

Kent Fire and Rescue Service:

Helping support people with dementia

Kent has focussed on improving the help and support it offers to older people, particularly those with dementia.

- All staff have been encouraged to complete an online training programme and nearly 400 have become 'dementia friends'.

- It is helping them to identify people with the condition and tailor their fire safety support around them.

Over half of all fire deaths and injury in the home happen to people aged over 60, according to the Chief Fire Officers Association. Recent research has also shown that impairment and disability increase the risk of injury or death from fire.

Kent Fire and Rescue Service has focused on helping its crews understand more about the dementia.

A simple online staff training programme has been developed and offered to all 1,665 fire officers and support staff within the organisation.

The service has also encouraged staff to take part in the Alzheimer's Society's dementia friends initiative. Nearly 400 have signed up.

The work on dementia means staff are able to identify the early signs of the condition and – where appropriate – make suggestions to those affected about the help they can get from the NHS.

What is more, through the home safety visits they do, officers are also able to provide tailored help to reduce the risk of fire. Charlie Smith, Kent's Safety Service Delivery Manager, says: "Having a better understanding of what it's like to live with dementia means fire officers are better able to help people with dementia stay independent and safe in their own homes for as long as possible. People with dementia may get forgetful, and leave stoves on after cooking, or allow pans to boil over so we provide help where we can."

This involves practical safety advice as well as fitting smoke alarms, cooker shut-off switches, deaf alarms for the hearing impaired and eye-catching stickers to remind people to turn off their televisions, cookers, and not to overload electrical sockets.

Kent has also held an event at its Gravesend fire station to highlight to people with the condition the help it has on offer. Last October visitors from the Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Services, who are all in the early stages of the disease, came to a demonstration day.

Green Watch Firefighter Mike Edwards, who organised the event, says he was inspired to get more involved after having the dementia training. "We know how important it is for those living with dementia to feel understood and included in their communities, so we invited them to the fire station. It gave them a visual and interactive session, which they all enjoyed."

Sherry Boyd, an Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Services worker who accompanied the group, says the day was really informative. "Doing it at the fire station meant it wasn't so abstract for the

group.” She says the group then shared the information with their carers and families.

Through its work on dementia, Kent has emerged as a national leader on dementia among the country’s fire and rescue services. Its online training programme, which it worked on in partnership with the Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire and Rescue Services, has been made available to all fire and rescue services across the country.

Kent also worked with Staffordshire and West Midlands Fire and Rescue Services to draw up a National Dementia Pledge, which asks fire and rescue services in England to take an active role on dementia. So far the majority of fire and rescue services in England have signed up to it and many are engaged in local work around dementia.

The Dementia Pledge was launched at a Dementia Conference hosted by Staffordshire University in 2012. Kent’s leading role in improving the quality of life of people with dementia came after David Cameron launched the Prime Minister’s Challenge on Dementia four years ago. Steve Griffiths, who was then Kent’s Director of Service Delivery (he retired recently), was the representative for UK fire and rescue services on the Prime Minister’s Dementia Friendly Communities Champion Group.

Mr Smith says: “We want this to be useful for everyone, because at some point in their life everyone will come into contact with someone who has dementia, whether that’s family, friends or through work.” He also says the work with older people has focussed on other hazards too. “We have worked with the NHS on its slips, trips and falls initiative because we want to help prevent people from falling over and breaking a hip, but also because if someone falls, knocks a pan over and causes a fire, the consequences can be much worse.”

But the push on dementia is just one part of Kent’s efforts to tackle health inequalities. The service has a dedicated vulnerable persons team who work with people on a daily basis to reduce their risk of fire. A team of specially-trained officers work closely with social services, mental health teams, local authorities, housing associations and the police to put intervention measures in place, often at short notice.

Mr Smith says: “We are realistic enough to know that if someone has been smoking for 30 years and we suggest that stopping smoking would be better for their health and their fire safety, they’re probably not going to. But we can provide fire retardant blankets and bedding, metal bins and fire retardant sprays, that may decrease the risk of fire.”

The Fire and Rescue Service also runs a youth-directed programme called Fire Fit, which it takes out to summer fetes and other events. It involves a challenge course completed against the clock with exercises similar to those that fire officers use. “We are always looking at ways we can have an impact,” adds Mr Smith.

Contact: charlie.smith@kent.fire-uk.org



For more information

Jemma Linton
Business Manager
NHS England
Quarry House
Quarry Hill
Leeds

E Jemma.linton@nhs.net