

Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Project: Clay for Dementia

Organisation: Garden Museum

Region: Greater London

Introduction

Clay for Dementia is a project began at the Garden Museum in autumn 2017 as a pilot with Arts 4 Dementia. It has continued since its first 8-week course with the same teacher, some of the same volunteers and many of the same participants. All sessions and materials are free.

The project involves people with dementia and their carers taking part in ceramics sessions at the museum over a period of (usually) 6–8 weeks. The sessions are facilitated by the Head of Learning at the Museum but taught by a ceramicist, Katie Spragg, who also teaches at the Royal College of Art. Volunteers support the session, including two RCA students. We run about 3 sets of sessions a year – spring, summer and autumn/winter. We exhibit the outcomes at the museum.



Being home 24/7, it's very easy for a person with dementia to decline. There isn't any outside stimulation, everything has to be artificially created... So Clay for Dementia that was always a fantastic programme, has, there's no doubt about it, become even more fantastic during this period

The participants enjoy the social side of the sessions and the discussion held at the beginning. Over time, participants have acquired skills – this is something that Katie has noticed amongst all the participants, including those with dementia.

Image: Cristina is in her 90s and is shielding with her daughter Marion. They usually live apart. They have been coming to Clay for Dementia since Cristina was diagnosed.

During the lockdown, we held 6 sessions over April and May with a 3-week break and after consulting the group have just started another 6 sessions. Participants didn't want to have the usual length of break between sessions, so we are planning to keep running as many sessions as possible whilst participants are at home shielding. The content of the lockdown sessions has been linked to exhibitions at the museum – our Sanctuary exhibition and currently Derek Jarman (participants are currently making homes out of clay inspired by Derek Jarman's Dungeness home).

The online sessions have been a change of format - lasting one hour - and on zoom. Participants have been taught by demonstrations from Katie. Bags of clay and cutting wires were sent to the homes of the participants and powdered slips more recently for adding colour. Their greenware will be collected for firing and glazing.

Since we started in 2017, we have lost some of our participants to illness (carers and those with dementia as many are late stage) but we aim to support the bereaved by ensuring that they are still welcome to attend sessions.

Funders

The Garden Museum is an independent charity and receives no core government or local authority funding, and projects like Clay 4 Dementia are therefore reliant upon the generosity of charitable individuals and trusts. While Clay 4 Dementia was initially part of our National Lottery Heritage Funded programme of activities carried out following our 2015-7 re-development, we have been fortunate to receive additional funding from The Wixamtree Trust, as well as a prize fund from the John Gregory Williamson Memorial Fund, when the project won an award.

Who is it for?

People with dementia and their carers who would normally be able to attend the sessions at the museum but due to lockdown were shielding at home.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

- To keep the sessions running as planned even through lockdown;
- To keep everyone in touch with each other;
- To provide something for people to look forward to;
- To provide some sense of normality.
- To make a link with the museum and the participants.

Where is it happening?

London

Are you working in partnership?

No, although participants have sometimes been referred by memory clinics and Alzheimer's organisations. We initially piloted the sessions with Arts4Dementia and sometimes still collaborate with them e.g. on the filming of a CNN programme on dementia and well-being link below.

How many people took/are taking part?

13 people with dementia and carers, 4 volunteers, one freelance artist

For how long has it been happening?

Ongoing

What were/are the main outputs?

A display of their ceramics work at the museum.

Evaluation:

Out of the responses we have received about the online sessions, in answer to the question 'What are your favourite things about the session?', Being Creative; Having a chat; Doing a regular weekly activity; clay; and A break from the daily routine, were all cited as equally important.

Disadvantages of the online sessions, as described by participants, are:

- Lack of face to face physical contact. Participants have to prepare all the materials and equipment in their own home before the session starts.
- Not being at the museum.
- Not being able to have private conversations with other participants.
- Storage issue for participants having to store clay work at home.

Feedback:

This is feedback from a carer who sent me an email at the end of the first set of 6-week sessions in May:

‘What I’ve been wanting to say is how very much I appreciate your organizing Clay for Dementia during this lockdown period. It’s been a godsend for both of us. H looks forward to Thursday – he loves doing the clay and enjoys seeing everyone on screen too. We keep the finished products in a carton under the sofa (for lack of anywhere else!) and he gets it out regularly to see what he’s made.

But probably what’s even more valuable is that Clay for Dementia is the only activity that H does that has continued during this period. So it’s a little bit of normality in an abnormal period. Keeping him stimulated is a challenge – I’m his only playmate! – and it’s a joy to have a regular event that gives structure to the week. It’s something to look forward to, something to talk about afterwards. And, from my perspective, an activity that I don’t have to dream up and organize!!

Being home 24/7, it’s very easy for a person with dementia to decline. There isn’t any outside stimulation, everything has to be artificially created, if I can put it that way. So Clay for Dementia that was always a fantastic program has, there’s no doubt about it, become even more fantastic during this period.’

In a recent feedback survey, participants have written:

‘it has allowed our family to continue to create fun memories together.... To be able to work on a family project together, like building our miniature family home, is precious.’

‘although I prefer to be with everyone in person, it has been some time I have looked forward to whilst in lockdown.’

‘working with clay relaxes your body and mind. It involves your mental and physical skills. You can ponder about it between sessions.’

‘The world may have changed around us but Clay for Dementia, moving online, adapted and continued in essence unchanged.’

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

- I have been surprised by how few technical challenges there have been for the participants online on zoom.
- The main challenge has been reaching the few participants who don’t have wi-fi at home or have very little confidence in using zoom. One participant doesn’t have wi-fi (we posted her a step by step making activity) and one has difficulty using zoom (her friend helped her get up and running but she has since stopped taking part in sessions).

- We can't help as directly as in class but because most of the participants have been coming to Clay for Dementia for some time they have acquired enough skills to follow demonstrations and online teaching.
- Using Zoom has allowed participants to take part in the planned Clay for Dementia sessions from their homes whilst shielding. Seeing each other at home has been interesting and creates discussion points.
- Volunteers have been able to join from their homes and the artist in lockdown in Brighton has been able to continue teaching the sessions.
- Teaching by demonstration on zoom has worked well.
- Everyone can see what others have made, volunteers join in and make too.
- Online sessions have been an opportunity to chat, to laugh, to share tears and to support each other.
- One of the original members of Clay for Dementia (in 2017) passed away recently. His wife continued sessions whilst he was in a care home, during his illness and has joined in sessions since his passing.

Further information

Details of the sessions which went online using zoom:

<https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/events/clay-for-dementia-2020/>

A Case Study of Clay for Dementia written up as part of our HLF redevelopment project:

<https://dyvdmpp0itmzz.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/17195600/Clay-for-Dementia-Garden-Museum-Interim-Report-FINAL.pdf>

Crafts Council Resource created in collaboration with the Garden Museum:

https://dyvdmpp0itmzz.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/17204117/Dementia-Friendly-Craft_.pdf

CNN health programme featuring Clay for Dementia at the Garden Museum:

<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/health/2019/11/11/dementia-illness-longevity-innovation-vital-signs.cnn>

The Garden Museum is a small independent museum inside a church situated on the Thames opposite the Houses of Parliament. In 2017 we reopened after a HLF redevelopment project with new galleries, Learning spaces and garden spaces. The museum's collections focus on plants and people. Well-being is a key ethos of the Learning department. We have a teaching kitchen and our Food Learning Officer teaches plant-based cooking. Our art collection and exhibitions offer an opportunity to explore the arts through a variety of activities including ceramics.

Katie Spragg who teaches Clay for Dementia created a site-specific permanent installation inside the museum last year as part of her ACE funded project 'Lambeth Wilds'.

<https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/exhibitions/katie-spragg-lambeth-wilds/>