

Carebright Dementia Cafe

CareBright is a village community and an incredibly special place where people living with dementia can truly feel at home. It comes complete with a café, hairdresser, arts room, spa, and social club. This '*household model*' adopts a person-centred social approach. It was the first model of this type opened in Ireland.

The CareBright Community has three bungalows, each containing six private living spaces and each space is staffed to suit the needs of the residents. There is a sensory garden with outdoor seating and even an animal sanctuary. The Community provides a supportive environment for people living with dementia. The aim being to ensure that people can grow old and live well in a community of their choosing with dignity and independence.

During the pandemic Yarn Social Day Club Manager Valerie Clancy decided to open a Dementia Cafe. Earlier this month I asked her to share her experience of opening the cafe.

Why did you set up the Cafe?

During the pandemic we found that some groups were particularly badly hit, especially older people and those living with dementia. As a dementia service provider, we engaged creative solutions to assist them through this time of lockdown. At that time there was no remote or virtual dementia cafes in County Limerick. We decided to set up a dementia cafe and got great help and support from The Irish Dementia Cafe Network.

When did the cafe open?

We presented our plan to the board and management of Carebright and received the go ahead for opening in October 2021.

How would you describe a Dementia Cafe?

Our Carebright Dementia Cafe is a one-stop-shop for information and support for people living with dementia and their families in East Limerick and surrounding counties. It provides an opportunity for people to share experiences and get reliable information on dementia care and supports. It is a soft first step for those coming to terms with a diagnosis and underpins other support services available to them on their journey. It is a service that does not feel like a service and as such reaps rewards beyond monetary value. Sitting and chatting over tea/coffee and treats helps to break down the barriers and ease the stigma that can surround a dementia diagnosis. This is a totally free service with the only requirement for access being that you are living with a diagnosis of dementia or supporting a loved one/friend with a diagnosis.

Who can attend a Dementia Cafe and what is the format?

We have an open-door policy allowing access to community members, their families and members of the general public who are living with dementia or supporting someone on their dementia journey.

Our Carebright Dementia Cafe takes place in our training room at our Yarn Cafe in Bruff. We always have an icebreaking activity to open, making everyone feel at home. This can be a brief general knowledge quiz or 'guess the logo' game. Sometimes it can be a general conversation following a popular event that recently took place i.e. Munster Hurling Championship.

Our talks have been quite general, usually giving advice on what to expect and what is available to make life easier. We keep information jargon free and as straightforward as possible with nothing too heavy as we find this works best for everyone attending. Sometimes people just want to sit and chat or listen and share a cuppa in a safe environment where they don't feel judged.

What kind of feedback have you received from people?

Those attending have connected with people and support services they were not aware of beforehand. They have linked with people in similar situations and learnt from their experiences. They have returned with their families and loved ones to this safe comfortable environment for socialisation. The timing of the opening of our cafe in October 2021 coincided with the reopening of services following Covid lockdowns and a time of burnout for carers and people living with dementia alike. This provided family carers a place to come and get support also. Some comments from participants:

'This is the first time I've been out of the house in the last three months.'

'I've found my space; I don't feel anxious coming here. I can be myself'.

What advice would you give someone who thinking of opening a dementia cafe in their local area?

Get all your ducks in a row –

- Ensure commitment from your steering committee and that they have an awareness of what is involved, and the enthusiasm and desire needed to follow through.
- Breakdown roles and responsibilities of the steering committee to ensure that everyone has a part to play.
- Ensure your venue has ease of access especially for those with mobility issues or limitations. It should be private allowing those attending to feel at ease and comfortable especially when sharing.
- Sign-in sheets are very useful for following up with those who attend – always get their permission to do so and respect their decision not to participate if desired.
- Do your needs analysis not only for your immediate area but further afield, sometimes those starting on this journey like to start away from their own locality and will travel to maintain privacy.

With numbers of people affected by dementia growing we need to provide an all-inclusive society in every village / parish. This includes providing a one-stop-shop for the dissemination of dementia information, supports and services to everyone involved and not just those lucky enough to live in our cities. Even in the coldest of winter evenings when you think no one is coming it is important to keep your doors open, your presence may be the only support that person has to guide them in the right direction.

The final piece of advice from Valerie was, 'Go for it, while it might seem daunting at first it is certainly worth the effort.'

If you would like any further information you can contact the Irish Dementia Cafe Network email Michelle@engagingdementia.ie.

