

## Day Centres

Understanding the value of Day Centres for their regular users



## Background

In early 2020 Surrey County Council initiated a review of the daytime activities offer for older people across Surrey. Within the wider context of activities and related requirements for the over 60s in general, Surrey County Council's review set out to examine Day Centre provision in Surrey.

## What we did

Healthwatch Surrey contributed to the design of Surrey County Council's online survey about activities among residents aged 60 and over - this reached just under 600 people and will be reported within Surrey County Council.

Healthwatch Surrey also offered to undertake a qualitative study among regular Day Centre users. Our aims were to deliver insight into the role and value of Day Centres for their users, and to ensure we spoke to an older cohort who were less likely to respond to an online questionnaire.

The qualitative research was initiated but delays caused by the pandemic combined with changes to Surrey County Council project priorities resulted in the project ending sooner than expected. However, the insights from the people we did interview bring the role and value of Day Centres into sharp focus.

The interviews took place during the pandemic when Day Centres were closed.

## Recommendations

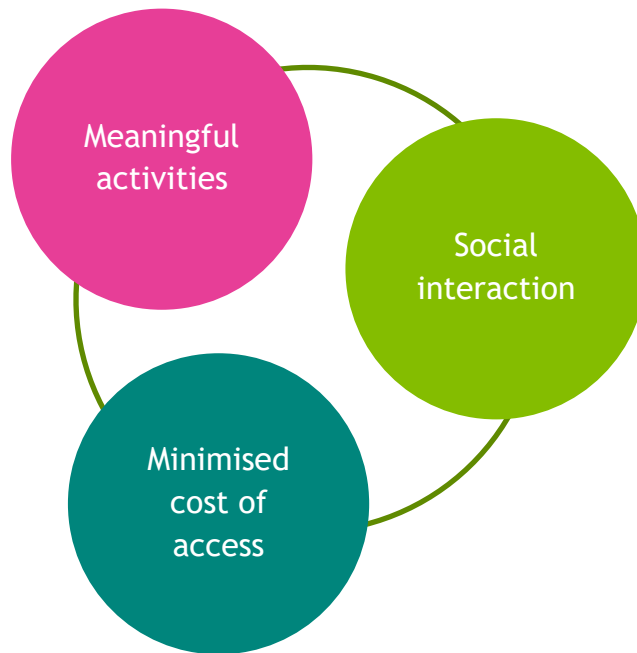
1. **Day Centres should be recognised and valued** for their role in delivering Surrey County Council's vision that **"everyone lives healthy, active and fulfilling lives"** to older and more vulnerable residents.
2. Provision of individual activities or services is not enough to deliver Surrey County Council's vision to this cohort. When planning services and activities for older people whose independence is compromised **consideration should be given to all three elements of the "value equation"**:
  - The value of the activity itself
  - The opportunities for social interaction
  - Maximising access/minimising the physical and mental costs of access

## Main Findings

For our sample of older, regular Day Centre attendees:

- Day Centre **attendance strongly supports mental health**; primarily by enabling social interaction but also by providing meaningful activity:
  - Importantly this social interaction is with a range of different kinds of people - often friends, but also acquaintances and strangers; not just with peers, but across a range of ages, interests and experiences.
  - It also happens across a range of experiences: chatting, sharing a meal, learning something, doing something.
  - Volunteering/helping at the centre, supporting others (formally or informally) and learning new skills contribute to feelings of self-worth and personal value
  
- **The social side of attending a Day Centre is an activity in itself - in fact, it is the primary activity relating to Day Centres:**
  - A Day Centre is much more than the sum of its parts. For most regular visitors individual activities are not the primary driver for visiting the Day Centre - people go to a Day Centre because it is a social ecosystem, a community that also happens to offer good activities.
  - Meeting and chatting with friends, sharing activities, interacting with different kinds of people, being out in the world are the key drivers for most.
  
- **Day Centres are also valued for their practical offer:**
  - Physical wellbeing: cooked meals, exercise and activity, services such as podiatry
  - Information exchange: often informal by way of discussion with peers and those with lived experience, but also more formally through talks or teaching sessions (e.g. scam awareness, computer skills)
  
- **Transport and travel time/physical effort are significant barriers** for the user group we spoke to:
  - Mobility, continence, fatigue, sight and hearing problems all mean that the only viable transport option for many is door to door vehicular access. Few drive so (where no transport is provided) this means enlisting family and friends, arranging volunteer drivers or paying for a taxi both ways.

- Even where door to door transport is provided, the time and effort that need to be invested to get to an activity can be very high. A stay of several hours with good social interaction and multiple activities makes the effort worthwhile.
- For a Day Centre user the “value” of a Day Centre is judged by weighing up the benefits of social interaction and meaningful activities against the difficulty of travelling to and from the centre.



# Survey Details

## Method and Sample

We undertook 9 individual telephone interviews lasting 45-90 minutes each. Our respondents were provided by managers at three Surrey Day Centres:

- The Clockhouse, Milford
- Westway, Caterham
- Rowleys, Cranleigh

The Day Centre managers recruited the respondents, gaining relevant consents on our behalf. The interviews were carried out by Healthwatch Surrey Volunteers and our Research Officer.

We requested respondents who were:

- Regular attendees at their Day Centre
- Aged 75+
- Mix of male and female
- “Unlikely” or known to be limited/non-users of internet services

## About our sample

- Age range 79-91
- 2 men, 7 women
- All but one had given up driving
  - o While one retained a driving licence he planned to stop driving soon, having had a minor accident recently
- Several had mobility issues
- Several had sensory issues (hearing/sight loss)
- All but two were non-users of the internet
  - o Use was limited to internet shopping or emails. One refused to use search tools as a matter of principle (“I don’t like how everything is Amazon or Google, I won’t use them”).
- While a variety of physical conditions were mentioned none were living with Dementia
- All but one lived alone
- Their level of independence varied: one provided childcare for her 4 year old grandchild once a week but another was heavily dependent on her daughter for almost everything and living with mild cognitive impairment. The remainder fell between these extremes.

## Main Findings

### When and why did visits start?

***“I moved here to be near my son when my husband died and wanted to make new friends and join a new community”***

All but one of our respondents had been visiting their Day Centre for 10 years or more: the range was 2 ½ years to 40 years. Most had started visiting in their early/mid 70s.

Most explicitly stated they had started visiting for companionship.

*“I lost my husband, and I said...to my son can you take me somewhere, to pull me out of myself, and I love it”*

Several had started as volunteers and one still classified herself as a volunteer at the age of 86.

*“I went as a volunteer, I wanted to do something useful. Over the years I’ve done everything. But then in 2019 I had a big knee op and now I just go to meet my friends and chat although I’m on the committee”.*

Only one or two mentioned an activity as part of the rationale for starting to visit, and always in addition to companionship.

*“After my wife died I started going for company. And I hate cooking so I went for my lunch. They did talk where they showed me how to use a computer, that was very helpful”*

### Frequency of visits and main activities

***“I go three times a week. It’s like my club”***

All our respondents visited their Day Centre at least once a week, and most were visiting 3+ times a week.

Consistently, our respondents told us their main activity was social interaction. Every respondent cited “see my friends” “companionship” “coffee and a chat” “mixing with other people” as a primary ‘activity’ in its own right.

They did also take part in specific regular activities such as sewing, having lunch, listening to talks or visiting the hairdresser. However, there was much appreciation of range and the odd surprise - *“the variety of things to do”, “whatever’s on in the afternoon”, “all the different talks”* rather than strong focus on specific individual activities.

## Benefits of visiting a Day Centre

### *“If I don’t go out what’s the point of going on?”*

All our respondents expressed benefits relating to mental wellbeing.

Uplifted mood, fun and happiness:

*“all you hear is laughter”*

*“I used to play a lot of tennis, I loved it, and I can’t do that any more but they have indoor bowls and I really enjoy doing it”*

*“It’s a place full of life and vigour”*

Mental stimulation:

*“using my brain”*

*“learning new things”*

*“meeting people with different experiences and ages”*

Mutual support, empathy:

*“they are like a little family to me”*

*“we talk about the difficulties [of old age] to come and learn from each other”*

*“we all talk about our aches and pains but at our age those are a big part of our lives and we’re all interested in them, nobody else is”*

To a lesser extent we heard about benefits to physical health and levels of activity:

*“I go for a hot lunch, since my wife died. I’m not much on cooking”*

*“I do the keep fit but I’m not a fanatic!”*

*“it gets me out of the house”*

A minority mentioned the value of the centre for signposting or learning:

*“I need to get back there as I have a tablet and I need to work out how to use Zoom”*

*“They have all the information there if you need something. Very helpful”*



Most told us they would be returning to their Day Centre the minute it reopened:

*“I’m lost, I’m waiting for it to open...I can’t wait to get back there, I’ve been depressed because of lockdown”*

*“I miss the people and the sense of warmth and community”*

*“you don’t realise how much you depend on seeing other people”*

*“I’ll be at the front of the queue”*

## Finding new activities

***“what people need is a manual or a booklet for when they retire telling them what there is and what they can do”***

Our respondents were not interested in looking for new activities - they were busy with the Day Centre, family (for some), and existing activities such as faith groups. As an exercise we asked them to imagine what they would do if their Day Centre did not reopen after the pandemic. All were horrified at the idea:

*“I can’t bear to think of the Day Centre not opening again”*

None of our respondents would use the internet to search for information, or would use social media. Most had no internet access. The two who did have access used it for shopping or emails but not for information searches: one lacked confidence, one was opposed to Google on principle.

None of our respondents were interested in finding new activities.

There was a range of views on how difficult or easy it would be to find replacement activities.

The main sources of information would be:

- Pre-existing knowledge
  - o *“there is the xxx centre in yyyy, I could go there I suppose”*
- Friends and family
  - o *“I have a friend who goes to one in xxx, I could ask her, although it would be hard to get to”*
  - o *“I’d ask my son to find out what is available”*
- Local magazines and print media
- “Organisers” at other activities such as their Church, or fellow attendees



## What would be important when choosing a new Day Centre or activity?

*“It would all depend on whether my daughter could take me”*

For all our respondents transport/access/proximity were the dealbreaker when considering any activity. None were currently driving, only one owned a car. For the more mobile walking had become their main way of getting around. Many had reduced mobility so accessing public transport was difficult and tiring (and many had stopped using it during the pandemic); taxis are expensive. Some Day Centres offer a free bus pickup and drop-off service, but as one respondent commented these could involve a long, uncomfortable and tiring journey.

*“some of [the people who use the bus] complain because it goes all around the houses before it drops them off”*

## Conclusions

For these older, committed, regular visitors, Day Centres play a vital role in preventing social isolation and enhancing mental health.

They also support physical wellbeing and can deliver important signposting to this vulnerable group.

Day Centres deliver these benefits - especially the benefits to mental health - not through individual activities but through their unique combination of three characteristics:

Opportunities to socialise and be part of a community

AND

Enjoyable, meaningful or valuable activities and services

AND

“Cost efficient” in terms of effort to access for a group with low transport and physical reserves

When considering Day Centres it is important to recognise that it is the sum of these three parts that delivers for this user group.

## Project Limitations

This project is smaller in scale than originally intended and was not a scientific exercise. Respondents were all enthusiastic Day Centre visitors, selected by the managers of just three Day Centres in Surrey. It is intended to deliver fresh perspective and give insight that can help enrich strategic development.

## Thanks

Our thanks go to

- Our respondents
- Healthwatch Surrey volunteers who undertook interviews for this project
- The managers of Westway, Clockhouse and Rowleys Day/Community Centres
- Kathryn Telford, Commissioning Manager for Older People, Adult Social Care, Surrey County Council