

Fire, Rescue and Dementia; The start of our journey

In January 2012 members of the Fire and Rescue Services of Staffordshire and the West Midlands came together with experts from Staffordshire University and professionals from social services and others with an interest in dementia. Aware of a great deal of work already going on, in our area and elsewhere, our aim was to explore ways in which we might work together to improve the lives of people with dementia in our region.

This conference is part of that work. Through it, we aim to share some of the steps we have taken during the first part of our journey and to seek contacts, experiences and views from others with an interest and expertise in this area.

This was our starting point:

We know that-

- There is a growing population of the elderly in the UK and a growing number suffering from dementia in one form or another.
- In the West Midlands the figures are significant and the rich mixture of histories, cultures, faiths and traditions that we enjoy in this part of the country offers a further dimension.
- The trend is for more people to be supported in their own homes rather than moving into residential care. In the future, more people with dementia will be living at home, in houses not built or designed for such patterns of living. They may be living alone. These people will therefore be at high risk of harm from fire or accident. Risk factors include mobility problems, memory issues and a decreased awareness and understanding of risk and danger. For some individuals there will be additional pressures, for example through sight or hearing impairment.
- Fire Service personnel, both in their rescue and prevention activities, have valuable and often privileged points of contact with people with dementia and their families, neighbours and carers.
- Many agencies are involved with the care for people with dementia and we believe that it is always possible to improve the ways in which different agencies can communicate and work together to prevent harm and to save lives.

We started by learning more about types of dementia and associated behaviours from the perspective of researchers in the field, clinicians, social services, Fire and Rescue personnel and carers.

- We asked therefore a) how could the Fire and Rescue service make a real difference and b) how could we work in partnership with other agencies to do this?

- We recognized that this might involve a) an increased awareness amongst Fire and Rescue officers of the signs and characteristics of a person with dementia b) a good understanding of the way best to support such people and their carers in a range of circumstances from risk to real danger and c) a better knowledge of how and when to contact other agencies from the NHS through Social Services to voluntary organizations.
- Our decision was not to create a strategy but to prepare elements of a practical tool kit that could be used widely and which could be added to as new or existing 'tools' were identified.

The characteristics of this initiative are:

- Collaboration with experts in the field to allow Fire and Rescue colleagues to be better informed about dementia in its various forms.
- An increased awareness of the impact of environment and culture on dementia sufferers and the best ways to offer support. This includes urban/ rural differences/ hard to reach people as well as cultural and community attitudes to dementia.
- A commitment to work with a range of professionals in the health and caring professions and further development of communications between relevant agencies.
- A commitment to work across boundaries of regions of the Fire and Rescue Services (Staffordshire and West Midlands) to develop this project and to offer thereby a potential model to be used elsewhere.

The projects have included:

- Work with pharmacies which are aware of properties where dementia medication is being used to build an understanding of the role of Fire and Rescue Services and to facilitate the sharing of information between the two.
- Work to promote the potential of technology based support at Alzheimers Cafes, Memory Clinics and with NHS clinical leads
- The development of the use of online training for Fire and Rescue officers and where needed, the development of new online training modules.
- A mapping of pathways of professional help and support to allow speedy and clear communications and work across agency boundaries.

- A consideration of how to work effectively when there are barriers to communication such as sight or hearing impairment or geographical isolation.
- Involvement in conferences to share contacts and ideas and to building on the early learning of the group.

Since the group was established in 2012, other FRS's from London, Kent, Nottinghamshire and Devon and Somerset have joined and the group has a formal link with the Chief Fire Officer's Association.

For more information:

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