

Practical and adaptable dementia-friendly design

When it was rated “requires improvement” by the CQC, Quarry House care home decided on a design overhaul. **Geoff Crocker** and **Peter Kevern** describe the process

How do you go about creating a dementia-friendly environment in a care home, especially when the Care Quality Commission (CQC) has said that the existing environment is “lacking in stimulation”? We will describe what happened at Quarry House, owned and operated by Bristol Care Homes – a small specialist provider with four care homes, two of them rated “outstanding” by CQC.

Quarry House, by contrast, was rated “requires improvement” a few months after opening in early 2016, partly due to perceived inadequacies in the suitability of the environment for dementia care. The care home is newly built and has 65 rooms spread over four floors, with a central lobby surrounded by eight “modules” ideal for smaller care clusters, as well as the flexible provision of different types of care. It is one of few homes in Bristol providing care for residents with more advanced dementia.

Making plans

Discussions with residents, staff and visitors revealed a widely-held sense that, while the home was decorated to a high standard with attractive arrangements of themed art, the uniform nature of the décor offered little interest, recognisability or orientation for residents. So Bristol Care Homes embarked on a process to design and deliver a more appropriate interior for Quarry House.

■ Geoff Crocker is chair of Bristol Care Homes and Dr Peter Kevern is associate professor in values in care, Staffordshire University

Plans for rethinking the interior décor were shared with the relatives, residents and staff at two meetings in November 2017. At these meetings, participants discussed the idea of giving each unit a distinctive and recognisable name and theme, and the process of consultation with a design company was agreed.

A guiding principle was to avoid stereotyping or patronising elements in developing an environment for dementia care. Two distinct priorities emerged from our consultation process: first, the internal environment had to embody the best principles of dementia-friendly design, but, secondly, a “painting by numbers” approach must be avoided.

For example, it could not be assumed that all people with dementia had the same institutional needs, thereby obscuring personal tastes and preferences. Nor could it be assumed that all stimulation was good stimulation, an erroneous notion which can lead to the overuse of large designs in bright colours not normally seen in a domestic context. Such designs can alienate residents, staff and guests alike and, as one participant in our consultation put it, Quarry House should avoid “looking as if it was designed by the Early Learning Centre!”

Re-thinking the design

Recognising that the uniqueness of Quarry House and its needs required a bespoke approach, one of the authors (Geoff Crocker) got in touch with the PACE design consultancy locally. The design

consultants agreed that the previous designs “lacked levels of quality or thought-process necessary for such significant surroundings and living environment.”

With the management team, PACE agreed a brief to produce a series of designs, drawing on consultations with residents, their relatives and the Quarry House management and staff team, which would “cover the wall expanses throughout the corridors and communal areas over four floors.” These would be “large expanses of wall that would feature prominently in the residents’ day-to-day lives” (PACE report 2018)

Discussions with the PACE design team were led by Tina Curtis, Quarry House’s nurse manager. The first step proposed was to create an interesting identity for each of the four floors. The themes agreed at the next meeting with residents, in February 2018, were called “Garden”, “Meadow”, “Ocean”, and “Sky”. At the same meeting, PACE consulted residents and staff to produce a first draft scheme, the essential components of which were an integrated “digital wallpaper” providing striking murals in the lobby to each floor reflecting that floor’s theme, vinyl murals running between the skirting and dado rails

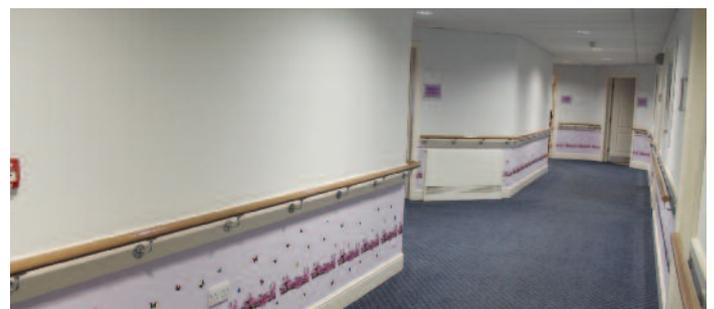
along the corridors, and signage, including signs for residents’ rooms, which would also incorporate the floor themes.

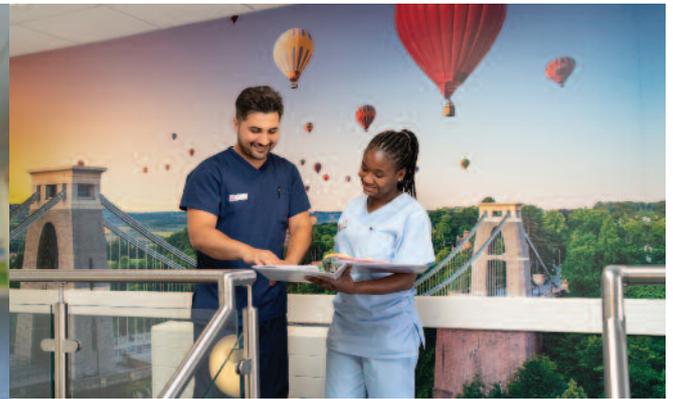
Consultation and new ideas

Over the following weeks, various designs were shared with residents and staff. The response to the consultation included proposals to increase the image content in the Ocean design and have more images of local interest in the Sky design, such as Concorde (built nearby), hot air balloons and the Clifton suspension bridge. All themes came with two options: either a photographic realism design (chosen for the Garden and Sky floors) or an abstract vintage design (chosen for the Meadow and Ocean floors). The final designs were approved by staff, residents and relatives at two meetings last May, work beginning almost immediately. PACE completed the installation over six months at a cost of around £30,000.

Instead of the traditional paint and wallpaper, designs were digitally printed on to a vinyl material with an adhesive backing, which had the following advantages:

- ten-metre lengths could be printed without any repeats, creating interest and making it





Before (previous page) and after (left and above): the new murals add an appropriate level of stimulation along with clear, recognisable features to aid wayfinding and recognition

I love the wellington boots, it reminds me of my garden at home (resident).

My favourite is Sky, it makes me feel like home, I've lived in Bristol all my life, especially the pictures of the suspension bridge and the balloons (resident).

Staff have particularly approved not only of design decisions that have enabled practical yet homely and appealing spaces, but also of the design technology, where digital storage makes it possible to further develop and adapt the designs with the full participation of everyone concerned.

Following the redesign, the CQC has visited Quarry House again and we are expecting its report to be published shortly. This time we achieved a rating of "good" in every category, the inspectors commenting that "we observed the environment to be very dementia-friendly". ■

possible to incorporate a "journey" with landmarks to aid orientation

- designs could easily be adjusted and re-sized to maintain proportion in awkwardly-shaped spaces
- residents' own preferred elements could easily be added, giving a sense of ownership and familiarity, aiding recall and orientation
- self-adhesive material could be applied directly to the painted walls in a short period of time, minimising any disruption to the life of the home
- designs could be digitally stored for use to produce further materials as the need arose, for example to produce new name signs for residents' rooms.

Visual appeal and wayfinding

For residents, the primary identified need was for visually appealing surfaces that would provide an appropriate level of stimulation along with clear, recognisable features to aid wayfinding and recognition. It had to be informed by the principles of dementia-friendly

design while having a homely feel and avoiding institutional characteristics.

Empirical research on the effectiveness of particular design features is in short supply but, based on what research and experience are available, we decided to install the decorative feature below the dado rail rather than above it. This was to engage with the tendency of older people with dementia to look downwards when moving (Benbow 2013). Another of our innovations was to introduce "interest features" at the end of blind corridors.

Apart from the use of self-adhesive material to minimise disruption, among the advantages for staff of the redecoration was that the use of bonded colours on a flexible, plasticised material meant that walls were scuff and fade-resistant. Since the space above the rail had been left in a plain colour, signage and information for staff and visitors could be placed there as well as other artworks. By having different, contrasting themes for each floor, the fact that each was a distinct community with its own character was brought home to staff as they moved between floors.

For visitors, including residents' relatives, the primary identified need was aesthetic, with a finish that enabled orientation, encouraged engagement and resisted the dulling effect of an institutional feel. In this respect, a particular strength of the design was the large mural at the head of the stairs on each floor to provide a striking statement of the theme for that floor. The 10-metre non-repeating sections prevented a sense of monotony, while the resizing of the design for narrow spaces, such as under low windowsills helped to counter the foreshortening effects of looking along long stretches.

Beautiful...and so real!

Residents have enthusiastically welcomed the project, while visitors have commented on it favourably too. Here are some typical comments:

It helps orientation for us all, the floors are now easily identifiable. I know where I am now (visitor).

Just beautiful, it brightens up the home. My mum's favourite is the garden, it's so lifelike (visitor).

It's so real I want to get my watering can out and water the plants (resident).

Acknowledgements

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References

Benbow W (2013) Evidence-based Checklist for Wayfinding Design in Dementia Care Facilities. *Canadian Nursing Home* 24(1) 4–10.
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www.bristolcarehomes.co.uk