle Heward

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow

Telephone: 01202 962538

Email: mheward@bournemouth.ac.uk

If you have any questions about the conduct of this research or wish to make a complaint, you may contact Professor Vanora Hundley (Deputy Dean - Research and Professional Practice) on +44 (0) 1202 965206 / vhundley@bournemouth.ac.uk.

Thank you for considering taking part in our evaluation.

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form



Dementia Institute
(BUDI)

Consent Form

Title of Study: 'Stepping into Nature' evaluation in collaboration with the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty team.

Please initial or tick box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and that I have been able to ask questions.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am able to withdraw up to the point where it is not possible to establish my identity from the data (the point of anonymisation during data analysis). In addition, should I not wish to answer a question, I am free to decline.	
3. I understand that all of the information I provide will be kept confidential. I agree that data may be used in the evaluation, on the condition that all identifiable information, including my name and the name of organisations, will be removed from any data I provide. All data will be anonymised.	
4. I agree that audio recordings may be taken of the focus group.	
5. I understand that all data will be stored safely, and only seen by members of the research team. I agree that audio recordings will be destroyed after transcriptions, and transcriptions will be destroyed after five years in accordance to the UK Data Protection Act 1998.	
6. I agree to take part in the above study.	

Please print, sign and date below:

Participant Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact: Michelle Heward on 01202 962538. If you have any questions about the conduct of this research or wish to make a complaint, you may contact Professor Vanora Hundley (Deputy Dean - Research and Professional Practice) on +44 (0) 1202 965206 / vhundley@bournemouth.ac.uk.

Appendix 4: Focus group topic guide



Dementia Institute
(BUDI)

Focus Group Topic Guide

Experience and current interaction

1. What does the term natural environment mean to you? (probe for countryside etc.)
2. What natural environment is available in Dorset? (Jurassic coast, nature reserves, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty etc.)
3. How often do you go out of the house?
4. What activities do you like to do?
5. How often do you visit the natural environment?
6. Is it important to you to get out in the natural environment? Why?

Enablers

7. What do you like about the natural environment in Dorset?
8. In what ways do you currently access the natural environment within Dorset?
9. How does getting out in the natural environment make you feel and are there any benefits for you?

Barriers

10. Do you feel there are any potential barriers that have stopped you accessing the natural environment in Dorset?
11. How do you feel these barriers could be overcome?

Suggestions for improvement

12. Are there any other nature based activities that you would like to be available in the future in Dorset?
13. Are there any other nature based events that you would like to be available in the future in Dorset?
14. Any other comments/suggestions that you would like to make regarding this project?

Thanks for taking part in this group.

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