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**A USER'S PERSPECTIVE OF DAY CENTRES
IN WEST KENT
REPORT ON AGE CONCERN FOCUS GROUPS
- first part of a review -
August 2009**

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August / September 2009

CONTENTS PAGE

Contents	Page
1. Acknowledgements	3
2. Introduction	3
3. Method	4
4. Findings	6
4.1 How did you hear about the Centre?	6
4.2 How do you get to the Centre?	6
4.3 What do you most / least like about the Centre?	6 -7
4.4 What help / support have you seen the Centre giving others?	7
4.5 Do you go to other activities during the week?	8
4.6 If you weren't able to get to the Centre, how would that affect you / your family / carer?	9
5. Inferences	9 -10
6. List of appendices	11- 12

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to say a big thank you to all those service users that gave up part of their day to participate so fully in all the Focus Groups. All our staff that took part in this exercise came away from these with a smile on their faces and with a better insight into what day care services mean for so many individuals.

We are especially grateful to the Chief Executives of Age Concern, their staff and volunteers who were extremely co-operative, friendly and welcomed us at all the places we visited. Whereas they could well have been suspicious of what we were doing they embraced this exercise fully and in the spirit of wanting to listen and hear the views of those using their services.

2. INTRODUCTION

In July 2009 the Kent Local Involvement Network (LINK) was approached by Kent Adult Social Services (West Kent) with a request to assist them in gathering the views of individuals who use day care services run by Age Concern in the west of the County. Specifically, the LINK was asked if it would carry out three pieces of work involving day care services which are commissioned by Kent Adult Social Services These three pieces of work comprised a:

- Series of focus groups involving users of Age Concern day centres in West Kent
- “Mystery shoppers” assessing the day centres and their services from the perspective of prospective recipients of day care services
- Survey of individual users and prospective users with regard to their expectations of future day care services

We were told that this exercise was to complement the research Age Concern had already carried out, and was to ensure that Kent Adult Social Services were putting the views of individuals at the heart of their commissioning process.

Before embarking on this project the Governors’ Group of the LINK sought and received an assurance that the results of this piece of work would not be used to the detriment of current day centre services, but, to the contrary, would be used to enhance and improve services. In doing so the Governors took the view that it would be best if the LINK independently funded and carried out this research as its value would be enhanced by so doing.

This report covers only the first stage of this project, which is that which relates to seeking the views of users in a series of focus groups involving users of Age Concern day centres in West Kent.

3. METHOD

Focus Groups are a good means of obtaining quality, as opposed to statistical, information from groups of individuals who can take part in a facilitated discussion on equal terms with one another around a series of 'focussed' questions.

A series of eight Focus Groups were held between 24 July and 11 August 2009.

The Focus Groups were held at Age Concern Day Centres at:

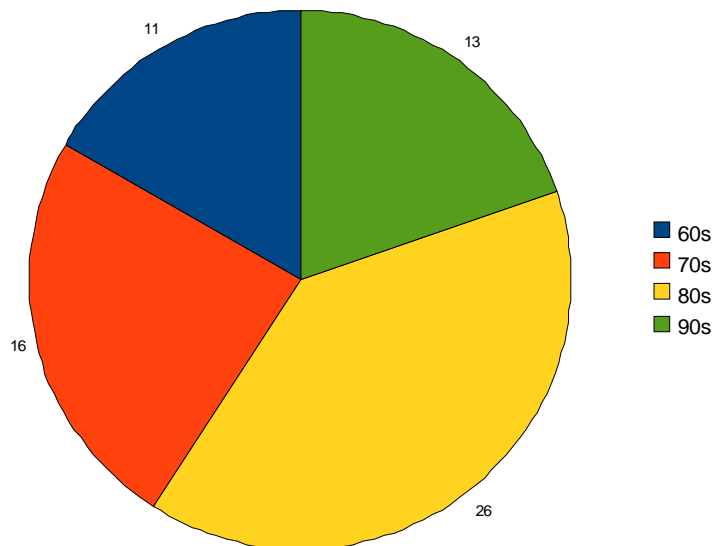
- Dartford
- Gravesend
- Maidstone (Harbledown House)*
- Northfleet
- Sevenoaks
- Swanscombe and Greenhithe
- Tonbridge (Town Lock)*
- Tunbridge Wells (Wood Street)*

**Note: The asterisk denotes those Centres which have satellite centres, but which were not included in the study. A map showing the location of the Centres and their satellites is attached in the Appendices to this report*

The three Age Concern Day Centres which did not participate in this study, were those at

- Darent Valley
- Southborough, the services for which are provided by Tunbridge Wells Age Concern, which did take part in the study
- High Brooms which has recently closed.

In total 77 individuals - 51 women and 26 men - took part. The ages of those taking part are shown in the pie chart.



Elayne Oxley, LINK Development Worker for West Kent, acted as Facilitator for all but one of the Focus Groups. Graham Hills, Director of Operations for the LINK, acted as the other Facilitator.

Notes of proceedings were taken by an independent note taker, namely, Mrs. Donna Jones for six occasions, Mrs. Carol Crisfield on two and Cate Boland for one. On five occasions, for the purpose of capturing people's views accurately, discussions were tape recorded. This was done with prior consent of all present. Only one group objected to having their proceedings recorded, so their wishes were respected and no recording made.

Note: Recording equipment was not available for the first two meetings.

Selection of those taking part in the focus groups took place when the facilitator arrived and from those present and willing and able to take part.

The Focus Groups were arranged to take place in a private part of the Day Centre, and, in one instance, a separate building altogether. No staff or volunteers of Age Concern were present or contributed to the discussion.

Some of the Centres could accommodate the meetings better than others. There were some limitations in a couple of the Day Centres with finding suitable space to allow a private discussion.

Also the meetings had to be arranged around a very tight schedule, with transport to and from the Centres at specific times. Also to enable service users not to miss out on their lunch or other activities they enjoy.

4. FINDINGS

A full note of each Focus Group can be found in the Appendices. The following attempts to summarise some of the main issues to emerge from these discussions.

The Groups deliberated on six questions, as follows;

1) How did you hear about the Centre?

Generally service users had no preconceived ideas about what a Day Centre was, although some thought they were for “old people”, not for them.

They got to hear about the Centre, mainly by word of mouth, or referral from a professional, such as a Doctor, Nurse, Warden, Hospital, Hospice or Social Worker. Few participants gained knowledge of the Centres from publicity generated by Age Concern.

2) How do you get to the Centre?

With the exception of the Maidstone Centre, most use transport provided by Age Concern’s own transport service. In Sevenoaks it appears the District Council provide a door to door service. We gathered that this service is also provided by some other District / Borough Councils) A few service users walked to the Centre, or had access to a car or use taxis.

For the majority of service users we spoke to it was apparent that they would not be able to attend the Centres without the use of Age Concern’s own transport service or some other door to door service. Lack of confidence / an inability to use public transport was cited as one of the main reasons

At one Centre it was pointed out that the vehicles can run virtually empty at times because, it was said, some users, when the vehicle turns up, cannot go by reason of illness or not feeling up to it.

3) What do you most / least like about the Centre?

Like most:

Social factors predominate – company, friendship being the most important. Getting out of the house and being able to do things was another. For some, a fresh, “home cooked”, meal was important, and at two Centres there was mention of a Lunch Club held on Sundays which was very much appreciated. All groups listed a range of activities, especially outings which they enjoyed.

Some mentioned computer and modern technology they have the opportunity to learn about, and would like more time to gain and improve upon their skills.

Like least:

Lack of cleanliness at one Centre (Tonbridge) was mentioned by one member of a Group (this referred to a rather heavy stained carpet) The mix of service users was a concern with some suffering dementia, which places heavy demands on staff / volunteers and users have to keep an eye out for them. The level of noise at another (Sevenoaks) but mostly comments / discussions were around what they would like more of, (some of these did vary from Centre to Centre however) such as:

- An ability to do their own cooking at the Centre
- Would like to form a choir
- To visit other Age Concern Centres (in the County and other parts)
- More activities / outings
- To have more time on shopping trips – getting out to the shops was something valued by many housebound people
- Setting up a monthly forum to be kept informed about activities in the Centre (some did already have this up and running)

Some comments focused on the impact of funding shortages, which resulted in “cuts” in trips / outings and staff shortages.

Access to some activities in the Swanscombe / Greenhithe Centre was restricted because the upstairs room was inaccessible for some service users, due to the nature of the building (a converted Oast House).

4) What help / support have you seen the Centre giving others?

A range of observations were recorded:

- Help with filling in forms / writing letters
- Arranging social service visits / referrals
- Arranging dental / hospital / GP appointments and visits
- Phone calls to service user’s GP
- Arranging delivery of medication
- Advice on money matters
- Talking over personal worries
- Advice on service change
- Help with installation of chair lift

- Advice on benefits
- Advice on tax and insurance on Death (partner)
- Counselling particularly bereavement

5) Do you go to other activities during the week? If so, what and what do you like / dislike about them?

For many service users of the Centres this is their only activity outside the home. For some service users it depended on support from family and friends whether they went out to the shops or took part in other activities. Some service users, in varying degrees, and depending on their mobility or support from family and friends, take part in a wide range of activities such as:

- Attending other clubs for older people, such as over 60s clubs, British Legion, Church groups, Fitness Groups
- Dancing
- Sports / leisure activities
- Outings with other clubs
- Feeling part of a village community
- Lunch clubs
- Volunteering eg National Trust
- Shopping with family
- Amateur dramatics
- Allotment
- Church

6) If you weren't able to get to the Centre how would that affect you / your family / carer?

Most groups spoke of the isolation and possible impact on their mental health if they were not able to use the Centres. At one Centre it was pointed out that many Housing Associations do not allow pets, and when a pet dies they are not allowed to get another. This can cause loneliness and depression.

For those with family and those engaged with other activities outside of their attendance at the Age Concern Centre, non attendance at the centre was less of a concern.

For some the ability to have a cooked meal was important, with them attending 5 days a week in most cases. So this would have a greater impact on them.

The loss of friendship and social interaction was important to combat loneliness. There were quite a number of happy stories where people who had lost touch with friends over many years had been reunited again. It was acknowledged by a number of users that it would impact on family / carers as attendance at the Centre provided a break for them too.

5. INFERENCES

Bearing in mind that the focus groups form only one part of a three part study one has to be cautious in drawing too many conclusions. It is however possible to draw some preliminary inferences from what our 77 users of Age Concern Day Centres in West Kent have told us.

For many users these Day Care Centres provide a lifeline to the outside world, enabling, as they do, human and social contact which helps stave off burgeoning loneliness. Those users that combined attendance at the Centres with other activities during the week, such as attendance at an over 60s club, engaged in volunteering, going on outings with other clubs, had less reliance on the Centres in this regard.

Surprisingly, few users found their way into these centres as a direct result of Age Concern's own promotional advertising. Many had heard about the service by word of mouth from friends and family or by direct referral by some professional worker. This suggests that Age Concern are hiding their light under the proverbial "bushel" and it may also suggest that it can be quite a random process as to who is able to find a place at one of these Centres. Also the image of Age Concern and these Day Centres led some users to believe that they are portraying a service only for very old people and that it was not for them. Whereas, we know from our Focus Groups that the age range is quite wide.

Users commented that some Centres, in terms of their buildings, were not fit for purpose. For example, it was pointed out at Swanscombe that some users are unable to benefit from some services because they are located upstairs and are inaccessible.

Transport is key to the operation of these Centres as most users, with a few exceptions, were utterly dependent on bespoke transport to get them to and from the Centres. As well as Age Concern's own transport services it seems that District / Borough Council schemes have a key role to play, particularly for those in outlying areas. It seems self evident that those services which have satellite / local centres appear to have less reliance on transport – see map at Appendix A which shows the location of Age Concern day centres in West Kent. We observed that nearly all of the Centres have problems with very limited parking. This makes it very difficult for service users who can still drive (or have use of a car).

Service users drew attention to the increasing number of their fellow users suffering from dementia to varying degrees. Issues around staffing, problems, users being able to mix / socialise one with another, came out of our discussions. It was apparent that users also form part of the caring regime for this vulnerable group and tend to "watch out" for them. The extent to which users felt they missed out because of this was not easy to gauge. However, it was apparent that some users are concerned about staffing levels, including the level of volunteers, and about perceived funding problems which meant that there were cuts to some social activities / outings which they had previously enjoyed.

There are some innovative schemes which some centres are providing to supply variation and an opportunity to cover the “long” weekends. The service users at Northfleet, for example, enjoy their Sunday Lunch Club because it is provided through the Kent Probation Service by younger people, resulting in them requesting Wii Fitness Equipment as a change from the usual Fitness programme.

It is interesting to observe that a number of our participants had previously been volunteers at the Centres. Many service users we spoke to said they would have gone to the Centres sooner, if they knew they would be useful. Many of those who had been volunteers then made that transition to being a full time service user in later years, and knew what to expect, and how much enjoyable and companionship people gained from attending.

In conclusion, we found high levels of satisfaction from the service users we spoke to although looking forward it was generally accepted that there was scope to make a good service even better given the resources and a desire to embrace innovation.

APPENDICES

- Location of Age Concern Day Centres in West Kent
 - A. Map showing location of day centres and satellite centres
- Age Concern notes from Focus Groups as follows (in the order visited):
 - a. Swanscombe & Greenhithe
 - b. Maidstone
 - c. Tonbridge
 - d. Gravesend
 - e. Tunbridge Wells
 - f. Dartford
 - g. Northfleet
 - h. Sevenoaks
- Chief Executives' reports on services provided – and future plans (those that wished to contribute – not all had time to submit one):
 - i. Swancombe and Greenhithe
 - ii. Maidstone
 - iii. Tonbridge
 - iv. Gravesend
 - v. Tunbridge Wells
 - vi. Northfleet
 - vii. Sevenoaks

- Brief observations made by facilitator, Elayne Oxley, and note takers Carol Crisfield and Donna Jones on day centres visited:

1. Swanscombe and Greenhithe
2. Maidstone (Harbledown House)
3. Tonbridge (Town Lock)
4. Gravesend
5. Tunbridge Wells
6. Dartford
7. Northfleet