Australian Government
Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

Webinar series: Home matters – Rethinking aged care design Questions & Answers

Webinar 2: Designing better aged care environments
12 March 2026

Thank you to everyone who attended and submitted their questions. This document provides answers to questions that were not addressed by the panel during the live session. If you have any further questions please contact: design.dementiasupport@health.gov.au

Design

Can you describe some ways that outdoor spaces can be made to be more active spaces rather than just passive places where the most you can do is sit or walk in a circle?

The National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines support people living in aged care homes to see and spend time outdoors. They encourage outdoor spaces with good access, easy orientation and inviting, purposeful activities.

For example, Guideline 3.4 – Garden destinations, suggests creating a variety of outdoor places with meaningful activities to encourage older people to spend time outdoors. These may include domestic activities, morning tea, gardening, animal tending or exercise. Outdoor areas can also include quieter places for rest, reflection, and entertaining family and visitors. Involving residents in decision-making about outdoor spaces helps ensure they reflect people's interests, feel familiar and support cultural traditions.

Webinar 5 in this series explores Principle 3 – Access the Outdoors in more detail, including the benefits of contact with nature, removing barriers to access and examples of well-designed outdoor spaces.

Is there an expectation or belief that construction according to the design principles will reduce or increase the costs of construction? Since publication of the design principles how many providers have either commenced construction of a new facility utilising the principles, or have reworked existing approvals to meet the principles?

Research suggests construction costs for small-scale, household models of residential aged care may be slightly higher than for larger homes. However, operating costs are comparable and may be lower when differences in resident and facility characteristics are considered. We have also heard from providers who are successfully operating small home models. They report reductions in hospital admissions and medication use, improved quality of life for residents and better staff retention.

The department recognises that escalating building costs and material and trade shortages can make capital improvements challenging. Importantly, even relatively small, low-cost changes to existing homes can make a meaningful difference to both residents and staff. The National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines have been written to allow for flexibility and innovation when designing accommodation solutions. Strategies range from simple, low-cost changes suitable for existing homes through to more substantial features suited to new builds.

The Guidelines under Principle 1 – Enable the Person, can be easily incorporated during a new build or be applied retrospectively to existing buildings. This may include decluttering programs, upgrading furniture or renewing flooring as part of routine maintenance programs.

The Principles and Guidelines are voluntary. The department encourages all providers to use the document and supporting resources to identify practical improvements. Options to monitor the uptake of the Principles and Guidelines, to inform recommendations to government about long-term implementation arrangements, are being explored.

Is it better to have plain walls with less pictures/changes in colour, or more colour/pictures/changes in colour?

The National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines encourage minimising visual clutter in resident areas to reduce physical and cognitive stress. Older people, particularly those living with dementia, can experience sensory overload and physical challenges in cluttered or noisy environments. This can lead to disorientation, agitation and confusion.

Guideline 1.1 – Minimal clutter recommends that walls should be relatively plain, with limited patterns and designs and realistic prints avoided on walls. This will help to support residents to understand their environment and prevent potential hazards.

Tonal contrast is also important to clarify key surfaces in a room. Guideline 1.4 – Tonal Contrast suggests a contrast of more than 30 light reflectance value between walls and flooring, commonly achieved using a white skirting. Strong tonal contrast supports older people with poorer vision to see objects easier.

Do you have some suggestions for how to balance the need to provide a home-like environment vs the legislated requirements for compliance in a residential setting (e.g. in the before/after slide the removal of fire extinguishers, illuminated exit signs, hand-washing basins etc.)?

The National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines encourage minimising visual clutter in resident spaces to reduce physical and cognitive stress. However, they acknowledge that regulatory and safety requirements must still be met.

For example, access to handwashing basins in hallways are important to support infection control. Rather than removing basins, consider recessed designs or discreet cabinets with push-catch opening mechanisms (Guideline 1.1 – Minimal clutter), or locating basins in discrete corridor nooks (Guideline 2.10 – Clinical support).

There are a range of regulations and codes that already apply to aged care homes. The Principles and Guidelines aim to complement and not duplicate or replace these existing regulatory frameworks. For illuminated exit signs, they should align with the specifications in the National Construction Code (NCC) and Australian Standards AS/NZS 2293.1:2018.

Similarly, fire extinguishers need to be installed in line with the requirements of the NCC. For new builds, engaging a fire engineer to develop a 'performance solution' may allow for the positioning of extinguishers in non-resident spaces. Residents and visitors are generally not relied on to use extinguishers, and staff are trained to know their positions. In an existing building, a fire engineer can also be engaged to work through a possible solution.

How can it be ensured they (clients with moderate dementia) are safe when using an outdoor environment?

The National Aged Care Design Principles and Guidelines support people living in aged care homes to see and spend time outdoors. They encourage outdoor spaces with good access, easy orientation and inviting, purposeful activities.

Concerns about safety are often why gardens are not used, but limited outdoor access also carries risk to residents' wellbeing. A clearly articulated model of care that promotes daily

access to the outdoors for all residents is the first step in alleviating safety concerns. Staff should be aware that managers support residents going outside, with risk management strategies in place. Staff training can further reinforce the benefits of outdoor access and address safety concerns.

The way a physical space is designed can either help or stop someone accessing the outdoors. Design strategies may involve:

- providing a dedicated garden or balcony for residents' living areas that is safe, accessible and has opportunities for meaningful engagement (Guideline 3.1 – Dedicated outdoors)
- ensuring residents can easily see and go outside if they want to, and staff feel supported to keep residents safe when spending time outside (Guideline 3.2 – Garden connections)
- creating shaded, sheltered areas that are located immediately outside the doors to the garden (Guideline 3.3 – Garden verandahs)
- providing a variety of outdoor spaces where residents can do meaningful activities that they enjoy (Guideline 3.4 – Garden destinations)
- ensuring garden paths are simple and clear, have seating and are wide enough for different levels of mobility (Guideline 3.5 – Clear paths).

Webinar 5 in this series explores Principle 3 – Access the Outdoors in more detail, including the benefits of contact with nature, removing barriers to access and examples of well-designed outdoor spaces.

Dementia support

How are safe spaces created for people living with dementia in public spaces, and what are councils doing to make sure they are providing spaces for people with dementia?

The Australian Government funds Dementia Australia to deliver the Dementia Friendly Communities (DFC) program. DFC aims to reduce the stigma surrounding dementia and increase the understanding, awareness, and acceptance of dementia in the community.

Through the DFC program, information for councils is available, including a toolkit. It provides guidance for Local Government Area (LGA) councils to help make their services and the local area more dementia-friendly. This guidance covers areas such as customer service, facilities and infrastructure, health and community services, and tips for designing dementia-friendly physical environments.

The DFC program also supports the creation of Dementia Alliances. These are local groups centred around a core of people living with dementia and/or their carers who are seeking to make a positive difference in their communities. Several LGA councils across Australia are members of their local Dementia Alliance and many others have sought to become more dementia friendly.

General

Am I getting a certificate after completing this webinar? If yes, it will really help me to promote my career.

The department will not be issuing certificates of completion. The series is designed to be accessible so that as many people as possible can participate and benefit from the sessions. If you need proof of participation for your own records or organisational requirements, you may wish to use your registration confirmation emails.

For more information about education and training opportunities for aged care workers, you can visit the learning and development page on our website. To find out about accredited and non-accredited dementia education and training programs and opportunities, you can visit the Learning Pathways tool.