



OPENING THE DOOR

ENABLING NATURE CONNECTIONS FOR OLDER PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

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Curie**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from a Churchill Fellowship study trip to Norway and the Netherlands to better understand how to enable outdoor experiences and foster nature connections for older people including those living with dementia.

Spending time in nature is a powerful way to support our health and wellbeing. But as we get older, our opportunity to be outdoors can diminish, especially for those with care needs such as dementia, due to the combined factors of declining health, increased social isolation and environmental barriers.

Today's seniors may have lived a lifetime of enjoying the outdoors, but in later life are too often denied opportunities to access green spaces and can spend most of their days indoors, 'protected' from the elements and therefore unable to access the many health benefits that spending time in nature can bring.

Aim of study trip

The project focus is to increase opportunities for older people to access nature through;

Understanding ways to enable outdoor experiences and foster nature connections for older people including those living with dementia

Implementing and influencing approaches to nature connection for people in my own organisation and in communities across the UK

I visited voluntary sector groups, day care services and care homes in Norway and the Netherlands to see and experience good practice, with a view to developing a model that we could implement in the UK.

Key findings

Spending time in nature helps older adults stay physically fit, mentally sharp, socially connected and emotionally uplifted. Enabling access for longer in life can directly impact on quality of life, and when care is needed, building outdoor activities into provision has benefits for those who work with and care for older people too.

The opportunity to enable nature connections for older people presents itself across a range of contexts from social groups and day care settings through to residential care. Drawing together learning from across different settings, I propose there are five key principles that underpin good practice across the board.

A person-centred approach:

Plans and activities are individualised, tailored, and link the life a person has led with who they are now. Creativity and self-expression enable individuals to maintain their interests and have new experiences that spark joy.

Activities are meaningful:

Participants feel motivated by activities that are purposeful and connected to themselves, contributing to a sense of self-worth and having a useful place in society.

Working with participants, not for them.

Facilitators and participants work collaboratively, valuing and respecting ideas, skills and knowledge. Agency and choice are presumed and enabled for all stakeholders

Connection to the wider community;

Projects seek to build relationships within the groups and with a wider society. Contact between generations, with neighbours and friends or with animals is built in to combat isolation and underline a sense of belonging

The setting is intrinsic to the experience and the outcomes;

Nature is accessed on a regular basis according to a person's capabilities. Participants feel safe, welcomed and part of a community

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practice-level

- Design meaningful activity programmes which reflect participants past experiences and interests connected to nature and the outdoors. Ensure care programmes include frequent outdoor experiences tailored to individuals' capabilities and preferences, including relevant task-based activities that offer a sense of contribution and purpose.
- Embed participant-led structures in programme design and facilitate activities where participants have the opportunity to express opinions and contribute to decision making regardless of cognitive ability.
- Strengthen community connections through integrating intergenerational activities and partnerships with the local community, using communal meals and shared outdoor experiences as a foundation for building relationships
- Train those working with older people, including outdoor practitioners, care staff and

volunteers, how to plan and deliver safe and stimulating activities that connect older people with nature. Support professionals to feel confident in embracing seasonal change and participant choice and understand the risks and benefits of this approach.

Policy-level

- Advocate for further research to explore the UK potential of successful person-centred approaches used abroad, such as the structured life history mapping tools and weekly planning and evaluation, as used by Livsglede for Eldre and the co-production model of the Odensehuis
- Campaign for improvements to make local green spaces more accessible for all, such as seating, paths and toilets

**“LEVE HELE LIVET, LIVET UT”,
(TRANSLATION; ‘LIVING YOUR
WHOLE LIFE, ALL YOUR LIFE’)**

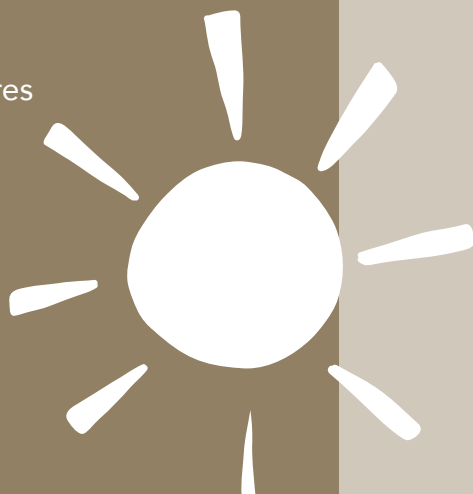
Livsglede for Eldre motto



INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Through my Churchill Fellowship I was looking for models of good practice to enable change within my own organisation. This report aims to share those insights with others working at practice level in the voluntary and care sectors, whether outdoor practitioners or care workers. I also draw it to the attention of those making decisions at a management and policy level and advocate for the joyful experiences that nature-based and person-centred practice can bring to older people with care needs. As a project it has developed out of an ongoing mission to make the benefits of being outdoors more accessible to those who stand to benefit most. I hope it inspires a shift towards enabling more outdoor experiences that honour the dignity and potential of every individual.



ABOUT ME

My name is Annie Berrington and I am the founder and Managing Director of Get Out More CIC.

I grew up in a village on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales and, like most of my generation, I was lucky enough to experience an outdoor childhood. As an adult, I continue spend time in nature as much as possible and see this as vital to my wellbeing and sense of self. After working in community development in Bradford, I noticed how disconnected many people, especially those in urban areas were becoming from the natural world.

In 2012, motivated by the knowledge

that we can lead healthier, happier lives through being active outdoors, I founded Get Out More CIC, a social enterprise that reconnects individuals and communities with nature. Our vision is: communities and nature growing healthier together, reflecting our passionate belief that we need nature as much as nature needs us.

I have been a forest school leader for fifteen years and a forest school trainer for the last four. In this time it has been rewarding to see how the forest school movement, a concept adapted from a Scandinavian model, has spread across the UK, meaning generations of children are benefiting from access to nature on a regular basis.

**IT BECAME A MISSION
TO UNDERSTAND HOW
WE COULD HELP TO OPEN
THE DOOR TO NATURE
EXPERIENCES FOR PEOPLE
LIVING WITH DEMENTIA.**

Background to the study trip

Get Out More is proud to work with people of all ages, from crawling babies to active retired folk, with a focus on hard-to-reach and disadvantaged communities. But a group that we feel are under-served, by ourselves and by society, is older people, particularly people with care needs such as dementia.

When we tried to address this gap through arranging outdoor activities with local day care centres and nursing homes, we found joy and challenge in equal measure. We had a wonderful time in the gardens or visiting the local park, but barriers we had to overcome to make that happen were many: arranging suitable transport to get us to the green space, accommodating different mobility needs, ensuring there were enough staff and volunteers to help and checking that there would be enough toilets and places to sit when we got there - and that's before we even knew what the weather was doing. It was no surprise to find that staff and carers are rarely, if ever, able to make visits like these possible.

I saw this too when my older relatives reached the stage of life when they needed care, and their worlds shrank from being active nature-lovers, to being indoors all day, and I noticed their mental wellbeing and physical health deteriorate as a result. As an active nature-lover myself, the thought that one day I may be trapped indoors looking at the world through a closed window is intolerable.

Unwilling to accept that losing touch with nature is an inevitable part of aging, nor that older people should not have the same rights to enjoy nature as everyone else, it became a mission to understand how we could help to open the door to nature experiences for people living with dementia. Thanks to the support of the Churchill Fellowship, this was the theme of my study trip in Norway and the Netherlands.

Aims of the project

The aim of my project is to

- Understand ways to enable outdoor experiences and foster nature connections for older people living with dementia
- Implement and influence approaches to nature connection for people living with dementia in my own organisation and in communities across the UK

Over six weeks in the spring of 2025 I visited voluntary sector groups, day care services and care homes in Norway and the Netherlands to see and experience good practice, with a view to developing a model that we could implement in the UK.

Why Norway and the Netherlands

In search of answers to how to make the outdoors more accessible for people with care needs, I was repeatedly drawn to Scandinavia and its concept of '*friluftsliv*' the practice of spending time in nature to support physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. The word *friluftsliv*, literally meaning free air life, was first coined by the 19th century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, but the concept is older and is engrained in Norwegian culture, capturing an approach to living in harmony with nature.

The idea is so deeply rooted, especially in Norway, that it is seen as everyone's right and valued as part of national identity. The concept of *friluftsliv* is woven into citizen's identity and lifestyles, so it was a natural link to go and discover how this concept is expressed for older people with care needs such as dementia.

In the midst of my research for the trip I came across the Odensehuis model, a meeting place for people living with dementia. The Danish concept has taken root in the Netherlands, so as this was a country I would be passing through on my train journey to Norway, I added Amsterdam as a stop on my tour.

Photo © Adrian Bebb



**FRILUFTSLIV,
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MENTAL AND
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WELLBEING.**



Cultural context

As near neighbours facing each other across the North Sea, the UK, the Netherlands and Norway share some common characteristics and notable differences, worth commenting on for this report. Our common Germanic roots and cultural links to the Vikings suggest we share a modest sensibility, an understated sense of humour and an obsession with the weather, reflecting the role of climate in our coastal nations.

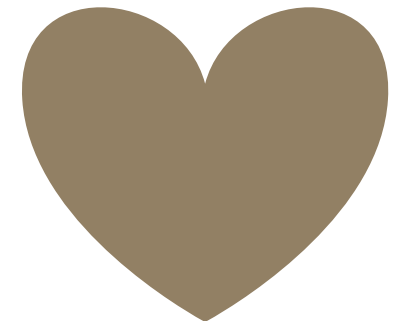
All three countries rightly claim to be nature-lovers, although in a nature-connectedness study¹, the UK ranks at the bottom of Europe with the Netherlands ranked four places higher, and although Norway was not included in that study, its cultural concept of *friluftsliv* would surely place it much higher. History and geography may well play a part. Norway's vast mountainous landscape and low population density (just 16 people per square kilometre) means there is plenty of nature to go around while the more industrialised, urbanised and densely populated Netherlands and UK, (424 and 277 people per km² respectively)

mean nature may not be as close or easy to access, making the ability to connect with it an unlevel playing field.

All three countries provide a universal health and social care system, although with distinct funding differences and challenges. The Netherlands uses a mandatory health insurance system while UK and Norway's free healthcare is paid via taxation. Significantly, Norway's national budget is supplemented by its sovereign wealth fund, created through investment of its North Sea oil income, an approach not taken by the UK or Netherlands.

In common with the most of rest of Europe, the three countries have an aging population and therefore a rising number of people living with age-related conditions such as dementia. Supporting individuals living with dementia and providing suitable care is becoming one of the most important health and social care issues we all face.

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IN THE UK 40% OF PEOPLE AGED OVER 65 VISIT GREEN SPACES ONCE A MONTH OR LESS OFTEN.

UK context

There are extensive research studies supporting evidence that spending time in nature is linked to improved physical fitness and mental wellbeing, including reduced stress, enhanced mood, and greater life satisfaction. The UK's Adults People and Nature survey (2024)² shows that 70% of adults in UK visit green spaces at least weekly. However, those aged over 65, those who consider themselves in bad health and people living in deprived areas are the least likely to visit green spaces regularly. Forty % of people aged over 65 visit green spaces once a month or less often.

Almost one in ten adults who reported having bad health answered that they had never visited a green space in the last year. For those who expressed concerns about visiting green spaces, the most common concerns were; a lack of facilities, fear of anti-social behaviour and crime and feeling isolated, highlighting the need for older people and those with care needs (and everyone else) to feel safe outdoors.

There are around 900,000 people with dementia in the UK and a third of them live in care homes. The health benefits of spending time outdoors for people living in care have been widely reported such as improved mood, increased wellbeing and quality of life, better sleep, decreased agitation and disruptive behaviours, and reduced use of medications used to treat changed behaviours. However, the desire to protect vulnerable older people can translate to keeping them 'safe and warm' indoors. For people living in care homes this can mean spending all their days inactive and inside. A study³ examining access to outdoor spaces in care homes, found that only 22% go outside daily and 32% less than once a month.

ALMOST ONE IN TEN ADULTS WHO REPORTED HAVING BAD HEALTH ANSWERED THAT THEY HAD NEVER VISITED A GREEN SPACE IN THE LAST YEAR.

Adults People and Nature Survey 2024

‘ONLY 20% OF THE PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA CITED THEIR DEMENTIA AS A BARRIER TO USING OUTDOOR SPACES, WHEREAS 83% OF CARERS BELIEVED THAT DEMENTIA LIMITED THE PERSON’S ABILITY TO USE OUTDOOR SPACES’

From ‘Is It Nice Outside?’ Natural England commissioned report⁴

The numbers don’t indicate reluctance in supporting older people with care needs to enjoy nature but reveal that caregivers, both professionals and family members, are often preoccupied with caring, concerned about potential risks, or unaware of the benefits, hindering their ability to provide such experiences.

There are many organisations in the UK working in this space to address the issue, notably Dementia Adventure and the Sensory Trust. As its name suggests, Dementia Adventure is on a mission to support people living with dementia to get outdoors and connect with nature, which they achieve through active days out and supported holidays. Their training programmes equip family care givers and professionals with knowledge and skills to support people living with dementia to live fulfilling lives.

The Sensory Trust’s flagship dementia project, Creative Spaces, is a programme of nature-based activities including active walking groups and place-based community cafes across Cornwall. Like Dementia Adventure,

it undertakes and contributes to research which have added to the evidence for how nature benefits older people with care needs and how landscapes and nature spaces can be more accessible.



CASE STUDIES

During my Churchill Fellowship I have been privileged to meet care workers and managers, volunteers, academics and people living with dementia who have shared their considerable expertise and insight. I have chosen to feature as case studies five of the organisations, where I was able to take part in outdoor activities alongside participants and residents and experience the inspiring practice for myself.

From these snapshots, there are a number of common threads that I have pulled together to propose a set of ideas of effective ways to enable nature connections for older people.



ODENSEHUIS, AMSTERDAM

I arrived at Odensehuis Zuid in Amsterdam just as lunch was being served. A volunteer cook from Syria had made delicious lentil pasta, and everyone was helping set the table and chatting. The diners included locals of different ages including an artist who worked in the same building. We all ate together around one large table.

One elderly man told me he'd been coming since his wife died,

"I come here every day. It's somewhere to go where people are kind and ask, 'how are you?' It's part of the neighbourhood."

An Odensehuis is described as a community-based meeting place designed to support people with mild dementia, their caregivers, and their families. There are Odensehuizen across the Netherlands offering a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for social interaction, activities, and access to information

and advice. Members play an active role in how the group is managed and I was intrigued to understand more about this.

After lunch, a planned fire drill gave insight into how involved members are. The fire practice only took a few minutes, but afterwards, everyone arranged themselves in a room to discuss how it had gone. The conversation was lively and animated and took more than twice as long as the fire practice itself. Facilitator Maartje den Breejen gently guided with some opening questions but largely the participants led the discussion, fostering inclusion and respect—something often lacking in community work with older people.

People living with dementia often talk about feeling undervalued and losing confidence, as everyday tasks become more difficult, but here I could see people engaging fully, confident that they had a voice and an active part to play in their community.



My visit to Odensehuis Zuidoost later in the week was equally inspiring. Located in a multicultural neighbourhood, this Odensehuis runs twice a week from a busy community centre. Coordinator Hans van Amstel explained this encourages wider involvement in neighbourhood life. One of the group, who is living with dementia, had the group engaged in seated yoga when I arrived. After an introduction, they took up my offer of some nature-based activities in the green space outside, before sitting down for a lively communal lunch together.

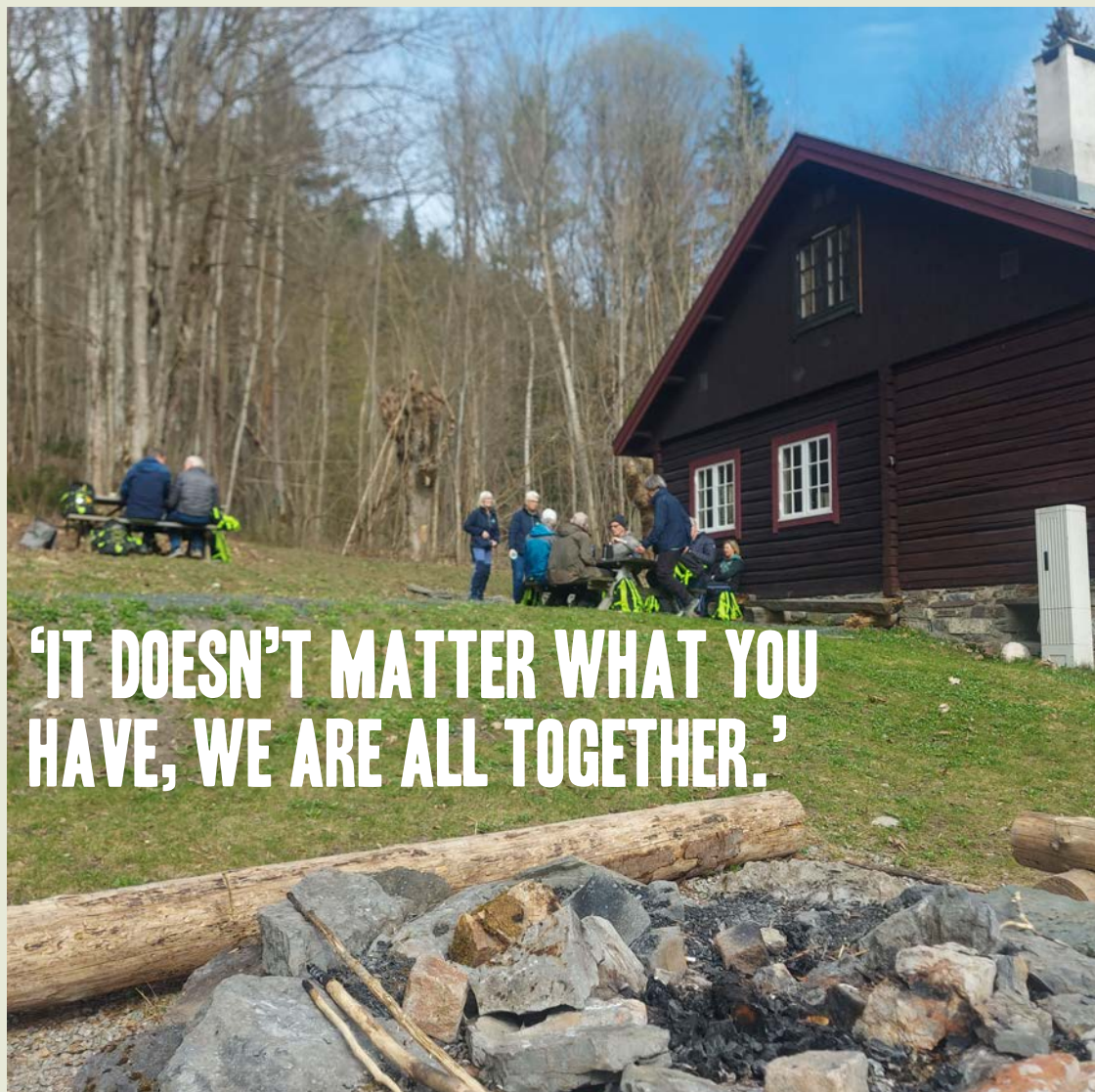
After lunch, we joined a 'Cultural Pharmacy', where poetry and prose read by a volunteer sparked some deep conversations. Though I couldn't follow every word of the Dutch being spoken, the engagement was clear. A piece of writing about a man in jail provoked some intense discussion and a lot of laughter as they recounted family stories.

What impressed me about the Odensehuizen was that there was

no suggestion of dumbing down at all. This group of elders were respected for their insight and their stories and all voices were sought and valued. Odensehuizen sit firmly in their communities as a meeting place where people, including people living with dementia, come to learn, eat, chat and support one another. It was apparent that these spaces truly break down barriers and stigma, making people feel welcomed, respected, and part of the community.

"I COME HERE EVERY DAY. IT'S SOMEWHERE TO GO WHERE PEOPLE ARE KIND AND ASK, 'HOW ARE YOU?' IT'S PART OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD."





FRIVILLIGSSENTRAL DEMENSGRUPPE, BÆRUM MUNICIPALITY

On a warm spring day I hiked through the forest in Sandvika, near Oslo, with a group of pensioners. Robins and nuthatches sang overhead, and wood anemones bloomed across the forest floor. I had joined the *Demmensturgruppe* (dementia walking group), organised by Bærum Frivilligsentral, a local volunteering organisation. After meeting in town and being dropped off by minibus, the group walked briskly, pausing only to admire flowers, watch deer, or greet fellow hikers.

At lunch, we stopped outside a cabin for coffee, sandwiches and more chat and laughter, then carried on through open fields to complete an impressive 6.5k walk. The group included both people living with dementia and volunteers, but you couldn't tell who's who; everyone wore the same rucksack and walked as equals. Coordinator Karina Sylling

explained, *'It doesn't matter what you have, we are all together.'*

This walk reflects the Norwegian approach to outdoor life. The group meets weekly, year-round, regardless of weather. If it's rainy, they bring waterproofs; if snowy, they put ice grips on their boots. Participation doesn't drop off in winter, unlike similar UK programmes I've been involved with. Ranging in age from sixty to eighty plus years, people attend as long as they're able, continuing lifelong outdoor habits. These walks are possible thanks to Bærum Frivilligsentral and its volunteers. Karina coordinates with families, arranges transport, and ensures a volunteer-to-participant ratio of 1:2. When I asked what they do if they can't get enough volunteers, the reply was simple: *'It never happens.'* Volunteers love being part of the programme, and families benefit too—they get a well-earned break, knowing their loved ones are having a good day out.

I spoke to Harold Reid Waugh who works for the Bærum municipality about their mission to create *'meaningful content in everyday life'*

“THEY DON’T ALWAYS REMEMBER WHERE THEY’VE BEEN, BUT THEY KNOW THEY HAD A GOOD TIME.”

for seniors through culture, activity, and community. They’ve organised beach festivals, winter activity days, and intergenerational events. He explained that *friluftsliv* is rooted in lived experience—many grew up skiing, hiking, and berry-picking, and they expect to continue outdoors into old age.

Even when the weather turns, they adapt—one year, a downpour moved the party to an aircraft hangar; another year, a storm blew the shelter away. Residents still laugh about it. On a snowy day, dressed warmly, residents enjoyed snowmobiles, laser shooting, and grilled sausages—activities they remembered from earlier in life.

I admire this approach: ageing doesn’t mean giving up adventure. In Bærum municipality there’s a

strong belief that outdoor life can and should continue, no matter the weather. Whether memories of the day remain or not, the joy in the moment matters most. As Karina said: *“They don’t always remember where they’ve been, but they know they had a good time.”*



“IT'S MORE FUN TO GO TO WORK. I CAN DO MY HOBBIES HERE, I CAN BRING MY ANIMALS. YOU FEEL MORE VALUED. THE DAY IS FULL OF JOY”



LIVSGLEDE FOR ELDTRE

At Kamfjordshjemmet, a nursing home in Sandefjord, residents from all the wards poured into the outside space and took a seat at the tables or in the campfire hut. Guests also included family members, day care centre participants and neighbours from the local community.

One man was wheeled out in his bed to enjoy the outdoor party. A team of active volunteers served coffee, grilled hot dogs on the campfire and mingled with staff and residents who were engaged in conversations, games of ring toss or singing. The sun was starting to peek out and the event had the atmosphere of a jolly garden party. This 'friluft' (fresh air) event is a part of a programme of regular outdoor activities organised as part of the home's Livsglede for Eldre scheme.

Livsglede homes focus on person-centred care, using life story mapping to tailor daily activities to residents' past experiences and current preferences. This includes details from their education and careers to their favourite outdoor pastimes or pets. These insights are recorded and used to plan

weekly activities, ensuring residents spend time outside every week and interact with animals—both core Livsglede for Eldre principles. New insights that might be picked up from spontaneous moments, such as a resident engaging with the chickens or sharing a hug when the local nursery children visited, cascade down through the life story documents, the calendars and weekly planners, so they always remain current and relevant for each resident.

I spent the day in two Livsglede homes. Guided by Coordinators Cecilie Bolsø Langeli from Kamfjordshjemmet and Ann-Charlott Borge Vik Nystad from Plankemyra nursing homes, I learned how Livsglede became part of daily life in these homes. Though initially seen as extra work, staff learnt to embrace it, enjoying the deeper connection with residents—and even bringing their own hobbies to work. Cecilie showed me some pictures of residents cuddling a couple of fluffy Pomeranian dogs, who a staff member had brought in the day before. She explained,



"It's more fun to go to work. I can do my hobbies here, I can bring my animals. You feel more valued. The day is full of joy"

Ann-Charlott raised the point, that **before they focused on the life story mapping, sometimes they only really got to know about the life of a resident when they attended their funeral**, but now they know details, right down to what music they like to get up to in the morning.

"We can use this to our advantage, and make it a good day, because we know who they really are."

The programme honours Norwegians' strong connection to the outdoors. Staff explore each resident's relationship with nature and incorporate it into their week. This might mean collecting eggs, berry-picking or sweeping snow – celebrating the turn of the seasons is another of the nine Livsglede principles.

At Plankemyra in the seaside town of Arendal, a fisherman in the palliative ward was wheeled to the sea in his bed, and another resident's son took

a group out on his fishing boat— but the approach doesn't always have to be big things – **it can be as simple as knowing who likes to have a fresh breeze come in through an open window.**

In the garden at Plankemeyer, the residents of one ward have come outside for a cup of coffee in the sunshine. Not all residents can describe how they are feeling, but it's clear from their faces and in their body language that everyone is feeling calm and relaxed today. It costs money to factor in access to nature for people living in care, whether that's the design of the outside space or monitoring a quality assurance scheme.

Talking to the staff it's apparent that the benefits are many; **residents are happier and calmer, less anxious and agitated and therefore medication can be reduced and staff are happier at work so stay in their jobs for longer**, which both reduce costs in the long run.

The approach can be summed up in the Livsglede for Eldre motto "Leve hele livet, livet ut", (Translation; 'Living your whole life, all your life')



LILLEHOV FARM, LØTEN

In the countryside near Løten, Norway, red-painted barns dot the rolling hills, and cows with calves graze peacefully. Amid this rural setting is Lillehov, a farm which has offered day care services for people with dementia for over 20 years. As I arrived, a taxi of elderly men pulled up—also heading to Lillehov. I was welcomed by Ingunn Sigstad Moen outside her charming wooden farmhouse filled with old kitchen implements. Inside, the group has already gathered, chatting over coffee. Lillehov didn't feel like a care facility, more like a warm friendly home, and that's because it is.

In Norway, municipalities (local authorities) provide free day care to citizens who need it, and farm-based day care is one innovative way of doing this. There are around 400 such care farms across the country, offering services not only to people with dementia but also to youth and adults with mental health challenges. Attendees usually visit once or twice a week and take part in everyday activities like gardening, cooking, or feeding animals. The setting is peaceful and home-like, grounded in real-life tasks that provide a

sense of purpose.

I spoke to Ingerborg Pederson, a researcher from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences in Ås. They have done extensive research⁵ into how farm-based day care compares to regular day care, and the benefits are manifold. The setting plays a large part in enabling participants to feel relaxed and part of a community. We discussed how activities that are purposeful, real and useful, not created just for the benefit of participants, mean people feel that they are contributing. As dementia progresses and slowly robs an individual of their abilities, it can erode their sense of confidence and self-worth too. **But at farm-based day care, the activities may be things attendees have done all their lives like stacking logs, so continuing to do them contributes to their self-identity and sense of accomplishment.**

On the day I visited, we didn't do chores—there was a rumour that the cuckoos were back, so we set off to the woods to listen. Along the way, we inspected ripening berries, discussed the weather,

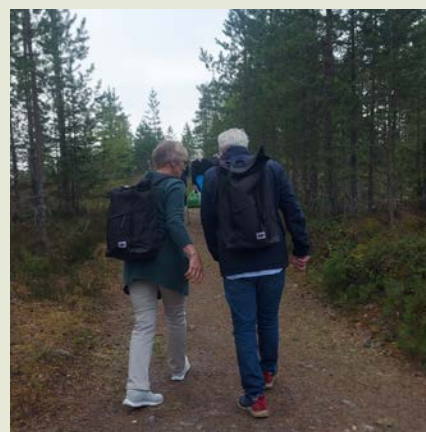
and shared laughter. One of the elderly gentlemen playfully tossed pinecones, then span me a tale about the woodland spirit Huldra. Some are quiet, but the mood is cheerful. Ingunn, along with Ragnhild from the municipality and Mona, a farm helper, know everyone well, creating **a safe space where trust and friendship flourish—crucial for those facing the uncertainty of dementia.**

We stopped at a lake to enjoy coffee and cake made earlier by the group. On cue, the cuckoos called out, and we spot a rare bird in the reeds. One man, silent until now, stands and whistles softly to it—a beautiful moment of connection with nature.

The farm-based day care is shown to keep attendees active for longer, not because it can 'cure' the effects of dementia or other conditions of old age, but because **when there are jobs to do and places to go, attendees are more motivated to keep active, rather than sitting in a chair all day.** At the care farms, feeding chickens or cooking lunch isn't just symbolic—it's real work that needs doing.

Whether it's sharing tasks, laughter, or silent companionship with animals, these are meaningful moments that matter.

LILLEHOV DIDN'T FEEL LIKE A CARE FACILITY, MORE LIKE A WARM FRIENDLY HOME, AND THAT'S BECAUSE IT IS.





DEN NORGE TURISTFORENING

Established in Victorian times to support the growing number of visitors who had come to explore its fjords and mountains, Den Norge Turistforening (the Norwegian Trekking Association), has become Norway's biggest hiking and outdoor activity organisation. It exists to help everyone enjoy the outdoor life and looks after an extensive network of cabins, trails and outdoor activity groups across the whole country. Their programme covers all Norway's regions and its size and popularity means there are regular groups for every age and ability.

In Kristiansand on the south coast, I joined a walk for seniors, that met outside the DNT shop in town. "God tur!", (have a good walk!), they called to each other as we set to walk around Odderøya, a coastal peninsular accessible from the city centre. The moderately demanding walk through the woods and up and down steep rocky paths took exactly two hours. The retirees, all in their

seventies and eighties, told me this is all they have time for, and they attend once or twice a week, come rain or snow – a lady I spoke to could only remember it being cancelled once when a winter storm made them turn back.

Earlier in the trip I had spoken to Helga Løvoll, Professor of Friluftsliv at Volda University College. She outlined that for many Norwegians, nature is valued in perception of a good healthy life, and this echoed in comments from the walkers

"I have to get out every day. It's a compulsion and part of life!"

"Walking is important for a good life. I walk every day. I keep moving and my mind active as well as my body"

Later in the trip on a Sunday morning in Bergen, I caught the cable car up Mount Ulkriken, and having taken in the stunning view I started the walk down. I seemed to be the only one heading in that direction, as I was met by a strong flow of Norwegians walking up to the 643 metre (2110 feet) summit. The walk up the 1333 steep Sherpa Steps is apparently a popular Sunday morning jaunt, and

**"I HAVE TO
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while I know there are similarly active walkers in the UK, it was the volume of people – and the range of ages from toddling children to elderly people with walking sticks that was noteworthy. Norwegians love to walk in nature and as a nation, they are among the most active in Europe. **We can learn from their positive attitude to keeping active in all weathers well into old age.**

I noticed throughout my time in Norway how the access to nature is enabled through the infrastructure of green spaces. Wherever I walked there were well maintained marked paths, benches, shelters, campfire areas and compost toilets – even in remote areas. This makes green spaces and countryside much more inclusive for all, including those with physical needs as a result of disabilities or old age. In my experience of community work in the UK we often struggle to find nature places in to take groups of older people because of the lack of suitable facilities.

In Norway much of this infrastructure is put in place and maintained by Den Norge Turistforening.

Its facilities are well used, well maintained with no signs of abuse or vandalism. This reflects a cultural attitude that aligns with the Norwegian saying, that staff at DNT South shared with me, *“Det du elsker tar du vare på,”* (translation; ‘what you love, you take care of’). **When people feel a sense of ownership and emotional connection to their environment, they are more likely to protect it, reinforcing the importance of creating outdoor spaces that are accessible and safe – and loved.**

**“DET DU ELSKER
TAR DU VARE PÅ”
(TRANSLATION;
‘WHAT YOU LOVE,
YOU TAKE CARE OF’)**

THE LEARNING

DRAWING ON THE LEARNING FROM MY CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP VISITS, I PROPOSE FIVE PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERPIN GOOD PRACTICE IN SUPPORTING NATURE-BASED EXPERIENCES FOR OLDER PEOPLE WITH CARE NEEDS.

PRINCIPLE 1:

A person-centred approach: plans and activities are individualised, tailored, and link the life a person has led with who they are now. Creativity and self-expression enable individuals to maintain their interests and have new experiences that spark joy.

A feature of the projects I visited was the personalised approach which recognised the individual and links the life they had led to who they are now. Dementia can erode a person's sense of identity, but a person-centred approach values individuality as an important factor for good mental health

"Our job is to understand the individual" Cecilie Bolsø Langeli, Kammfjordshjemmet nursing home

The *Livsglede for Eldre* (Joy of Life for the Elderly) scheme requires that care staff invest a great deal of time learning about the earlier lives of their residents and who they are now, to develop tailored programmes that

remain relevant to them and spark joy. The ongoing commitment to this approach and attention to detail was significant, covering background, needs desire and habits through an extensive mapping process.

Staff could be creative in applying the knowledge about residents to bring connection into their time in care. It was apparent in the big things such as the outdoor party and the boat trips and in the smaller meaningful actions such as, giving a ball of wool to handle for a lady who had enjoyed knitting or playing a favourite piece of music to 'dance' a reluctant resident out of bed in the morning.

For people with higher level of care needs, learning about individuals' interests needs the support of relatives and a commitment to observing current preferences.

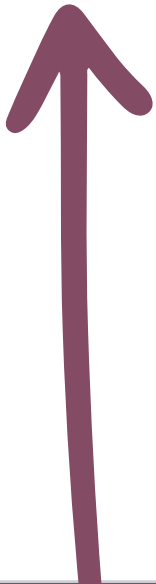
"Not everyone can describe what they used to enjoy, but when we saw him listen to the birds, suddenly his face lit up." Cecilie Bolsø Langeli, Kammfjordshjemmet

Seeing individuals for who they are, not what condition

they have, was apparent in the relationships between people at the Odensehuizen and Bærum Frivilligsentral's dementia walking group and demonstrated relationships built on trust and mutual respect. Many organisations in the UK already understand this principle, which can be applied widely when care givers are supported with tools and the time to see the individual and learn what gives their life meaning.



**“OUR
JOB IS TO
UNDERSTAND
THE
INDIVIDUAL”**



**HOW CAN WE MAKE IT EASIER
FOR YOU TO GET OUT IN FRESH
AIR? DO YOU ENJOY BEING
OUTSIDE?...DO YOU LIKE THE
SUN AND THE WARMTH, OR
DO YOU PREFER TO SIT IN THE
SHADE?**

Questions from the Life History
Mapping questionnaire, Livsglede
for Eldre





PRINCIPLE 2:

Activities are meaningful: participants feel motivated by activities that are purposeful and connected to themselves, contributing to a sense of self-worth and having a useful place in society.

Closely related to the person-centred approach, a significant thread through the engaging programmes were outdoor activities that were meaningful and purposeful. Spending time outdoors in nature is important because of the relevance it has to the lives of this generation of seniors, whether that was a rural childhood attached to the working cycle of the farming year or a lifetime of enjoying walking in the fresh air.

“People want to be part of something and to belong. They want a sense of meaning. It’s a balancing act between keeping a sense of old self and adapting to your future”

Ann-Charlott Borge Vik Nystad,
Plankemyra nursing home

The farm-based daycare approach was evident through tasks mirroring real farm work, such as sweeping snow or stacking wood. Unlike traditional daycare activities like puzzles and crafts, these ‘chores’ give a sense of purpose and familiarity. At Lillehov, the practical approach was well-received, particularly among male participants, as supported by Norwegian research⁵

The Bærum municipality recognised the need to enable its older citizens to continue to experience the activities they had enjoyed in younger lives. In Norway this was year-round barbecues, having a turn on a snowmobile or visiting a ski jump, while in the UK options may look more like summer picnics, bird watching or visiting botanical gardens.

These outdoor activities can spark conversation at the time and give participants something to talk about when reflecting on their day later, but its important to note that **for people living with dementia, its not always about making memories, but enjoying moments that are fun at the time, as the present may be all**

there is. Nor does engagement need to be about participation; I heard good examples of older people engaging through observing.

Watching chickens feeding or children enjoying outdoor play were pleasurable activities in their own right. Whether linking with past experiences or trying something new, meaningful experiences were a factor in participants’ wellbeing and quality of life.

“PEOPLE WANT TO BE PART OF SOMETHING AND TO BELONG. THEY WANT A SENSE OF MEANING. IT’S A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN KEEPING A SENSE OF OLD SELF AND ADAPTING TO YOUR FUTURE”



PRINCIPLE 3:

Working with participants, not for them; Facilitators and participants work collaboratively, valuing and respecting ideas, skills and knowledge. Agency and choice are presumed and enabled for stakeholders according to their abilities.

To work with participants, rather than delivering services to them is an established principle of community engagement in the UK, but in practice it can sometimes feel tokenistic. The principle of co-production was underlined by examples of it working well such as at the Odensehuizen where inviting contributions and opinions was a key feature. The discussions, whether about the management of the venue or within the ‘cultural pharmacy’ workshops were participant-led. Facilitators may get things started but then take a step back empowering group members to have their say. Participants are expected

to speak up and speaking on behalf of others is not allowed.

The principle remains in place as the impact of dementia and other conditions progresses. The Livsglede homes insist that staff have inclusive conversations and do not speak over or about residents while they are with them.

“We try to give people as much responsibility as possible. We have to give people choices, but they may not be able to make decisions”
Maartje den Breejen, Odensehuis Zuid

People with care needs like dementia may find they have fewer opportunities for control over their lives, but opportunities to make choices, including the choice not to participate, can help restore dignity and enhance their quality of life. The responsibility of undertaking tasks and looking after others, whether animals or fellow participants is apparent in the farm-based day care and other settings which also empower participants to believe in themselves.



PRINCIPLE 4:

Connection to the wider community; Projects seek to build relationships within the groups and with a wider society. Contact with animals, between generations, with neighbours and friends combats isolation and underlines a sense of belonging



The desire to connect with others and feel you belong is part of the human condition, perhaps felt more keenly in older age as illness, loss and isolation may impact on number of social contacts and depth of social networks. Group activities in an outdoor setting were conducive to developing social connections, perhaps by providing a calm neutral space with plenty to prompt conversations and evoke past experiences.

It was no surprise that the practice of sitting together to eat and talk was a common feature in all the projects I visited. The communal food experiences were at the heart of the day, providing a space for social interaction and building connections. From the cosy breakfast in the kitchen at Lillehov farm or the sharing of chocolate bars outside the cabin on the dementia group walk to the lunch for 30 at Odensehvis Zuidoost, these were the most sociable and laughter-filled parts of the day. Communal meals had own sense of purpose too, as participants contributed to the shared experience, through preparation,

serving each other, or clearing away.

It was noticeable that facilitators were skilled in building supportive relationships based on safety and trust. **A calm manner, an easy-going nature and a great sense of humour were characteristics essential to create the strong bonds within the group.**

Beyond the groups themselves, there were good examples of connecting to a wider society. At Odensehvis Zuid this was through inviting neighbours into their space to join in activities or share lunch, while at Odensehvis Zuid Ost, their placement within a community centre meant group members were more inclined to visit other activities happening in the same building. Nursing homes I visited encouraged local groups such as a choir or parent toddler group to use the building for their own purposes, breaking down their institutional separation as a place for older people. This was formalised in the Livsglede for Eldre homes which fulfil their requirement to collaborate with schools and kindergartens through an arranged pairing and visiting scheme. I was

told heartwarming anecdotes of toddlers bringing backpacks full of toys to the nursing home or falling asleep on an elder's lap.

Farm-based day care providers, such as at Lillehov, are by their nature, based out in the countryside and provide another type of connection.

Contact with animals, whether on the farm or in the wild, is often described as therapeutic, providing a calming connection without the need for words, such as the quiet man transfixed by the bird we encountered on our walk to the lake.



“WHEN I AM INSIDE I
FORGET THE WORDS
FOR THINGS, BUT WHEN
I AM OUTSIDE I CAN
TALK EASILY”

Participant on a dementia walk

PRINCIPLE 5:

The setting is intrinsic to the experience and the outcomes; nature is accessed on a regular basis according to a person’s capabilities. Participants feel safe, welcomed and part of a community



Extensive evidence shows that spending time in nature has a positive impact on mental health by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, enhancing mood, and improving cognitive functions like focus and memory.

“When I am inside I forget the words for things, but when I am outside I can talk easily” Participant on a dementia group walk.

Naturally, enabling nature-based activities for older people requires access to suitable quality green spaces and sustaining the wellbeing outcomes means that access needs to be on regular basis. The outdoor activities I encountered in Norway were running all year round, taking a positive approach to the changes in the seasons and the vagaries of the weather, even as far as Bærum municipality’s older people’s winter activity day in the snow.

The DNT walking groups trusted in good clothing, their own outdoor skills and their ability to assess risk for themselves. When deteriorating health made individuals more vulnerable, good support from proactive voluntary organisations

like Bærum Frivilligsentral bridges the gap to keep older people active as long as possible. Their **professional support and high ratio of volunteers helped lower the barriers that prevent older people maintaining their active interests.**

Sites like parks, woodlands and nature reserves are calming, peaceful spaces where people feel more relaxed. The farm-based day care research highlighted that the quiet seclusion of the countryside helped people living with dementia feel at ease. Yet nature spaces also provide natural stimulation and, in the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, something new to observe and sometimes to talk about, such as what flowers are in bloom and which birds are visiting. This level of stimulating variety can’t be replicated indoors, but can be accessed through a small visit outside, such as into the garden of a nursing home.

Norway is fortunate to have nature so accessible even for city-dwellers and access is enhanced by its excellent outdoor infrastructure (footpaths, benches, toilets and shelters). The UK can only dream



of the same level of facilities, but investing in better provision would be a first step towards addressing the concerns of those visiting green spaces least often i.e. older people and those with ill health, as identified by UK's Adults People and Nature survey (2024)²

"Feeling safe is an important value. Everyone has a quality and is valued"
Maartje den Breejen, Odensehuis Zuid

Creating safe, welcoming environments was a crucial aspect across all projects. For example, Odensehuis emphasised their inclusive neighbourhood spaces where everyone feels at home and accepted, while Lillehov offered a cosy, non-institutional atmosphere. Both indoors and outdoors, both spaces prioritised safety, inclusivity and a chance to sit quietly with nature, or other people.

**"FEELING
SAFE IS AN
IMPORTANT
VALUE.
EVERYONE HAS
A QUALITY AND
IS VALUED"**



RECOMMENDATIONS

PRACTICE-LEVEL

- Design meaningful activity programmes which reflect participants past experiences and interests connected to nature and outdoor living. Ensure care programmes include frequent outdoor experiences tailored to individuals' capabilities and preferences, including relevant task-based activities that offer a sense of contribution and purpose.
- Embed participant-led structures in programme design and delivery and facilitate activities where participants have the opportunity to express opinions and contribute to decision making regardless of cognitive ability.
- Strengthen community connections through integrating intergenerational activities and partnerships with the local community, using communal meals and shared outdoor experiences as a foundation for building relationships
- Train those working with older people, including outdoor

practitioners, care staff and volunteers, how to plan and deliver safe and stimulating activities that connect older people with nature. Support professionals to feel confident in embracing seasonal change and participant choice and understand the risks and benefits of this approach.

POLICY-LEVEL

- Advocate for further research to explore the UK potential of successful person centred approaches used abroad, such as the structured life history mapping tools and weekly planning and evaluation, as used by Livsglede for Eldre and the co-production model of the Odensehus
- Campaign for improvements to make local green spaces more accessible for all, such as seating, paths and toilets



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