

# Designing landscapes for older people

Older age is a time of significant change. On the positive side, many people find that in their later years they have more time to do more of the things they want to, and for more of today's young retired this comes with both time and money to spend. It is a time when there is often greater motivation and inclination to enjoy the outdoors, from gardening to garden visits, walks in the park to excursions to new places.

At the same time the ageing process brings changes in mobility and sensory acuity and it's a time when people have to make more careful choices about what activities and interests feel pleasurable and within reach. These choices depend in large part on the design of the environment and how supportive it is. Things that may be overlooked by younger people - doors that are heavy to open, steps that are easy to overlook and loose slippery surfaces - start to present themselves as tiresome obstacles. With age these things matter more, and people become more adept in their ability to detect ways in which the design of their surroundings makes life difficult for all sorts of people.

The Sensory Trust has spent many years gaining an understanding of how we can design environments in ways that make them easier to use, while keeping hold of the qualities that make them special, fun and engaging. These principles are relevant for any outdoor site, from public parks to private gardens and will help make the experience more accessible and enjoyable for the widest range of visitors, including older people.

For any design there are some key considerations to take into account:

**Mobility** – Ageing brings changes to mobility. This may mean walking more slowly, reduced strength or stamina, or needing to use a mobility aid such as sticks or a wheelchair. The design of an environment can work with or against people with limited mobility. Steps and slopes with uneven or slippery surfaces can become obstacles that prevent a visit or seriously spoil enjoyment once there. Improving surfaces, reducing gradients and giving a choice of ramps and steps are helpful measures. Adding more seats so people can rest more often can be one of the most helpful improvements a site can make.

**Reach** – For many people, bending down or reaching up gets harder with age. This can make it hard to reach things at ground level or above head height. With plants and other design features intended to be noticed and explored it is a good plan to bring them up to a reachable height.

**Visual impairment** – With ageing, vision can be affected in various ways. People may find that certain darker colours filter out, making it easier to see yellows, reds and oranges than dark blues and greens. A reduction in depth perception can make it more difficult to see changes in ground levels. Eyes become more sensitive to glare which can make reflective and shiny surfaces difficult, or even painful, to see clearly. Changes in level such as steps should have high contrast nosings, and signage should have good contrast and hard surfaces and furniture should use non-reflective materials.

**Sensitivity to weather extremes** – Older people are often more sensitive to extremes of temperature and rapid changes in temperature. Appropriate clothing is a must for a good outdoor experience. It is also important to know there is sufficient shelter and shaded areas for us to use within an outdoor space. Seating should also be considered in these spaces for those who prefer a more passive rather than active involvement.

**Memory loss** – Another trend with ageing is for memory to reduce. The design of a site can help support this by ensuring it is dependable (a place where people feel safe and comfortable) and uncomplicated (so people don't feel they can easily become lost).

Reduced confidence – This can be a major reason for older people making less use of the outdoors. As getting around becomes more difficult, people's confidence that they can handle any situation can also dwindle. With age, people can feel more vulnerable and things that may have once been straightforward can now become a cause for worry; transport and getting to a place, who to go with, getting around a site, having the right equipment, clothing and so on. All of these aspects can be supported by good information and a supportive environment so people feel reassured their needs have been taken on board.

## Summary of design considerations

Characteristic	Implications for design	Design solutions
Reduced mobility (ability to get around)	Access is limited by obstacles like steps, uneven surfaces, gradients, slips and trips	Reduced gradients; choice of ramp and steps; level, firm surfaces; handrails and supports; design for wheelchairs and mobility aids
Reduced stamina (tiring easily)	Distance and gradients become a significant issue	Seats to reduce impact of distance and grades; choice of route lengths; maximise interest within easy reach
Reduced dexterity (eg from arthritis, Parkinson's)	Fine motor skills are more difficult and can be painful - turning handles, locks etc	Choose easy-to-use handles, gate latches, locks etc
Falls and impaired balance	Reduced confidence to go out and higher risk of injury	Good access, low impact hard surfaces , careful siting of furniture and features, handrails and supports
Visual impairment	Items like furniture, signboards and steps can become hazards if not well designed	Careful siting of furniture and signage, good colour contrast, tactile indicators, sensory design to cater for all senses, remove hazards
Hearing impairment	Not alert to aural cues eg alarms and approaching traffic	Include visual alarms and clearly differentiate vehicular and pedestrian routes
Sensitivity to weather	Need for protection from weather extremes	Need for protection from weather extremes
Alzheimer's, dementia	Reduced ability to cope with complex designs, reduced memory, may want to wander	Legible designs, familiar settings and detail, design for reminiscence, safe materials, secure and comfortable
Incontinence	Access to toilet facilities	Accessible and well-signed toilets
Sensitivity to weather	Need for protection from weather extremes	Shelter, shade, use of indoor/outdoor spaces eg conservatories