



Dementia Dog Project

The Dementia Dog Project is a charitable collaboration between Alzheimer Scotland and Dogs for Good, bringing together leading dementia support services with the provision of specially trained assistance dogs.

The project aims to explore and measure a variety of ways that dogs can be trained to empower people to live well with dementia. This focuses on three key areas:

- Training and placing **dementia assistance dogs** with couples living at home, where one person is in the early stages of dementia and the other is their full time carer
- Trialling dog-assisted **therapy intervention visits** for people in early-moderate stages of dementia who may not be able to have a dog full time, yet can benefit from goal-focused regular therapy visits to help improve their physical, social, emotional and cognitive functioning as well as self-reliance in the local community.
- Developing '**Dog Day**' **community therapy events** at Alzheimer Scotland dementia resource centres, open to groups of people at all stages of dementia and their carers.

Dementia assistance dogs

This Scotland-based pilot project aims to explore how assistance dogs can help people to live well with dementia in their own home for longer – for both the person with a diagnosis and their carer.

Since 2012, an initial pilot study in east Scotland has involved successfully training and placing three assistance dogs (all Labrador/retrievers) with couples, where one person has a diagnosis of early stage dementia and the other is their full time carer.

To pilot this approach was a world-first. We have learnt a huge amount through this initial trial, which involved the 'pioneer' client teams pictured below.



How are the dogs trained to help?

As with all assistance dog work, huge effort goes into matching the right dog with the right client. In addition to matching the dog's skills with the support required, we also want to ensure a happy bond is established to form a lasting partnership.

The dogs help **maintain a structured routine** at home, be a **social connector** within the community and an **emotional anchor** for both the person with dementia, and their carer.

Once a 'match' has been identified, our team then tailors the dog's advanced skills to meet the individual needs of the couple they will be placed with.

Responding to an alarm, dogs can be trained to **retrieve a medication pouch** or water bottle to a person's lap to remind them to take their medicine or hydrate.

The dogs can also learn how to help **regulate sleeping patterns** – waking someone up in the morning to get out of bed, gently nudging them awake if they cat nap during the day, and helping **remove items of clothing** when it's time to get dressed.



A special dog harness and dual lead enables the person with dementia and their carer to both take the dog for a walk. This not only **improves levels of physical exercise and balance**, it provides a healthy positive focus for the couple to enjoy together.



With dogs acting as a natural social icebreaker, they help open up conversation within the community, providing an opportunity to shift focus away from always being about dementia.

We have seen through the first pilot how the dogs hugely **boost confidence and independence** for the couple, helping **reduce social isolation** while providing a renewed sense of purpose for the person with dementia.

During this time we have also seen unexpected benefits this approach has brought to **help build the resilience of carers**, enabling them to cope better. A dog's natural ability to diffuse tension and provide a positive dynamic has played a major part of the project.

One of our pioneer teams, Ken and Glenys, received their dementia assistance dog, Kasper, in 2012. Ken describes the moment when he received his diagnosis as a "dark hole". Glenys, his wife and full time carer, explains: *"Life was just unbearable before Kasper came into our lives. Kasper has given us our lives back. He brings the mail, the alarm goes off and he brings Ken's medicine pouch. Ken's never alone now."*



International collaborations

During 2014 the Dementia Dog Project collaborated with **Assistance Dogs Australia and HammondCare**, to test this concept 'down under'. This has been very successful, resulting so far in **seven couples across Australia receiving dementia assistance dogs**. We continue to work closely to bring together international learning. HammondCare has also recently been appointed to evaluate our dementia assistance dog activity in Scotland.

Exploring other therapy approaches

Interest registered during the first pilot revealed a demand from people with dementia who are unable to have an assistance dog at home full time (eg no garden, or don't live full time with a carer and therefore may have limited long-term capacity to care for a dog).

In response, we did small scale trials in community settings, testing different therapy approaches involving volunteers with pet dogs at differing levels of training.



Dog-assisted therapy intervention visits

Animal Assisted Intervention is the term given to a **goal-directed intervention** where a trained dog and practitioner work to promote improvements in physical, social, emotional and/or cognitive functioning of a person. Weekly sessions **help increase confidence, self-reliance and independence**, enabling a better quality of life in the community.

The initial trial involved recruiting and training volunteers (all professionals working in the dementia field) with pet dogs to visit people with dementia who were unable to have a dog full time in their home.

The trial successfully achieved a wide range of outcomes for participants in early-mid stage of their dementia journey, such as **increasing physical exercise, reducing agitation and anxiety, boosting self-esteem** and bringing **companionship and joy**. In some cases, the carer also identified the visits could provide a temporary **respite** break for them too. Each session was evaluated so impact could be consistently measured.

“The presence of the dog seems to give him a reason to go out and he seems to take ownership of the dog when out therefore giving him some responsibility.”

Support worker

6 week intervention
Goal oriented

Recent funding secured from the National Lottery through the Big Lottery Fund will enable us to **pioneer further developments** using Animal Assisted Intervention techniques in the dementia field, working with a specially-trained Dementia Community Dog and a specialist handler. This will build on the considerable experience Dogs for Good has in their professional Community Dog programme, delivering Animal Assisted Intervention services in other support areas.

'Dog Day' community therapy events

These are monthly dog-themed community therapy events, currently being trialled at Alzheimer Scotland's dementia resource centre in SW Scotland, to complement their existing programme of therapy activity and events.



The two hour event **brings together groups of people at all stages of dementia** with their carers to enjoy gentle interaction with trained pet dogs and handlers and to participate in dog themed activities (eg dog bingo).



Dog Days aim to bring **joy, happiness and conversation** into a group setting of people with dementia, to help improve quality of life, provide respite for carers and promote access to dementia support services in the community. Family members and carers often report the beneficial impact lasting long after each event, triggering **positive reminiscing** and increased opportunities for sharing meaningful time together.

We often see **incredible temporary connections** made with people in late stage dementia. Dog soft toys also provide reassurance and comfort to those with very limited communication.

The future

Thanks to funding from the Life Changes Trust, we will be able to train and place eight further dementia assistance dogs in Scotland over the next three years. We have also received additional funding from the National Lottery (Big Lottery Fund) to develop and trial a series of goal-oriented dog-assisted therapy interventions and 'Dog Day' community therapy events and, first in Scotland and then also in trial areas in England for the first time.

Wider positive social change

To help deliver the overall Dementia Dog Project, we are delighted to be working in partnership with the **Scottish Prison Service at HMP Castle Huntly** and **Paws for Progress CIC** to establish Scotland's first prison-based assistance dog training programme.

This innovative partnership provides a full time operational base and capacity boost for the Dementia Dog team, while enabling men in custody to support the training and care of dogs in the advanced stage of training. This also allows them to develop employability skills and build a non-criminal identity to help reduce future re-offending.



This rehabilitative collaboration enables participants to help transform the lives of people in the community through the provision of highly trained dementia assistance dogs, while also helping transform their own futures.

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