Medway Local Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JLHWS)

Qualitative Findings and Recommendations from Survey and Focus Group Engagement 2023

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# **Executive Summary**

The following provides an overview of qualitative exercises conducted with local communities in Medway, carried out from February to May 2023 to inform the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JLHWS). This includes seven focus groups with communities most impacted by health inequalities and the open-ended questions from two broader surveys to Medway residents (526 adults) and organisations in March/April 2023. A survey of children and young people in Medway which has been excluded from this analysis because of a very small sample size.

This Executive Summary presents an overview of the key findings and recommendations from these qualitative exercises. Further detail can then be pursued in the full report.

**Key Findings**

1. **Access to health and wellbeing services.** Participants said being able to easily access services was essential to supporting good health and wellbeing. They felt that general practitioners (GPs) were difficult to access (i.e., difficult to get through on the phone to book appointments and long waiting times). Concerns were raised that the increasing use of e-consults and virtual communication methods would make access even more difficult for certain groups and those with existing health inequalities (e.g., homelessness populations, older adults). All participants referred to wanting to learn more about healthy eating and alternative exercise within the community. More health promotion on these topics within community settings would be beneficial but also an opportunity for individuals to manage their own health and wellbeing.
2. “And they keep saying about an e-mail address and I don’t even know what an e-mail address is. I don’t. I’m 57 and I didn’t do none of that at school, you know…the other day I got six questions from the surgery, and I can’t reply to it cuz I can’t get on the internet.”

Participant from homelessness focus group

“Easy accessible healthcare [is needed]. Not being able to get help, care and advice when you need it is the most worrying and stressful part of my life”

“Much better and more accessible health centre [is needed] because at the moment my present one is overstretched, oversubscribed and difficult to access”.

Adult Survey Responses

1. **Integrating health and wellbeing into the local community.** Participants discussed the importance of having access to information and services to support their health and wellbeing beyond primary care and in the local community. Many felt that they would benefit from health advice but were unsure where to access this. The development of community and health hubs was raised as a valuable way to achieving this and would mean that a broad array of services would be in one place. Services needed to include traditional health and wellbeing support services (e.g., mental health, substance misuse support, health checks), but also consider the wider determinants of health (e.g., financial support, befriending services) as these are a means of reducing pressure on primary care. Local community and health hubs needed to be in an easily accessible place with good transport links and ensure good access for those without personal transport, low incomes and/or mobility issues. It was also recommended that the hubs/services within them are co-created with services users and the public.

“You know, a lot of people now are walking with the trolleys down the High Street, and you know, they can barely put one foot in front of the other…it would be nice for somebody to be central that they could maybe, you know, leave a shopping list with…”

Participant from older women focus group.

“More affordable and safe access to exercise and not just subsidising those who are unemployed or on benefits. For example, the cost of swimming, even in local council pools can be too expensive for many who are working.”

Survey Respondent

“It’d be nice if there’s like a website that listed all the local services available.”

Parish Councillor Focus Group

“Services helping people to understand and gain knowledge about healthy lifestyle, nutrition, and wellbeing. It could improve people's general health and quality of life.”

Survey Respondent

1. **Strong social support networks.** Participants stated the importance of good social support networks in helping to maintain good health and wellbeing. This might include being part of local interest/hobby groups (e.g., allotments, knitting), taking part in group physical activity sessions (e.g., walking, parkrun) or those maintained by services and organisations (e.g., gym and fitness classes). In this way, social support networks were cited as being beneficial to both physical and mental health and wellbeing, where people can socialise, have fun, and engage in interesting conversation. Participants said that the increase in cost of living meant it was more important than ever for local groups/activities to be affordable.

“I know a gentleman that lives across the road from me he's on his own. He has his dog, and I don't see anybody visit. So, who does he talk to in the day? And that goes on for weeks and weeks and months and months. You know, I'm concerned there are a lot of people just sat in doors waiting to die. Umm, literally waiting to die and I’m not exaggerating.”

Older Women Focus Group

A lot of them up there, it’s just a job. They don’t care. People like me, they look at me and judge me…We’re not all the same but you’re judged by that…They call you crackhead and all that.”

Rough Sleepers and Sex Workers Focus Group

“Drop-in places to sit and have a chat if you need to, informal, perhaps somewhere to sit by yourself but with others around you, sometimes you don't want to talk but it is nice to have things going on, I think so many of us live alone or feel lonely 'gathering' places where you feel safe and can be with others might be a good thing to have should you need it."

Adult Survey Respondent

“'Men in sheds' is a great organisation, especially for older or even middle-aged men to socialise.”

Adult Survey Respondent

1. **Population needs for health and wellbeing in Medway.** Participants indicated the growing and unmet need of the population of Medway. Many considered the health and wellbeing needs of resident as being unmet by current services. With concerns around the limited health promotion on exercise and healthy eating to their inability to access primary and secondary services without delay. Introducing new services (e.g., community hubs) or sharing good ways of working (e.g., health fairs and health checks) could support current services to meet the unmet need and offer opportunity for shared lessons of learning for health and wellbeing services in Medway. Continuity of care was important to all participants - in particular, for those most impacted by health inequalities where they may be moving around or not living in a permanent address. Ensuring health care networks are supported to successfully transfer patients between services through increased signposting and better cross network communication, is needed to support the ongoing health improvement of people in Medway. Finally, participants suggested that while some services were available, they would like to see them designed in a holistic model to support the growing and changing needs of Medway residents. This varied from supporting the use of green spaces within the environment to ensuring diversity of the population is valued by the current services.

“People need more bottom up, co designed services dealing with aforementioned issues and that these services need to flexible to the ever-changing needs and landscape we live in.”

Organisations Survey

“I get frustrated that all my medical records for Medway and St Thomas’ are not on computer for me to access when I see a nurse. And they don’t tell one another about any changes to medication. That’s a nightmare as well.”

Older Men Focus Group

“The level of support that we receive here at the Barracks from Medway Council's public health team, in my experience, is unparalleled.”

“I've taken the Medway approach as like a blueprint so I can share with all the medical centres around the United Kingdom to reach out to their Council and see what's available in there for them to have a closer working relationship.”

Barracks Focus Group

# **Recommendations**

* Taking a place-based approach to developing policy on health and wellbeing. The findings indicate that overall Medway residents are aware of the diverse and changing population needs of people in Medway and therefore, a place-based approach to developing policy would be beneficial to improving health and wellbeing in the long term.
* Raise awareness about the multidisciplinary teams that make up General Practice and inform people on how to access help in different ways and signposting them (e.g., pharmacy etc). There is clear need for better access to GPs and given the current climate with a shortage of GPs and appointments, there are alternative routes people can access the help they need without seeing a GP. The use of community and health hubs may also take pressure from primary care, and increased awareness of social prescribing.
* Create local community and health hubs that include traditional and non-traditional health and wellbeing services. Ensure these are co-produced with local communities and are accessible to those groups who may have more challenges accessing services (e.g., homeless communities, sex workers, older people, those with mobility issues). Ensure these are advertised using various communication channels and not just online to target those without these technologies.
* Ensure that healthcare staff are provided with patient compassion training (including training such as Making Every Contact Count) so that no individual or community feels judged, disrespected, or discriminated against.
* Increase availability and/or signpost to services that support mental health and wellbeing. This includes local groups where people can access social support networks, to dedicated mental health services that may be needed for certain populations including those suffering from homelessness.
* Address barriers to physical activity. Participants emphasised the importance of physical activity to their health and well-being, but face barriers to participating. To address this, the council could consider offering free or low-cost exercise classes or workshops specifically for homeless men. The council could also work with local gyms and fitness centres to negotiate reduced rates for homeless individuals or explore options for providing fitness equipment in homeless shelters.
* Increase information about services, support groups available including physical activity options. Participants highlighted a lack of information what is available in their local area. To address this, the council could create a comprehensive directory of local services/support and make it available to individuals through shelters, community centres, shops etc. As many participants do not use smartphones and many have limited access to the internet, this information should be provided in several formats (both electronic and hard copy leaflets, in magazines etc).
* Address financial barriers. Money was identified as a barrier to participating in physical activity. The council could consider providing financial assistance or subsidies for individuals who want to participate in physical activity programs but cannot afford to do so. The council can work with local leisure centres and community organisations to provide low-cost exercise classes for retired individuals.
* Increase support groups for older/retired men. It is important to address the gap in support groups available for older/retired men. Public Health Medway can work with community organisations to provide a range of support groups that cater to the needs of retired men. These could include activities such as walking groups, DIY clubs, and gardening groups.
* The initial investigation uncovered several key themes including a number of issues impacting the health of wellbeing of people in Medway. More research into the health and wellbeing needs would allow the council and health services to better support communities in Medway in managing their own health and wellbeing in the long run. Whilst also adopting an evidence-based approach developing health and wellbeing policy in Medway.

# **Focus Groups Findings**

The following presents the findings from a series of focus groups designed to better understand the health and wellbeing needs and priorities of local communities in Medway. The focus groups were carried out with a range of different groups in Medway and focused on those which are likely to be most impacted by health inequalities including:

* Those living in areas of disadvantage
* Those experiencing homelessness
* Sex workers
* People living with disabilities
* Vulnerable people
* People living in rural areas (via Parish Councils)
* People from armed forces

In total, 7 face-to-face focus group discussions were conducted between February and May 2023. Each focus group had between 2-8 participants. The main topic areas which were explored include health and wellbeing priorities, staying healthy, and Medway’s health priorities. Based on these areas the following questions were asked during the focus group discussions:

1. Thinking about health and wellbeing, what are your priorities/what would you want for yourself?
2. What do you think people find useful to keep themselves in good health and wellness?
3. What type of services or held do you think people will need more of in the coming years?
4. Thinking about health and wellbeing, what are the most important things to address for everyone living, working and/or studying in Medway?

## **Homelessness (Men)**

This focus group consisted of four white British male participants in their late 20s to late 50s living in an accommodation in Chatham. One of the participants was in paid employment with support from a homelessness organisation while the other three participants were not in an employment. Of the three unemployed, one was a prison leaver. The main themes that emerged from this focus group included the need for better access to mental health services, and importance of physical activity.

### Access to Mental Health Services

Access to mental health services were deemed essential to support the overall health and wellbeing of homeless communities. One participant raised concerns that they were unable to access professional mental health support and felt frustrated that these services are too busy. They explained that the difficultly in receiving professional support has worsened their mental health including increased anxiety and depression.

“But it's like the last thing you really want to do is like, you know, if you're really depressed, it's like and say, oh, we'll contact you within 72 hours and they don't. And it's like, well, why is no one listening to me?”

Another participant on the other hand expressed their positive experience around access to mental health services like Mind which has been very helpful in keeping them in good health and wellbeing. This participant highlighted that the communication and the service itself is very good. This service was referred to the participant through their GP and they might not have found out about them otherwise.

### Physical Activity

All three participants expressed the importance of physical activity to maintaining good health and well-being. However, they said that this has been challenging to implement in their day to day lives due to low motivation and mental health issues including depression. One participant who has moved to Medway a year ago, highlighted a barrier to physical activity which is around lack of information and where one can get advice for health. Although they are interested in getting back to physical exercise, they have not heard of anything around the area and have only seen one gym which does not suit their preference. Money and time are two important factors that would determine whether they sign up to physical activities. The cost needs to be reasonably priced.

## **Older Women**

This group consisted of three white British women over the age of 60. All women were retired with different levels of income and lifestyles ranging from affluent to limited financial means. The main themes that emerged from this focus group is the importance of accessible local community hubs, support groups and in particular support groups targeted at men, and accessible information.

## Local Services

### Local Hubs

Participants explained that as people get older, mobility becomes a major problem, and they raised concerns that local community hubs were not easily accessible for those with mobility issues. They need to be central with good transport links so that people do not have to go a long way to access. Additionally, these hubs need to be a ‘one stop shop’ and offer a variety of services. These might include financial support, medical services, mental health support, befriending services to help with social isolation and loneliness and caring services like support with food shopping. By having these services and information in one accessible place, people especially those with mobility issues will be able to access this information and service easily.

“You know, a lot of people now are walking with the trolleys down the High Street, and you know, they can barely put one foot in front of the other…it would be nice for somebody to be central that they could maybe, you know, leave a shopping list with…”

### Support Groups

As the participants in this focus group were mainly retired, support groups were cited as important to all of them so they can socialise with people they will not normally come into contact with. This would help to keep them mentally active. The group said they arrange and participate in several groups and events including coffee mornings, knitting groups, Nordic walking, which they expressed is important for their mental as well as physical health and wellbeing. Additionally, there was emphasis on affordable or free physical exercise activities that they could participate in to keep themselves active. They believed that having access to activities such as Yoga and Pilates was important to their health and wellbeing. A participant mentioned that there used to be a Pilates session each week at MCH which they very much enjoyed but that stopped due to COVID-19. One main issue was raised around an environmental factor affecting the physical activities. A participant mentioned that when they do the Nordic Walking although there are a lot of green spaces in Medway, they are separate. This then means that it is difficult to walk on green parks/fields without having to go on the road.

A crucial gap in the types of support groups available was discussed. All women agreed that men are left out when it comes to support groups due to the types of groups which are usually knitting, and these are more targeted at women. They believed that their men who are mainly retired are left on their own with nothing to do. These women have been taking a proactive approach and arranging for their men to get together however they feel more male support groups need to be available.

One participant mentioned;

“This time of year, it’s just me and him. And of course, I’m coming to my groups. He’s left on his own, first thing he says to me when I get home is ‘what did you talk about?’”.

Another participant added;

“I know a gentleman that lives across the road from me he's on his own. He has his dog, and I don't see anybody visit. So, who does he talk to in the day? And that goes on for weeks and weeks and months and months. You know, I'm concerned there are a lot of people just sat in doors waiting to die. Umm, literally waiting to die and I’m not exaggerating”.

### Accessibility of Information

Participants expressed the need for better accessibility of information around activities and support groups that are taking place. One participant explained that she goes to Nordic Walking with Medway Council which is free. However, when she speaks to people about it, they express interest but explain they do not know anything about it or how to access it. The information usually appears in Medway newsletters or in an email, but if you are not signed up, you will not know that they are available. One participant emphasised the importance of having information available on posters or leaflets in areas where people gather for example shops, community centres, and surgeries because the elderly do not use the internet as much.

She said;

“It would be nice thing if you had even posters outside to say oh, this is available. Would you like to come along to this cause people read things. They can’t always access the Internet because some people, especially when they’re older, don’t do Internet and don’t do technology on phones.”

Additionally, this grouped discussed the difficulty in navigating online portals to view their options when it comes to reduced energy costs. Energy companies try to signpost them to view their options to reduce costs via online portals, however due to difficulty in navigating, they end up giving up and paying much higher bills due to digital divide.

## **Older Men**

This focus group consisted of two white British male participants over the age of 60. One of the participants was registered blind. Both have experienced mental health issues with one participant who has experienced problems with excessive alcohol intake. Both participants were retired. The main themes that emerged from this focus group are around the lack but importance of continuity of care, support groups, the difficulty in accessing information, and improvement of local transportation. These themes are very similar to those highlighted in older women’s focus group above.

## Continuity of Care

A participant expressed frustration over the lack of continuity of care in general practices. They have not seen their doctor for over 4 years. More so they believe no one is communicating with the system. Their medical history and records which should all be electronic and accessible to nurses and doctors are not.

“I get frustrated that all my medical records for Medway and St Thomas’ are not on computer for me to access when I see a nurse. And they don’t tell one another about any changes to medication. That’s a nightmare as well.”

## Support groups

A main priority that all participants discussed was the importance of getting out of the house and doing something whether it is attending a support/community group or going into town. Being part of a group where you can socialise, have fun, and engage in interesting conversations is crucial to their wellbeing. A participant explained how before COVID-19 they used to have coffee mornings at Twydall Library. However, during COVID-19 they had it around their neighbour’s houses around the front in the gardens. Moreso, another participant added that by getting out of the house, you are also engaging in physical activity through walking which is an added bonus to one’s overall wellbeing.

## Accessibility of Information

A concern raised by participants was the lack of information around services and support groups available to them. One participant mentioned that they prefer to get their information from word of mouth and posters/leaflets. They prefer word of mouth as the person recommending it has already experienced it therefore it is more credible and relatable. Additionally, if one lives in Gillingham, they believe it is an inconvenience and difficult to access welfare services if they are all located between Chatham and Rochester. They believe there is no proper information around how to access services located in Chatham especially around welfare. One participant would like to know whether they are entitled to any help in terms of their welfare. They mentioned;

“I want to know if I’m entitled to any help. See I haven’t got a bus pass because I’m in the middle of the age group…so I’ll be 64 years this year and I’m still not entitled to whatever. But I’m semi-retired…if I don’t get any help from the council tax or anything like that. So, am I entitled to anything?

## Local Transport Service

One important aspect that participants in this group felt was important for everybody in Medway is improving the local transportation which they believe has a knock-on effect on their overall health. One participant mentioned that on Sundays the buses that run are few and far between while in the summer they believe the buses do not run as much. Another participant added that the bus stop should have been left in the Pentagon Centre. They feel the location of the bus stop at the moment by the waterfront is an inconvenience with the wind blowing and rain due to no protection.

## **Rough Sleepers & Sex workers**

This focus group consisted of seven female participants in their early 20’s to 60’s. One of the participants was Russian while the other six were white British. Four participants were currently living in homeless hostels, two in social housing, three had a history of rough sleeping, and two are known to have previously been engaged in sex work. The main themes that emerged from this focus group include importance of mental health services, continuity of care, compassionate care, lack of support from social services, importance of housing and a support network.

## Access to Health Care

### Access to Mental Health Services

Being in good mental state is an important aspect of the participants’ health and wellbeing. One participant specifically mentioned being clean of drugs as she believes that drugs affected not only her mental health but other aspects of her wellbeing like appetite, weight, and mood. In terms of access to mental health services, the group had mixed experiences. One participant has had positive experience with several services including talking therapies and the mental health team. On the other hand, another participant has found it difficult to get a prescription for mental health medication. She explained that she used to get her mental health tablets from MEDDOC. However, they now won’t prescribe them anymore and she has to go through a doctor. The problem with this is that some doctors she has been to want an ID, but she is homeless. Another GP she went to will not let her in and are redirecting her to ring some phone numbers listed on their door, but these numbers were found not be active when the participant rang them. As she cannot get access to her tablets and being bi-polar, this is having a negative toll on her health and affecting the people around her.

## Care

### Continuity of Care

Continuity of care is important to these participants’ wellbeing as it helps them to build trust with health and care practitioners. One participant talked about the importance of having the same support worker due to her trust issues. This leaves her helpless and having to repeat herself all over again to a new support worker which she finds frustration and takes a toll on her mental health.

### Compassionate Care

The group discussed experiencing discrimination and a lack of respect by healthcare staff (specifically in hospital settings) and how important a compassionate approach is when providing care. One participant explained;

“A lot of them up there, it’s just a job. They don’t care. People like me, they look at me and judge me. But we’re not all the same… there to nick some one’s bag from the next locker. Understand? We’re not all the same but you’re judged by that. And the security up there is disgusting mate. They call you crackhead and all that.”

Participants noted that people judge them and assume that just because they are homeless, they are automatically ‘crackheads’ or ‘prostitutes’. She suggested that one way to improve the way they are treated by others is to have a service that educates and informs people who do not know what is going on in the streets about what it means to be homeless, what it means to be on drugs or alcohol and how these people have still got a heart.

“But people who are out there should think before they approach. You know what I mean? Kids and even adults say get out the road, you crackhead, you staghead like that. You know what I mean?”

## Social Services

### Justice System/Child Custody

Most participants said they had experienced significant emotional distress and feelings of helplessness as they discussed the Justice System/Child Custody in relation to their children. They felt that there has been significant lack of support from social services adult and children. Two participants from the group have had their children taken away from them by social services and that has impacted their health and they are left helpless and do not know where to go to find help. Although one participant understands there are solicitors and social workers they can go to, they feel their situation is unique and more challenging to resolve. One of the participants who eventually broke down crying mentioned;

“Like every day I’m breaking down and emotional and crying…. I just want to shout at everyone. I hate the world, like I’m angry constantly. I have actually lashed out at people that I love (tearful).”

### Housing

There was a consensus regarding the need for more help to support homeless communities. One participant although she now has a room, recounted her experience of being homeless:

“Six months out in the street…and I was dead in Gillingham high street on the floor and people was walking past me while I was unconscious, and it took one person to recognise me and got me an ambulance. And people walked past me. I’m a grandmother, I’m still human, but you don’t knock someone when they’re down. Disgusting. But that’s just life, innit? But I’m in a really good place now.”

She explains how her mind is now at rest because she has a place to stay, and her partner is off the street at night. The group explained that some people are not rough sleeping. They are homeless and are sleeping in other places like pubs or their friends and require help. One participant in particular is not getting the help she needs from the council with her flat. She currently finds it difficult to lift her leg whilst getting in the bath. This has been reported to the council, but they are yet to come and have a look.

### Outreach services

Participants believed there needed to be outreach services available seven days a week, not just on Mondays to Fridays.

A participant mentioned;

“Homeless don’t stop at 5pm or Monday to Friday”.

### Support Group

This group expressed their need for support groups in order to keep them feeling good about themselves. They believe these groups allow them to talk freely about anything, and it is a way for them to find out more about services and agencies available. Some of the events they attend include ladies’ nights which they enjoyed. Moreso, these support groups provide more than a good conversation and socialising. They can get clothes, showered if they want to, have a hot drink and a safe place to sit away from the streets.

## **IMAGO clients**

This focus group consisted of two white British men in their late 40’s possibly early 50’s living in central Chatham. Both participants had mental and physical health issues. One participant was in employment while the other carried out voluntary work while looking for paid employment. The main themes that emerged from this focus group is the importance of support specifically continuity of care, having people that listen, and eating well.

### Support

One main theme that emerged from this focus group was the need for more permanent support groups that provide continuity of care. One participant noted that there is one mental health support group they have been going to for the past two or three years. But every other group he has come across, in six weeks, 12 weeks at most you are out the door with little to no guidance on what to do next and no signposting to other groups. He explained how it does not matter what you say in the sessions because you know at any moment it will come to an end and you are back out the door. He further goes into detail on how depression affects every aspect of your life, from your eating to your hygiene and what you wear. Due to moments like this, the participant is constantly seeking day to day support, contact with one person that can genuinely care for them like a friend and make sure they are taking care of themselves properly (eating, keeping away from alcohol, washing up etc.).

From the discussion with both participants, they seem to value people that care for them and that can genuinely listen to them and want people to understand them better. Having places they can go to speak freely is important to their health and wellbeing and they believe this is important to everyone living in Medway.

Both participants explained the limited nature of support they receive in terms of mental health mainly from the crisis team who come if one has a crisis or attempts to commit suicide. They feel as though they are being treated as just as another number. They believe that the crisis team are quick to ask them whether they are okay or what can they do for them just so that they quickly close the case and move on to the next person, rather than taking the time to assess and make sure they are better. Another participant added that they have been in touch with crisis teams over five times to try and get further diagnosis of their autism but still have not received any help.

### Healthy Eating

Eating well has been highlighted by one of the participants as one that that is important to keeping themselves healthy. They believe eating well is the first thing that gets your brain focused. Their experience with dementia and anaemia made them understand the importance of eating well in terms of vegetables and fruits.

## **Parish Councillors**

This focus group consisted of eight male and female affluent Parish Councillors in their late 40s to late 70s. This group considered themselves to be in relatively good health, with some long-term conditions like diabetes but no other mental or physical illnesses. Most of the participants were retired with a few of the working aged participants in professional occupations. This focus group was conducted in Frindsbury. The main themes that emerged from this focus group include the need for better healthcare system, importance of outdoor leisure activities, and better accessibility of information.

### Healthcare System

There was a general consensus about the inadequate nature of the healthcare system which comprises of lack of appointments, long waiting times to be seen by a GP, need for another hospital as current hospital is overrun, and better support in terms of mental health services. Particularly for the elderly, access to the GP has been more difficult due to the shift to e-consult. Better support for mental health through the provision of having more beds for patients has been raised. One participant gave an example of how when he used to work in prisons, there was a lot of people who came into prisons with mental health issues, and he saw the effects of lack of support because they did not get the support or help, they needed. One participant highlighted that however much we need and want more GPs, there just are not enough of them. Therefore, the focus needs to shift from opening more surgeries (as there are not GPs to run them) to looking at other healthcare professionals and self-referral schemes so that people can refer themselves to where they think it’s appropriate.

### Outdoor Leisure Activities

Participants explained the importance of encouraging people to get out of their cars and walk, cycle. By taking part in physical activities, we are not only improving our health and wellbeing but also doing something to improve air pollution. Leisure facilities including clubs have been highlighted as an important aspect in reducing social isolation and improving overall mental health. One participant explained the current projects that are ongoing aimed at trying to encourage people to be more outside including an outdoor gym equipment that has been recently installed. Another participant highlighted the good things in Medway including the Medway Health walks which is quite popular with people and located in different areas. There is also the free swimming for under 16 to over 60s.

### Accessibility to Information

A general consensus amongst participants was the need for better information around what services are on offer. There is need for a more comprehensive directory on what is available. One participant mentioned;

“It’d be nice if there’s like a website that listed all the local services available.”

One participant also mentioned how people need to know how to look after themselves and how to make the right choices as they believe there is a lot of misinformation out there. They believed it is important to have resources that people can turn to for credible information and also able to signpost them to appropriate resources to suit their needs. Another participant noted that the lack of clear and credible information is probably the reason why A&E is always busy because they go to A&E instead if they cannot reach a doctor.

## **Barracks (Men)**

### Provision & Access to Primary Healthcare

A consensus amongst the participants was the need for better quality patient care; access to primary health care including access to GPs and mental health services. Participants would like to be able to speak with a health professional (i.e., get an appointment) in a timely fashion. One participant explained the number of times they have phoned and sat in the queue for half an hour at 8am in the morning trying to get through to the GP only to be told all appointments have been taken for that day and having to repeat the process the following day. Additionally, one participant found it difficult to get a doctor that would then refer them to psychiatric services. One participant highlighted the need to better resource Medway Maritime Hospital and the need for a new hospital.

“...Medway Maritime hospital again, it's under resourced, under provisioned. I’ve been treated there on several occasions. The staff are fantastic, but they’re being asked to do too much with too little, and the site cannot grow to meet the needs of the expanding population. So, Medway needs to have a new hospital.”

Lack of continuity of care and the transfer of patient healthcare/records is a major challenge faced by these participants. As military staff, their work requires them to move around either from one county to another or between Northern Ireland, Scotland and England. However, the transfer of healthcare around their medical notes within the NHS does not happen. These participants expressed frustration as the entire process has to begin which is inefficient and quite dangerous.

### Local Access Point

One main area of importance for these participants is a local access point where a variety of services are available. Participants were impressed with the support of Public Health Medway Team and believe the team have been instrumental in providing them with the tools and services needed to improve their health and wellbeing.

“I’ve moved all around the country with work, but I’ve never met a Council before this heavily engaged in public health...but the level of support that we receive here at Brompton Barracks from Medway Council’s public health team, in my experience, is unparalleled.”

One main project that participants particularly enjoy, benefitted from and is well received by those on the campsite in Brompton is the Health Fair. These health fairs are like “a one stop shop” for a variety of healthcare services and resources. Some of the services they mentioned which they engage with include sexual health, how to prepare healthy meals, alcohol and drugs support, and domestic abuse services. Additionally, participants explained that because many people in the army have some barriers that make it difficult for them to be open and honest about their health and wellbeing, these fairs break down that barrier. Many people in the army do not disclose certain health and wellbeing issues with the fear of it being seen as a weakness which might serve as a disadvantage to them in many areas of their work and career progression including not being promoted, or worse being discharged.

“...whether it be minor theft because he’s supporting a gambling habit well. But it’s too late. Then, he’s gonna get discharged from the army because he’s a thief. Whereas if we can interact through these health fairs and other support charities, we may be able to put an intervention in place long before it becomes an issue.

Moreso, one participant explained how he is currently embedding services and keen to embed many other projects that Medway Council Public Health have on offer into their Medical Centre. Some of the services that he has been able to obtain support from is the smoking cessation service, the Fibro scan clinic and the COVID vaccine team which have been delivered from within the camp.

### Healthy Eating

In the upcoming years, participants expressed the need for support around healthy eating given the current cost of living crisis and financial burdens faced by everyone. This would be even more beneficial as many of the troops are now allowed to cater for themselves in the living accommodations. Some of the provisions that are being improved upon include providing more ovens, grills, and fridges for storing fresh food.

“So if there is any campaigns, processes, teachings, whatever that the Medway public health team are offering around healthy eating on a budget, I think that would really go own well.”

One participant would like to have cookery classes where they can be taught how to make nutritious meals with basic equipment and relatively inexpensive ingredients.

### Gardening & Physical Activity

Participants agreed that one of the activities they engage in to facilitate their wellbeing is gardening. One participant explained how gardening itself is physically interacting with green spaces, taking the time to appreciate nature, but it also provides that mental wellbeing. Another participant who also enjoys nature, tends to go out of Chatham and goes for a hike or climb some mountains. Given the importance of gardening and green space, one of the participants mentioned that one of the things they are looking at doing is improving the green space offerings and availability on Camp so that more people can grow their own food.

# **The Medway Better Health Adult Survey 2023**

The Medway Better Health Adult Survey asked 526 Medway residents three questions on; 1) what do they currently do to stay healthy? 2) What local services and organisations do they use to stay healthy? And 3) what would they like to see in Medway in the future to help others to stay healthy?

## **How Adults in Medway stay Healthy**

### Movement

~75% [[1]](#footnote-2)of people described some form of movement or regular exercise. The most common way to stay healthy was through a movement activity or “regular exercise”, with three quarters of respondents saying they take part in an exercise activity to maintain their health and wellbeing. This included, ~40 % of people who said they enjoy “walking” or “being outdoors”. A quarter of respondents said they take part in regular individual exercise activities, this included going for a run, to the gym or swimming. And ~11% of people said they take part in regular exercise in a group, this included; yoga, gym classes and team sports such as, football or netball.

### Social Interactions

~58% of people described spending time with others as an important health behaviour. Over half of Medway residents considered that forming and maintaining meaningful social relationships as important to sustaining everyday their health and wellbeing. ~43% of these people indicated “spending time with family” and “keeping up with friends” were key to maintaining good health. These social relationships extended beyond family and friends as ~8% described positive connections/experiences at work important to health. These individuals valued work relationships with one resident explaining; “work keeps me mentally alert and happy with my work colleagues”. And ~11% of residents described attending community groups as way of staying healthy.

### Recreational Activity

~27% of people described some form of recreational activity from pursuing hobbies to volunteering as supporting general health and wellbeing. Recreational activities described as pastime activities or hobbies were considered by over a quarter of Medway residents as important to staying healthy. This included ~9% of residents described taking part in some type of hobby or club such as “men’s shed” as beneficial to wellbeing and health. ~8% of residents listed volunteering as key to sustaining good health and ~6% of people found gardening and going to an allotment as good for general health. Finally, ~4% of people indicated singing playing and listening to music as important for health and wellbeing. Overall recreational activities that are not considered an expense but can fill in past times are considered good ways to stay healthy.

### Healthy Behaviours

~25% of people described actively participating in healthy behaviours. A quarter of respondents described behaviours that are recognised in policy as “healthy behaviours”. ~16% of people indicated they actively try to “eat healthy” from dieting or “cooking from scratch”. ~5% of people suggested they would seek help about their health and wellbeing when needed from health professional in the form of medication or “reaching out” to speak to someone. Others considered a “good night sleep” (~3%) and “stopping/not smoking to reduced/no drinking” (~1%) as a good way they stay healthy.

## **Usefulness of Local groups, Services and Organisations**

### Local Groups

Around 30% of respondents described how useful they found local social, fitness and health groups to stay healthy. These responses were split into three subcategories.

#### Local Groups subcategories; Local Social, Fitness and Health Groups

Local Social groups such as clubs and community groups were popular with ~13% of respondents, alongside online local social groups, and communities such as Facebook groups, were noted by ~5% of people and volunteering groups with ~2%.

One resident explained;

“'Men in sheds' is a great organization, especially for older or even middle-aged men to socialise.”

Another said they like to attend the “friendship club at Sunlight centre and coffee morning with Whoo cares”. Socialising in a community club or group was key for Medway residents as they found it useful to help maintain health and wellbeing. Local Fitness groups were identified as Sports clubs, Walking Clubs and Park Runs with around ~8% of people suggested they found them useful to help them stay healthy, with some residents saying; their “sons attend the local football club” and that the “park run is amazing”. Local Health groups were popular with ~2% of people attending a diet/nutrition group such as slimming world or parental or baby classes groups where people were either, be supported with their healthy behaviours or able to share their experiences with others.

As one resident explains;

**“**I attend a number of baby groups such as Hartbeeps, Toddler Sense, baby bounce and rhyme at our libraries - these are great for meeting new friends and talking about your experiences”.

### Local Facilities

Approximately 24% of respondents explained they found local fitness and activity facilities most useful for themselves and their families to stay healthy.

Medway residents said that local facilities are important to keeping themselves and their families healthy, with almost a quarter of respondents mentioning the various outlets available in Medway. ~21% of people said they made use of gyms/leisure centres for gym/fitness classes and swimming pools, as well as parks and outdoors spaces for regular exercise. Others mentions allotments and libraires as important facilities they used regularly with some saying they “use the library to check out books to read in spare time” and another said, “I have an allotment, which helps in many ways”. Local facilities that were within walking distance or accessible by public transport and low charge or free of charge were popular with residents.

### Local Services

Finally, local services were recognised by residents as important to staying healthy. ~10% of respondents said that they use health services such as GPs, Mental Health Support and Medway specific programmes were mentioned such as “healthy way” and “healthy workplace” as good ways to help themselves and employees maintain health. This also included those who mentioned using adult education services and classes, as one resident said they; “attend course at Adult Education for hobby outside of work”.

Local Groups, Facilities and Services are valued by Medway residents who use them, and they consider them useful to help themselves and their families stay healthy.

## **Services needed in the future to help residents to stay healthy**

### Access to reliable health care (MH, Social Care, Hospital and LTCs)

Access to reliable health care was considered a top priority for Medway residents with approximately 38% of respondents indicating the current health care services such as GPs were ‘inadequate’ and more health services for specialist areas including mental health were going to be needed in the future. In this context, ‘reliable’ can be considered as reduced waiting time for GP appointments, introducing “walking in clinics and advice hubs” and increasing the option to have face to face consultations to facilitate better accessibility for people who do not have access to computer or apps.

One resident said;

“Easy accessible healthcare [is needed]. Not being able to get help, care and advice when you need it is the most worrying and stressful part of my life” and others agreed “Much better and more accessible health centre [is needed] because at the moment my present one is overstretched, oversubscribed and difficult to access”.

Access to reliable healthcare incorporated several themes such as, social care services, hospital admissions and bed and most importantly, the access and delivery of GP in primary care. Reliable health care is considered the most important need of Medway residents for the future.

### Affordable/Accessible activities

Approximately 38% of respondents indicated the importance of affordable and accessible activities to their health and wellbeing (Subthemes; Affordable/Accessible Fitness ~32%, Affordable/Accessible recreational activities ~3% and Affordable/Accessible youth activities ~3%).

Medway residents considered future needs of Medway based on rising cost of living alongside the future health needs of individuals and groups and therefore, considered affordable and accessible activities were necessary to support future health of the population. AA activities included, Fitness, Recreational and Youth activities. AA fitness was most popular in this category, with ~32% of people mentioning or describing possible future AA fitness activities from “subsidised gym membership” to “free fitness classes”.

One person said;

“More affordable and safe access to exercise and not just subsidising those who are unemployed or on benefits. For example, the cost of swimming, even in local council pools can be too expensive for many who are working.”

And another suggested;

“We need more exercise equipment in all parks, my nearest one is too far for me to get to but the park nearest me doesn't have anything”.

Activities that supported or facilitated health and wellbeing opportunities were deemed important by many as long as they were considered as affordable and accessible to those most in need.

### Advice/Support on nutrition and healthy behaviours

Advice and support on nutrition and healthy behaviours were mentioned by ~30% of Medway residents. This included anything from healthy eating classes to health promotion on healthy lifestyle changes. This theme was considered by many alongside the increasing cost of living and the decreasing health of people.

As one person explained;

“Education on cooking with fresh ingredients, especially veg - saving money in the process”,

Another suggested;

“Good food costs more and it shouldn't. access to local produce - home grown produce”.

These ideas were grouped with other comments such as “Services helping people to understand and gain knowledge about healthy lifestyle, nutrition, and wellbeing. It could improve people's general health and quality of life.” Nutrition and healthy behaviours were recognised by many as important to future health but also considered as unattainable to many who live in Medway due to wider determinants such as cost of living and education to make informed choices. Therefore, the survey respondents suggested advice and support on nutrition and healthy behaviours would be needed to help Medway people stay health in the future.

### Social Interactions

Finally, social interactions were recognised by many as key to their own health and wellbeing and therefore necessary to support others in the future. ~24% of Medway residents referred to supporting others with accessible social groups or places dedicated to social drop-ins to support the impact of loneliness.

One person explained;

“Drop-in places to sit and have a chat if you need to, informal, perhaps somewhere to sit by yourself but with others around you, sometimes you don't want to talk but it is nice to have things going on, I think so many of us live alone or feel lonely 'gathering' places where you feel safe and can be with others might be a good thing to have should you need it."

This was a common theme, and many had similar suggestions such as; integrating or restarting accessible community services that has stopped during COVID or drop ins coffee mornings for people to use ad hoc with reduced pressure.

# **Medway Organisations Health Survey 2023**

This survey was completed by 14 organisations in Medway. This included 2 Public Sector organisations and 12 Voluntary, charitable, social and enterprise sector (VCSE). The organisations were asked the same three questions from the Adult Survey but asked to answer using their experience of working with clients/service users that they encounter.

The questions asked to organisations include; 1) what do the people you interact with currently do to stay healthy? 2) What local services and organisations do the people you interact with use to stay healthy? And 3) thinking about your role in the organisations and the people you interact with, what types of services do you think people in Medway will need in the future to stay healthy?

Using the same thematic analysis for the adult’s survey, the analysis of the Better Health Survey found the top priorities for organisations in Medway to help people stay healthy and maintain wellbeing.

The organisations indicated that the top three ways clients/services users currently stay healthy are 1), Movement, 2), Social interaction and 3) Recreational activities. Over three quarters (11/14) of the organisations recognised Movement, such as going to the gym, walking outdoor and participating in sports teams as the most common way service users/clients stay healthy in Medway. 9/14 organisations found people also found maintaining social interactions or relationships as important to their everyday health and wellbeing. Just over half (8/14) of the organisations suggested people who interact with their organisations found recreational activities such as hobbies or volunteering in their pastime was an effective way to maintain health and wellbeing.

When asked what local services the clients/service users use in Medway the themes were the same as the Adult’s survey. 11/14 organisations said Local Groups such as community groups, social gatherings and organised activities were most popular by the people they interact with. Three quarters (10/14) of the organisations said local health and social care services were used by people, in particular counselling and mental health services were most common answer. Over half (8/14) of the organisations found local organizations such as clients/service users also used places of worship or children/parents’ groups. Finally, local facilities such as gyms or outdoor spaces were acknowledged by 6/14 organisations as something people used in the local areas to help them stay healthy and manage wellbeing.

Future health was considered especially important by the organisations, with many organisations’ offering detailed recommendations for; services, organisations and campaigns that could be implemented in Medway to help support people maintain long term health and wellbeing. One of the key themes was empowering people through support services with 10/14 organisations referring to this. It was evident that organisations wanted to see a change in how the population of Medway needs were met through increased support for services that already existed but also increase opportunity to develop services to support new ventures in Medway.

For example, one VSCE organisation said;

“People need more bottom up, co designed services dealing with aforementioned issues and that these services need to flexible to the ever-changing needs and landscape we live in.”

This was echoed by others with examples of how this can be achieved; “Internet connection is a big factor in bridging the gap of inequalities, giving everyone the same opportunities. Part of the internet is upskilling people to become computer literate, as this will open up a host of opportunities from applying for benefits, jobs, services”. The other key themes in the responses considered the health needs of individuals, with 10/14 recognising the future need of reliable health care in particular mental health and local accessible medical professionals as key to ongoing health for Medway. Increasing social interactions was supported by 9/14, with suggestions that supporting underfunded community groups or introducing new ways in which they can be made accessible was crucial for some target populations.

As one VCSE explained; “There is the app Meet Up - a lot of members use this to see which groups are available for them - they may type ADHD/ Autism- this can be used by the council and other groups to ensure that they are advertising the groups that are taking place.”

Future needs were all associated with the impending impact of the rising cost of living and the growing gap of inequalities that face many residents in Medway.

1. For this report, the qualitative responses were coded and quantified to illustrate the frequency of response. The percentages were calculated and rounded up to the closest figure. Therefore, we recommend the figures be used with caution and understand they are an estimate of population responses and reporting of behaviour and opinions and be reported as estimates using ~, for example; ~75%. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)