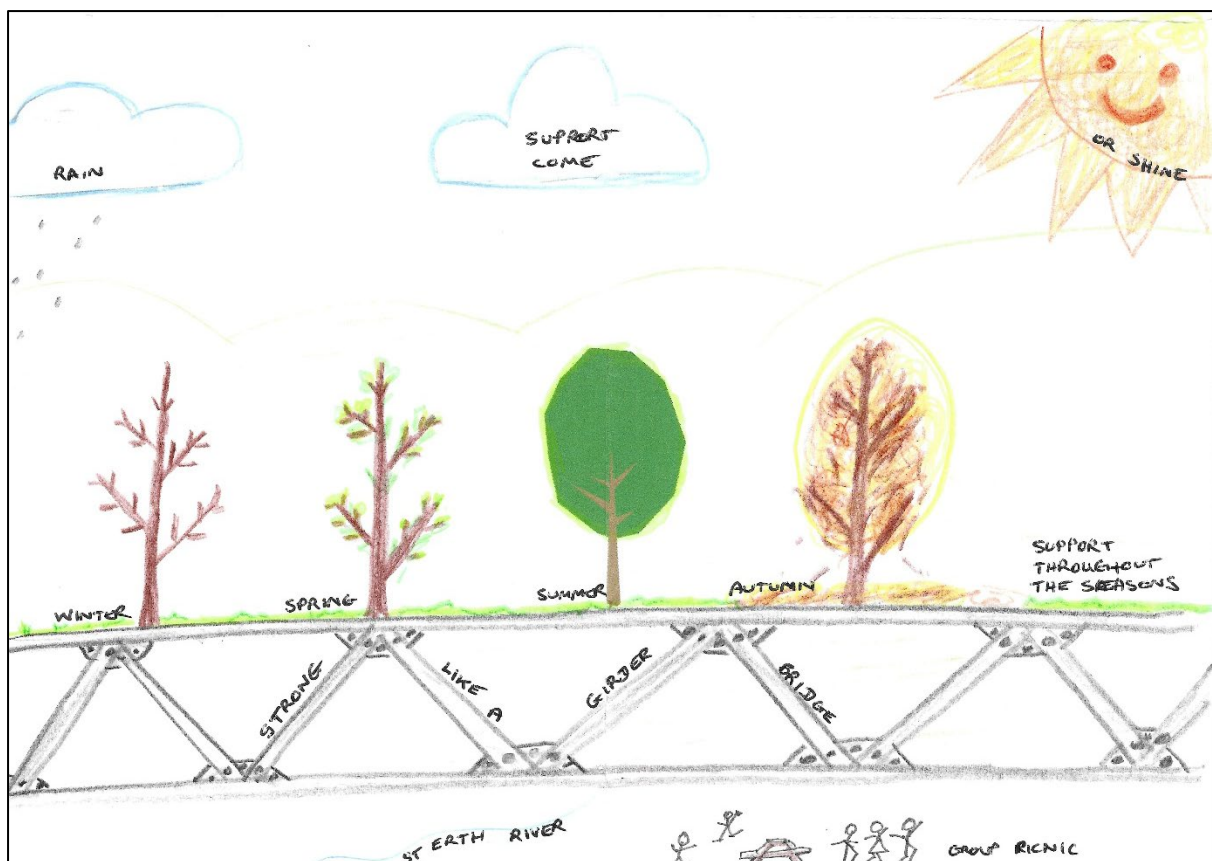


The benefits of connecting with nature for people living with dementia

Bringing nature into the lives of people with dementia, their families and carers in rural communities in Cornwall



Impact report outlining the health and wellbeing benefits of the Sensory Trust's Creative Spaces programme.

December 2025

1. Introduction

Connecting with nature and the outdoors helps people live better with dementia. Our nature-based approach helps people reduce their social isolation and enhance their physical, social and mental wellbeing.

Creative Spaces is our flagship dementia project and is based on evidence that the health and wellbeing of people with dementia can be significantly improved by introducing contact with nature and the outdoors. Creative Spaces is bringing together lonely and isolated people who have mild to moderate dementia, providing positive opportunities to connect with nature and meet other people in similar situations.

The project has seen confidence and happiness grow in individuals; it fosters long-lasting friendships and helps people develop coping strategies to deal with tough periods in their lives. It motivates people to be more physically active, to develop new shared interests and to be more engaged in community activities. A key aim is to give people the tools to help them improve their own day to day lives, which enables them to remain independent for longer.

Positive impacts on care networks surrounding people with dementia are also strong. Family carers gain new techniques to support their own mental wellbeing as well as coping strategies to support those they care for. They form new networks to provide informal support through meeting and sharing with others in similar situations.

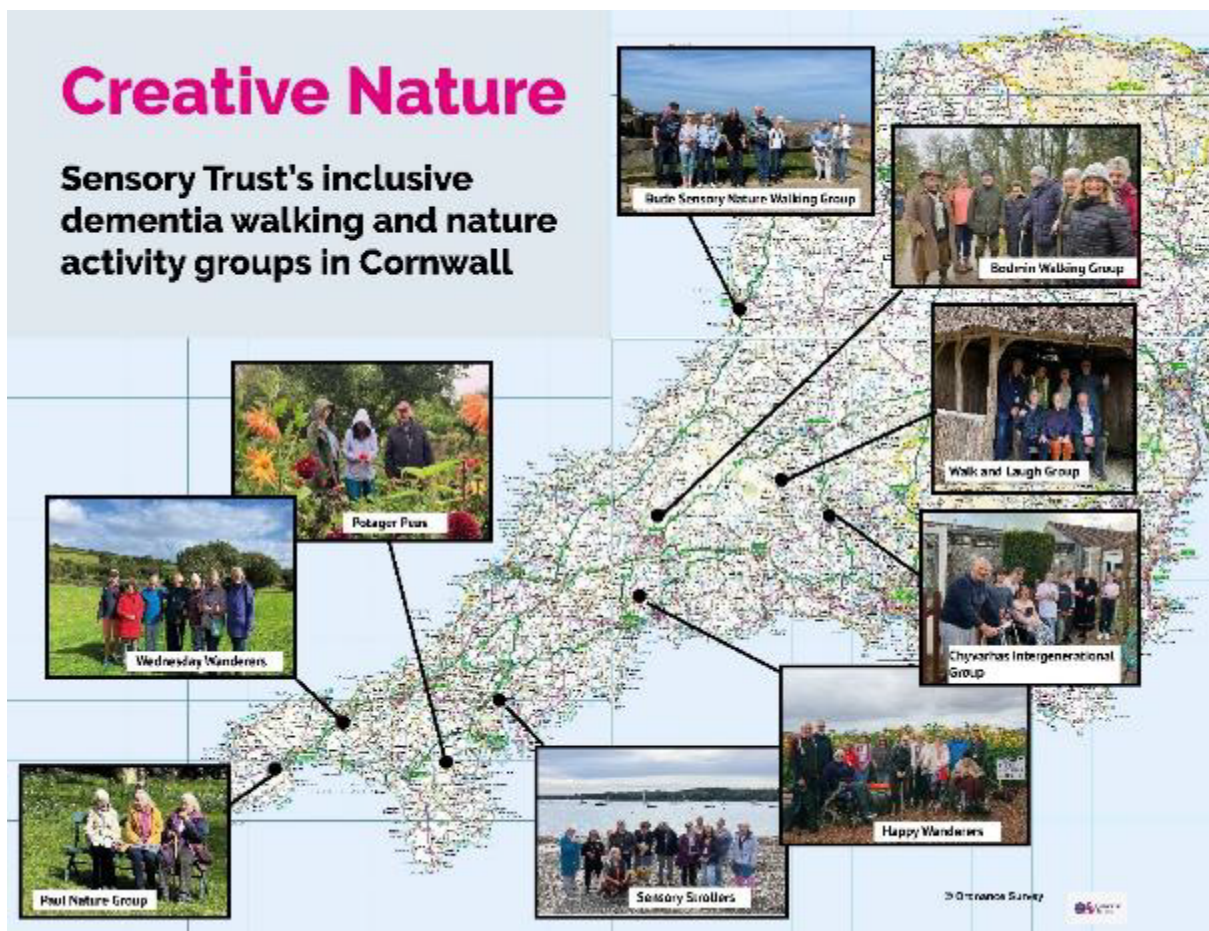
“I feel more relaxed after our walks and sleep better that night. Nature has a calming affect on me.” Person with dementia

This report covers the period from 4 October 2024 for the following 12 months.

2. Key Achievements

- Maintained nine groups providing regular walking and nature-based activities in rural locations across Cornwall.
- Delivered 185 sessions (compared to 186 last year), attended by 266 people (compared to 362 people last year). This was made up of 79 people living with dementia, 75 carers, 68 community members and 44 young people.
- Welcomed 22 new people with dementia and two new carers to the groups.
- Shared four newsletters with 564 people. This maintains connections with those unable to attend due to a change in circumstances as well as provide seasonal inspiration to connect with nature outside of our activities for current members. They also share information about other support opportunities in Cornwall.

- Supported a team of 29 volunteers, including recruiting two new volunteers. We provide external training in Outdoor First Aid, Dementia Awareness, Adult Safeguarding and Moving and Handling. A one-to-one induction meeting helps to embed our unique approach to supporting people living with dementia.
- Created a short film to showcase the groups, shared on our social media, website, YouTube and through events:
<https://youtu.be/mnONTJVvO2c?si=VZrDhX-i4MpdUr-->
- Published guidance on our website on 'how to start a dementia-friendly walking group'. This shares our approach UK wide, and has already been downloaded nearly 200 times.
- On 15 January 2025, our Happy Wanderers group celebrated their 10th birthday, having completed over 500 walks together during this time. We celebrated by walking together, sharing photos from the years, enjoying a cuppa and of course, cake.
- Secured matched funding from four additional funders and donations from group members to complement the core support provided from National Lottery Community Fund. Total project costs for the year were £89,336.



3. Our Approach

3.1. Overcoming barriers to accessing the outdoors

Many of our members struggle to spend time outdoors. Their world can shrink after diagnosis as they experience decreasing social opportunities, reduced self-confidence and other health issues such as reduced stamina, loss of balance, mobility or sensory impairments.

Feedback shows that our groups help participants to continue to access the natural environment that they love, overcoming potential barriers such as poor mobility or anxiety about leaving the home. Providing transport is also often flagged as particularly important, as many members can no longer drive.

All of our activities are planned for mixed abilities. We consider access, stamina, seating, shelter and facilities such as parking and toilets; ensuring that everyone feels welcome and able to participate.

“Think about your audience, what their experiences have been, who they are as people, and the Sensory Trust have nailed that as far as I’m concerned.” (Former carer)



Happy Wanderers on their 10th Birthday walk, accompanied by some of the Sensory Trust team

3.2. Nature connection supports health and wellbeing

There is a strong body of evidence demonstrating that exposure to and engagement with nature positively impacts our health and wellbeing. It calms us, improves sleep patterns, energises us, motivates us and regulates serotonin levels. There is a

reason we seek out views of the countryside, feel better after breathing in fresh air and marvel at the smell of rain on a summer day.

Unfortunately, access to nature has become increasingly unequal and many of our group members tend to have much more limited opportunities to access greenspaces. Our work is about ensuring there is access for all people.

We share multi-sensory opportunities to connect with nature. We all experience the world through our senses. Sensory experiences build layers of memories in our brains which in turn create an emotional attachment to place. The more sensory experiences that we expose ourselves to, the stronger the connection to nature and the outdoors becomes. It is only when we connect with, and care for something that we begin to act.

“It’s the sights, the smell, the sounds, it’s the whole sensory environment that’s uplifting.” Former carer.

Nature-based activities therefore enable group members to experience the seasons, get hands-on, create memories and learn new skills. Examples include creating ceramics inspired by nature walks, harvesting and tasting apples, creating flower crowns and making wildflower seed bombs.

Some activities are more directly linked to environmental action. For example, Bude Sensory Nature Walking Group have connected with local environmental groups. They learnt about plastic pollution in the sea and participated in a beach clean with the 2 Minute Foundation and planted spring bulbs to support pollinating insects with Friends of the Earth.

3.3. Carers benefit too

When a diagnosis of dementia is made, we know that the effects are also felt with the partner, family member and circle of friends. Caring for someone with dementia can involve many challenges and at times, feel quite isolating. A recent UK carers survey found that 87% of participants stated that caring had a negative impact on their mental health with 91% stating that the biggest impact was anxiety or stress.

With this in mind, carers tell us how joining the groups helps them cope with issues such as social isolation, anxiety and poor sleeping patterns. The friendly and informal small group setting and an emphasis on nature and the outdoors are a great recipe for increasing feelings of wellness and reducing periods of anxiety.

To anyone who has been through, or is going through, the loss of a loved one to dementia, in a group like this is a great way to combat for the loss, the people in these groups understand what it is like, so, can talk openly to each other this is a great way forward. This is a great group. I'm so lucky to be part of it.

To anyone who has been through, or is going through, the loss of a loved one to dementia. A group like this is a great way to combat for the loss. The people in these groups understand what it is like, so can talk openly to each other. This is a great way forward. This is a great group. I'm so lucky to be part of it.

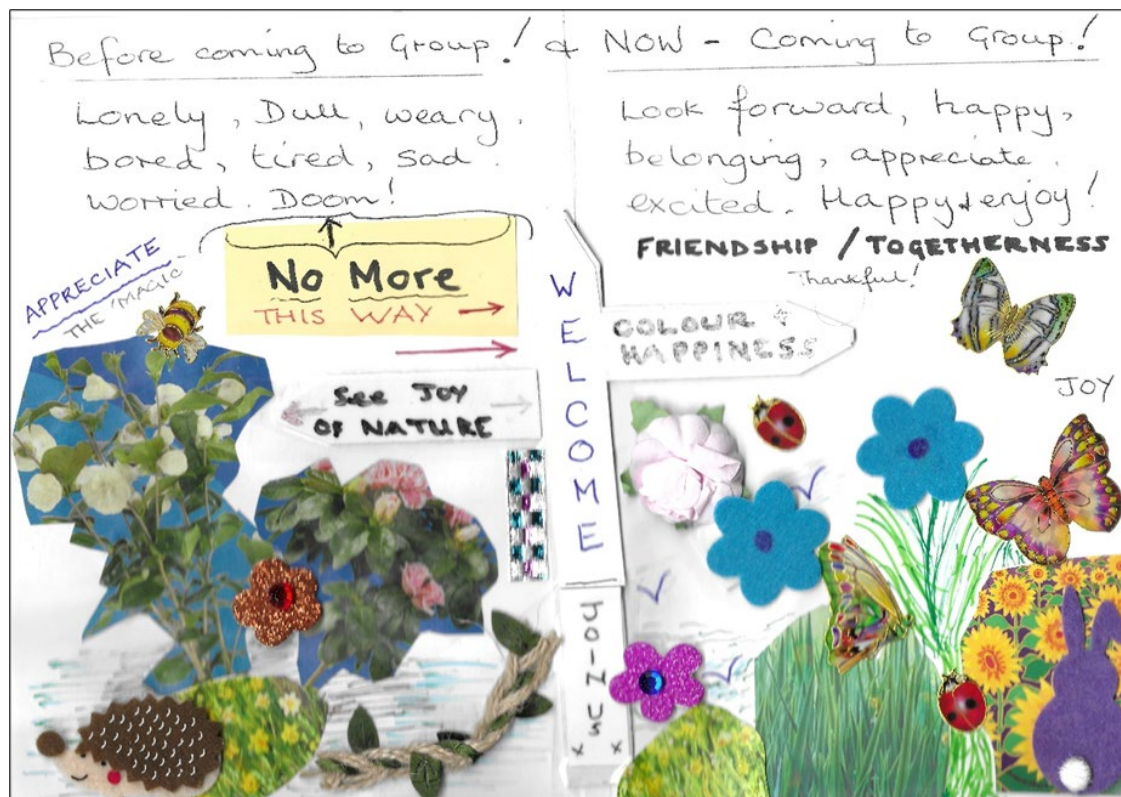
Former carers who have lost their loved ones often continue to attend the group. They appreciate the continued support of group members and also give back by offering their support to other group members.

“Your social antenna are all over the place, you need to be in social situations that you feel comfortable with... What’s wonderful is even though you’ve lost the person doesn’t mean you lose their support.”
(Former carer)

Case Study one: Sylvie from the Wednesday Wanderers

Sylvie's husband has dementia but was not keen to join the group, when it was suggested by their dementia nurse several years ago. Instead, Sylvie asked if she could join and was somewhat surprised to learn that she could.

She acknowledges the pressures of being a carer to someone with a long-term condition. *"We have good days and bad"*. Sylvie said that recently her husband has become quite angry about some things, *"sometimes I feel as though I almost want to cry as out comes this sentence, and then half an hour later he's back to normal"*. Sylvie said that being part of this group has helped her to feel less isolated, as shown in her collage here:



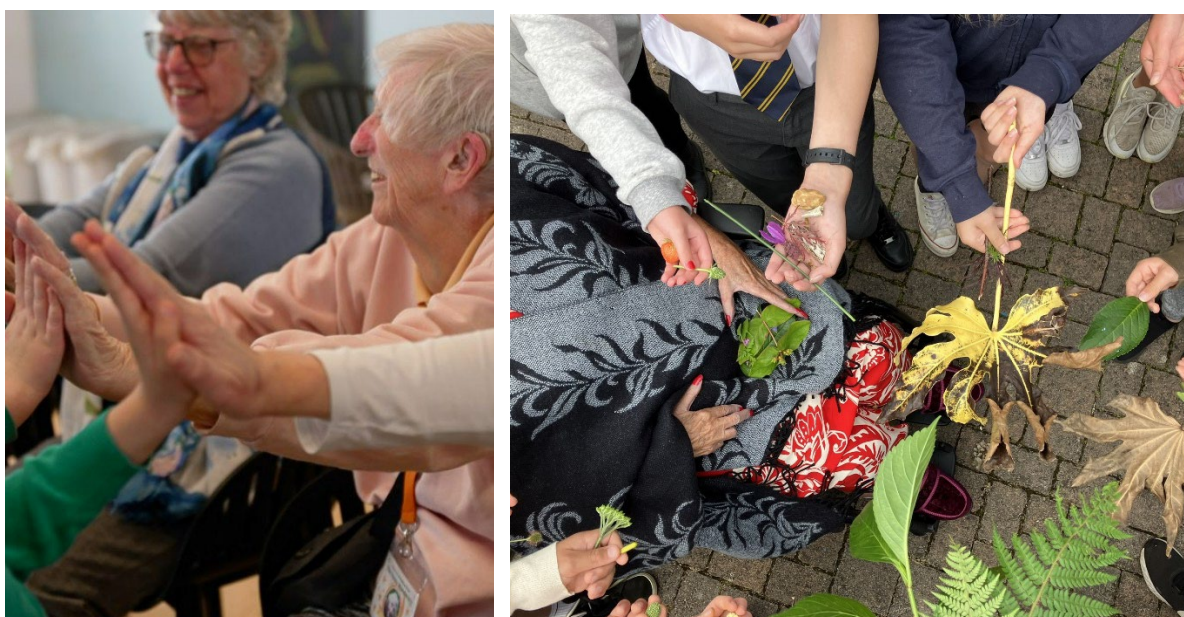
Being around other carers, and building relationships with people over time, is important in helping her cope with her own caring responsibilities, *'You can say what you like, you don't offend people, it's part of being able to cope'*. Sylvie said that after the sessions she feels *'happy, not so lonely'*.

Names have been changed in case studies to preserve anonymity.

3.4. Intergenerational activity fosters connections and shared interests

We continue to foster group members' interest in intergenerational connections. This is a positive opportunity to connect communities, change perceptions, challenge ageism and harness nature to improve well-being and reduce social isolation across generations.

Our flagship intergenerational activity is the Chyvarhas after-school club, which meets monthly during school terms connecting residents of Chyvarhas care home with students from Calstock Primary School. Together we explore nature and the care home garden, sharing, learning and enjoying inclusive creative nature activities together. This has included gardening as well as painting bug and bird houses.



Alongside this, other groups have engaged in mini-projects with local young people. This includes:

- The Happy Wanderers explored Robert MacFarlane's book *The Lost Words* with Cscape Dance Company and Sky Primary School.
- The Sensory Strollers worked with Falmouth University photography students to create an editorial feature on their group for a local magazine.
- Potager Peas created a living sculpture by planting a chair with sweet pea and edible peas with Little Tree Woodland School.

We also contributed to a pilot with Apples and Honey Nightingale, the UK's first intergenerational nursery, developing national indicators of intergenerational good practice. We tested a toolkit of best practice and connected with UK wide intergenerational practitioners:

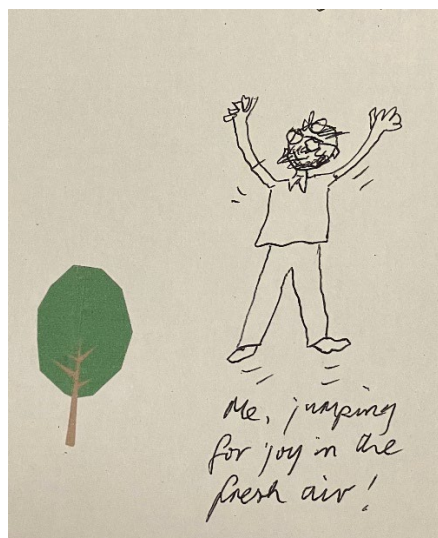
<https://www.applesandhoneynightingale.com/creating-intergenerational-communities/>

3.5. Partners are key

We contribute to county-wide initiatives such as Cornwall's Dementia Partnership Board which comprises NHS Kernow, Age UK, Disability Cornwall, Fire and Police services, memory cafes, Healthwatch Cornwall, Alzheimer's Society, Admiral Nurses and care providers. This ensures our support dovetails with other provision. All of these dementia support workers regularly signpost participants to our groups.

“I had a lot of confidence, I knew that if I was sending someone there (to a walking group), they would get a really beautiful time in nature, a little bit of exercise, to get fresh air, but also that therapeutic, a deeper sense of the human condition and understanding that there's a soul still, there's a person there, and there's no pressure to be anything or anyone. There's a fluidity and a creativity to the Sensory Trust's work. It's an incredible service and charity, very inclusive and open.” (Anna Lempriere, Disability Cornwall)

Three of the groups run in close partnership with other organisations – Potager Garden, Leach Pottery and Chyvarhas Care Home. In addition, we regularly work with a network of organisations and community groups such as National Trust, CHAOS FM and Flookan Clay Community Hub to deliver and promote activities.



3.6. Ensuring that everyone can participate in evaluation

Following the success of our creative surveys in previous years, we have continued using this approach to gain feedback from our group members. We provide a simple question and the start of an image, such as a plant pot or leaf, for participants to add their own words or drawings.

A total of 96 group members shared their thoughts on the project by completing these surveys, this represents 62% of our participants. This response rate demonstrates that people feel comfortable and welcome to share their personal views about the project.

We also commissioned independent evaluator Jenifer Macindoe of Connect the Dots to carry out two focus groups to capture feedback directly from participants as well

as interviews with individual carers, former carers, people with dementia, volunteers and dementia practitioners. These have been used to form the case studies in this report.

In addition, we record relevant comments from people living with dementia and their carers, as well as observations by staff and volunteers.

- 1. How does coming to the group make you feel?
Does spending time outdoors help with your health and wellbeing? If not, why not?**

Feel free to add to the picture below, write words or draw your own picture overleaf

Keeps me active, & its nice to be able to walk around in the fresh air (when its not raining) & get to do things & see things you wouldnt be doing just sitting at home, also, its company as well.



Example of a completed survey, where the respondent has added drawing to the plant pot and words above. "Keeps me active and it's nice to be able to walk around in the fresh air (when it's not raining). I get to do things and see things you wouldn't be doing just sitting at home. Also, it's company as well".

4. Outcomes

4.1. Improving health and wellbeing by spending more time outdoors and connected to nature

All participants in the focus groups noted improvements to their health and wellbeing. Many recognised that fresh air and gentle exercise were valuable. The groups provide a reason and stimulus for people to 'get out and about', particularly as dementia can make it too easy to stay at home and feel isolated.

Others focused on improvements to their wellbeing, with the evaluator noting the 'mindful' effect of being in nature. The groups are often very playful in nature, with the natural environment leading to imaginative conversations or warm humour between members. Comments from the focus groups included:

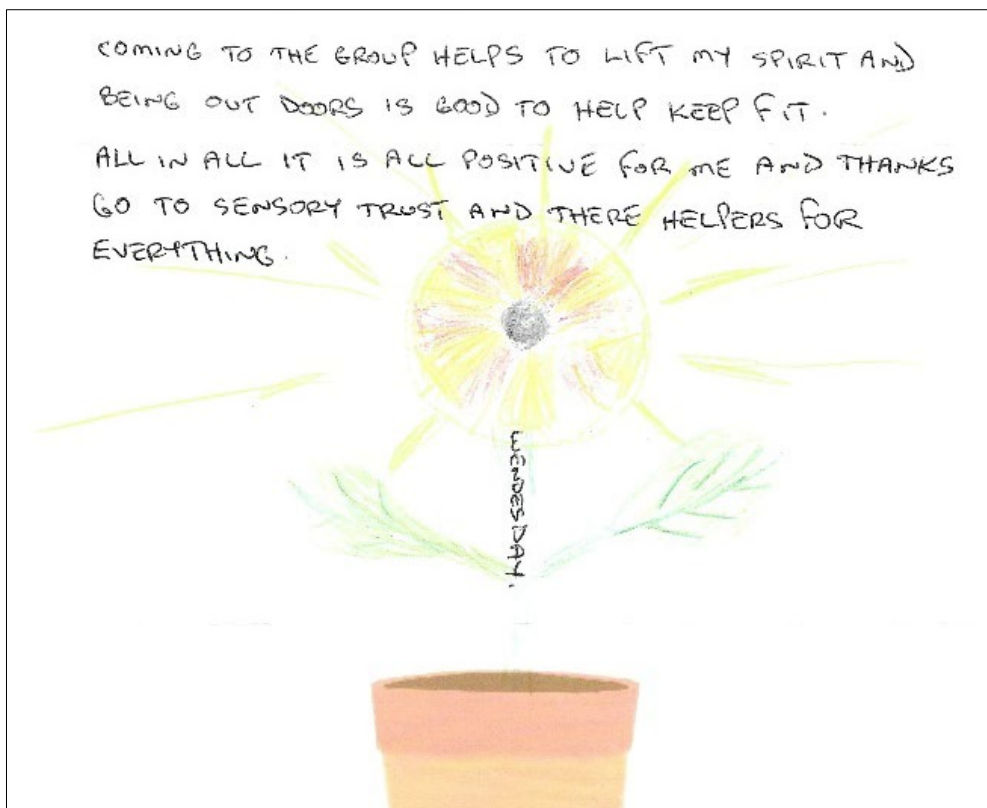
"Mick can't say how it makes him feel, but I would say coming to the group makes him feel included and worthwhile. Being outdoors improves his mental health and usually he comes home in a much better place than when he left" (Carer)

"It makes me feel happy and enables me to visit places". (Person with dementia)

"Being outside is invigorating" (Carer)

"I have already begun to feel better since arriving, I was in a bit of a huff this morning" (Carer)

100% of 46 responses to our first survey on health and wellbeing highlighted positive impacts from being part of the groups. Comments made reflected the value of friendships, regularly walking in nature, feeling included, talking, laughing, and taking time to share experiences together. For example:



“Coming to the group helps to lift my spirit and being out doors is good to help keep fit. All in all it is all positive for me and thanks go to Sensory Trust and their helpers for everything”.

“Going out walking with the group makes me feel normal” (Person with dementia)

“The exercise is beneficial to my health, especially as the walks don’t involve hills which I couldn’t manage” (Person with dementia)

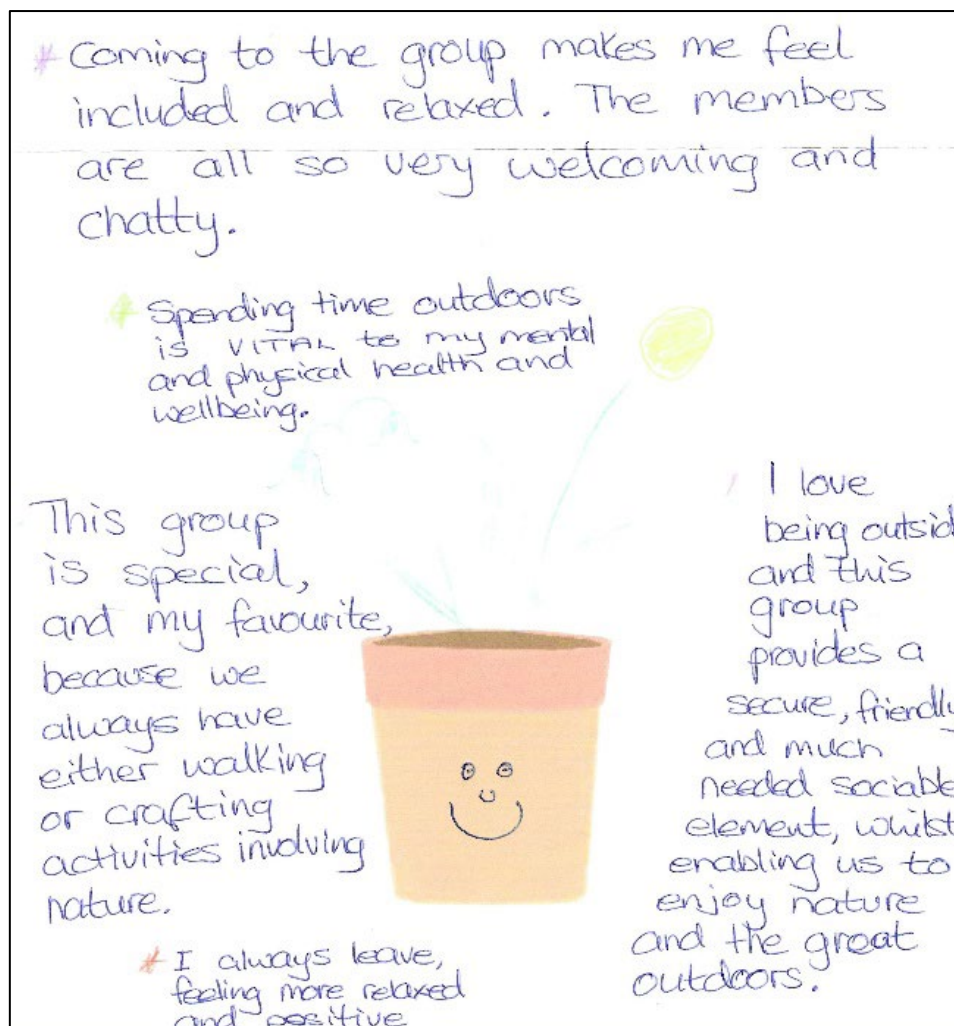
“Relaxed good to be out” (Person with dementia)

“Feels so good to be out, breathing fresh air” (Person with dementia)

“I really enjoy going out with this group and feel I have made new friends. The person who I take out, has really benefited from getting out in nature and his mood has improved a lot. It brightens up my week” (Carer)

“I always feel good after the group walk and look forward to the next one” (Person with dementia)

“I benefit from the physical exercise of a walk and mentally from the friendship in the group.” (Carer)



Handwritten feedback says: "Coming to the group makes me feel included and relaxed. The members are all so very welcoming and chatty."

Spending time outdoors is vital to my mental and physical health and wellbeing.

This group is special and my favourite, because we always have either walking or crafting activities involving nature.

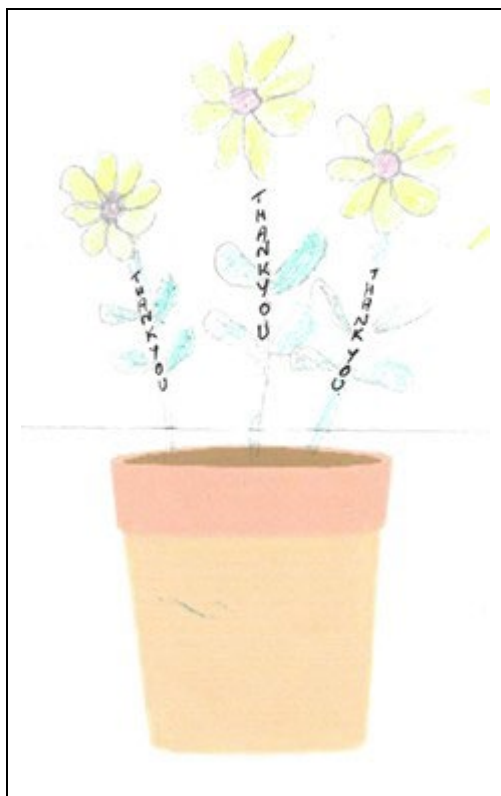
I love being outside and this group provides a secure, friendly and much-needed social element, whilst enabling us to enjoy nature and the great outdoors.

I always leave feeling more relaxed and positive."

Case study two: Alan and Sarah from Wednesday Wanderers

Alan and Sarah have attended the Wednesday Wanderers group for the last two years; Alan described it as *“hugely important to us”*. As Sarah’s diagnosis came at a relatively young age, Alan said this was challenging to come to terms with at first, and he admitted to feeling quite *“standoffish”* with regard to accessing support initially. Gentle but persistent encouragement from their dementia support worker eventually encouraged them to join the group and Alan reflected that they had *“been made so welcome”*.

The pair have always enjoyed walking, so a walking group was a natural fit for them. When asked if she liked walking, Sarah replied *“oh yes”* and then *“I don’t like to be inside”*. Alan talked about how they adapted the provision to suit their needs. When they first joined the group, and Sarah’s mobility was stronger, they used to arrive a bit early to do a bit of their own walk first, to expend some energy, before joining in with the group walk.



Being in nature feels comfortable and calming to the couple too *‘it’s us all over’*. Alan and Sarah attend other activities and support groups, and really value the extra dimension that being outside brings to the Wednesday Wanderers group. As the programme runs year-round, Alan says it has given them an appreciation of different seasons. He has noticed that Sarah’s senses have heightened and attributes this to attending the group - they love smelling roses and mint and recently went to a lavender farm together.

Alan notices other positive impacts of the group on Sarah, most noticeably a feeling of anticipation in the days leading up to the session. He said there is a tangible feeling of excitement on the morning of each session. Having the published programme is helpful for them, *“we always have something to look forward to, it keeps us going”*. They have enjoyed the sessions with Leach Pottery too, and value opportunities to learn new things.

As a relatively young couple living with dementia, Alan juggles work with caring, which brings different challenges. Alan explained the value of finding a group of peers and having regular contact with them. Alan said he gets “*a lot of strength, companionship*” from the group, “*you’re talking to people that get it*”. He said that they had always felt comfortable with the group and it was lovely to arrive as a couple but then ‘*separate out*’ with each of them being able to spend time interacting with others. This was important to Alan as a carer but also to Sarah; Alan noted that meeting up with her original group of friends was becoming more difficult as the conversation tends to move too fast. The ‘*in the moment*’, nature of this group has made socialising much more accessible for Sarah.

4.2. Improving resilience through gaining confidence in nature-based techniques that can be used as coping mechanisms for living with dementia, such as sleeplessness, anxiety and depression.

The focus groups evidenced the positive impact on members’ daily lives. Members see the groups as something to look forward to together and are excited about coming. Some members are physically tired after their walk and sleep well. Others carry good feelings into the rest of the day and beyond.

Members enjoy the variety provided by the groups, from occasional special activities like wreath-making, to the range of new places visited. The different environments stimulate cognition, which practitioners say is key to slowing dementia symptoms.

Carers reported they strongly value the ability to spend time with other carers, this helps them feel less lonely and more able to cope. Carers tell us they gain some practical tips and ideas for dealing with their loved one’s condition.

“We did a wonderful (nature inspired) creative activity together, it was just so lifting, very mindful”. (Carer)

“Coming to the group makes me feel included and relaxed”. (Person with dementia)

A key aspect of the group for one couple was that it takes place outdoors and in different places each time. “Getting out in these beautiful places, cos you don’t tend to go”. (Carer)

“Following the sessions, she (person with dementia) is normally more tired; she often sleeps in her recliner when she goes home”. (Carer)

“They might not even be that aware, depending on where they are with their dementia, of what they’re doing, but actually being in the fresh air, the general exercise, all the goodness that comes out of that, it’s actually so

good for them. That's one of the big things we say about dementia, how important it is for cognitive stimulation, cognitive engagement, social interaction, it's so, so important". (Jo Danielsen, Integrated Admiral Nurse)

90% of the 28 responses to our second survey, asking how coming to the group makes you feel about living with dementia, highlighting the benefits of being with people in similar circumstances, feeling included and supported in a kind safe space. Comments included:

"Coming to the Wednesday Wanderers is a life saver". (Carer)

"I find the companionship very comforting and I enjoy it". (Person with dementia)

"It is so good to know people care and to be part of a group, something to look forward to". (Person with dementia)

"It certainly has a positive effect on my life. I enjoy it. I like meeting the people". (Person with dementia)

The fresh air
wind & sun
on the body.

The chat
& knowledge
of other walkers
An answer may
be found of the
problem
both ways you.

Green is
a very
calming
colour.

The different
shapes
& tones of
the leaves!

Motion & movement
can help
in mindfulness.

draw your own picture overleaf

A reason to go out - very important
exercise
no judgment

understanding
People with
the same problems
Feeling
supported
A respite from
caring for
the people looking
after you.

Make new
friends
meet old friends

Doing
Something
Together

listen without feeling
you need to contribute
they understand how
difficult it is for you

Case study three: Yvonne and Keith

Yvonne and Keith have been part of three of the groups, first joining the Potager Peas in 2019 and then moving to the Bodmin and Bude walking groups when they moved from Falmouth to the North of Cornwall.

Keith was in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease when they first joined and the initial motivation was to keep Keith connected with other people. Yvonne noticed that as his illness progressed, "not a lot of people have the time or the patience, or understand what his needs were". The groups offered a slower pace, and the companionship that they were looking for; "it was just a lovely, warm, welcoming group". Yvonne felt this especially with the Bodmin group, as members became firm friends and started to meet up for lunch and at each other's houses. She said it was invaluable to find friendship with people who were understanding of Keith's needs.

Walking became a key activity for the pair, especially when other things stopped being possible. "I thought it was the only thing he connected with – nature". She said that even into a very late stage, Keith was spotting rabbits darting across the field, or birds of prey in the air, before anyone else in the group. "It's the exercise, it's the fresh air. And walking is moving, and seeing things. The landscape was lovely. It puts you in a better frame of mind. At home, he was fidgety, but outside... it was good for him."



Yvonne described how their experience with different groups suited the couple at different stages of Keith's illness. In the beginning, they enjoyed the nature-based activities with the Potager Peas, especially the pottery, which Keith really enjoyed. These had a positive impact on Yvonne too, who was working at the time "I felt so much better afterwards, I had to go back to work in the afternoon but I was floating". She said it was wonderful for them to have something to look forward to each week together. In the latter stages, the benefit was more about walking and being outdoors and they enjoyed the company from these groups too.

Across all groups, Yvonne implied that the mutual respect all members have for each other is utmost. "Being accepted and being part of a community, and people talked to him, and not over his head, or talked over his head to me. It doesn't happen, we all talk to each other, we all communicate with each other. We're all equal."

Yvonne feels that the groups have supported her all the way through Keith's illness, with true friendships being made. Members came to visit Keith at home in the latter stages. When he passed away 10 months ago, Yvonne continued coming to the groups: "I felt after I lost him, I felt I needed to go out in the world and they were the people that understood the most."

Familiarity was really important to her at this difficult time. "They knew Keith, I didn't have to explain anything, they've seen us in a home setting, social setting". She described the group as a kind of anchor point in her life at that time. She is keen to remain in the group for the time-being as she feels it provides her with such stability and keeps her happy memories of Keith alive. "It's good for me and helps me. They knew who we were as a couple, they knew Keith, they supported him through the last year so it's a happy place for me."

4.3. Reducing social isolation and improving community involvement through building support networks and creating powerful, positive role models of people with dementia.

The focus groups highlighted that members consistently talked about the value they derive from being around people who share their experiences and are understanding. They feel welcome and supported by their groups.

As members' illnesses progress, conversations with existing friendship groups seem to move too fast. Finding companionship with new peers and the 'in the moment' nature of the groups is particularly important.

There is a strong feeling of parity between members, which helps build the feeling of community in the groups and creates strong bonds. There is a mutual respect and care for each other, rather than seeing people with dementia as no longer able, the focus is on what people can do.

The open and fluid membership of the group, supporting members and carers at all stages of their journey, is a strength. Bereaved members have benefited greatly from familiarity and stability at a time of loss and uncertainty.

“We all meet with a hug and leave with a hug, so we have really quite good friendships, although we only meet every other week”. (Carer)

“Oh we've found our tribe”. (Former carer)

“What we've gained is back to that empathy and that feeling that we were with people who understood”. (Former carer)

“It's really rewarding because I can share my experiences and help other people, people I've become very fond of. Before it was about me and Lou, now it's more about how my experiences can help others but I also enjoy their company”. (Former carer)

“When you on your own for most of the time, meeting up with the group (my friends) it's lovely, just to have a chat and a laugh or sometimes in my case, just to be with company”. (Person with dementia)

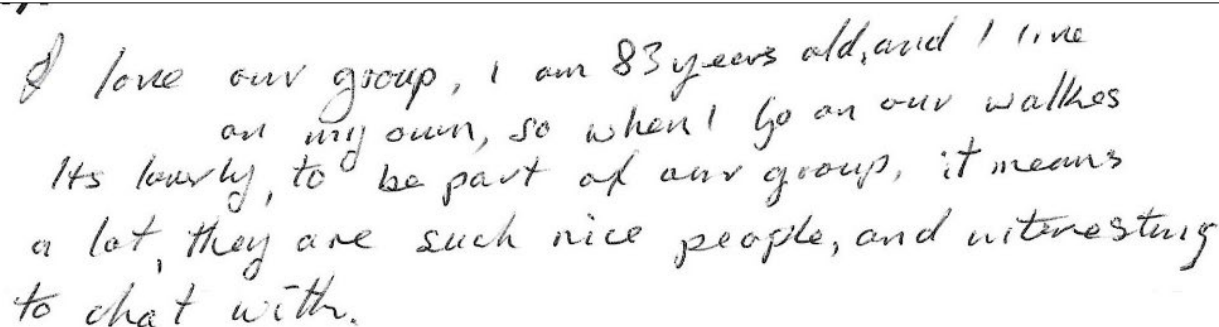
This was supported in responses to our survey asking 'how coming to the group makes you feel?' Comments included:

"It makes me feel I am not the only person living with dementia and that I am still of worth to others in the community". (Person with dementia)

"It makes me to feel connected to society and gives me a reason to leave the confines of my home". (Person with dementia)

"When you on your own for most of the time, meeting up with the group (my friends) it's lovely, just to have a chat and a laugh or sometimes in my case, just to be with company". (Person with dementia)

"Sometimes it's hard to enter a communal space on your own, but together you have strength". (Person with dementia)



I love our group, I am 83 years old, and I live on my own, so when I go on our walks its lovely, to be part of our group, it means a lot, they are such nice people, and interesting to chat with.

Case study four: Jo and Jane, Sensory Strollers

Jo, who has dementia, attends the group with his wife Jane, they have been members since the group started. When asked about their enjoyment of the group, Jo straight away said he liked the *'nice company'*.



Although the pair attend other groups for people living with dementia e.g. a local memory café and a group run by Cornwall Museum, they said that this group was different because it gets them out and about. Interestingly, Jane commented that Jo is always exhausted after attending a session, whereas Jo described feeling more energetic. He said that he feels great when he comes home from the group, *"It kind of wakens you up"*, and he has more energy, it makes him want to go out again. It seems that this is not just a short-term effect, as Jo feels that attending the group has encouraged him to go out more. He recognises this as important to his wellbeing, as he said *"I hate to admit it, but I am one for sitting at home"*. Jane reiterated this view, she said that because of his illness, Jo had become limited to walking around his own village, so these sessions offered the opportunity to experience new surroundings with confidence.

Like others, the social aspect of the group was very important. Jane reported that Jo is not so talkative at home, but is much more chatty when he comes to the group. She felt that the group provides some relief from the worries that may occupy his mind when he is at home with few other distractions. From a carer's perspective, Jane feels a sense of relief from being in the group, from the opportunity to be with other people who understand and just enjoy each other's company. She talked about *a big umbrella of support* from the volunteers. It was clear that they also enjoy being part of that support network – Jo talked about how the group helps each other out. He used to push a wheelchair-using member around and he said they all go at the slowest pace, *"if someone stops, we all stop"*. Jane noted that the group gives Jo the opportunity to take people under his wing, which he likes to do, and that it was important to both of them to feel useful. The couple also contribute to the advisory group for Sensory Trust's Creative Spaces Programme.

5. Plans for the future

This year marks the end of the four-year funding with the National Lottery Community Fund. We are exploring ways to maintain the groups in the longer term and share our approach beyond Cornwall. Short-term funding is in place to continue each of the groups over the next year whilst we explore options. We are keen to share our approach beyond Cornwall, contributing to the evidence of the role that nature can play in dementia care, particularly at a community level.