

GUIDANCE FOR CUSTOMER FACING STAFF

A briefing note for organisations



How to help customers with memory problems

This information sheet is designed to help staff members support customers who may have dementia.

What is dementia?

Dementia currently affects over 800,000 people in the UK.

There are many forms of dementia, with the most common forms of dementia being Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Each individual will experience their dementia differently, but they are all diseases of the brain which can cause:

- Memory loss
- Problems with everyday tasks, like handling money.
- Difficulties with communication both speaking and understanding
- Confusion regarding time or place
- Sight and hearing problems
- Perception problems
- Altered behaviours

It is progressive – in that it starts off with very mild symptoms and gets worse over time. It affects everyone differently. No two people with dementia are the same.

Why do I need to know this?

Lots of your customers may already have dementia.

As the population ages, many more of your customers may develop dementia and will want to continue using your business.

Many people with dementia withdraw from their communities due to worries and uncertainty about how they will cope with daily tasks.

Encouragement and support of local businesses can help those individuals remain an independent part of their local community and participating in activities of daily life.

Improving your understanding of how to help people with dementia will enable them to continue using your organisation and may also

attract new customers with dementia who find it easier to use your services.

What are people with dementia like?

Each person experiences dementia in different ways – activities that one person struggles with may not be a problem for someone else.

Most people think of someone with dementia as:

- Very confused
- Needs a lot of help
- Lives in a care home
- Can't communicate
- Cannot control themselves

This is how the media often portrays people with dementia, however, most people will not fit this stereotype.

They are more likely to have much less pronounced difficulties, living independently, getting out and about, using shops and cafés, doing the same kind of things we all do... but they may just need a little more help to carry on doing these things as time goes by.

How can I spot a person with dementia?

You can't. Most people with dementia are over 65, but some are younger.

Many people living with dementia may not be aware as diagnosis rates in Plymouth are currently around 45%.

Some people with dementia will tell you if they are having problems and how you can help, or they may carry a card which explains the problems they have and the help they need.

Other people with dementia may feel embarrassed about their condition and would not wish disclose the information, or have attention drawn to their difficulties.

You may find that people refer to having memory-problems rather than using the word dementia.

Carers may also indicate that the person they are with has some difficulties, it is important however to continue to work with the person with dementia rather than just the carer.

You might also notice customers doing, or

saying things which suggest that they are having problems that might be caused by dementia.

What kind of difficulties might a person with dementia have?

- Looking, or saying that they are a bit lost or confused.
- Appearing to be searching for something they can't find.
- Looking like they don't know what to do next.
- Appearing to have problems handling or understanding their money, or how to use their card.
- Appearing to find self-service facilities hard to understand.
- Difficulties with speech, which may be hard to understand or they may be struggling to find the right words to explain.
- Appearing to have problems understanding what is said to them.
- Forgetting to pay for things they have picked up.

Of course, there are all sorts of reason why people might be having these problems that are nothing to do with dementia or memory problems.

Generally-speaking - the younger the person appears to be, the less likely it is to be dementia-related. But remember, younger people can have dementia too.

What can I do to help?

If you have good 'people skills' and work for a business with a good culture of customer care, you already have much of what you need to provide great service to someone with dementia.

Customer service skills like kindness, respect, common sense, avoiding stress, using good communication skills and a smile go a very long way.

When dealing with someone you know or believe may have a dementia you should;

Speaking

- Take your time – speak clearly and not too quickly
- Use short simple sentences
- Try to make only one point at a time
- Say things more simply if you need to
- Try saying things another way
- Use direct question so “Can I help you to...?” Rather than “What would you like me to do?”

Listening

- Allow the customer to take their time.
- Listen very carefully and make sure that you are communicating through your body language that you are listening and focused on them
- Try to best guess if you still don't understand and say something along the lines of “I'm finding it hard to understand you – are you saying?”
- Ask the customer to point at what they want
- Ask the customer if they can write it down what they need.

Body Language

- Approach the person in a friendly open manner; and ask “can I help?”
- Make sure you are at the same level as the person
- Use good eye contact
- Use sign language and gestures to reinforce what you are saying
- Be conscious of their body language

Support

- Offer reassurance and understanding
- Offer to pick out the right money if someone appears to be struggling to work out the coins or notes in their hand.
- Offer to run the items through self-service, or show them how to do it.
- Ask if they would like to sign for their purchase if they can't remember their PIN.
- Offer to keep their shopping to one side so that they can come back and collect it when they have remembered their PIN.

- Be aware of the impact the shop environment may have on a person with dementia with unfamiliar noise, alarms, patterned or shin surfaces, lighting all of which can add to confusion and stress.

It really is that simple, and for many people with dementia, this will be all they need, and will be able to explain exactly how you can help.

Try to avoid:

- Calling from a distance -many people with dementia also have hearing problems, or might have difficulty locating where the voice is coming from. It is also much less friendly than approaching someone directly.
- Standing too close or in a manner that could be perceived as threatening.
- Covering your mouth- facial expressions help the person with dementia understand what you are saying
- Attempting to hurry them.
- Letting any impatience show, especially in the form of raised eyebrows, ‘tutting’, or exchanging knowing looks with other customers or staff.

What can I do if someone appears to have forgotten to pay for something?

This is difficult. While someone may have forgotten to pay, they might equally be engaged in theft, and your safety is the most important thing.

If you know the person, and you know that they have dementia, then you can simply ask if you can help, and if they would like to pay. This will often be all you need to do.

Very rarely, people with dementia will not understand that they need to pay, or may feel that they shouldn't.

In these cases, it is up to the discretion of the manager. Some businesses, if they know the person and their carer, have simply totted up the value of goods, and asked the carer to arrange for payment.

If you do not know the person, then your businesses usual policy on theft should apply.

What if more help is needed?

One approach is to ask the person if they would like to take a rest or a sit-down somewhere quiet – so long as you have that facility available. Quite often, after a break, people feel much better and are able to function more effectively.

Ask the person if there is anyone you can contact who might be able to help. If so, then call them.

If none of this works, and the person appears to need help, then you should call for your manager for help.

If you are the manager, or are working alone, then depending upon the nature of your business and location you could call:

- Your community police officer Tel: 101
- Adult social care team Tel: 01752 668000
- If the person appears to be at risk, then the emergency services as a last resort.

For more information

If you want to find out more about dementia, the document in the toolkit ‘Awareness-raising for staff’ has more information on sessions or e-learning opportunities.

The Alzheimer's society also produces a booklet for customer facing staff which is available at: www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=2497

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