

# Healthwatch Wandsworth Assembly: Connecting with Our Communities

October 2024



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# Summary

## Background

The Healthwatch Wandsworth Assembly is held to give the Wandsworth community the opportunity to discuss new developments in health and social care. On Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024, the assembly focused on connectedness as 25.99 million people in England (49.63% of the adult population) often feel lonely, and this has an impact on their mental and physical health<sup>1</sup>. Speakers from local organisations were invited to share what they understood about what keeps people in the community connected and participants from the local community in Wandsworth were also able to provide their thoughts on the topic. This report aims to summarise the information presented.

## What we did

We heard from multiple speakers from Healthwatch Wandsworth and other local services. The assembly was welcomed and introduced by Stephen Hickey, the Healthwatch Wandsworth Chair. The speakers were:

- **Ije Amaechi (Community Development Worker at Sound Minds)** – Spoke about the vision and values of the service and how its work has impacted the lives of those in the community who are living with mental health conditions.
- **Michelle Rose (Service Manager at Citizens Advice Wandsworth)** – Identified the key issues affecting older people in Wandsworth and how the new initiatives, the CAW Cost of Living Project and the Health Inequalities Fund will be commissioned to tackle these challenges.
- **Josh Huckins (Policy and Review Officer at Richmond and Wandsworth Councils)** – Discussed the cost-of-living crisis and how the Access for All initiative aims to deliver the best concessionary scheme package that will allow for greater inclusion and access to Council services.

Attendees also had the opportunity to voice their thoughts on their own feelings of connectedness.

## What we were told

Individuals in attendance joined in the discussion and provide their insights on the topic of connectedness. Attendees were asked to discuss what they are currently doing to connect with people and what they have done in the past. They were also asked to describe what makes them feel connected to a space and why. Here are some of the key ideas that we were able to gather from the community, read on to hear more about what people had to say:

- On average, when individuals were asked 'how connected do you feel', most reported feeling only somewhat connected at the beginning of the event (3 on a Likert scale) with most people attending with the intention of meeting new people and learning how to connect with their community.
- 'Knowing people' was mentioned by almost everyone as a factor that makes them feel at home in a place. This suggests that being familiar with people in a space has a large impact on feelings of connectedness.
- 80% of attendees stated that they would go to an event if it had all the elements that made them feel at home in a place and it was two miles or less from home. Those that stated that they would still be unlikely to attend noted difficulties traveling as the main reason for this.
- People in the community connect with others by engaging in recreational and educational activities organised by local services.

# Introduction

Healthwatch Wandsworth regularly holds assemblies to create an opportunity for local people to hear about and discuss key developments in health and social care. On Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024, we held an assembly centred around the topic of how people can connect and prevent loneliness. This in-person event provided free food for local residents in attendance and highlighted initiatives by local services.

## Connectedness

**Stephen Hickey, Chair for Healthwatch Wandsworth, introduced the assembly and discussed why we were particularly focused on connectedness.**

25,99 million adults (45%) in England report feeling lonely either occasionally, sometimes or often. We know through research that loneliness can lead to negative health outcomes, and this has only been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis as people cut back on social activities to save money. Feelings of connectedness, however, have been shown to contribute to:

- Longer life
- Boosted mood
- Higher sense of purpose
- Positive wellbeing
- Higher sense of belonging and trust in people
- Better mental and physical health

**Ije Amaechi, a Community Development Worker at Sound Minds, spoke about the vision and values of the service and how its work has impacted the lives of those in the community who are living with mental health conditions.**

Key highlights:

- Community-focused, member-led approaches to mental health services.
- A shared space for hobbies that promotes connectedness within the community.
- Demonstrated positive impact with 80% of members noting improved mental health, social connectedness and sense of purpose.

Ije described how Sound Minds works with people from various backgrounds, with a focus on individuals experiencing serious mental illness and particularly those from Black communities, who face systemic discrimination within mental



health services. Sound Minds' mission is to create a supportive environment where individuals with mental health issues can express themselves artistically, build resilience, and regain self-esteem through a community-focused, member-led approach.

Sound Minds provides a range of creative programs, including one-to-one music lessons, community choir, drama groups, and regular performances. These gigs and exhibitions allow members to showcase their talents, gain performance experience, and connect with the broader community. Ije highlighted that these activities are more than just events—they offer members a sense of purpose and achievement. The next Sound Minds gig, scheduled for November 27th at The Magic Garden, will feature live music, spoken word, and special guests, inviting the community to engage and celebrate together.

The impact of Sound Minds is evident through member feedback, with a 2023 survey reporting that 80% of members noted mental health improvements, increased social connections, and a greater sense of purpose. Testimonials, such as one participant's renewed sense of creativity and confidence through the art sessions, underscore the transformative power of Sound Minds' creative approach to mental health support.

**Michelle Rose, Service Manager at Citizens Advice Wandsworth (CAW), identified the key issues affecting older people in Wandsworth and how the new initiatives, the CAW Cost of Living Project and the Health Inequalities Fund, will be commissioned to tackle these challenges.**

Key highlights:

- The cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on the growing complexity of social welfare cases.
- Cost-of-Living project being commissioned to offer short-term help through food banks, crisis grants, and budgeting support.
- The CAW Cost-of-Living Project aims to not only address but prevent health inequalities by improving access to welfare and legal advice.

Michelle discussed Citizens Advice Wandsworth's mission to support social welfare in Wandsworth amid rising living costs. CAW, a long-established charity network, operates with 45 staff and 75 volunteers. Their diverse team provides specialised casework and welfare benefits advice.

Michelle highlighted the growing complexity of cases as cost-of-living pressures continue, with people of colour and disabled people being disproportionately affected. CAW supports with a wide range of issues such as benefits, housing, employment and immigration.

For immediate relief, CAW's "Cost of Living Project" offers short-term help through food banks, crisis grants, and budgeting support. A dedicated team of six staff members provides residents with income maximisation guidance, advice on reducing expenditures, and support in addressing underlying issues like the benefit cap.

CAW also collaborates with the NHS South West London Integrated Care Board through the Health Inequalities Fund. This initiative targets asylum seekers, Black,

Asian, and other minority groups, LGBTQIA+ individuals, young carers, and socially isolated people. It aims not only to address but also prevent health inequalities by improving access to welfare and legal advice, reinforcing that both a stable standard of living and protected rights are essential for health and well-being.

**Josh Huckins, Policy and Review Officer at Richmond and Wandsworth Councils discussed the cost-of-living crisis and how the Access for All initiative aims to deliver the best concessionary scheme package that will allow for greater inclusion and access to Council service.**

Josh Huckins from Wandsworth Council presented on the Access for All initiative, an effort to reduce financial barriers and expand access to council services for Wandsworth residents affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Josh shared updates on the Council's current projects and outlined plans, emphasizing the Council's commitment to making local facilities and services more affordable and accessible.

Josh explained that Access for All provides free access to council gyms and swimming pools for residents receiving means-tested benefits. This initiative has already seen a high uptake, with 30,000 bookings from eligible residents by July 2024. Additionally, the Council has maintained its School Uniform Support Scheme, which last year supported over 1,000 residents by providing essential uniforms and supplies. Josh also noted that reduced-price tickets for community events, like the annual Battersea fireworks, have been introduced to ensure affordability for all residents, including those facing financial hardship.

Looking to the future, the Council aims to further expand concessions for eligible residents and to address practical barriers that can prevent access to services, such as limited childcare and transportation challenges. Josh highlighted the importance of adapting services to meet the needs of residents who may otherwise miss out on opportunities due to financial or logistical limitations.

## Discussion

At Healthwatch Assemblies, discussion between attendees is important and highly encouraged so that local people can share their thoughts and experiences. On 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024, we discussed:

1. The ideal place – what are the elements that make a place ideal for facilitating and encouraging connection; what makes a place 'feel like home'.
2. How we can connect – what have local people been doing, both in the past and presently, to connect with and help other people.

Participants were also asked to gauge their feeling of connectedness, and on average participants rated themselves at 3 out of 5 on a Likert scale.

# Topic 1 – The Ideal Place

When asked the question ‘What makes you feel at home in a place?’, participants largely noted themes encompassing familiarity with both the space and the people within the space. Additionally, important points concerning safety and inclusion were raised with people highlighting the importance of ensuring that events were considerate of attendees from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and those in the LGBTQ+ community.

Participants were then asked why these elements were important, here are the key themes mentioned:

- Familiar people (friends, neighbours, and family)
- Familiar and welcoming environment
- Good food
- Music
- Inclusive activities
- LGBTQ+ friendly
- Knowing what to expect from the event

Participants were asked if they would be likely to go to a place in Wandsworth if it was two miles or less from their home. Here’s what was said:

Why:	Why not:
Connections to local people and friends	Family and people I know not there
To meet new people	Feeling embarrassed
Easy access to facilities, advice & activities	I prefer my routine/familiar space
	Clashes with caring responsibilities
Inclusive of LGBT+ people, no prejudice	Fear of dogs/something that’ll be there
Welcoming and accepting of everyone	Not if it’s unsafe and unwelcoming
Sometime away from home	
Access to free/low-cost food	Travel disruptions/difficulty travelling
Reduced/free activities	



## Topic 2 – How we connect:

By asking attendees to identify ways that they have connected with or helped others, both in the past and present, we were able to understand that engaging in recreational and educational activities in the community fosters connection. Here are some of the ways people are achieving this:

- Volunteering for charity organisations
- Community social events
- Cultural and religious activities
- Local libraries
- Local choirs
- Art classes
- Walking groups
- Music festivals, events and classes
- Further education
- Yoga classes

# Conclusion and Recommendations

### From our speakers:

In short, we can see that local organisations are making efforts to combat the effects of loneliness in Wandsworth by creating opportunities for connection. Sound Minds has demonstrated marked success by providing a community-focused, member-led project that promotes connectedness through shared hobbies.

Other services such as Citizens Advice Wandsworth's Cost of Living Project have been able to address some of the underlying economic issues that are affecting individuals' ability to connect with their community. By introducing short term assistance through food banks, crisis grants and budgeting support, this project aims to ease the impact of the cost-of-living crisis for Wandsworth residents.

Wandsworth Council's Access for All project also has been helping to create opportunity for connection in the community by providing free access to local spaces

such as gyms and swimming pools and subsidising community events. This initiative is important as we have heard from attendees at our assembly that the main ways that they have been able to foster a connection with others is by attending events and partaking in shared hobbies in the community.

## **From the community**

Attendees presented their ideas around how we can better connect with our community, and we saw that:

- Familiarity with a space and the people within a space was a large factor in creating an 'ideal place' for fostering connection.
- Providing information, music and food were highlighted as important factors.
- Spaces that are inclusive of people from various ethnic backgrounds and sexualities/gender identities.
- Accessibility
- Activities

We also gathered that there are important factors that prevent individuals from accessing these opportunities to connect that encompass:

- Difficulties with travelling
- Anxiety about meeting new people
- Lack of network and social groups or familiar people, feeling disconnected.
- Not having enough time or space within their regular schedules and clashes with care responsibilities.
- Lack of diversity or not being accepting of everyone and strangers.

## **What next?**

There are a number of issues that organisations should consider when organising community events to further promote connection and increase engagement. The main ideas that we heard from the community encompass themes around familiarity, inclusivity and accessibility. We recommend that organisations should assess ways in which they are able to ensure that these points are considered, here are some example resources that may be helpful:

[Campaign Against Loneliness:-](#) Works to further understanding on loneliness and how it relates to other issues by building new evidence and synthesising existing evidence. Through this, they provide a strong voice on the need to tackle chronic loneliness.

[Social Prescribing and Community Based Support](#):- Part of the NHS Long-Term Plan's commitment to embed personalised care in the health and care system. Social prescribing works with the aim of connecting people to community groups and agencies for practical and emotional support. This is useful for helping individuals to access community services as part of their care and can be accessed by lonely and isolated people.

[The Proud Trust](#):- The Proud Trust provides useful information for LGBT+ inclusion and provides notes on inclusive language and visible cues that allow individuals to feel comfortable in an environment.

[The Congress Centre](#):- The Congress Centre has provided a 15-step guide to creating inclusive events which is useful for addressing the barriers mentioned by attendees around accessibility and inclusion.

## Become A Member

Sign up to become a member for free and receive our newsletter so that you can keep up to date with local health and social care news and our ongoing research projects and find out how you can be involved.

What do we offer our members?

We champion local voices, and tell you about:

**Events:** where you can meet other people, share experiences, and talk to decision makers in health care.

**Signposting:** to free opportunities, services, and community events.

**Volunteering:** to give back to the community.

**News:** keeping you updated on the latest news

[Sign Up Here.](#)

# Appendix

Share on the table the following:

Based where	Now: what are you doing to connect/help people?	Past: what have you done to connect/help people?
Fulham	This event, new people, sharing with people that I know	Stayed for dinner, met new people, combined teaching
Based where		Food, music and dancing
Fulham		Food, church
		Hobbies, watching shows
	Working with service users and families to monitor and develop services	I have worked with service users throughout my career
	Monthly tea party organised by re-engage for over 75, will go to the Older People's Forum	
Wandsworth Town Hall	HW/WCA + other charity roles	
Putney	Youth Participation/youth council/youth major	Worked with the community in a range of settings to provide support
Wimbledon	Several charities including Wandsworth Older People Forum, Group meetings	Organised community get togethers, social networking
Wandsworth	Deliver advice services, community engagement	Parent teacher association
Battersea, Clapham Junction	Health Inequalities Project	At uni, joined societies
Wandsworth	Help with Healthwatch Wandsworth links with St George's, involved in local community	Sure start – connecting parents with each other

	volunteering at the children's centre	
Wandsworth	Raising awareness about Macmillan Support, connecting individuals with health professionals	Worked for Healthwatch England
Wandsworth	I teach at Katherine Low Settlement with seniors and ESOL learners	Helped at hospital with young cancer patients/worked with parents with SEN children
Croydon	On GP practice committee (vice chair), Ukraine local support group, local political activist and role holder	Clinical Psychologist in NHS for 32 years
Wandsworth	Canvasser, local walking group, street parties and street WhatsApp group	
Northcote Ward	Healthwatch (enter and view), grandparent to local grandchildren	
	AgeUK volunteer, street WhatsApp. Local residents' association, support older neighbours, census manager, settled status applications, pension credit, attendance allowance, care home placement	Healthwatch Enter and View, Director of Social Services
	Working with the public sector, progressing programmes for financial inclusion	Worked in policy and engagement jobs
Southfields	Cultural, religious activities, befriending service	Trips to Battersea Park, Kew Gardens and Bletchley Park
Tooting Broadway	Links between different charities, community groups and grants	



Furzedown	Working with partners, communities to increase our understanding and operations	As now but on a lesser stage, less of seldom heard communities
Wandsworth	Events, networks to connect people and organisations, reaching out to others on what is available	Events, networks held focused on certain audiences and areas, helping those start their networks and collect funding/support
Wimbledon SWL	Social prescribing, link to local community, support	Wellbeing support, hand-holding support
Tooting, Wandsworth	I go to my local library	Art classes with sheltered housing residents/choir
Battersea Park Wandsworth	I talk to people a lot to encourage them to join the choir/come along to events	Presentations on age discrimination (the hidden prejudice in plain sight)
Tooting	EMHP, Recovery Café, prayer group at St Anselm's Church, doctor's practice	Library
Earlsfield/Wandsworth	Volunteer mental health rep with Healthwatch	In the past I worked as a counsellor and volunteered
Roehampton	Social food meetings signposting for help, health events, run a weekly health café, talking to people, walking group, meeting 3 times a week, reduce isolation, create friendships, support with cost of living and food bags	Music festivals, food, health events, art installations, giving qualifications, signpost to services, organise yoga to support people, music events for people to perform, bring services in to help people



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