

**ARC East of England  
Stevenage Dementia Involvement Group  
Physical Activity in Stevenage**



Image of Stevenage Town Centre from the ARC East of England Photography Competition 2020.

**December 2020**

# Stevenage Dementia Involvement Group

Stevenage Dementia Involvement Group aims to provide opportunities for people with experience of dementia to have their voice heard and to have influence on research and the planning of new services. Each session the group will discuss a particular topic relating to living with dementia or health and social care services in Stevenage.



Photos shared with permission from the group.

This group is based on a similar model to SHINDIG- a collaborative project between Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Foundation Trust and Alzheimer's Society. Stevenage Dementia Involvement Group asks for people's views to shape research as co-researchers or experts by experience rather than as research participants.

Stevenage Dementia Involvement Group was held virtually on 8th December 2020. In attendance were five people with experience of living with or caring for somebody with dementia. Facilitating the group was Nicole Darlington and Elspeth Mathie (Researchers from the University of Hertfordshire) as well as Su Harvey from The Red Shed Project, Stevenage. Although most group members joined the group virtually, there was also the option to physically go to The Red Shed and join the group from there.

The topic of discussion **Physical Activity in Stevenage** was proposed by Elspeth Mathie who is about to start working on a research project on Physical Activity and Dementia Friendly Communities in Stevenage.

# Summary of discussions

## What sort of physical activity do you do in Stevenage?

The group discussed taking part in a wide range of different physical activities in Stevenage including but not limited to:

- Walking, in particular around Fairlands Valley Park
- Bowls (indoors and outdoors)
- The gym at Stevenage Leisure Centre
- Community centre chair-based exercises and meditation
- Running their own exercise groups
- Gardening groups (The Red Shed Project in particular)



Fairlands Valley Park, Stevenage.

Image submitted to the ARC East of England Community Photography Competition.

The examples of physical activity groups attended were a mixture of *dementia specific groups* and groups that were *open to all*. The group recognised a need for both types of activities.

## Problems faced with physical activity in Stevenage

- Issues with funding of particular physical activity groups meant that the groups could not continue. The alternatives provided were based in Letchworth Garden City (7 miles away) which was inaccessible to most group members.
- Transport to groups can be expensive (taxis). Although Stevenage Borough Council do offer a community transport service, none of the group were aware of this and the group agreed it needs to be advertised better.
- Cost of attending the groups regularly can add up. The group members were very appreciative of groups in Stevenage that were free to attend.

- Attending a new group can sometimes be daunting if the group already know one another and have connections.
- When asked if there were any groups missing in Stevenage, there was enthusiasm for a dementia-specific walking group.

### **COVID-19 and Physical activity in Stevenage**

- Some groups are being held virtually by Zoom. The group did not appear to mind this and still gained a lot from attending the virtual groups.
- Some groups, however, have been cancelled altogether as could not be operated in “COVID-secure” ways.
- Examples were given of some people with dementia and their carers who had not left the house since March 2020.

### **Benefits of Physical Activity in Stevenage**

- All group members provided examples of how taking part in physical activity was beneficial to both the person living with dementia and the carer.
- This included improvements in mood and physical energy after experiencing physical activity.
- Having something organised motivated group members to attend compared to doing things spontaneously.
- The importance of being able to do something “*together but separately*” was expressed multiple times by the group.
- Activities where the carer could attend too and “*have a break from caring*” and “*feel like your old self again*” were important.
- Social interaction with other people who understand and make allowances was considered just as important as the physical activity offered. “*We are like a little gang who all get it*”.
- Positive stories were shared about how activity groups had enabled the person with dementia to take a small step “*away*”

*from their comfort blanket”* in a safe space allowing them to socialise away from their carer.



Image. Stevenage Arts & Leisure Centre.



Image. The Red Shed Project Stevenage.

## Conclusion and next steps

This group provided people with experience of living with dementia the opportunity to share their opinions on physical activity in Stevenage.

At the end of the meeting the group discussed what they would like future meetings to look like. The next meeting will take place in January 2021 and the topic *“receiving a diagnosis and the memory clinic in Stevenage”* received a lot of interest. Information about the next group will be sent to group members.

This group is organised by researchers from the University of Hertfordshire as part of the National Institute of Health Research Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England. For more information, or if you are interested in joining or visiting the group, please contact Nicole Darlington, [n.darlington@herts.ac.uk](mailto:n.darlington@herts.ac.uk) or visit <https://arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/stevenage-dementia-involvement-group>.