

Community Connections Lewisham Gaps Report

2022-23



Introduction

Social prescribing is a non-medical approach seeking to improve people’s health and wellbeing by connecting them to wide range of activities, groups and services in their local area. Anyone can benefit from social prescribing, however it works particularly well for people with mild or long-term mental health problems, people with complex needs, people who are socially isolated and those with multiple long-term conditions who frequently attend either primary or secondary health care.

Community Connections Lewisham provides social prescribing in borough, as do organisations and the NHS. Last year Community Connections Lewisham worked with 5121 clients, successfully connecting them to groups and activities in the borough.

Each year Community Connections Lewisham produces the Gaps Report to highlight gaps both in statutory and voluntary sector service provision.

This year, we have identified gaps in six key areas:

- Support at home
- Making connections
- Getting out and about
- Health and wellbeing
- Jobs, learning & skills
- Advice and support

01 Support at home

Practical Tasks

In Lewisham, there is no free or low-cost handyman service. Handyman services help people with small repairs such as putting up shelves, changing light bulbs or fixing a broken chair leg. They also carry out safety measures such as fitting smoke alarms and grab rails. There have also been requests for a free service to help with moving or building furniture that does not require the client to have their own tools.



Since no Handyman service exists in Lewisham, many social prescribers refer to GoodGym. GoodGym volunteers will visit an older person and help them with small household or gardening tasks. However, the service that GoodGym provides is limited to those aged 50+ and volunteers are unable to help with skilled tasks such as fixing furniture or painting.

Sometimes people need extra practical help around the home, especially if they have difficulty walking or getting around. Often just a small amount of support can make a huge difference and helps people to retain their independence for longer.

As an alternative, social prescribers recommend companies on the Age UK Trusted Trader list, however with many handyman or cleaning companies charging £20-£30 per hour, the cost is prohibitive to most.

The lack of handyperson service in the borough can delay people being discharged from hospital. For example, a person leaving hospital may require handrails to make their property safe.

Even if a client has the financial means to fund a handyperson, there have been instances where it has been difficult to hire someone, for example the trader may deem the job too small to warrant their time or may not be willing to enter the congestion charge zone. Although some social housing providers operate handyperson services, these tend to be oversubscribed and have a waitlist.

The scale of this issue shouldn't be underestimated, a new report from the Good Home Inquiry has found that 4 million homes in England don't meet basic standards of decency – 2 million of which (1 in 10 homes in England) contain a 'category 1 hazard', meaning they are of such poor quality that they put their residents' health or safety at risk. The cost to the NHS of poor housing is estimated to be £1.4 billion a year.

There is a gap for free or low-cost gardening services and garden clearance services. Overgrown gardens can be a target for criminals as this might suggest that a vulnerable person may be living in the property.

Social prescribers also report difficulty finding low-cost electrician and cleaning services. Similar to Handyperson, even clients who can pay for these tasks may not be able to access them due to traders not wishing to attend for jobs they deem too small and unprofitable.

Food delivery

With the closure of Lewisham's Food2You shopping service in 2022, there is no food delivery service for those who are housebound. Although supermarket telephone shopping services are an alternative, these are subject to a delivery charge and minimum shop amount.

These services require clients to have access to a telephone and a bank card, which are further barriers to access. GoodGym will do food shopping for people over 50, however volunteers are not guaranteed and there is a spending cap of £30. There is an urgent requirement for a food delivery service to help people under 50 who have a limited income. There is also a need for a service to take people around the supermarket in a wheelchair.

Other needs for support at home

Furniture and moving properties

There are not enough places in the borough which can provide free or cheap furniture and white goods. The Donation Hub is brilliant but is increasingly overwhelmed and not everyone can travel to their premises. It also may not have everything that a client requires.

There are limited services for people who require free furniture quickly. Websites and apps such as Freecycle and Olio provide alternatives but rely on people having the technology to access these platforms, and often the means to collect items.

Social prescribers have struggled to find help for vulnerable clients who require assistance to move home, for example with packing and

unpacking. There is also no service to help with moving furniture or building furniture, that doesn't require clients to have their own tools.

Personal hygiene services at home

There is a need for more mobile hairdressers in the borough. Although Age UK Lewisham and Southwark provide toenail cutting clinics, there are no services providing free or low-cost home visits for toenail cutting.



02 Making Connections

Adults who are socially connected experience an improved sense of health and wellbeing over their more isolated peers. People who participate in meaningful social activities report feeling healthier, happier, safer.

Groups for adults under 50

There is a lack of social and activity groups in the borough for younger adults below the age of 50, and particularly for people aged between 18-35, many of whom prefer to mix with people of a similar age.

Weekend groups

Fewer groups operate during the evenings and on Saturday and Sundays. This limits choice for people who are working during the day but want to socialise after-work or at the weekends.

Wider choice of group activities

People have told us that they would like to join groups to participate in activities such as going to the cinema, going for meals together or playing pool. Free access to snooker and pool in a community space has been repeatedly flagged as a gap in Lewisham, alongside casual and open-access cricket clubs. There have been requests for free opportunities for people to make music together, such as open jam sessions.

At the other end of the scale, there is a need for purely social groups where people can come just to chat and meet others in an informal and relaxed environment. Groups like this are especially useful for people who find it difficult to relate to others or need to build their confidence or skills around interacting with other people in a supportive environment.

Supporting a wider range of people

There are limited options of groups for people who do not speak any English or are not fluent in English. There has been a call for more community spaces that bring people from different cultures together to socialise and participate in activities alongside each other.



There continues to be a need for more groups to support the LGBTQI+ community in Lewisham. There are also gaps in support for people with learning disabilities, particularly people with mild learning disabilities or those who have finished in education but are struggling to find employment. Lewisham Mencap and Ignition Brewery are doing brilliant work in this area; however, this area remains underserved.

Making your group more accessible

We would encourage groups to consider how they could become more accessible to people with an additional need. For example, a group could make some small changes to become more accessible to someone with a learning disability.

Befriending

Although several organisations in Lewisham offer befriending, the demand for this service vastly exceeds the provision. Face-to-face befriending in particular remains in short supply and many befriending services are oversubscribed with long waitlists. Community Connections Befriending for example reopened its referrals in August 2023 and now has 132 clients on the waiting list.

The Dementia hub used to provide Befriending for people diagnosed with Dementia, but this service has gone this year in the change of provider from Bromley Lewisham and Greenwich Mind to Alzheimer's society.



03 Getting out and about

Being able to physically get out and about in the local community helps people to retain independence and enhances their sense of connection and belonging. It also allows for people to engage in various everyday or leisure activities that improves their quality of life and overall wellbeing.

Accompanying or escorting people to access activities and errands

There is little help available for people who are isolated and have mobility needs. This includes people who require someone to accompany them when accessing various community activities or amenities, for example someone to push their wheelchair when they are out running errands.

Buddies for All does some brilliant work in this area, pairing both non-disabled and disabled volunteers together with disabled people, to access various social activities, however they are a small organisation and do not have the capacity to fully meet this need.

We know of one client who had recently been discharged from hospital and due to mobility difficulties, did not feel confident going out on his own to carry out errands or for walks in the local area. The client did not have any family or friends he could ask to accompany him and as a result was now isolated at home. Furthermore, his

inability to go for walks was hampering physical recovery from his operation.

There is a particular need for people to accompany patients to hospital appointments. Visiting the hospital for tests or a consultation can be a nerve-wracking experience, especially if people will be visiting alone, or have a condition that limits their understanding such as dementia or learning disability. Some people also require additional support with the journey there or navigating complicated hospital corridors on arrival. Having someone by their side to accompany them throughout their visit, can provide considerable relief and reassurance.

However this service is difficult to provide as hospital appointments can be last minute and during the day. Moreover there are confidentiality factors to take into account and the volunteers would need to be thoroughly trained and supervised to ensure they don't provide clients with health advice for example.



The introduction of a Travel Companion scheme could help people to maintain their independence and stay connected with community activities.

Support to access transport services

Adult social care frequently experiences difficulties trying to find transport to and from hospital and GP appointments for those who need it. Although statutory hospital transport options are in place,

clients report having to wait hours both before and after appointments to get picked up and sometimes hospital transport does not arrive in time leading to missed appointments.

Wheelchair users tell us that they often cannot access transport services because there is no help to get them into their wheelchairs at home and in/out of vehicles. Similarly, we know of a client who could not get help to carry their walker up and down the stairs of their building, which meant that they were unable to use available transport. Furthermore, there is lack of accessible transport for day trips such as seaside trips or visits to nearby attractions.

For people who require additional support to travel further afield, there is a need for inclusive and low-cost community day trips. One client who has a disability struggled to find a community day trip which would allow her personal assistant to join her for free.

04 Health and wellbeing

Mental and emotional health, physical health and a healthy lifestyle all contribute and are important to a person's health and wellbeing.

Mental health support

Demand for mental health services and support continues to rise. Mental health services in England received a record 4.6 million referrals during 2022 (up 22% from 2019), with the number of people in contact with mental health services steadily rising. All mental health support services in Lewisham have long waiting lists and demand exceeds provision available.

Even after being discharged from NHS services, many people request ongoing one-to-one support. Unfortunately there are few free or low cost options for continued one-to-one support in the borough.



There is also a need for culturally sensitive counselling in the borough, long waiting lists exist to access this through the NHS. Bromley, Lewisham and Greenwich Mind have partially filled this gap by providing group support through their Culturally Diverse Communities Project, however more support is needed.

05 Advice and support

Many clients have unresolved issues or questions about debt, benefits, immigration, housing, family and employment. The provision of free, easy-to-access, high quality information and advice at an early stage, can prevent minor issues from escalating and improve the health and wellbeing of the individual.

Advice Lewisham provides help with a wide range of issues for Lewisham residents including benefits, debt, rent arrears, employment and consumer issues. However, like many advice services across the country, the service is stretched and often closes for referrals at short notice due to high demand, leaving many vulnerable clients without support.

There is also a gap for services that can advise on complex housing and legal issue, especially for people who don't qualify for free advice due to having a middle income or savings but cannot afford to pay for professional legal help.

Form filling

While some organisations offer help with filling in forms for people who struggle to do this themselves, form filling remain a significant gap in the borough especially for documents such as passport forms, transport forms and school forms. There is also a gap for suitable services to help visually impaired people complete forms.

Form filling providers face a huge amount of demand, with people travelling from other boroughs to access this sought-after support.

We have heard from services that many people are turning up with increasingly complex issues that need addressing in addition to form filling, which the organisations don't have resources or capacity to help with. Form filling services are chronically underfunded, The Advocacy Project through Sydenham Library (V22) closed this year due to lack of funding.

Long term Personal Assistant (PA) and Coach support

Sometimes people need help with practical, life admin tasks such as reading or writing letters, organising appointments or managing a bank account. Without this support in place, people are unable to manage their personal affairs or advocate effectively for themselves causing significant stress and anxiety. People who have a disability, long term health condition or lack digital literacy, are particularly underserved by the current system. For some clients, a paid PA service is not financially viable.

Social Prescribers have also highlighted the need for mentors or coaches to help individuals with soft life skills such as time management, problem solving and decision making.

There is also a lack of services for people who are deaf or hearing impaired. For clients who are visually impaired, support is available from Blind Aid however many come back after that support has ended requesting further help. More options are needed in Lewisham for clients with a visual or hearing impairment who require practical support.

Money help

Social prescribers have received several requests for money management support, including people needing help with ordering a new bank card, understanding bank statements and creating a budget. There are some organisations offering workshops on money management in the borough such as Christians Against Poverty but more needs to be done to support this client group.

Housing

Living in poor quality or unsuitable housing is detrimental to a person's mental and physical wellbeing. Housing problems are often difficult and time-consuming to sort out, with people having to navigate different agencies or organisations. Help with housing problems falls outside the role of Social Prescribers.

Housing Associations and independent advice services offer some help, but there is a gap for a specialist housing advocacy service. It can often be difficult to signpost clients to an appropriate service when they have a specific housing related issue, for example we heard from one Social Prescriber that there was nowhere to direct a client who was looking for support to downsize their property.

06 Skills, jobs and learning

There is a lack of places to send people for skill building outside of Adult Learning Lewisham. Social prescribers have also struggled to find free, in-person skills building courses for adults.

There is little employment support for people who are currently in (unsuitable) employment. Lack of support to find a new job can impact on a client's practical, financial circumstances alongside their mental health and wellbeing.

We are also aware of clients who have additional needs or limited digital skills who require assistance with maintaining communications with HR departments or recruitment agencies for job applications. For example, this may include requests for help with sending emails, CVs and documents. In these scenarios clients require an accessible device and someone to teach them how to use it. This gap is partially met by Catbytes who can teach people to use devices and develop their digital skills, however their support is not employment specific.

07 Areas in Lewisham

The main centre of activity in Lewisham is Catford, Rushey Green and Ladywell in the centre of the borough. It seems that the further out you go from this central point, the less groups and activities there are for people to access. The south of the borough has less provision than the north, especially Grove Park and Bellingham.



08 Volunteers needed



Many of the community groups delivering services to improve the health and wellbeing of Lewisham residents rely on volunteers.

During the height of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, many people volunteered their time to help community groups. Since then, as people have returned to work and other commitments, organisations are once again struggling to recruit volunteers. Lack of volunteers means that some services are experiencing increased waitlists, for example befriending organisations which rely on volunteer befrienders.

We would encourage anyone reading this report who can volunteer their time to check out the opportunities featured on Lewisham Local's volunteer webpage: <https://www.lewishamlocal.com/volunteer-opportunities/>

Summary of gaps in Lewisham

Handyperson

Transport services

Food delivery

Groups for under 50s

**Free or low-cost
gardening, electrician,
cleaning**

Weekend groups

Form filling

**Groups for people who
do not speak English**

PA support

**Groups for LGBT+
people**

**Furniture and moving
services**

**Groups for people with
learning disabilities**

**Personal hygiene at
home**

**Community mental
health support**

Escorting to activities

Coaching for soft skills

Summary of gaps in Lewisham continued

Money skills

Complex housing problems

Free, in-person skills building

Help finding a new job for those already in a job

Digital or communication support for people who need to interact with HR teams or job agencies

Can **YOU** fill a gap?

This report has highlighted gaps in services across Lewisham. If you are a business or community group and feel that you can fill a gap, please contact me.

Similarly, if you live, study or work in Lewisham and know of a gap not mentioned in this report, please let me know.

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