

## Loneliness and community – what are we hearing?

One of the new priority populations for the Surrey Health and Wellbeing Strategy in 2026 is **those who are lonely and socially isolated**.

Our Luminus vision is ‘a society where everyone’s voice is heard, so we all receive the support we need for our wellbeing’ but what does this support look like to the people of Surrey and what else needs to be done?

Whilst we recognise that the new Neighbourhood Health Services plan to provide the opportunity to harness and build on the vital work happening at a community level, it’s important that during the Local Government Reorganisation transition period, these community groups providing support do not disappear either due to funding or facilities not being available.

Some of our recent work highlights the impact of loneliness and isolation on people’s wellbeing, the importance of local community support and makes recommendations based on the voices of local people.

The Healthwatch Surrey report: [Men in Mind: loneliness, mental health and men’s access to support in Dorking and across Surrey](#) had a primary focus on Dorking and Villages due to:

- Statistics from the Surrey Health and Wellbeing Strategy Index showing that Mole Valley has the highest incidence of suicide of all Surrey boroughs.
- The Dorking and Villages Neighbourhood Area Committee (a pilot scheme which Healthwatch Surrey is a part of) identifying loneliness and isolation as one of the most prevalent issues in the area.

Feedback from 125 men shows a strong desire for deeper community connection:

- Men value belonging but want stronger social ties and more chances to engage locally.
- Weak social networks can lead to loneliness and poor mental health.
- Barriers to support include time, low awareness, and a lack of male friendly options.

“I need a place where it’s safe to say I’m struggling without feeling guilty or weak. Peer groups, drop-in sessions, or even one to one support would make a huge difference.”

Recommendations include expanding men only mental health community support (and raising awareness of those already available) and co-designing solutions with independent VCSE organisations.

The importance of community services is also highlighted across several priority populations in the Healthwatch Surrey report about prevention: [Living, coping, thriving: exploring preventative health behaviours of people aged 50-66 in Surrey](#). This project focused on Spelthorne, the borough with the poorest health outcomes in Surrey - and compared their responses to those living in the rest of Surrey. Over 150 people shared their experiences:

"Human contact is the biggest positive, knowing that people care is more important than any amenities."

The Surrey Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) Loneliness and Social Isolation chapter states that loneliness is a risk factor for older people, so we were interested to hear from the people approaching this age group.

When we asked people what they do to support their overall wellbeing, as well as eating healthily and exercising, many examples given included some element of social connection, socialising or group activities.

For some, however, the lack of opportunities in their local area is a challenge. This impacted on their ability to take part in physical exercise too (one person told us that to get from Stanwell to Staines leisure centre using public transport takes either 2 buses, or 1 bus plus a 17 minute walk.)

For those with long term health conditions, physical disabilities or sensory impairments - 31 out of 41 people said they would like to be more active but their long term condition or sensory impairment is the main barrier to them doing more. It is also the main factor stopping them doing more to look after their overall wellbeing (either physical or mental). We spoke to people with multiple sclerosis (MS) at an in person engagement event. They told us that, although some of the members do exercises at home, they would benefit from access to more physiotherapy sessions. The group leader told us that although she would like to set up exercise sessions at the centre specifically for people with MS, this needs careful consideration to be accessible and appropriate.

Men again highlighted gaps in community provision:

"I wish there were more things for men to do. Lots of hobby things are for women or older people."

Volunteering supports wellbeing, yet participation in Spelthorne is low (41% vs 70% elsewhere). Encouragingly, **26%** want to volunteer but haven't yet—often due to work or caring responsibilities.

Community initiatives such as the Runnymede Cooks and Runnymede Grows initiatives could be widened across Surrey to both assist with community activities and to assist with people eating more fruit and vegetables.

Those with caring responsibilities highlighted their need for wellbeing-focused support:

"Support for us to be able to take the time to do things for our wellbeing. It would be good if carers groups arranged activities to help us with our wellbeing... reflexology or meditation."

This is reflected by what the Giving Carers a Voice team hear from those with caring responsibilities:

"My partner needs 24/7 care and support... I have my own health issues which I need to take care of... I get no break."

Young carers and parent carers also described the difference the right support can make:

"My son comes here [Nurture Through Nature] once a week, which has been a lifeline for both of us." **Parent carer**

"I'm pleased I came tonight as I've made some new friends and had lots of fun. It's a shame that we can't do this every week. I might not see my new friends again." **Young carer**

But again, sometimes getting support is not that easy:

"They've been to other events, but more often they're too far away for us to go. If they were more often and local, my children would certainly go. I think it's important for them to interact with other young carers and to have some time to themselves. Other than school, they receive no support at all."

Whilst individuals might be able to seek help and support regarding substance use, the Surrey Substance Use Partnership - Public Involvement team hear that some young carers are still feeling the impact of a parents drinking later in life.

"It would have been nice to know I wasn't on my own there is so much shame that goes with caring for someone with an alcohol problem. [...]"

But again support needs to be flexible:

"When I came out of detox, I didn't feel comfortable with AA. Here, it is more welcoming. All being in the same boat, really helps. Dealing with a new life, a life without alcohol is hard so people doing it at same time, helps."

The proposed NHS 10 Year Plan has a specific focus on hospital to community, however, the Giving Carers a Voice team continues to hear from those with caring responsibilities who find this process isolating:

"My husband had prostate cancer. He was sent home [from hospital] with all the paraphernalia but no support... We ended up in A & E when his catheter fell out."

"I feel like I have just been left with my mother to get on with it. No help, support or advice... No one has shown me how to wash her safely."

The community can only provide support if it is resourced appropriately: The Surrey Community Action report [Bridges and Beacons](#) discusses the strain that the VSCE sector is under, particularly for many smaller groups who might provide more localised support: [Bridges and Beacons-Surrey Community Action](#).