

# Community insight report

Understanding barriers and facilitators to  
physical and social activity

January 2024



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## Foreword

Encouraging and supporting Merton residents to take part in local activities is a key element of the borough's shared health and care plans.

Both physical and social activities are integral components of a healthy lifestyle. Combining the two can have synergistic effects, enhancing the overall benefits for physical and mental wellbeing. Merton has a number of assets that we are proud of including a thriving voluntary and community sector, significant green and open space, and strong partnerships to build upon. These assets will be important to promote as part of future work.

Being physically active has an enormous range of benefits, including improved cardiovascular health, reducing the risk of heart diseases and helps to maintain a healthy weight. There are also mental health benefits because being active releases endorphins, alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety, and improving overall wellbeing. Regular physical activity is associated with better sleep patterns, enhanced immune function, and increased life expectancy.

Engaging in social activities is equally important. These interactions provide emotional support, mitigating feelings of loneliness and stress. Social engagement has also been linked to better cognitive health and being part of a social network fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, contributing to mental and emotional wellbeing. Socialising serves as a natural stress reliever and strong social connections are associated with a longer life.

The World Health Organisation states physical inactivity as the fourth leading cause of premature deaths globally. The Chief Medical Officer recommends that adults should be doing a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate, or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity exercise a week. Children under 16 should be doing at least 60 minutes every day in order to stay healthy and prevent developing long-term conditions.

Nationally only 63.1% of adults and 47.2% of children meet these guidelines. In Merton, the figure is 63.7% for adults. There is no Merton specific data for children, however the figure for less active children for London is 45.3%. \*(Source: Sport England Active Lives data)

We know people in our communities experience health inequalities, unfair differences in health and life expectancy due to their background. It is a priority of statutory health and care organisations to work together to address these inequalities.

We know barriers to physical and social activity contribute to health inequalities, and only by understanding what they are and by working with our communities can we seek to make a change.

## Introduction

In 2022 Merton Health and Care Together agreed to work in partnership to deliver a programme called Actively Merton, with the aim of increasing both physical and social activity; and to build and give agency to communities. Merton Health and Care Together brings together all the organisations in Merton who play a role in the health and care of Merton residents – including NHS South West London and Merton Council.

More broadly, Merton is on a mission to make it easier for everyone to become more active and is working to be London's Borough of Sport. Over 3 years starting in 2023, Merton Council is investing in more low-cost sporting opportunities across the borough and working with local clubs and societies to reach more people, young and old, and of all abilities.

So far, there were two elements to the Actively Merton programme.

The first element of Actively Merton was an interactive game for the community to take part in called Beat the Street which took place during Spring 2022. Funded by NHS SWL ICB, Merton Council and Sport England, the game was free and open to anyone who lives, works or studies in Merton. To play, participants used a special tap card and paper map, which was distributed by primary schools or picked up from one of Merton's libraries or leisure centres. Players over the age of 13 could also download the free Beat the Street app to play the game by tapping their phone.

The idea was for players to work as part of a team to travel actively, explore Merton and to tap as many of the 200 Beat Boxes as possible - contactless card readers positioned on lampposts around the borough. There were prizes for the teams that travel the furthest, with vouchers for books and sports equipment on offer. The Beat the Street leader boards allowed players and teams to compare their progress.

The project was a huge success, with more than 22,500 people – or 10% of the local population – competing to walk, cycle and wheel the furthest during the six week period. Analysis of data collected through the programme helped inform which groups we targeted through the insight work.

The element which this report focuses on is a grants funding programme for local community and voluntary organisations to bid for small pots of funding to extend the opportunities to be active through more sessions and to gather insights on what stops people from being physically and socially active (the barriers) and what would encourage them to get more involved in local activities (the facilitators). This report sets out how this grants funding programme was delivered as well as the insights gathered and analysis of common themes.

The insights gathered through the Actively Merton grants programme will influence future work in Merton as we work toward becoming London's Borough of Sport.

## Executive summary

Health and care organisations in Merton worked with 14 local voluntary and community organisations to connect with local residents to deliver physical and social activities and to engage with local communities to learn more about:

- The barriers to getting physical and socially active
- How to make physical and social activity more accessible
- What local initiatives will help the local community to move more and connect more

Organisations we invited to bid for up to £1000. The programme was open to all but we especially interested in hearing from community organisations who work with less physically and socially active groups and communities. For physical activity we identified these groups through national and local data and from the Beat the Street project – they were women and girls, older people and people with a disability.

We heard from 319 Merton residents in total through activities carried out between July and September 2023. Of the 319 people engaged with, we know at least 306 of the responses we received were from the priority groups. There are many insights which are attributed to our target groups where demographic information is not available.

- 234 people were older adults
- At least 106 of the participants were women and girls – though we know more women were engaged
- At least 2 people were reported as having a disability – though we know more people with a disability were engaged

As well as reaching those for the targeted communities, we also connected with other communities who experience health inequalities including people from an ethnic minority background, those from the LGBTQIA+ community as well as communities who live in areas where incomes are lower than the London average.

### Key themes of insights shared by older people:

- **Impacts of the pandemic** - the lasting effects of the lockdown, social isolation and the risk of infection, was a significant contributing factor in people's ability and desire to engage in physical and social activity in the community.
- **Social connectivity** - the opportunity to meet other people was a significant driver, for older people accessing physical and social activity.
- **The fun factor** – some people reported that they were surprised that physical activity was fun. Making physical activity fun was an integral motivating factor.

- **Cultural links** – some communities reported that physical and social activities, that aligned with their cultural background such as African dance or Tea dances enhanced their feeling of fulfilment and pleasure.
- **Feeling of belonging** – where people reported feelings of isolation and loneliness, group based physical and social activity gave a sense of safety.
- **Intergenerational connection** – an unexpected positive impact of the cultural dance activity was intergenerational connection.
- **Transport and access** – the distance to the community activities was a significant consideration for older people.

### Key themes of insights shared by women and girls:

- **A protected space** – women reported that female only space was important when partaking in any activity, especially physical activity.
- **Opportunities to bring children** – having no childcare was a barrier to women engaging in physical and social activity.
- **Activity type** - women reported enjoying physical activities session when it was overlaid with health information and health related self-management.
- **Cultural links** – women attending groups felt further connected with others in the group, along cultural lines such as sharing the same religion, ethnicity, and cultural background.
- **Access to toilet facilities** – women with young children reported that the lack of toilet facilities when travelling, meant they could not attend community events with young children. We also know women may also experience issues with incontinence and this is a factor in their decision to travel.
- **Isolation caused by lockdowns** - the impact of the isolation, brought about by the lockdown during the pandemic made women feel disconnected with their local communities.
- **Stigma associated with incentives** - some families reported that there were additional challenges around food poverty, and they felt stigmatised when food vouchers are offered as incentives. However, when they were partaking in the social and physical activity where there was food and refreshments, there was no stigma attached and meant that the women could socialise, free of judgment, and feel more comfortable.

### Key themes of insights shared by people with a disability:

- **Physical disability and Learning Disability are different** - activities for people with physical disabilities are often merged with people with learning disabilities but they're not the same and have very different needs.
- **Lack of accessible activities for people with disabilities** – we heard physical and social activities are not promoted to specifically reach people with disabilities

with the exception of learning disabilities. People reported that reasonable adjustments were often not made for them.

- **Transport challenges including the lack of disabled parking** – people reported a lack of disabled parking, which was a barrier to accessing physical and social activity.
- **Health issues** – people with a disability had other health conditions which meant they were more complex challenges intersecting at the same time.
- **Accessibility** – whether there is wheelchair access at venues was a factor for people utilising community spaces. People also reported that buddies and carers were also seen as an additional person, meaning there was an expectation of additional payment, rather than a support mechanism for the person with the disability.
- **Mental health issues** – people with mental health issues were less likely to disclose the nature of their disability and the way it affects them due to the stigma people with mental health challenges face by society.

There are a number of cross cutting themes across all groups – namely the cost of activities; transport and access issues: impacts of the pandemic still meaning it's harder to put yourself out there and try something new; activities having cultural issues was also key to many participants.

# Methodology

## Overview

There are a range of methodological approaches we use to gather insight from local communities – including focus groups, interviews, surveys and events.

For this piece of work we already had access to data from the Beat the Street project and the objective was to build on these insights, targeting engagement with key groups where sufficient insights hadn't been gathered or where additional insights would support the development of future plans.

We chose to run a grants programme for voluntary and community organisations to lead activities they believed would be most successful in connecting with the identified target groups. Organisations were also asked to run an activity which increased the physical and social activity of those who took part.

Community and voluntary organisations are fabulous assets in Merton, and have a wide reach and trusted relationships with communities and are able to connect with people who are less likely to engage through traditional engagement methods.

In order to enable different organisations and communities to meet and collectively discuss their insights we also held an event with table discussions. This was facilitated through NHS South West London's monthly Merton Community Voice Forum.

## What we learned from Beat the Street

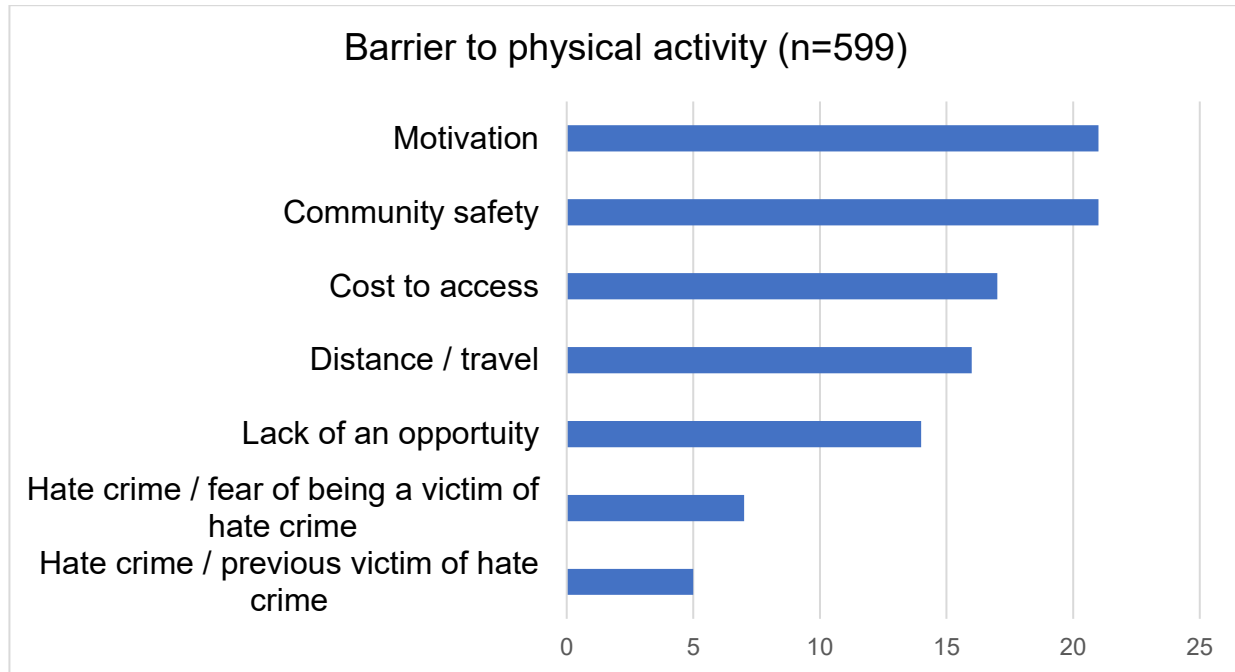
Beat the Street Merton set out to increase levels of physical activity across the population, and to help address health inequalities. The game also aimed to promote active travel and improve mental wellbeing amongst participants.

At the end of the project, a report was compiled to demonstrate the impact Beat the Street had on individuals and communities, through the analysis of pre and post intervention data, case studies, studies, movement data, anecdotal information and digital performance. The findings were used to identify key themes and insights to help inform future local planning of physical activity initiatives.

Registration data was collected on 16,675 people at the start of the game, providing audience insight into who was taking part; their age, gender and postcodes. A further 10,915 people completed an optional survey on their ethnicity, physical activity levels, long term conditions, disability and mental wellbeing. 47 primary schools were involved and 18,175 people played for a school team.



Participants were asked about their major barriers to participating in physical activities in their local areas. Among the three most significant barriers to engaging in physical activity for people, it was found that motivational issues, community safety issues and costs to access sport to be the biggest obstacles for residents.



We were also able to map groups where we'd collected less insight to help inform target areas for collecting further insight. Only 2% of those surveyed were over 56 and only 3% had a disability. Women and girls were also identified as a group where further insights would support plans moving forward.

Further analysis of Beat the Street is taking place, to identify if the increases in physical activity gained at the time of the game have been sustained.

## Outline of the grants process

Organisations were invited to bid for grants of up to £1000 to work with communities to:

- Increase social and physical activity levels in Merton
- Gain a better understanding of barriers and facilitators to being more physically and socially active in Merton.

The opportunity was publicised online and through the NHS in Merton's local community and voluntary organisation networks and connections. Interested organisations were asked to complete an application form - detailing how they would deliver activities and engagement reaching the target groups.

We received 15 applications out of which 14 were granted after being scored on the level of evidence provided on how the application would meet the requirements and offer value for money. Applications were scored jointly by representatives from NHS South West London, Merton Council and Merton Connected.

In terms of reporting, we were keen to keep the programme administration minimal but meaningful, at the start of the project successful organisations were provided with:

- A simple monitoring form to be completed at the end of each event
- Guidance on how to report back on the insights collected and showcase the activities carried out

## **Limitations of our approach**

Due to the nature of the engagement, the majority of the findings are in the form of qualitative data which has some limitations in terms of analysis, but it can also provide a deeper and more holistic understanding.

Community and voluntary organisations have a varying level of administrative support, much of which is often provided by volunteers. We minimised the level of administration required in order to increase the number of organisations applying. While this enabled us to achieve our primary objective, it does mean the level of information for analysis is limited as returns were not standardised and directly comparable.

There is a self selection bias in the insights requested due to the nature of the grants process – we have only engaged with organisations who chose to bid for a grant.

Due to requiring organisations to collect insights during physical or social activities certain members of the community would not have been able to take part, including housebound residents.

While requiring activities to take place during the summer period will have encouraged some people to participate and we believe working with voluntary organisation will have reduced barriers, it's possible this discouraged some people from getting involved.

## Who we heard from

We heard from 319 Merton residents in total through activities carried out by 14 different organisations:

1. Age UK Merton – connecting with older people and people with disabilities – 14 participants
2. Wimbledon Guild – connecting with women, older people and people with disabilities – 66 participants, 45 women
3. Sherwood Park Hall – connecting with women - 9 participants
4. Five A-Side – connecting with older people and people with disabilities – 17 participants
5. Ethnic Minority Centre – connecting with older people and people with disabilities – 17-20 participants for each 6 week session
6. Media Management London – connecting with adults and young people – 13 participants across the sessions
7. Turning Point Academy – connecting with women and girls
8. Commonsides Community Development Trust – connecting with women, older people and people with disabilities – 45 people through the day of activities
9. North East Mitcham Community Association (NEMCA) – connecting with people with disabilities – 9 participants, 2 people with a disability
10. Inner strength Network – connecting with women, girls and people with disabilities
11. Polish Families Association (PFA)– connecting with older people and people with disabilities – 28 participants, 8 female
12. Merton Plus – connecting with adults and women - 12 participants, 2 female
13. Commonsides Trust – connecting with women and girls – 26 participants, 13 children, 13 women
14. Togetherness Community Trust – connecting with older people – 20-35 participants per session over 3 months

We also had 30 attendees at our Merton Community Voice forum event.

Of the 391 people engaged with, we know at least 306 of responses received correspond with the groups identified as those we were particularly interested in hearing from. There are many insights which are attributed to our target groups where demographic information is not available.

As well as reaching those for the targeted communities, we also connected with other communities who experience health inequalities including people from an ethnic minority background, those from the LGBTQIA+ community as well as communities who live in areas where incomes are lower than the London average.

## Activities and insights from funded organisations

This section sets out information on each organisation funded and the different communities they were able to reach on our behalf. You can read about the activities they carried out and the insights gathered.

### 1. Age UK Merton

#### About the organisation – in their own words

We are an independent charity that provides services for older people in the London Borough of Merton so they can access the advice, support and care they need as they get older. On average our services help over 3,000 individuals each year and are carefully tailored to meet increasingly varied and complex needs. Our mission is to provide quality advice and services that meet the needs of older adults in Merton. Our strategic priorities are focused on three key areas: providing high quality advice and practical support; building social connection; and creating opportunities for lifelong active ageing.

Age UK Merton has a long history of delivering activities to older people in Merton and the surrounding area. We are a well-known organisation in the area and have been steadily increasing the number of clients that we are supporting, both through our activities and our other advice and support services. Our client database allows us to promote these proposed activities widely and engage older people that may not normally participate in our more physical activities.

The work we do in the borough makes a huge difference in older peoples' everyday lives. As an organisation we also have the experience of engaging with older people in the borough to provide their thoughts and feedback on the services that we offer and will use this experience and established relationship with our clients to discuss the issues and barriers that they have to being more active and what would help to overcome those barriers.

#### Activities delivered

A monthly sports morning was provided for older people over the months of July, August and September. These sessions offered a range of fun sports such as indoor golf, quoits and bowling.

The sessions were used to engage clients in fun and accessible activities alongside discussion with them about barriers and issues that they face in taking up forms of physical and social activity that are on offer in the borough, such as the various walking groups.

The sessions offered refreshments as well as the sports activities and will focus on the fun, social aspect of the sessions to encourage those that are not usually active to attend. The sessions were promoted widely across the borough and specifically target communities who are under-represented in their current client base.

## Insights gathered

### Barriers

- Transport can be a big barrier – some of our clients are not keen to take two buses for example to get somewhere, one bus is preferred or getting Dial-a-ride or other assisted transport support – parking can be a nightmare too in the borough!
- Keen to try something new in environments that are well known or feel “safe” and welcoming – it can be quite daunting to walk into a new place alone to try an exercise
- Timing of activities is also quite important, very early sessions are not so popular or late in the afternoon when it can become dark
- Cost is a consideration for lots of clients, keeping activities at a reasonable cost is important
- Booking online is a real barrier for older adults – if you have to book through an app or have to be a member of a sports club/ gym where everything is managed online that can be a real barrier

### Facilitators

- Free taster sessions are helpful as people get to try an exercise or activity before they pay for it, also free classes in general are very popular!
- It is nice to have a range of activities to try – this is why clients liked our sports day as there were different things to try (kurling, boccia etc) and they wanted even more options e.g. bean bag throwing and table tennis
- An element of fun should not be underestimated also, our clients always prefer the activities that are lively and invigorating with dynamic teachers who know their stuff

## 2. Wimbledon Guild

### About the organisation – in their own words

Wimbledon Guild is an established community charity in Merton offering practical help and support, so local people never have to face life’s challenges alone. We work only in Merton and focus all of our resources on delivering welcoming and accessible services to local people. Our services aim to reduce social isolation and loneliness, help people who are experiencing difficulties and enable older people to be active and healthy.

We have a very strong social activities and exercise classes calendar aimed at people over the age of 50. Our programme is well established and respected locally, over 780

people attended our activities and groups during 22/23. In addition, our Merton Moves project, funded by Merton Public Health, has made a huge impact on individuals, delivering motivational coaching and exercise to over 200 older people struggling with activity levels, since July 2021.

Our proven experience in this area will enable us to reach older people and gather feedback as requested for the project.

## **Activities delivered**

The organisation gathered insight by holding focus groups with several of their social groups all of which are attended by people ages 50+:

- Men's Space – a group of older men who meet every Friday. This is a diverse group with 13 members including representatives from the BAME community and individuals with disabilities
- Ladies before lunch – a group of mainly older Muslim women
- Food for thought group – we hold regular talks on different topics for a group of older people and we would use this time to focus on gathering feedback on the barriers to exercise.
- Thursday games group – aged 70+, mixture of men and women.

They held 121 phone calls with 20-25 older people who attend their social and exercise activities, to gather insight and case studies. They also developed and delivered an online survey for their 180+ Merton Moves graduates.

## **Insights gathered**

### Telephone questionnaires

Key barriers:

- Finance – they would attend more classes if they could afford it
- Transport – limited provision through Dial-a-Ride
- Parking – comments about lack of free availability
- Fear and Confidence – people feel nervous about attending something new
- Caring responsibilities – providing limited opportunity for personal time
- Cultural – many comments about lack of single sex provision and English as a second language
- Lack of Knowledge/Awareness of what is available in the borough
- No centralised information point for all activities in borough – accessed offline at organisations such as GP's, supermarkets and libraries
- Health concerns however all participants said that attending activities improve both mental and physical health

Key facilitators – what would encourage you to attend:

- Feeling welcomed
- Group sessions with a social aspect
- Being recommended activities to attend as a follow up to being discharged from hospital or the physio
- Keep the cost as low as possible
- Better provision through Dial-a Ride

### Case study responses

Key barriers:

- Mentally/emotionally not in right place
- Physically not able to be active
- Anxiety – fear of starting something new, meeting new people and whether you'll fit in, worry about if you'll be able to keep up with the exercises
- Gyms are too intimidating – too busy and not knowing what to do, plus, ongoing monthly cost whether you attend or not
- Classes not being tailored to older adults, so not being able to keep up
- Difficult to find out what's available – especially if you don't have access to the internet
- Transport – can't travel too far so limited options
- Motivation – it's hard to get started by yourself
- Cost
- Lack of men in classes
- Caring responsibilities

Key facilitators – what would encourage you to attend:

- Health advice from doctor to reduce risks or help recovery after illness like Diabetes or Stroke
- No ongoing commitment i.e., gym fees – being able to drop in and out of classes
- Having someone to go to new groups with for the first few sessions
- Having more time since retiring
- Having more social events for people who aren't able to be active
- Knowing the positive difference exercise will make – being stronger and walking more easily
- Tailored groups e.g. for wheelchair users or people with Dementia
- Range of times – morning, afternoon and evening options available
- Being able to 'be yourself' in classes with older adults – not worrying about keeping up with others
- Having more than just the activity – staying for coffee or lunch after

### Groups – key themes

## Key barriers

- Finance – Would like to join in more but worried about costs.
- Transport – Limited options when public transport not an option/suitable.
- Lack of disabled parking
- Dial a Ride – unreliable, difficult to navigate system, info all online, long application time
- Disability – Physical disability and Learning Disability are different. Activities for people with physical disabilities are often merged with people with learning disabilities but they're not the same and have very different needs
- Lack of information/awareness of what activities and classes are around
- Fear/Confidence:
  - Going to a new place/new activity on their own.
  - Accessibility: Will there be lots of stairs, accommodate wheelchairs, clear signs where to go etc.
    - Travelling somewhere new on their own.
- Lack of knowledge/awareness what is available in the borough:
  - No information given post physio/hospital discharge/falls prevention clinic etc
  - Felt left to their own devices to find out what is available that is suitable.
  - Not enough activities available for people with disabilities or support to attend them.

## Key facilitators – what would encourage you to attend:

- Knowing what is available in Merton:
  - Leaflets/adverts/information in key places not just online: GP Surgeries, Supermarkets, Libraries, Chemists etc
  - Open days to try all activities in Merton (Like the Celebrating Age Festival Merton used to run)
- Someone to go with/meet and greet/introduce:
  - Feeling welcomed and introduced to a class/class members
  - A coach/buddy to go with for your first time
- Someone to help get you started:
  - Merton Moves Officer/Social Prescriber or someone to help identify and find what is available to suit you and facilitate you attending (motivate & encourage you)
  - Staff at Gyms to welcome and introduce you to equipment

## Merton Moves survey – key themes

### Key barriers:

- Finance – being able to afford classes and travel
- Ill health – physical or mental
- Caring commitments



- Not being able to make the time of classes
- Low confidence
- Lack of motivation
- Worrying about not being good enough for the exercise class
- Not having the right equipment
- Not knowing what's available
- Not being able to find classes suitable for their disability
- Not having anyone to go with

Key facilitators – what would encourage you to attend:

- Having activities tailored to older adults
- Having more men at groups
- Awareness – having posters in doctors surgeries
- Free activities
- Knowing about the other benefits of exercise –making new friends, positive affect on mood
- Rewards or recognition for continuing to attend
- Having role models or ambassadors who are active older adults
- More local classes so less travelling involved
- Easy to book and attend without having to go online

### Comments from participants

D aged 69 (stroke survivor):

"The stroke affected my life in a massive way, I mean I couldn't walk, I was in a wheelchair. I was lucky to be alive, I could have easily gone.

An advert came through my letter box. I probably wouldn't have found Wimbledon Guild otherwise. This opened my awareness of the opportunities at the Guild, I believe I started Stroke Exercise and Seated Yoga after my Stroke and it really helped with my rehabilitation."

I continue to garden at Wimbledon Guild and participate in Seated Yoga, as well as swim 20 lengths at the gym.

How do you think this could be improved?: "I guess target the advertisement correctly, make sure the leaflets or ads are in places my age group would see them"

J aged 62 and aware of her frailty:

Social barriers: "Was thinking of having a go at Kurling but unsure if I'm fit enough to do it. Maybe if had someone to go with I would feel more confident to try."

"I was uncomfortable exercising with much younger people in a class who could do all the exercises when I felt unable to. Exercising with other older people is more comfortable."

Financial barriers: "I only go to one class a week but wouldn't go multiple times as this may cost too much."

"I use public transport – get the bus to the Guild but wouldn't like to go any further than Wimbledon as wouldn't feel confident not knowing where to go by myself."

M age 72:

Disability barrier: Speaking from a point of view of someone diagnosed with Dementia, Msaid: "People may suffer with low mood, it's hard to get back out there once diagnosed. Other's may struggle with income; the cost of living, they may have had to stop working and still have dependent children." He mentioned that "people are wary to tell others they have Dementia, which could also stop people from joining."

How could this be improved? M highlighted that it was after his diagnosis that the 'Living with Dementia' team created a welcome pack with lots of leaflets, presenting him with all the opportunities around the borough, that can help in one way or another. - This included Wimbledon Guild. He is now invited to speak at seminars, to let others know of coping mechanisms and to spread the word for useful organisations.

Gender barrier: Mi mentioned that he has noticed a lack of Men attending Wimbledon Guild activities. He doesn't believe there are barriers for men joining but wondered if this was a generational thing. "As women were more likely to be proactive with finding things to do, compared to men, who just enjoying going to a pub or playing golf which isn't a class-based activity. A women's life is very different from a man's, in this age bracket, although we are becoming more and more the same. But maybe not quite there yet. Seeing more men at the activities would help with male attendance."

Z age 58:

Speaking on Gyms: I was paying all that money, but I wasn't able to get involved because it was too much for me. The classes were very active, very hyper, I didn't feel like I belonged there. The gyms and the gym I went to, do not cater for my needs. It would have been better if I had spoken to someone, and they could advise me on what is good for me or what is not. Or even just tailor some classes to suit me and others. Then I could have made other arrangements, but no one did that.

"Once you hit a certain age, you want a more slow-paced activity, you want to be somewhere where you feel you are not over doing it. I don't feel a lot of gyms are looking after people. They are just there to provide a service to younger more able people. Not a service to the individual"

How could this be improved: "When I decided I wanted to do something, it all changed once I spoke the Merton Moves officer. Because she was able to talk in depth about the

classes, and why they would work for me personally, and the overall goodness in exercising and what it could do for me. Especially considering I couldn't walk properly. I still can't walk properly but I am a lot more stable on my feet. I was also able to say what I am looking for."

C aged 58 - Mental Health Barriers: "I think the barriers are, Anxiety. A new place, new faces, being fearful of whether you're going to fit in and whether you can adjust to being in a group. I only say this because these are the kind of things that would turn me against joining groups, before I knew about my anxiety and how it worked. It would be all these factors; would I be judged by a group if I was to take part in the activity? All those kinds of emotions." "Gyms are too much for me. For one, I wouldn't know what to do, I would need help. It would also be far too busy, there would probably be background music, sounds of machines, all those things could be a trigger for me. I avoid those kinds of places. Having monthly payments coming out would be too much pressure on myself, fear of letting myself down, if I couldn't go because of my anxiety, I would be wasting that money, it would just be too much."

How to improve: I need a space to escape, where I can detach when I need to detach. And come back into the fold when I feel ready to, an escape route. Being able to have classes where I can come and go is useful too me. If there is less obligation there, the more I am into doing it. If it comes with the obligations like a gym does, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole.

"I think a buddy system would work. If someone is coming in a bit fearful, like with anxiety and depression, they could have a buddy system where someone would accompany them to the activities. They could be there for the mental support and confidence building. Just for the first two sessions, and then they can try to go on their own but have someone to call and talk to them about it. Something like that in the system for someone who wants an active life, but can't because of their mental health issues, that would really help, and aid them to just get started."

H aged 70 - Gender / information barriers: Has seen 'female only' activities advertised but feels there is nothing specifically for men. Has noticed there are no free activities for men whereas she has found more free activities for women. Finds it difficult to leave spouse for long periods of time. Wishes there were more classes available for him to join, this is an issue shared with others.

### **3. Sherwood Park Hall**

#### **About the organisation – in their own words**

We are at the heart of our community, both physically and in terms of the relationships we have built with individuals and other partners. For over 2 years, we have worked closely

with the community to provide the services they need and have asked for. We have consulted with them and the relevant partners including the local council to ascertain the gaps in services and add value to the local offer.

We are now a trusted organisation which creates a warm and welcoming environment. We are set up to support our surrounding communities, providing user led services with a focus on provisions for low-income families in particular for the benefit of residents of Merton and in particular the Sherwood Park area we do a lot of work with the elderly, parents and babies, families and young people aged 5-11.

We host classes and workshops for our community. to increase their health and wellbeing and continue to tackle isolation and loneliness as well as physical wellbeing. Our aim is to help our community to become more physically and socially active.

During COVID-19, we adapted our activities to create an online community hub, where the community could connect and we hosted online exercise classes for our community to increase their health and wellbeing such as Zumba, body pump, yoga, self-esteem and self-confidence classes as well as fun social activities like on-line Bingo and Quizzes. Now we have returned to physical delivery for some time we would like the support to continue our projects with the groups we support, which will continue to make a strong difference to the community.

The interaction we had through the online platform, allowed us to gain insight into the needs of vulnerable groups and barriers to engagement. We utilised this learning in the planning of our services to ensure that we meet local need. We continue to provide a space encouraging community cohesion, is accessible and promotes a healthy lifestyle and feels like a safe and inviting space.

We will encourage people to reach their potential through getting involved in the delivery of projects and be fundamental to the planning and delivery of services.

### **Activities delivered**

The organisation runs a parent and baby group - delivering face to face support in a relaxed environment where they provide soft play facilities and sensory play, which is offered twice a week at Sherwood Park Hall, to deal with concerns that new parents may have.

Based on feedback, the group used the funding to add to their offer by bringing in a fitness and mindfulness element, while collecting further insights.

### **Insights gathered**

Birth can take a toll on a woman's body and it's hard trying to get back to being themselves, and finding it hard losing baby weight, they are having feelings of low self-esteem, losing who they are as well as a lack of sleep.

Key issues included:

- Mums drop in on the sessions at different times and leave at different times due to
- babies tired or hungry, so the numbers differ week to week.
- Sessions can be shorter than an hour
- Older kids need attention from parent

## 4. Five A-Side

### About the organisation – in their own words

Five ASide Theatre is an organisation who work with other local organisations to address issues that impact our community. We have 3 years' experience exploring the lived experiences, heritage, health well being with the elderly African Caribbean and wider local community through art workshops, creative writing, dance and nutrition lessons in Mitcham, Colliers Wood, Raynes Park, Wimbledon and Morden.

Our FASTraining programme trained 8 young people for 6 weeks as Community Arts Practitioners and Workshop facilitators this included training in health, physical well-being and sports exercises.

For the past 4 years our FASTournament school holiday programme introduced young people aged 7-11 to healthy living and mental health awareness. This programme includes a morning of team sports activities, healthy plant based lunch and an afternoon of theatre games and exercises promoting a well-being and self-care.

### Activities delivered

Funding supported insight collection during the following activities, described by the organisation below:

**Get your Ground Provisions** These are our outreach workshops with elderly African Caribbean organisations to share stories of their cultural heritage. The workshops begin with a fun heritage quizzes to stimulate memories and stories around their cultural rituals, heritage, health and wellbeing. This is followed by creative writing workshops developing the participants ability to create oral performance narratives about their lived experiences. We explore barriers to health and wellbeing in these fun workshops particularly the availability of awareness raising resources and practices on dietary habits and physical activity of Black Africans and Caribbean populations. We will also explore the

findings in Health surveys that have shown that out of all ethnic groups, Black African and Caribbean people have the lowest percentage of people getting their 5-a day, and this has been dropping over the years.

**Saturday Soup community events** There are 3 sessions in our workshop. Session 1 Healthy diet and heritage. In this fun and practical workshop we'll explore new approaches including plant based approaches to Caribbean cuisine. Our nutritionist specialist will advise on new findings that support and/or explore healthier alternatives. We investigate the impact of Covid on their well-being and discuss any barriers to improving their physical, mental and social well-being. Session 2 Healthy eating and heritage. This workshop is a healthy eating taster session to introduce cost effective and nutritious approaches to Caribbean traditional cuisine. Participants will sample meals prepared using new plant based and organic methods. Session 3 Physical well-being and heritage. Our aim is to increase the knowledge and understanding of how to use elements of their culture and heritage to consistently improve physical, mental and social well-being. This is a physical fitness through dance workshop. Participants will develop an accessible physical activity plan to improve mobility, strength and stamina to music and dances of their heritage-1950s Calypso, 1960's Ska, Rocksteady, 1970's UK Reggae, Lovers Rock, 1980's UK Soul, UK Hip Hop and 1990's Garage and Jungle music.

The events address the impact post pandemic impact on the elderly African Caribbean community on their social interactions, physical and mental health. The dietary sessions helped participants with low mood and deteriorating physical health. The work goes some way to returning to the activities, which older people previously were involved and were put on hold due to the pandemic.

### **Insights gathered**

The workshop successfully engaged 17 participants, representing a diverse range of backgrounds within the African and Caribbean elderly population. The age of participants ranged from 55 to 85 years, with a majority being in their late 60's and early 70s.

The workshop yielded invaluable insights from the participants. Many expressed improved physical health, increased mobility, and enhanced mental well-being. Some highlighted the significance of cultural aspects in the program, which made them feel more connected to their roots.

- Participant Aged 75: "Di spirit of Africa come alive in dis place. When we dance, it's like we back home, di St. Kitts.
- Participant Aged 57: "This workshop has evoked the essence of Ghama for me. It's like a cultural journey. Dancing has ignited a passion in my heart that I thought was long gone."
- Participant Aged 58: "The dances we've learned here have been a revelation. I never knew exercise could be this enjoyable. It's been a game-changer."

- Participant Aged 61: "This workshop has truly revitalized me. I feel like I'm dancing my way to a healthier life!"
- Participant Aged 68: "Mi nuh know 'bout yuh, but when mi a do di Rocksteady dance, mi feel di rhythm deep inna me soul. It mek mi feel young again!"
- Participant Aged 72: "Mi family, di grandkids dem, dem love to see grandma movin'. Dis workshop, it mek me a role model inna di family."
- Participant Aged 74: "I didn't expect this dance class to make such a difference at my age. I can genuinely feel the improvement in my physical well-being, and it's brought a smile to my face."
- Participant Aged 80: "Mi never thought dis likkle dance class could mek such a difference. Mi can feel mi body rejuvenated."

The key themes that emerged from the participants' feedback included the positive impact on overall health, a sense of community and belonging, and the therapeutic effect of dance. Participants reported increased energy levels and a reduction in loneliness, emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant activities for their well-being.

## 5. Ethnic Minority Centre

### About the organisation – in their own words

Since 1988 Ethnic Minority Centre Ltd. (EMC) has worked tirelessly to support and promote Health and Well-being Services and bringing the Communities together in the London Borough of Merton, building the community cohesion and improve the quality of life for all Ethnic Minority Centre's members.

COVID-19 meant many had to change priorities and lifestyle. EMC realised these drastic changes left emotional, physical, and psychological scars which needed to be addressed with more health care awareness, education, and activities. EMC works with people who have lost total confidence. EMC's main objectives are to restore/ recover self- confidence and build self-esteem. EMC's projects are well attended. Community people like to attend EMC's activities as staff, volunteers are very accommodative and can create a good atmosphere easily.

### Activities delivered

The Ethnic Minority Centre funded a new 6 week project called "Talk and Coffee morning followed by Indoor Bowling" with the aim of focusing on three key characteristics of development, social interaction, physical activity and breaking down barriers of isolation that people have been suffering from especially senior citizens.

participants enjoyed the light exercise and social interaction, combined with a coffee morning. After the exercise the atmosphere was very good meaning people were more at ease and willing to talk, express themselves and happy to fill in questionnaires.

## Insights gathered

The participants welcomed this opportunity and enjoyed the activities. EMC's Actively Merton – "Coffee Morning followed by talk, Bowling, curling, Boccia and refreshments" The said it kept us going through tough times but now can take part easily whatever the weather. It was a fun with the variety of games, health talks and lovely refreshments.

Mrs K.D said "I truly hope that we can continue with this project. Just over 2 years ago I lost my husband. Life suddenly became lonely, meaning less and empty. Top of that, this pandemic made it worse, this activity is now my week's focus. It has been a great help. Although this project was for very short period, but I pray that we can continue again with this session."

T.A said I would like to thank EMC for providing this very important activity for BAME communities. Having seen the good work being carried out in EMC, in my opinion I will encourage good work for humanity because it's a lifesaving process. Otherwise, many people who have or had no idea of EMC will remain in dark, hence they are desperately needing assistance with where to go or

JS has severe health issues including Cancer/partial blindness was supported by carers and only meeting doctors, nurses, and going to hospital visits. She now attends all EMC activities and wishes to continue to do so while she is able to, it has given her a new lease of life. She is mixing making friendships and her confidence has grown.

TS said Amazing the benefits I have gained.

TA said I must not forget to mention that on 30/08/2023, my grandson who is just gone 7 years came with me to the bowling class and surprisingly there was a health wellbeing talk on the same day.

JS also said (JS is a cancer survivor and is blind in one eye, the EMC volunteer wrote down her answers to the questions that she dictated for her) .

I never had any difficulties or problem joining EMC activities, I am very grateful to EMC. This Bowling session is benefiting me a lot. I am positive minded, don't like unnecessary sympathy. This session is now my lifeline. After keeping ourselves in the four walls for a long time, these EMC's sessions seems like an open door for us to the outside world, it is so uplifting. Look forward to these sessions and I am exercising regularly again, I am disciplined and happy.



AS said Whatever small support I may have given to EMC, they have given me ten folds back. For their help and support I feel strong, balanced and alive. I have an opportunity to connect to new friends, can express my opinion when Sabitri discusses the feedback. I would like to thank Phil – our lovely Bowling Instructor, Rachael – Nutrician facilitator and EMC's staff and volunteers for their continuous support and help. I will continue attending EMC's activities.

## **6. Media Management London**

### **About the organisation – in their own words**

Media Management London (MML) is based in the New Horizon Centre in Pollards Hill and provides training and work experience for young people interested in graphic design and digital marketing. MML creates websites, runs a digital radio station and creates advertising and flyers for a wide range of clients including faith groups, musicians and other artists. A BAME-led not for-profit, MML seeks to provide opportunities for local young people and to network and support other local businesses and BAME-led organisations.

### **Activities delivered**

MML worked from their location in a deprived part of the borough to engage and gain the trust of local people who are not currently taking regular exercise for whom money and other matters can sometimes be a barrier. This included local residents on and off the Moat Housing estate as well as customers in the local shops and businesses. The activities provided physical exercise as well as a chance to socialise with others joining the class or by staying longer in the Centre before or after the sessions.

They ran at the Centre, four yoga sessions lasting 45-50 minutes each at a regular weekly slot in August. In the run-up to August they focused on publicity and talking to local people about the project and designing simple questionnaires that people would be motivated to complete.

### **Insights gathered**

The local community really welcomed having the opportunity to try yoga classes for free within the Moat Estate. People noted that activities such as yoga are not usual available there and they were encouraged to see that it was now available especially during the holidays. MML wanted to encourage younger people to attend the events and noted that there was a good interaction with the event via social media.

Participant 1: Thank you for the classes. We want a yoga class and to try to encourage young black men to try them

Participant 2: The yoga classes have been invaluable for my mental and physical wellbeing.

Participant 3: I am looking forward to the continuation of classes.

Participant 4: I met friends and good people.

Participant 5: This is to say a big thank you organising a truly fantastic event.

Participant 6: Your efforts make it a resounding success and I appreciate all your hard work and dedication.

Participant 7: Since I started this yoga class I have noticed changes in my posture and my well-being. I feel that this has changed my whole look on this exercise regime and I am truly grateful to be a part of this team. The class tutor is patient and looks out for everyone that needs assistance in working out at their own pace.

Participant 8: I am writing this to express my appreciation for the incredible yoga lessons at New Horizon Centre. The classes have allowed me to connect with my inner self, reduced stress and to find a sense of balance in this busy world. Thank you, New Horizon, for putting on these classes we need them to continue as there is nothing else like this in our community.

## **7. Turning Point Academy**

### **About the organisation - in their own words**

Turning Point Academy (TPA) is a London-based registered charity which serves women who have converted to Islam and those who are interested in Islam. It is a non-profit organisation, established in 2004 in response to the lack of local support for women, and it has now grown to provide a range of specific services that aim to meet educational, social and transitional needs.

### **Activities delivered**

The organisation led:

- Walks in green spaces.
- Breathwork and Mindfulness
- Nutrition workshops
- Stretching and toning
- Other similar outdoor and indoor activities

## Insights gathered

Limitations/Challenges and how we will aim to improve

- **Travel Costs** Travel costs to central London may have prevented some of our members from attending, as some are on extremely limited budgets. We try to mitigate this by offering to cover travel costs from charity funds, but not all students may have been aware of this, or may have been shy to ask. We will aim to increase awareness of TPA's commitment to financial assistance for future events. Also, following the success of this event, we may hold future events closer to our base in Merton, where more people may be able to travel. The newly redeveloped grounds at Canons House are being considered as one option.
- **Accessibility** Although a special trip to Central London is accessible for many, we acknowledge that this is not the case for those with mobility issues, or who use wheelchairs, or for mothers with pushchairs. TPA makes a point of holding all our regular study sessions, and the vast majority of our special events in fully accessible venues. For our next outdoor wellbeing session, we will aim to use a fully accessible venue. This is another reason why the newly paved paths and easy parking make the grounds at Canons House an attractive future venue



## 8. Commonside Community Development Trust

### About the organisation – in their own words

Commonside has run support services and activities for local families in East Mitcham for 18 years. Since 2005, it has managed the Pollards Hill Lunch Club for Older People, offering a two-course meal five days a week to older people and vulnerable adults. The Lunch Club also provides work experience for students of health and social care, working with Coulsdon College and local schools and colleges (Wandsworth, Sutton and Merton) as well as volunteer placements. More recently, we have broadened the range of activities at the New Horizon Centre to include Zumba Gold, Sporting Memories, indoor and seated sports and craft activities as the needs and likes of older people are changing over time. We have a particular focus on working with the Council and health partners to restrict frailty, enable people to live independent lives and provide different ways for people to connect and socialise.

### Activities delivered

During the summer the organisation ran a 'Day of Dance', open to all ages and designed to appeal in particular to local people over the age of 50 who are not currently taking regular exercise. The day comprised of three parts - three different dance teachers - with breaks and a healthy lunch. During the breaks we they ran a series of questionnaires to find out what the participants enjoy doing and what sports or fitness activities they would commit to attending regularly.

This activity was promoted in particular to local people who do not have the money to go on holiday, giving them a 'day holiday' at the Centre. They decorated the Hall to give it a party atmosphere. They also introduced the participants to the local digital radio station and to the young people running it, encouraging them to get involved in programming, request shows and interviews.

The day was offered to all of their current lunch club members and promoted much more widely, to people who are retired or semi-retired, who do not feel that the current lunch club service is for them but who are interested in finding out what activities there are at the Centre for them, or whether they can organise their own.

### Insights gathered

#### Insights

- It was a little unusual to publicise just the one day: it might have more appeal as a series of workshops on different days but at the same time each week over a period of time such as a month or six weeks, as part of a festival.
- Each different dance form was well received and participants were enthusiastic.
- We now know how to find a wide variety of dance teachers.

## Options

- We polled participants and as a result, have introduced a second weekly Zumba Gold class at the New Horizon Centre, on Monday mornings. We already run Zumba Gold classes on Thursdays at 12.15. The charge will be £3 per person.
- We will work again with the Jive teacher who also organises Jive- and 50's-themed events.
- Line dancing is always popular across ages and other characteristics. We will consider running regular classes if we can do this without losing money. It can work well as an 'add-on' to other activities, and as an ice-breaker.
- It is in Commonsides and the community's interests to have contacts with a variety of small, local dance and fitness suppliers. This is good for the local economy, minimises expense and reduces the need to travel far. The better we know them, the more successful are the community activities we run.

## 9. North East Mitcham Community Association (NEMCA)

### About the organisation – in their own words

North East Mitcham Community Association celebrated its 40th Birthday in April 2022! We are proud to have been serving the local community in North East Mitcham for such a long time, and we look forward to continuing long into the future.

The Centre provides a wealth of activities to suit all ages - our aim is to have something for everyone at NEMCA through our activities and clubs. We also provide help to the community by being part of the Tesco Food share project, the Coop Local Community Fund, Merton Volunteer Centre and many other local voluntary organisations.

The centre has a base of elderly people who, especially over the summer are unable to socialise and become isolated as, due to funding reasons, a lot of the activities at the centre shut down and are term time only.

### Activities delivered

The centre ran a lunch club for elderly and disabled women during which they were asked for feedback on barriers to exercise and how it prevents them from the uptake of physical exercise.

### Insights gathered

Over the 6 weeks the group were vibrant and spoke about enjoying coming together to eat and socialise but struggling to get to venues further afield than NEMCA in order to do any exercise and some also struggle to get online due to issues with arthritis or just memory in terms of knowing how to log in to connect to online exercises. They do like coming to the exercise that we have at NEMCA in the form of Chair-based exercises and Movement and Games club. We discussed and practiced a range of exercises similar to Chair based exercises that could also be done at home and connected to a TV programme or activity they do daily so that they could get more movement in as all agreed that they feel better when they exercise and most forget to do stuff at home and prefer to get out to do exercise at a safe space like NEMCA. They did have some awareness of activities going on in and around Merton but due to lack of ability to get to them due to their disabilities, ailments and injuries would not be able to get to most of them. Although 2 members of the group were accessing online classes. Overall the main barriers seemed to be affordable or free transport for people with disabilities to get to other exercises and facilities as well as info about those activities getting to them as most are not online so would only find out about it through posters at NEMCA or letters through the door.

## **10. Inner strength Network**

### **About the organisation – in their own words**

Inner Strength Network coaches and supports women and girls to overcome difficult moments in their lives. One of our aims is to reduce isolation from those women who are traumatised by the abuse and often we engage them with activity to support this process.

ISN has over ten years' experience of working with the vulnerable families within Merton and we pride ourselves in listening to the voices of those in need, providing them with support and in various ways. The first task is to listen and then with trust to engage them with the understanding of looking after their wellbeing.

### **Activities delivered**

Activity 1 – movement therapy – this trainer is a valued member of staff who has experience of working with families, qualified movement practitioner with a master's degree in physical theatre, dance body work & Somatic training. The aim was to raise confidence and increase social and physical activity. This activity will also bring mind and body alignment, and a trauma informed approach towards tension alleviation.

Activity 2 – art and writing sessions with women at Refuge once a week for 3 weeks. Based on a pilot on working with the women at the refuge before with excellent results. They asked the organisation to come back and to deliver writing as well as Art. It was delivered by a volunteer who was a survivor of domestic abuse but has developed her artistic skill to give back to the community with excellent results.

Working with the women has been a powerful experience.

In their application the organisation stated:

- women are isolated and find it difficult to come out of their homes due to abuse
- These activities will allow them to engage with others and avoid total isolation
- There are also opportunities to guide them on other activities to help them as well.
- Low self-esteem: doing the activities proposed will assist them in raising their self-esteem as well.

## Insights gathered

What would make it easier for women and girls to be more active:

- More access and education for girls and women.  
“Some classes are far away and i think having more access to a variety of classes nearby would help too.”
- More practice and encouragement to try .
- People need to be more accepting to women and girls as they are set against boys and men.
- Offer a variety of activities, dance, yoga and team walking.
- More women only activities
- Boys supporting girls
- Small girls and women's groups to include Aqua fit, swimming, stretching, and warmings up options
- I think women need to be listened to and heard more.
- Need to be more inclusive
- Needs to be more women's only groups
- Suitable classes for women of all different sizes.  
Some very enthusiastic classes to encourage engagement.
- Keep prices lower and different levels of fitness.
- Female only classes. Free childcare, Lower cost of classes.
- Improve schools access to local / county sports events.
- Provide funding for professional sports coaches to come into schools so children in poorer areas can get a better chance to do well at bigger events
- My daughter primary school x would always enter students last minute, would have done much more practice and would have received better funding for their schools & young girls. This would be the first experiences of taking part in sport.

The barriers to getting physical and socially active:

- Misogynistic behaviours were raised as an underlying issue preventing women from participating in physical and social activities. Occur themes included no access to free childcare, women only classes, concerns of body shaming & non inclusive classes, as well as males not supporting females. Other responses were;
- Finding the right flexible places
- Cost. Childcare cost and if you are a career.

- Because males will give you a hard time
- Because some sports teams might think women and girls might not be able to do it as they might not think they are as strong.
- Not enough women only groups.
- Women can feel uncomfortable if overweight, we need more women only sessions and having someone participate with you can help.
- Not knowing other people as well as not enough girls playing the sport.
- Limited access to children/ disability /family friendly activities and exercise sessions were a key factor, preventing many women (who are often carers or with dependents) from being socially and physically active.
- timings of sessions; not being suitable for those who have children to take care.
- Non-trauma informed settings for those who may suffer with PTSD, depression and stress.
- Non-sensory inform settings for those who have been diagnosed with ASD.
- Non-Supportive inclusive classes for those who classify themselves as overweight.
- Childcare
- Lack of mind and body holistic intervention type exercises.
- Women and families displayed an interest in attending inclusive and diverse activities that link to different cultures within the Merton community to become more physically and socially active.
- Time: having access to events and activities that were flexible with time.
- Encouragement: being amongst similar like-minded people or groups of similar interests.
- Having events associated with national holidays.
- Rewards or an incentive to attend social gatherings, such as discounts, competitions for members of the local community, all points card.access to activities not far from home
- Respite, residential, summer, holiday, or half term clubs for sen young people in order for the carers to have a break

Initiatives that would help the local community to move more and connect more:

- Women and girls highlighted a higher level of funding towards schools' sports activities, discount schemes for those on a low income, mother and child inclusive classes and free childcare services in leisure centres would increase communities' engagement to move & connect more, others mentioned;
- Improve schools access to local / county sports events. Provide funding for professional sports coaches to come into schools so children in poorer areas can get a better chance to do well at bigger events. My daughter primary school St Marks would always enter students last minute, would have done much more practice and would have received better funding for their schools & young girls. This would be the first experiences of taking part in sport.
- Small girls and women's groups to include Aqua fit, swimming, stretching, and warmings up options
- Once there are women sports available.
- Knowing how to find classes or groups.



What needs to happen to make physical and social activity accessible:

- Insights revealed there is a high demand within the Merton community for low cost affordable inclusive and female only classes. Other responses included:
- More access and education for girls and women.
- Some classes are far away, and I think having more access to a variety of classes nearby would help.
- More practice and encouragement to try.
- People need to be more accepting to women and girls as they are set against boys and men.
- Offer a variety of activities, dance, yoga and team walking groups.
- By boys supporting girls
- I think women need to be listened to and heard more.
- Suitable classes for women of all different sizes.
- Create some very enthusiastic classes to encourage engagement.

What initiatives will help the local community to move more and connect more.

- Women and girls highlighted a higher level of funding towards schools' sports activities, discount schemes for those on a low income, mother and child inclusive classes and free childcare services in leisure centres would increase communities' engagement to move & connect more, others mentioned;
- Improve schools access to local / county sports events. Provide funding for professional sports coaches to come into schools so children in poorer areas can get a better chance to do well at bigger events. My daughter primary school St Marks would always enter students last minute, would have done much more practice and would have received better funding for their schools & young girls. This would be the first experiences of taking part in sport.
- Small girls and women's groups to include Aqua fit, swimming, stretching, and warmings up options
- Once there are women sports available.
- Knowing how to find classes or groups.

## **11. Polish Families Association**

### **About the organisation – in their own words**

The association for Polish Family was established in 2007 and registered as a charity in 2011. It started as a playgroup for Polish parents but has since expanded its activities into many areas in response to the needs of the Polish and Eastern European communities in South West London. The Association for the Polish Family has a proven track record of delivering high quality bi and multilingual projects and services within the local community of Merton.

The Merton Ukraine Hub is run from the New Horizon Centre by Polish Family Association (PFA) and Commonsense Trust. It was set up in March 2022 as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting number of displaced people including refugees seeking to live in Merton. It supports the 400-600 Ukrainians in the borough, actively helping around 100 families per week with access to services, helping to find work, etc, running ESOL classes for them and running a food parcel service as a part of the Merton Community Fridge Network. It is funded by part of the Government funding set aside to support refugees from Ukraine, under a conditional grant arrangement with Merton Council. In addition to offering help with practical issues, the Hub works with Wimbledon Guild to provide art therapy, offers weekly Zumba Gold classes for free, and is organising summer Holiday and Food programme activities in partnership with the Council for Merton's Ukrainian children and young people.

### **Activities delivered**

Within the group of refugees from Ukraine there is a significant proportion of men and women aged 50+. They attend the ESOL classes regularly but have struggled to learn English and are often dependent on the friends and families or hosts who house them for help with accessing services and support. The group visited South Downs National Park, and took the 2km walk Seven Sisters visitor centre to Cuckmere Haven (beach).

The helper/guide talked to the participants about what they like about walking and other forms of exercise.

### **Insights gathered**

The feedback gives options for the future:

- More walking and hiking including Nordic walking, visiting hills, lakes and the coast;
- Swimming indoors, gym, tennis, table-tennis, Zumba, cycling, jogging and yoga are all of interest to this group.
- The more adventurous want to go ski-ing and skating in the winter.
- There is some interest in volunteering outside, particularly if the placements would be suited to their levels of fitness and health.
- Overall, this group is very positive about the effects of outdoor activity and is very self-aware in terms of exercise being good for mental and physical health even with everything else that they are worried about at the moment.

## **12. Merton Plus**

### **About the organisation – in their own words**

We are a new organisation formed in January 2023, but based on groundwork done by members of Merton's previous (disbanded) LGBT Forum. In our second month of operation we put on 8 events for LGBT History month, partnering with a wide variety of other organisations including Age UK Merton, Mitcham Arts Collective, and Sustainable Merton. We have since been arranging monthly meet-ups for the community in a local cafe, and recently hosted Merton's first Pride event (a picnic in Morden Hall Park). Our email list now sits at over 100 people and is growing by the day; we are actively recruiting to this by attending local events such as Mitcham Carnival, and putting up posters in local community venues and businesses with QR codes and our website and social media addresses.

## **Activities delivered**

A variety of types of well-being activity were offered to attract different sections of the community the group supports, with particular emphasis on engaging LGBT women and non-binary people, both of whom are currently under-represented in attendance at our events. There were four activities: yoga, a series of three walks, a craft event, and a writing workshop with poetry performance.

## **Insights gathered**

### Physical activity

Eight (8) people responded to the section on physical activity. No one said there was significant difference in the amount of physical exercise they were taking part in, but most (5) said they were doing more, compared to two (2) saying they were doing less. Half of respondents said they did not/rarely exercised in Merton (4), with two (2) saying they did "often" and two (2) saying they did most of the time.

Only one (1) respondent said they felt they had no opportunities to participate in physical exercise. Most (5) said they took part in active travel (ie. walking/cycling). Only two (2) took part in organised sport/exercise (ie. clubs/classes/gym) and one other (1) took part in sport for work. Two (2) said they exercised at home, and two (2) said they exercised in outdoor spaces (ie. parks). No one said they exercised as part of a non-sport specific group or society (as MertonPlus is).

The main barriers to physical exercise amongst the respondents were financial cost (3) and lack of time (3). Physical health/disability was a barrier for two (2), as was mental health and/or anxiety (2). One (1) respondent said they simply lacked opportunity for participating in physical exercise, whilst one (1) said did not want/have to do more physical exercise than they were already doing – the same respondent took part in sport for work purposes..

Two respondents provided further comment, both relating to Merton's sporting facilities. One said "I wish the local swimming pool was more accessible", and another said there was a "lack of safety for trans people in sports venues".

### Social activity

Seven (7) people responded to the section on social activity. Most (6) said they were socialising about as much as they were last year, with only one (1) saying they were socialising less. No one said they were socialising "a lot less".

Most (4) said they socialised in Merton "sometimes" with only one (1) saying "Often Two said they rarely socialised in the borough although at least one of these respondents did not live here. No one said they socialised in Merton "most of the time".

All respondents (7) said friends/relatives were facilitators for their social activities, as were venues (ie. cafes or bars). The other main facilitators of social activity were groups/societies (6), events/festivals (5) and home life (4). Only two (2) regarded their work life as part of their social intake.

The main barrier to socialising amongst respondents was financial cost (4). Two (2) said physical health/disability was a barrier, and one (1) said mental health and/or anxiety. Only two (2) said they lacked time to socialise and one (1) said travel was a barrier. Two (2) said they felt there was a lack of opportunities to socialise (ie. venues/groups), with another saying they found it difficult finding networks. Only one (1) said they felt no barriers to fulfilling their social life.

### Conclusions

The group of respondents was small but given these were all participants in an LGBTQ+ themed walk, the demographics were unsurprising. There was good gender balance, and representation of various aged adults, but no under 25s and no over 60s (the physical nature of the proceeding activity was probably a barrier to older adults). As expected, most identified as LGBTQ+, although MertonPlus is welcome to all LGBTQ+ allies. The under-representation of the BAME community, compared to the borough's population, is something we have previously noted at our MertonPlus LGBTQ+ events, and is something we intend to address.

Most of the respondents said they the amount of physical activity they were doing was increasing although financial cost and lack and time were noted as barriers. Probably as a result of this, most respondents said they were getting their exercise through active travel (also a money saver) with only a couple taking part in organised sport or using dedicated facilities. Physical and mental health barriers were also raised with one person noting that there was a "lack of safety for trans people in sports venues".

Most of the respondents said their present level of social activity was consistent over the long term, although the fact this this questionnaire was of participants of an in-person gathering probably skewed the results. Most Merton residents said they regularly socialised in the borough, sometimes if not predominantly here. All said they met up with family/friends in bars and cafes although most were also involved in societies/groups, and took part in organised events. Again, the main barrier for this group of respondents was financial cost.



### **13. Commonside Trust**

#### **About the organisation – in their own words**

Commonside has run support services and activities for local families for 18 years. Its Step Forward programme works with some of the most deprived families in the borough, helping with debt, budgeting, applying for benefits, health-related benefits, small grants application, housing advice, health appointments, children's health, behaviour and disabilities. The programme supports over 100 local households in the East Mitcham area

each year. Its staff team are trusted and have a good reputation for providing the right support at the right time. They are part-funded by Merton Council (Civic Pride, Headley Foundation and Moat Homes).

## Activities delivered

During the school summer holidays they ran a weekly breakfast and exercise club for local families with children. They provided a healthy start breakfast and ran sports/fitness sessions in our Main Hall.

The sports and fitness activities were fun and encouraged family members to work together, and were accessible for different levels of fitness and mobility.

At the breakfast part of the activity they talked to participants about what family fitness activities they enjoy, would like to see in the local area, what stops them doing more sport and fitness, what they would like help their children do more of etc, to get an idea of what sports and fitness activities people can easily sign up to in the Autumn term.

## Insights gathered

Mum 1

As a local moat resident and mum of 4 under 18 (all 4 have ADHD and 2 with Autism ) it's very tiring and I also struggle with my own mental health. Some days it's a struggle to leave the house. I was issued with HAF vouchers but some places filled up very quickly and there is not much to offer neuro-diverse children, or an option that their parents can stick around which is very disappointing!

I'm highlighting this because children with autism and ADHD can struggle with change and newfaces and lots of social challenges! The brunch club at the Centre, was a great idea. Providing three meals a day for children who can , on a daily basis be very picky is hard! I received some food vouchers which have been helpful but only go so far. I also love the idea of Lego play as from experience I know that Lego is a great therapy for children with SEN: one of my children previously had Lego therapy, whilst my other children have all benefited from playing with Lego during the day whilst at school as the combination of doing sports, having a healthy brunch, Lego & some friendly faces in a nice space was absolutely perfect!

Mum 2

I received school food vouchers for the holidays but with the cost of getting school uniform shoes bags PE kits etc for all 4 kids, I had to weigh up my situation and decided to use my food vouchers to buy school uniform. Not sure if that was the right thing to do, to be

honest as all the kids keep doing is eating everything in sight as quick as I'm buying it. But when it's gone it's gone. The brunch club took pressure off me a lot with making sure the kids were starting their day off with a decent meal. It's quite tricky making sure I have enough food and variety of food as they all like different things to eat. I have a vegetarian and an ASD child who barely eats anything or tries 3 different things before she's finally decided what she wants. It was something I could do with both my younger girls so my 4 year didn't miss out like she has with HAF clubs, but also my 13 year old who was happy that I was there with her, as I said previously she has social anxiety and prefers to be joined at my hip.



**LAST WEEK  
OF SCHOOL HOLIDAYS!  
FREE!**

**Sport • Healthy Brunch • Play**

**Tuesday 29th August  
Wednesday 30th August  
Thursday 31st August  
Friday 1st September**

**For 5 – 15 year olds  
accompanied by parent/carer**



**At the New Horizon Centre, CR4 1LT  
(Buses 255, 60, 463 & 255)  
10am Daily Breakfast**



With thanks to  
**Dons Local Action Group**  
for help with food.



COMMONSIDE TRUST

## 14. Togetherness community Trust

About the organisation – in their own words

Togetherness Community Centres (TCC) is strategically placed in the heart of the Figges Marsh – Colliers Wood area in Mitcham, Merton.

TCC's underlying ethos is developing a place where individuals and families are celebrated. Our activities will have an emphasis on building communication and strengthening relationships between children and adults by encouraging them to learn and experience fun together.

### **Activities delivered**

The activities delivered were designed for adults from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds to experience and make use of the various health improvement benefits of group activities and discussions.

The I'm coming out! Project introduced the use of games and exercise activities that can be done both at the centre with friends, family and social groups, as well as at home. The aim was to enable isolated and lonely adults to come together in a safe, stimulating space, where they can experience these games. Through both organic and structured discussions, participants shared the benefits they gained and how to help others that they know being able to access the activities.

### **Insights gathered**

The group size varied from 20 – 35 attendees over the period from early September to October.

- Most felt that 60+ people had less confidence in using the technology avail to them on their phones, iPads and laptops. Over 50% admitted that they wanted and needed more understanding and practice in using their phones to their advantage.
- Over 75% felt vulnerable using the internet due to scamming and hacks which a few had experienced.
- There is a request for training in using their phones. Some who asked had already completed workshops delivered at local libraries. There is a need for more regular practice and refreshers of what they have learnt.
- The weather greatly impacted attendance especially for those using walking aids. Level of anxiety can be increased for fear of falling
- Members shared that they were having to remind those invited and this meant that they were able to have more regular communication with them.
- Online participants enjoyed the sessions and some have continued to do the exercises learnt.
- Both online and face to face participants have shared that they have benefitted from the sessions.



- The 6 new attendees to face to face sessions are enjoying the extended forms of exercises they are engaging in – New Age Kurling, Bocca and singing.
- The new attendees are forging new friendships with people with whom they have relatable experiences, having come from similar places in the Caribbean.
- It has broken down the isolated and related symptoms of feeling lonely that they were experiencing.
- There were a few that found the process of logging in challenging and therefore did not attend.
- Some face to face attendees found the wet weather a challenge to get the centre as they use walking aids. Greater exploration of the methods of transport to get to the centre which is only accessible by one bus being that it is off the main road.
- Parking is very limited close the centre which is in a permit parking area.

## Merton Community Voice Forum event

NHS South West London's engagement team meet bi-monthly with the local VCSE and community for the Merton Health and Care Community Voice Forum. In October we held the meeting in person for the first time since the pandemic. This was attended by a wide range of organisations including:

- Merton Connected
- Merton Seniors Forum
- North East Merton Community association
- Wimbledon Community Association
- Enable
- Sherwood Park Hall
- Unique Talent Mentoring
- Ethnic Minority Centre
- Inter Faith Network
- Turning Point Academy
- Wimbledon Guild
- Age UK Merton
- Commonsides Community Development Trust

We invited presentations from Actively Merton grantee organisations, which were followed by facilitated discussion groups to collect feedback on the barriers and facilitators to people in Merton being active.

We looked at how this affects people who face specific challenges, in relation to their demographics.

We hosted presentations from the following Actively Merton grantee organisations:

- Ethnic Minority Centre
- Wimbledon Guild
- Age UK Merton
- Turning Point Academy
- Merton Plus LGBTQ+

Following the presentations from Community Actively Merton grantees organisations, we held facilitated discussion groups with a feedback session to the meeting afterwards. Community organisations and their members greatly appreciated this and said that they felt better heard following this opportunity.

The focus groups shared ideas about what could be done to help people get more active. ‘



## Discussion

The facilitated focus groups looked at the feedback from the community activity sessions and posed a series of questions.

1. What are the barriers and facilitators to being physically and social activity across the three target groups?
2. What are the barriers and facilitators to being socially and physically active for your cohort/target group?
3. What is particularly difficult?
4. Are there people who face specific challenges, in relation to their demographics?
5. What could be done to help with this?
  - Individually
  - Friends and Family
  - Community
  - VCSE
  - Local Authority/Social care
  - Healthcare/NHS

Merton Ethnic Minority Centre ran a six-week sports programme offering members the chance to try boccia, bowling and curling for the first time.

She reflected on what she learned from the programme: “Generally people said they don’t get these opportunities as they might be housebound or isolated and lonely - so and these activities were good fun and successful for them. They said the laughter they found in getting together in the community is the best medicine for life.”

People said that they felt strongly impacted by psychological issues and mental and emotional factors such as fear, embarrassment, disappointment and frustration. “Staying at home can make you feel tired and fed up.”

People shared that they had to overcome negativity, self-doubt and lack of self-confidence, staying at home can make you feel tired and fed up. One contributor mentioned that they did not like to feel pitied, ‘real friends are needed not sympathy’. The discussion also showed that people face specific challenges, in relation to demographics.

Young people worried about looking ‘cool’ – will only participate if their friends do (self-exclusion). Young people need more 121 encouragement and a personal touch, Need to create groups for young people with similar interests to get together, facilitated by extroverts/big characters.

Women need safe, private spaces with a real fear of being watched and affordable childcare such as a creche at activities.

Services targeting minority groups need to be culturally competent

In terms of older people there are less men that access these activities, for some men as they get older their friendship groups reduce. Some men prefer to do activities rather than talk and are more likely to talk after doing an activity together. Other initiatives have been useful to engage older men are older men’s sport and men’s sheds, also through libraries and engaging community leaders.

The facilitators/enablers to being socially and physically active for your cohort/target group, include factors such as childcare, financial subsidy and funding or free services, more resource/availability, support with transport/mobility to get out e.g., Dial-a-ride.

Some ideas about what could be done to help with this could be done to help with this were discussed. People said that individually this requires will power and self-motivation to leave the house and go out and meet people. Friends and family can help by going out of their way to contact others and going with friends and family can help to engage with services.

It was also stated that people may prefer to meet in their own community setting help overcome cultural, language and religious barriers. This helped people to talk more openly and was a good way to promote group work.

The voluntary sector often assists this process by encouraging people to use and grow their skillset. This may include activities such as cycling or knitting.

‘Knitting is a great therapy as you do it bit by bit, step by step and become motivated to finish it...’

‘Cycling makes us want to get up in the morning to progress and do more’.

Social care and Healthcare can help with fear to engage with people in authority, by building trust. The impact of this is more in disadvantaged areas. It was mentioned that it is important to ensure no that there is no division or disparity in provision across the borough.



There were three facilitated tables, with a mixture of community groups involved in the discussion.

### **Task 1: Identifying barriers to physical and social activity**

Women and girls:

- Women need safe, private spaces with a real fear of being watched
- Cheap, affordable childcare (creche at activities?)
- Carers also are a group that is under-catered for, but needs the most support
- Sports activities are often competitive and thus alienating. What casual physical activities are offered that people want
- Services targeting minority groups need to be culturally competent
- Buddy system with extroverted volunteers
- Young people worried about looking ‘cool’ – will only participate if their friends do (self-exclusion)

- Young people need more 121 encouragement and a personal touch
- Time is a big barrier, and need to make sure activities are fun
- Actively Merton-esque Pokémon Go was really popular
- Need to create groups for young people with similar interests to get together, facilitated by extroverts/big characters
- Weather can change moods.
- Psychological (embarrassment, fear, frustration/disappointment),
- Attitudinal (feeling in control of their condition, PA perception, older age perception), and motivational.
- Lack of time,
- Social influence,
- Lack of energy
- Lack of willpower
- Cultural and religious barriers
- Transport
- Weather
- Fear
- Self-doubt
- Lack of self-confidence/shyness

#### Older people:

- Fear of injury
- Lack of skill
- Lack of resources (e.g., recreational facilities, exercise equipment).
- Fatigue,
- Mobility problems
- Breathing issues caused by the weather.
- Community engagement barrier, a lack of trust or Distrust of planners
- Believing their thoughts and opinions won't be heard.
- The fear of the unknown
- Inaccessible tech
- Lack of awareness of programmes and services in the area
- If the current engagement is low for a service provider, most are reluctant to use it.
- Location
- Finding it difficult to immerse themselves in group activity.
- Money/ finance
- Mental health
- Language barriers

#### People with disabilities:

- Cost is clearly biggest barrier, both in terms of participating directly, but also getting to the activity (particularly for less mobile)
- Dial-a-ride is ineffective
- No free weight management opportunities in Merton

- Social Prescribers a critical resource
- Funding made available to VSCE needs to include overheads and costs for transporting service users
- Grants need to be light touch
- Need more opportunities for different community groups to advertise to one another – **joint community voice forum social media list**
- Support network- sometimes going with friends and family would help to engage in services. If they don't have that support network, this can lead to isolation
- Parking
- Overcoming Negativity
- Aversion to sympathy – real friends are needed not sympathy

**Task 2: What are the facilitators/enablers to being socially and physically active for your cohort/target group i.e., what helps people to attend?**

- The main enabling factors were related to motivation (autonomous or controlled), attitudes, self-regulation, and performance accomplishments.
- Free transport
- Tailoring activities to disabilities or for cultural accessibility
- Choosing appropriate settings for the community- making it more comfortable
- Having a WhatsApp group for a particular service -helps befriending – increases communication between group members and organisers.
- Advertising services appropriately using a variety of marketing mediums.
- Accessibility – how are facilitators making it easy to access services?
- Location – easy access and parking, bus / train routes etc.
- Childcare

**Task 3: What could be done to help with this?**

Individually:

- Will power and Self-motivation,
- leaving the house and getting out.
- Go out and meet people
- Empowerment (including empowering themselves, creating a drive to go)

Friends and Family

- Go out of your way to contact people, greetings, hugs
- Support from family
- Childcare

Community:

- People may prefer to meet in their own community setting
- Group work
- Talking
- Support networks

VCSE:

- Encourage people to use and grow their skillset

- Activities such as cycling, make us want to get up in the morning to progress and do more
- Knitting – motivated to finish it. It's a great therapy as you do it bit by bit, step by step.

Local Authority/Social care and Healthcare/NHS:

- Trust building – there is fear of engaging with people in authority - the impact is more in disadvantaged areas
- Ensuring there is no division or disparity across the borough. The whole borough should have access to the same facilities and support.
- Engaging community leaders
- Education – i.e., Tech training, self-management courses
- More funding and resources to help encourage uptake of services
- Support from health and social care worker
- Subsidy





# Analysis of insights

## Insights shared by older people

**Impacts of the pandemic** - the lasting effects of the lockdown, social isolation and the risk of infection, was a significant contributing factor in people's ability to engage in physical and social activity in the community. People feared accessing indoor community spaces and mixing with others. This meant that opportunities for activities were reduced, and it became a learnt behaviour, continuing beyond the pandemic. The changing rules around social mixing was also a source of confusion which meant that people would refrain for most activity rather than falling short of the rules.

**Social connectivity** - the opportunity to meet other people was a significant driver, for older people accessing physical and social activity. Some people reported that meeting neighbours (people in the local community) and meeting new people made physical and social activity more engaging and encouraged them to get out of the house, counteracting feeling of loneliness and isolation.

**The fun factor** – some people reported that they were surprised that physical activity was fun. Making physical activity fun was an integral motivating factor. Without this, people associated physical activity with feeling of physical challenge, inadequacy, and discomfort. This was not the same for social activity and older people were more willing to connecting socially as the fun factor was implicit in activities with a primary social focus.

**Cultural links** – some communities reported that physical and social activities, that aligned with their cultural background such as African dance or Tea dances enhanced their feeling of fulfilment and pleasure. These activities also bring together communities of similar background which facilitated a sense of community and togetherness.

Participants from the Black Caribbean and African community commented on the cultural dance sessions evoking a sense of *nostalgia* "*This workshop has evoked the essence of Ghana for me. It's like a cultural journey. (age 64)* the session became more than physical and social activity but piqued historical and cultural voyage, which evoked feeling of belonging and warmth.

**Feeling of belonging** – where people reported feelings of isolation and loneliness, group based physical and social activity gave a sense of safety. This supported individuals to connect with their local community organisations and neighbour. This then become a primary benefit of the activity. People realised how disconnected they had become once they were with people again. Creating local group-based opportunities for activity, would be welcomed by local people.

Psychological factors such as feeling of belonging will facilitate people ability and desire to partake in such activities. Especially when the group may have experienced factors related to ageing that impact on mobility and physicality *“Dancing has ignited a passion in my heart that I thought was long gone.”*

**Intergenerational connection** – an unexpected positive impact of the cultural dance activity was intergenerational connection. People reported that their grandchildren enjoyed seeing their grandparents dancing, especially after seeing their grandparents with limited mobility due to age and other health conditions such as arthritis.

The impact of intergenerational connection through dance was reported as a positive factor *“Mi family, di grandkids dem, dem love to see grandma movin’. Dis workshop, it mek me a role model inna di family.”* The sense that elders in the family were enjoy physical and caisl activity was appreciated by the wider family

**Transport and access** – the distance to the community activities was a significant consideration for older people. Having limited mobility meant that people would rely on buses rather than walking. Physical and social activity in spaces with good transport links, would encourage older people to attend - with the additional preference of singular buses journey rather than multiple changes. A hyper local approach to commissioning activities would ensure that older people would be encouraged to get involved.

## Insights shared by women and girls

**A protected space** – women reported that female only space was integral when partaking in any activity, especially physical activity. There was also a preference for having female only social activity a safe space where women and their children could engage, have fun and be with the others. Women reported the need to have protected space for women only, in order to feel comfortable to exercise. Having mixed, large and open sessions was a barriers for women getting involved.

**Opportunities to bring children** – having no childcare was a barrier to women engaging in physical and social activity. Women that had children that were not school age, meant they needed to bring their children to activities. It was reported that even though some activities did not exclude children, that there was nothing for the children to do. This meant that the mother could not fully get involved with the activity. Women reported that having Lego and toys kept the children engaged and the space was more inclusive.

One participant was quoted as saying: *“I attended the TPA picnic and feel good event with my 2 young children. It was great to be in the fresh air surrounded by flowers and greenery. I particularly enjoyed the gentle stretching and movement and my kids joined in too. I made new friends, and since kept in touch with young mothers like myself. Thank you to all that planned this special event for us.”*

**Activity type** - women reported enjoying physical activities session when it was overlaid with health information and health related self-management. Social and physical activity was greatly enhanced by being able to bring children and having opportunities to connect with other women and families.

There seems to be preference for activities such as aqua fit, dance and yoga. It was reported women only team walking was a preferred activity. This could be due to enhancing feelings of safety and or community. Women reported group walking as a preferred activity at the family's healthy brunch this provided opportunities for women to bring the children to activities making it more accessible.

**Cultural links** – women attending groups felt further connected with others in the group, along cultural lines such as sharing the same religion, ethnicity, and cultural background. This correlated with women requiring safe spaces where they could feel understood and heard.

**Access to toilet facilities** – women with young children reported that the lack of toilet facilities when travelling, meant they could not attend community events with young children. The ages of 2-3 when children are learning to use the toilet and transitioning out of nappies, meant that lack of toilet facilities on the journey to the activities increased anxieties of travelling with young children and was a barrier for women with young children. We know women also experience issues with incontinence and this is a factor in their decision to travel.

**Isolation caused by lockdowns** - the impact of the isolation, brought about by the lockdown during the pandemic made women feel disconnected with their local communities and many needed to be encouraged out into the community to partake in physical and social activity. Women reported a fulfilment after the activities and recognised the need to engage more especially after the challenges of the pandemic. One participant said: "After being couped up for so long due to Covid-19 I had not ventured far from my home. The TPA well-being day was a great way of socialising and learning all in one"

**Stigma associated with incentives** - some families reported that there were additional challenges around food poverty, and they felt stigmatised when food vouchers are offered as incentives. However, when they were partaking in the social and physical activity where there was food and refreshments, there was no stigma attached and meant that the women could socialise, free of judgment, and feel more comfortable.

## **Insights shared by people with a disability**

**Lack of accessible activities for people with disabilities** – we heard physical and social activities are not promoted to specifically reach people with disabilities with the exception of learning disabilities. People reported that reasonable adjustments were often not made for them, for example an expectation to join and pay for the duration of a course

rather than pay per session. Paying per sessions would provide the flexibility needed if the person was only able to attend 25% of the sessions.

**Transport challenges including the lack of disabled parking** – people reported a lack of disabled parking, which was a barrier to accessing physical and social activity. It meant that people would reevaluate attending the activity because it caused additional stressors such as worrying about finding parking.

**Health issues** – people with a disability had other health conditions which meant they were more complex challenges intersecting at the same time.

**Physical disability and Learning Disability are different** - activities for people with physical disabilities are often merged with people with learning disabilities but they're not the same and have very different needs.

**Accessibility** – whether there is wheelchair access at venues was a factor for people utilising community spaces. People also reported that buddies and carers were also seen as an additional person, meaning there was an expectation of additional payment, rather than a support mechanism for the person with the disability.

**Mental health issues** – people with mental health issues were less likely to disclose the nature of their disability and the way it affects them due to the stigma people with mental health challenges face by society. There was a need to actively support and promote physical and social activity for people with mental health difficulties that was welcoming and accessible, without the expectation of disclose. This is so people felt safe and did not need to explain how their disability impacts, them and having a recognised disability was enough. It is widely recognised that people with 'unseen' disabilities are met with the expectation that there is a higher threshold to meet when accessing community provision.

Disability barrier: Speaking from a point of view of someone diagnosed with Dementia, Mi said: "People may suffer with low mood, it's hard to get back out there once diagnosed. Other's may struggle with income; the cost of living, they may have had to stop working and still have dependent children." He mentioned that "people are wary to tell others they have Dementia, which could also stop people from joining."

How could this be improved?: M, highlighted that it was after his diagnosis that the 'Living with Dementia' team created a welcome pack with lots of leaflets, presenting him with all the opportunities around the borough, that can help in one way or another. - This included Wimbledon Guild. He is now invited to speak at seminars, to let others know of coping mechanisms and to spread the word for useful organisations.



## Evaluation and learnings

**Connecting with diverse communities** – The funding opportunities meant that NHS SW London and Merton Council, enhanced existing or developed new connection with grassroots communities. Reaching increased numbers of diverse communities and those that are disproportionately impact by health inequalities.

**Gathering insights during activities** – Inviting the VCSE to gather insights about people experiences, alongside delivering a programme was a reciprocal method of engagement far superior to the traditional form of ‘parachuting’ in to gather insights. This approach meant, that the funding reinforced capacity building of the local community organisation in Merton and provided additional resources for the local community.

**Building trust and relationships** – The investment of time and resource in the local community has meant that trust can be built and developed from an equal footing, which counteracts the institutional stigmatisation of communities who experience health inequalities.

**Demographic information collection** – while demographic monitoring forms were provided to successful applicants it’s clear that they were not always suitable for the activities being undertaken. This means that the demographics have not been recorded in a consistent way and therefore cannot be accurately reported.

**Further efforts to are needed to engage people with a disability** – while many successful bids outlined they would be able to engage people with a disability, few recorded they had spoken to people with a disability. In future any grants funding for insights and activities will prioritise funding where methods are designed specifically to engage people with a disability. We will also encourage organisations who work regularly with people with disabilities to apply.

**Standardisation of insight** – while the methods of insight gathering have resulted in rich insights being collected, more consistency in questions asked would have supported quantitative data analysis. Going forward we will consider using further questionnaire templates for participants to complete, but in a way that does not detract from the conversations needed. We will explore co-producing this with organisations taking part. It was recognised that there was value in diversity of insight and thought. Having a non-standardised approach to insight collation meant, that it was more challenging to draw comparison between the organisations target groups. This would have enabled more sophisticated analysis of the insight and correlation of the evidence.

**Sharing impact and influence with organisations** – While organisation were informed of the broader aims of this programme, we will liaise directly with each organisation before

the report is published to inform them of the influence and the far reaching positive impact their work and to acknowledge the delivery of the project and relationships they hold with the community.

**Promotion of community events** – The successful organisations used their own channels and contacts to share activities. A joint approach to sharing opportunities for activity may have enabled increased numbers of participants.

This report has been jointly developed by London borough Merton public health team and the Merton engagement team at NHS South West London.