Teacher Information Sheet

The following information is taken from the Red &Yellow Care website <http://www.redandyellowcare.com/>

It provides a good background to understanding more about dementia. Please see the website for further information.

**What is dementia?**

Dementia is an umbrella term that is used to describe a number of different conditions that affect the brain and should not be considered a normal part of aging. It is common, affecting more than 800,000 people in the UK.

There are several causes of dementia, with subtly different symptoms. The symptoms of dementia can vary and the ways in which they develop reflect personality, lifestyle, quality of relationships, and mental and physical health. Some of the key symptoms in dementia, regardless of the type are:

•Loss of memory

•Problems with thinking and planning

•Difficulties with language

•Failure to recognise people or objects

•A change of personality

The most common cause is Alzheimer’s disease followed by vascular dementia. Alzheimer’s disease directly affects the structure of the brain whereas vascular dementia is caused by a problem with blood flow and is often described as a series of mini-strokes. It is important to distinguish dementia from delirium or ‘an acute confusional state’, which is a confusion that comes on suddenly over a matter of hours or days and requires urgent medical attention.

**Simple as making a cup of tea?**

Irrespective of the underlying cause of dementia the outcome is damage to the brain, weakening the way in which it works. Our brains perform many different actions, often at the same time, and this complexity can be well illustrated by what might seem a simple task, making a cup of tea. If we break down the steps involved in this daily tradition we can highlight a few of these functions in action.

1. We imagine a cup of tea (abstract thinking) and decide to make one (motivation)

2. We may ask whoever is with us if they want a cup (language)

3. We plan making the tea ensuring that things are done in the right order, putting the tea in before the boiling water (executive function)

4. We remember where the tea, sugar and milk are stored (memory)

5. We put the kettle on and gather the ingredients (motor function)

6. We listen for the kettle (hearing), ensuring that we don’t get distracted with some other task (attention and concentration)

7. We carefully pour (coordination) just the right amount of water (judgement) on to the tea

8. We may then add milk and sugar to the cup, in the right order (planning)

9. We wait until it has cooled sufficiently (judgement) and we enjoy the tea (taste)

10. All the way through we have probably spoken and acted in a similar manner to how we usually do (personality)

Most people reading this have, at some time or another, made a mistake when making tea. Putting tea bags in the fridge and milk in the cupboard, forgetting to turn on the kettle, forgetting who wanted milk and whether or not you’ve already added the sugar, and if so, how many. And after all of that, it’s not unusual to forget to drink it. This does not mean that you have dementia. When someone has dementia, usually several of the different brain functions outlined above begin to go wrong, and not just once but repeatedly over time.