

BUSINESS CASE STUDY: CAPITAL THEATRES

Dementia affects each person differently, and even day to day experiences can change. The Scottish Government have launched the Rethink Dementia campaign to encourage Scots to support people living with the condition to stay socially active, to help them stay well for longer.

Capital Theatres (the charity who runs Festival Theatre, King's Theatre and Studio Theatre in Edinburgh) is one of the many organisations across the country showing what's possible when it comes to supporting people living with dementia. The theatre group have redesigned their buildings and continue to train their staff to ensure that people living with dementia feel welcome and supported.

Capital Theatres' dementia-friendly approach encourages people living with dementia to stay socially connected and continue doing things that matter to them. **Head of Creative Engagement at Capital Theatres, Claire Swanson explains** When someone receives a diagnosis of dementia, it means they have a diagnosis of dementia. It doesn't change who they are, what they've achieved, or the things that matter in their life. They're still the person that they have always been."

Helping someone living with dementia stay connected can help them stay well for longer and at Capital Theatres, this idea is as at the core of the organisation's mission.. "It's very important to us that the people in the community of Edinburgh and beyond feel that every one of our venues is a welcoming place for them," **says Chief Executive Fiona Gibson.**

That welcome starts with the physical space. Following a dementia-friendly audit in 2015, the team at Capital Theatres made small but impactful changes to their buildings, such as putting nosing on the edge of the stairs, so that there's a very visual barrier, and changing the toilet seats to be a solid, contrasting colour. These details reduce cognitive load and anxiety, making navigation easier.

However, a building is only as welcoming as its people. To counter the anxiety people may feel when arriving, every single staff member, from the people working in the café to the box office staff, is dementia trained. **Claire Swanson** adds, "We also encourage all our new staff to come along to our dementia-friendly events and spend time speaking with someone living with dementia. Just sitting together and having a chat can relieve a lot of anxiety for those who may not know how to interact with someone living with dementia." The more comfortable individuals become around those living with dementia, the more confident they will become in supporting people with dementia to live well.

On the foundation of a welcoming space and a confident workforce, Capital Theatres runs a dedicated dementia-friendly programme, consisting of a range of vibrant, in-person community events, led by a passionate creative engagement team, including Alex Howard, Gus Harrower, and Lucie Jeffrey.

The programme's ethos is one of total accessibility. **Alex Howard, Creative Engagement Coordinator and DementiArts magazine editor, explains**, "Here at Capital Theatres, everything in our dementia-friendly programme is completely free, so there are no barriers to entry. We have five regularly running events: Tea & Jam, Brew & Blether, Comfy Ceilidh, Relaxing Rhymes and Together in Song. We invite people to come down, tea and coffee is on us, and you can get talking to people and join in. It's important to us that cost isn't a barrier."

Each session is designed to create joy and connection. For **Lucie Jeffrey, Creative Engagement Coordinator and Dance Lead**, the work is a privilege "It's an honour to be able to support these individuals," she says. Her advice is simple: "My top tips for working with those living with dementia is to treat them as individuals, give them their time and their space and just be kind." It's important to give people living with dementia extra time, avoid interrupting them, and respond with understanding if confusion arises. Small acts of patience make a big difference.

Creative Engagement Coordinator and Music Lead, Gus Harrower connects this daily practice back to the national campaign. He says, "It's important to treat people with dementia the same as anyone would want to be treated. Treat them with kindness, treat them with respect, get on their level and give them the time that they need to respond – patience is key. Events like ours and campaigns like Rethink Dementia are really battling that stigma, which is amazing to see."

Capital Theatres also produces *DementiArts* magazine, which features articles and personal stories contributed by members of the dementia community, alongside a comprehensive listing of dementia-friendly events taking place across Edinburgh and the Lothians.

For **Claire Swanson**, it all comes back to the campaign's central challenge to every Scot. "We need to change the way we think about people living with dementia and put the person, not the diagnosis, back at the front of the conversation. We're proud to be championing that approach here at Capital Theatres."

It's time to rethink dementia. For more information and practical tips, visit nhsinform.scot/rethinkdementia