

2024-25



Community Connections
Lewisham

Gaps Report 2024 - 25



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COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS
LEWISHAM



Help at home

There's plenty of evidence showing that being able to stay independent at home has a big impact on wellbeing, especially for older adults. Living independently helps people feel more in control of their lives, gives them a sense of purpose, boosts self-esteem and lowers the risk of loneliness and depression.

Right now, there are gaps in the support available to help Lewisham residents remain independent for longer. Some of the most practical services that could make a real difference include:

- Free/ low-cost carpet cleaning service
- Free/ low-cost support with cleaning and making the bed
- Support for reading letters (aside from a Personal Assistant, which is usually expensive and beyond the means of most clients)

Investing in these simple but vital services, will empower residents to live independently for longer, stay connected and improve quality of life.



Handyperson

A handyperson service offers people extra help with small, practical household tasks, to make life at home easier and most importantly, safer.

Lewisham does not have a dedicated handyperson service, and this absence has been consistently identified as a gap by social prescribers and other professionals for many years. The need for such a service is evident among residents, many of whom would benefit from the help provided by a reliable, trustworthy and affordable handyperson service.

A social care professional said: *The handyperson issue has been a problem for some time, and we desperately need an affordable, reliable provider to support our residents.*

Moving house

There isn't a low cost or free service that helps people with moving their possessions to a new place, this can particularly be an issue for people with mobility difficulties or learning disabilities.

There are services that charge to remove old/unwanted appliances, but there are no services that do this for free (particularly helping people take heavy items down the stairs).



Help to get around

Currently there is limited provision for individuals with additional needs who require support to access the community. This includes people who need assistance to participate in local activities or use amenities.

A Social Prescriber highlighted the experience of a client who is housebound and uses an assistant-propelled wheelchair. The client would not be able to get out on their own without an assistant-propelling their wheelchair. There are no services that provide this, other than Personal Assistants which can be unaffordable.



There's also a clear need for companions who can go with patients to hospital appointments, making the experience less stressful and more accessible.

A social care professional said, *"I often have patients/residents that require support to access the community or to accompany them on appointments."*

Some Lewisham residents would benefit from gentle support to increase their confidence in moving around the community. At present, there is no service designed to help people who would like to go for a walk or run errands but feel uncertain about their mobility. Often, only a small amount of assistance is needed — such as having an arm to hold — yet safeguarding and health and safety requirements make it difficult to provide this informally through volunteers.

There is also a clear gap in services for those who remain housebound, whether due to ongoing health concerns or reluctance to leave their homes following the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing reliable support in these areas would alleviate loneliness and foster a greater sense of inclusion.

Befriending

Although befriending services exist in Lewisham, demand by far outstrips supply and there are often long waiting times to be matched with a volunteer. Most befriending services in Lewisham provide telephone befriending, however there is a large demand for face-to-face befriending support which few services offer.

A professional told us, “I think we all know that this has been problematic for the last 1-2 years – particularly those older people who are housebound. They are lonely and wonder if a service could ever be provided where a person can visit the person at home and simply spend an hour or 2 chatting and having a cup of tea – an opportunity to maybe indulge in a creative activity or listen to a programme together. Just simple company.”

Community Transport

The lack of a comprehensive community transport solution was raised several times as a gap. This includes- physical assistance to access transport, transport for group outings and financial solutions for individuals unable to access transport due to rising costs

There were calls to revive a model similar to the former Voluntary Services Lewisham (VSL) transport service, but with paid staff rather than volunteers. This would distinguish it from the current volunteer-led Community Connections Transport service and could provide greater sustainability.

Social Prescribers and other health professionals also suggested exploring a membership model, where residents contribute through a subscription, helping to ensure the service's viability.

In addition, there were calls for broader initiatives to encourage car-sharing and to expand the use of minibuses with paid drivers. Such services could support older adults in attending local groups, day trips across London and hospital appointments, thereby reducing isolation and improving access to essential services.



Advocacy and advice

A continuing challenge in the borough is the lack of face-to-face advice services. Much of the current provision is delivered remotely, either over the telephone or online, which does not meet the needs of everyone. For some residents, particularly those who find digital or phone-based support difficult to use, in-person advice is essential.

Libraries across the borough have highlighted a significant gap in support for residents struggling with utility bills and the red tape and bureaucracy that often surrounds them. This includes members of the public who lack the confidence to contact utility providers by telephone or letter when paperwork is incorrect. Another common issue is people lacking the digital skills to complete forms.

In many cases, people turn to their local librarians for assistance. While librarians are often willing to help, these enquiries can be time-consuming and typically fall outside the scope of their roles. This places additional pressure on library staff and leaves residents without a dedicated service to meet their needs.

One example shared involved a client who suspected that her internet provider was charging more than the agreed amount. She sought advice and advocacy, but the Social Prescriber supporting her was unable to identify any service offering specific guidance on internet contracts or billing disputes.



This illustrates a broader need for accessible, specialist support services that can provide practical advice and advocacy on utility and digital issues, ensuring residents are not left to navigate complex and bureaucratic systems alone.

There are few services providing a digital photo for applications for people who do not have access to a smart phone or digital device. Similarly, few services providing digital literacy support for form filling, this is a common need for social prescribing clients.

Form-filling services in the borough have reduced. There is a need for services that can help people complete PIP, Attendance Allowance and UC50 forms which all take a lot of time. One professional said while looking at the Community Connections Lewisham Form Filling Factsheet, “I’m looking through the form filling sheet and there are a few services that no longer exist that used to do this”.

Another gap flagged was letter writing for people without English and/or literacy skills.

A professional also flagged that advocacy services were often not located in appropriate and easy to access spaces.



Mental health support

Affordable counselling or therapy that is long-term, culturally sensitive and able to offer home visits is missing from Lewisham, leaving many residents without the kind of support that would make a real difference in their daily lives.

Furthermore, specialist help for people living with hoarding disorder is hard to find. The lack of support in this area, means that hoarding disorder can have a big impact on an individual's mental health, safety and quality of life.



There is a clear need for more counselling and emotional support groups within the borough. While organisations such as Together provide support, more provision is needed.

Many clients express a strong desire for services that provide a “listening ear” approach, which is not currently available through NHS Talking Therapies. Groups like Simply Listening in Crofton Park and Diamond Ecoute provide some support, but more of this type of support is needed across the four Lewisham neighbourhoods. In practice, this type of informal emotional support often falls to social prescribers, highlighting the importance of developing dedicated services that can meet this need more consistently.

Immigration and housing help

Although services addressing immigration and housing issues do exist in Lewisham, demand is so high that waiting lists are often prohibitively long, leaving many residents unable to access timely support. More support is desperately needed for those without recourse to public funds .

The gap in housing help is particularly challenging for those seeking assistance in securing social housing, where delays can have a detrimental impact on stability and wellbeing.

We'd encourage community groups, housing providers, and funders to work together to expand capacity and develop more accessible pathways to housing support.

Help with money

There are few services that will support clients with budgeting. One Social Prescriber spoke about the lack of grant funds available that could help a client apply for garden furniture and garden materials to renovate their garden space. Improving the outdoor space would have facilitated better mental wellbeing and health for the client had these funds been available.



Low cost and free activities

In Lewisham, there are notable gaps in the availability of free or low-cost activities that support inclusion and wellbeing, particularly for groups who would benefit most from accessible opportunities. For example, there are a lack of social groups for visually impaired adults in the borough.

Opportunities for low-cost creative outlets like drawing groups, media workshops or drama groups for adults, particularly at weekends or in the evenings are limited, and usually come with a price tag which can exclude those on tighter budgets. A Social Prescriber told us about a client who wanted to attend a low-cost woodwork class specifically for women, sadly the Social Prescriber was unable to find a group like this in Lewisham.

Similarly, we heard from another Social Prescriber who struggled to find a low-cost ballet class in the borough, the average price was around £10, which was outside the client's budget. The Social Prescriber remarked that *"It would be great to find something cheaper to make it more accessible for clients!"*

When it comes to sports activities, lack of free swimming in Lewisham is a gap that gets repeatedly raised by our Social Prescribers and their clients. We have also noted that there are limited options available for parents looking for exercise classes timed to start straight after the school run.



In a 2024 report, the Mental Health Foundation found that almost half of UK adults (45%) say that being physically active improves their mental health and wellbeing. This demonstrates why it is crucial that a wide range of affordable sports and physical activity options continue to exist in the borough.

The ongoing success of Warm Welcomes at libraries, cafes and community spaces across Lewisham over the past few years demonstrates how valuable these types of initiatives can be. However, funding challenges mean they usually only run for a month or two, with little continuity during the summer months. Building on the success of the Warm Welcomes by creating more consistent opportunities for simple social connection across the calendar year, would help to ensure that everyone has access to free spaces where they feel included and supported.



Increasing the number of free or low-cost day trips for all ages to places such as the seaside or the theatre, would enable people to establish new relationships and further social connection.

Young people with autism often find themselves without suitable activities once they leave formal education and no longer have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This concern was also raised by professionals at Imago who highlighted the lack of services for autistic younger adults.

Resources for Autism and Autism Voice are two good examples of groups delivering services in Lewisham to support younger people with autism. Brighter Horizons also provide excellent day services for neurodivergent adults and those with learning disabilities. However, if someone has complex needs, it can be difficult to find appropriate support as most community groups are often unable to deliver one-to-one support or personal care within a group setting.

Parent-carers and older adults have limited opportunities for respite, and more widely, support for parent-carers outside of school settings is scarce. For many parent-carers accessing statutory support can be a complex, bureaucratic and emotionally draining process.

Groups for young people (age 18-30)

In response to the gap identified in previous years, the MUD group for 18-25s at Sydenham Garden was established through support from the Diverse Communities Fund.

However, at the time of writing, MUD has closed due to a lack of sustainable funding. Prior to its closure, Social Prescribers referred most of their younger clients to MUD.

The lack of groups specifically for younger people and the need for therapeutically informed spaces for young adults has become a significant gap in the borough.

Cooking classes

There is a substantial gap for practical cooking groups and cooking classes in the borough. This need comes up repeatedly not only through Social Prescribers but from other organisations supporting individuals in Lewisham.

Organisations attending the Pathways to Support Food Justice Task and Finish group noted following:

- the need for teaching how to cook nutritious meals to go in the freezer to make food last and how to cook the foods that come in food parcels
- the need to identify, collating and sharing low-energy recipes and resources
- the need to ensure people had freezers
- the need for an ongoing drop-in cooking course, not just a 6-week, time-limited course.

Although there are groups that discuss healthy eating and groups that provide nutritional guidance around specific health conditions such as diabetes, there is a gap for basic, practical cooking classes.

These cooking classes would be for people wanting to learn simple skills such as how to boil an egg or cook a healthy, nutritious low-cost meal. It was remarked that GCDA used to run cooking classes in Lewisham which was commissioned as part of the Be Inspired programme by Public Health, and now they deliver only in Greenwich, but this programme came to an end in 2022.

The Food Justice Action Project flagged that food access can be more challenging for the following groups:

People living in temporary accommodation who are newly housed in HMOs with limited social networks; older people; people living with a disability, young people, asylum seekers/refugees, working poor, the Latino community, Black African and Black Caribbean residents, young people in secondary school, people with accessibility needs, people transitioning from benefits to work and people who are housebound and require food deliveries.

While Adult Learning Lewisham offers some courses around certain themes and types of cuisine, and had offered a pilot low-energy cooking course at their centre, there was little take up. Conversely, it has been noted that when community groups run cooking courses on an ad hoc basis, those groups tend to be oversubscribed as they are run by a local trusted partner in the community.

This shows that local community groups have a vital role to play in addressing this challenge.

By funders and community groups working together to expand food initiatives such as food hubs, cooking classes and wrap-around support services — we can help ensure that no one is left behind.



Health conditions

Most leisure centres do not allow cancer patients who are undergoing treatment to take part in exercise. The only place a person with cancer can get a referral to is Better Gyms (but only one year after the client has finished active cancer treatment). Guy's Hospital Physio team also do referrals, but it is a long way for clients to travel to London Bridge from Lewisham.



Better Gym update that they are working to ensure the majority of its Healthwise (Exercise on Referral) team are qualified in Cancer Rehabilitation, enabling earlier and more effective support for individuals on their recovery journey. Once sufficient staff are trained, Better Gym plans to introduce a dedicated cancer referral pathway alongside its existing GP referral and Phase IV cardiac rehabilitation services. This new pathway is anticipated to launch from April 2026.

Community sector infrastructure

There is a recurring theme of the need for information to be shared more widely across the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

VCS professionals also suggested that offering small grants to individuals could provide seed funding to turn passion projects into reality. This kind of bottom-up approach has the potential to nurture new ideas, empower residents, and grow into fully-fledged community groups that strengthen Lewisham's vibrant voluntary sector.

Priority groups

There was felt to be a lack of services in Lewisham for the following groups

- Teenagers who are in the developmental stage to help them build habits and develop social skills
- Young adults
- People with a medium-level need
- Those that are housebound
- Single people of all ages especially single men
- Unpaid carers
- Those for whom English is a second language
- Older women living alone



Can YOU fill a gap?

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

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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