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What People Told Us

Insights on the Future of Community Support in Elmbridge

April 2025

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Introduction

Introduction

Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) wants to improve how it supports communities.

We ran a listening exercise between January and March 2025 to understand what is important to people. This included hearing from:
- People who currently access, volunteer or work in the existing EBC community services – Centres for the Community, Dementia Services, Meals on Wheels, Community Transport and Social Prescribing
- Wider public
- Voluntary and Community sector partners
- Councillors

This paper sets out what we heard. Where appropriate, we have also used data to support what we have heard.

We want to test this with you. To make sure we heard correctly and that we haven't missed anything. Please complete the short survey and let us know what you think.

Who we heard from

We reached approximately 865 people though the listening exercise. This included:

- Five open public events (including one for 16–18 year olds)
- An event in each of the six Centres for the Community
- Focus group with Meals on Wheels volunteers and two interviews with people receiving Meals on Wheels
- Focus group with female Afghan refugees
- Staff listening events
- Voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations listening events
- Councillor's listening event
- Elmbridge Centres for the Community Alliance (ECCA) event
- Partner events –
  - St Peter's Community and Youth Hub, West Molesey
  - Claygate Youth and Community Hub
- Survey (plus review of previous survey responses)

The rest of the report is split into three sections.

- Building on strengths
- Challenges
- Future and actions

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Building on Strengths

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A wealth of local assets and strengths to build on

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Alongside data analysis, we heard about several strengths that could be built upon to help people thrive.

Volunteers. A large, mostly retired, population with skills, experience and time to contribute

Strong social networks where people know and support each other

Green spaces and parks

Active community and Voluntary Sector

Physical assets – libraries, pubs, EBC Centres for the Community, other community hubs

A prosperous area with good living standards

"The spirit of looking out for one another is what really keeps the community strong"

Main benefits of current EBC community services

Three key benefits were identified relating to current EBC services - Centres for the Community, Dementia Services, Meals on Wheels, Community Transport and Social Prescribing
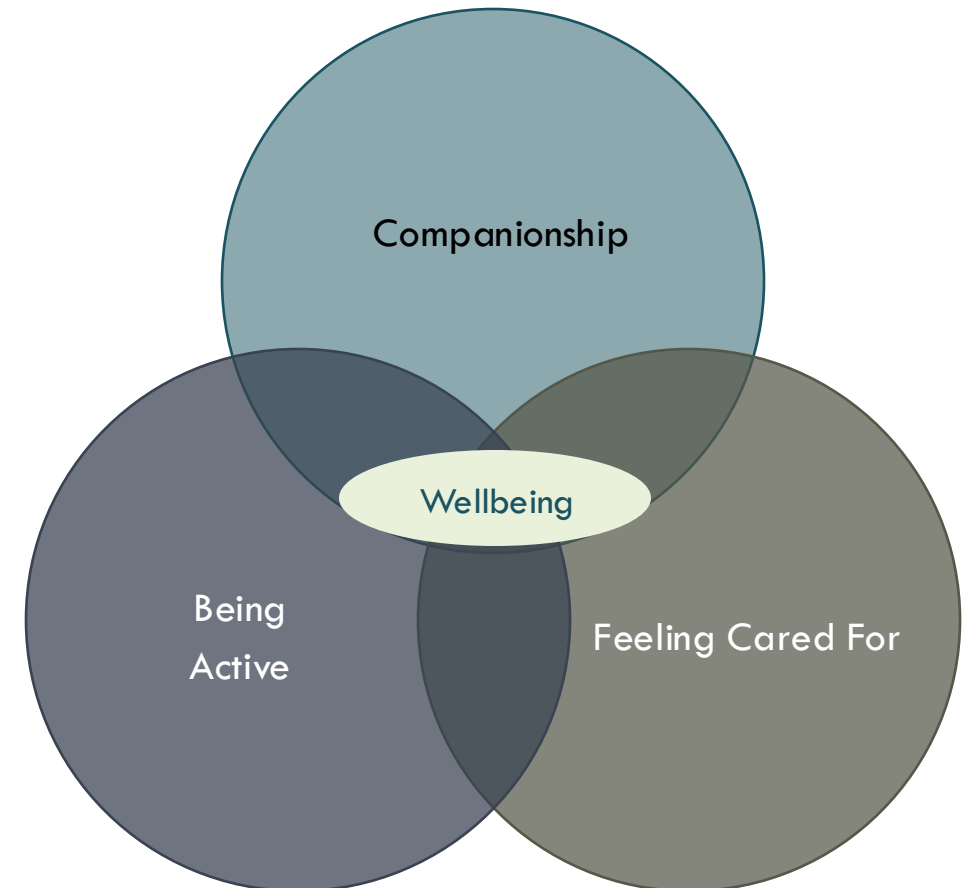
Companionship
The single biggest benefit that people talked about was having company and making friends. People talked about not having to eat alone. It helped to tackle loneliness, especially for those bereaved.

Being Active
People talked a lot about activities and things to do that kept their mind and body active. Including regular activities or one-off talks or events. Routine and having something to look forward to was important.

Feeling Cared For
People talked about being listened to and people noticing if they were missing and checking on them. This was especially mentioned in relation to staff and volunteers, making them feel cared for.

Main benefits of current EBC community services

In their own words, people told us how important the current offer was to them.

Companionship	"All start to come here [to the centre] for their own individual reasons but have found themselves making friends and sharing moments. It feels like a support system."

Being active	"Keeps brain active."	"Give structure to people's day."	"Exercise classes excellent."

Feeling cared for	"Staff remember your name, it makes you a person, not a silly old woman, you are seen".	"Staff are caring, nothing is too much trouble, I cannot praise them enough, they're my lifeline"	"Volunteers are a joy to see. It's not just 'here's your meal'. They make sure you are alright."

Factors that help achieve these benefits

There were five main factors which helped to achieve these benefits through the current EBC community services.

Volunteers	Volunteers are seen as a critical part of the service.
Accessible	Easy for people to get to the centres and accessible buildings for those with mobility issues. Proximity to where people lived was also mentioned.
Affordable	While there was some debate on affordability, people generally valued being able to have low-cost food, drinks and services such as the hairdresser and podiatry.
Spaces	Having a safe space where they feel welcome and comfortable. People valued having a place to go where they didn't get moved on. Some also talked about having a warm place to go, both for those who needed to save money on heating and those without any central heating. The long history of the centres being in the community was also highlighted.
Practical Support	Food is an important part of the current offer. This is particularly important for meals on wheels clients, some of which would be unable to make the homecooked food otherwise.

Factors that help achieve these benefits

Here is what people said.

Volunteers	"Not as much could be provided without them"	"Volunteers are very helpful and friendly"
Accessible	"As an elderly person with mobility difficulties I really value the opportunity to meet other people in a safe environment within my village and within walking distance."	
Affordable	"I can get a coffee for a very good price"	"Hairdressing: cheap, good service and caring"
Spaces	" Warm sociable centres that help lonely people"	
Practical Support	"I miss cooking, but its just not realistic now…making scrambled eggs at night is the most we can do"	

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Challenges

Key challenges in Elmbridge to address

Five primary challenges were identified during the listening exercise.

Information	People don't know what is available.	"There is so much out there if you only knew about it"
Join Up	View from the Voluntary Sector that there is a lot available in Elmbridge, but it is not joined up. Organisations don't know about each other and therefore cannot make the appropriate links.	"Avoiding duplication of services, with the council facilitating organisations to work together rather than delivering services directly"
Helping people take the first step	A key hurdle is getting people to take the first step e.g. walking through the doors.	"I spent two years convincing my father to attend a centre"
Travel	Public transport was seen as a significant issue, in terms of frequency, routes and cost. For those with access to a car, traffic was identified as a challenge.	"Buses are infrequent, often late and expensive. This stops families from accessing other services, and limits further integration"
Wait and time-limited services	Although not specific to community services, people shared concerns about significant wait lists and time limited nature of many services e.g. six week limited for social prescribers.	"There is a two-year wait for mental health services (CAMHS)"

People not currently supported by EBC community services

Financial hardship

Poverty is rising across the UK[1] - and it is affecting people in Elmbridge too.

Although Elmbridge is often seen as a wealthy area, the data tells a different story. More than 1 in 9 residents (11.7%) are experiencing financial hardship[2].

- 2.1% of people have very limited resources[2]. They often struggle to pay for essentials like food, heating, housing and transport.

- 9.6% are just about getting by. They can cover day-to-day costs but would find it hard to cope with an unexpected bill[2].

Many people—young and old, service users and non-users—talked about the cost of transport, activities, food and housing during the listening events.

Some parts of Elmbridge have more households facing financial hardship than others. But the reality is—every area has people who are struggling to afford the basics.

"We offer an emergency food store…it's to be used in really extreme situations…it's getting [used] more frequently and it's getting worse."

"People that we stumble across by accident are the real worries - fuel poverty - no food"

"Debt - you have everything you are entitled to but the numbers still don't work"

Who is at risk of financial hardship?

People in all parts of Elmbridge can face financial hardship. But some groups are more at risk than others.

Given that every area has people living in financial hardship, it is helpful to consider which groups are most at risk. Below is Elmbridge data for groups most at risk of experiencing poverty[1] (where known).

Disabled people and their households

23.3% of people live in households with one or more disabled person[3].

Children

13% of children living in poverty (after housing costs)[4]

Lone parent households

5.4% of households are lone parents[5]

Working-aged adults on low pay, insecure jobs and unemployed

- 2.6% of people are unemployed[6]
- 19% of employee jobs with hourly pay below living wage[4]

Ethnic Minorities

13.9% of people are from non-white ethnic groups[5]

Pension-aged adults

- 17.2% of people are over the age of 65[6]. Nationally, 1 in 10 pensioners live in poverty[1].
- Those relying only on the state pension, with limited savings, are most at risk.

Isolation and loneliness

Isolation and loneliness were major concerns raised during the listening exercise.

There is a range of factors that increase the risk of loneliness. These include[7]:

- **Young people** (16-24 years) are more likely to say they feel lonely. Life changes, pressure from social media, and money worries can all play a part.

- **Older adults** face loneliness due to bereavement, health problems, living alone, and shrinking social networks. 13.8% of homes in Elmbridge have someone aged 66+ living alone[8]. People we spoke to were especially worried about older men living by themselves.

- **People with long-term health conditions and disability** - Poor health can make it harder to stay connected to others.

- **Low-income** – Some can't afford to join in social activities, which adds to isolation.

- **Personal Circumstances** –Divorce, job loss, or bereavement can trigger loneliness. For example, we heard from people who started going to the Centres for the Community after being bereaved.

- **Marginalisation** - Ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants may experience loneliness due to discrimination, cultural differences, and social exclusion.

- **People in areas with poor transport links** - People living in rural areas or those with limited access to transportation and community resources are at higher risk. We heard that transport was a key issue in Elmbridge.

Mental wellbeing

Many people raised concerns about mental health during the listening exercise.

Nationally, 1 in 4 people in England experience a mental health problem each year[9].

According to the World Health Organization[10], mental health is shaped by many factors, including:
- Strong social connections
- Access to education
- Secure jobs
- Safe and supportive communities

No single cause explains poor mental health—it's usually a mix of circumstances.

While there's limited data for Elmbridge, concerns about mental health came up frequently in what people told us.

Mind[9] identifies groups of people more at risk of mental ill-health due to:

- Facing social inequality and disadvantage
- Facing discrimination and social exclusion
- Going through underlined traumatic experiences
- Differences in physical health.

Groups particularly affected:
- People who identify as LGBTQ+
- Black or Black British people
- Young women aged 16-24
- People experiencing overlapping problems including homelessness, substance misuse and contact with the criminal justice system.

"There are horrendous levels of poor [mental] health. People wanting to take their lives. Where do you signpost to?"

"For me, I feel mental health problems is one of the biggest challenges we face"

Homelessness and Overcrowding

Homelessness and overcrowding affect fewer people in Elmbridge than some other issues—but the impact can be severe.

Elmbridge has the 4th highest rate of overcrowded households in Surrey[11]. People told us about the practical strain this causes—like not having enough space for their children's schoolwork.

According to Shelter[12], an estimated 287 people were homeless in Elmbridge at Christmas 2024, including 133 children. This includes:

- Rough sleepers
- People in hostels
- People in temporary accommodation arranged by themselves, councils, or social services

The number of people sleeping rough in Elmbridge on a typical night in Autumn 2024 was 12[16]. However, Rentstart shared they were seeing a growing trend of people spending at least one night a month without accommodation.

People facing homelessness or overcrowding often also struggle with:

- Mental health problems
- Financial hardship
- Digital exclusion

The need for more social housing was raised at several public events.

Young people

Many people shared concerns about young people, and young people themselves spoke about the challenges they face.
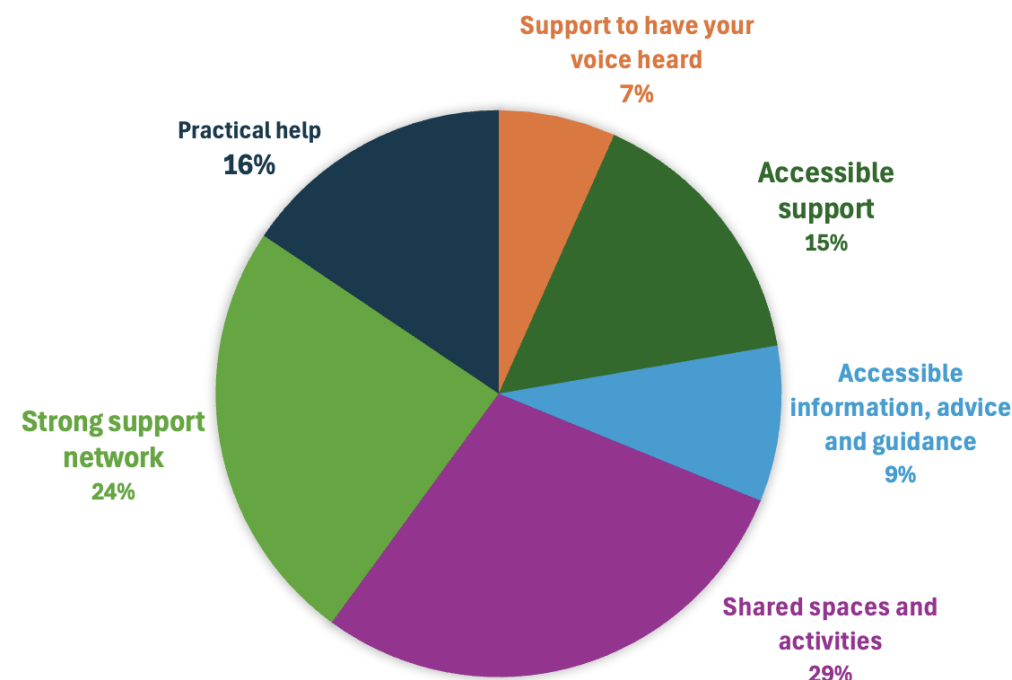
While they recognised strengths in their communities, young people also highlighted key issues:

- Mental health
- Lack of role models and mentors
- Difficulty finding work experience
- Not enough support for post-18 education (e.g. scholarships, bursaries)
- High costs for public transport and activities
- A need for shared spaces and free activities, like access to sports facilities

We also heard concern for:

- Children not attending school
- Support for young people with special educational needs and neurodiversity
- 19–24-year-olds – Key challenges included transition into employment, affording rent in a high-cost area and managing money.
- Care leavers

Which of these are most important to you?

- Support to have your voice heard 7%
- Accessible support 15%
- Accessible information, advice and guidance 9%
- Shared spaces and activities 29%
- Strong support network 24%
- Practical help 16%

Claygate Youth Hub – 11-19 years old

Minority ethnic communities

Data shows that minority ethnic communities in Elmbridge often face higher needs.

While the picture can be complicated, ethnic minorities typically have higher levels of need:

o They are more likely to live in low-income areas. For example, parts of Walton North and Molesey Heath—more ethnically diverse than most areas—show higher levels of need.
o Overcrowded or inadequate housing is also more common in these communities.
o Language can be a barrier:
  o 6.9% of Elmbridge residents do not have English as their first language[8]
  o 3.6% of households don't have anyone in their household whose main language is English[8]

We also heard some voices saying that the Council should not spend money on translation services.

Unpaid carers

7.3% of people are unpaid carers[8]

Research shows that many carers are struggling to afford daily essentials[14]. This financial pressure often affects their mental health and wellbeing.

Voluntary sector partners raised particular concern about young carers.

During the listening events, we heard concerns about the lack of support for parents and siblings of children with Special Educational Needs.

Challenges with
the current offer

Challenges with current EBC community services

People really value the Centres for the Community and other EBC community services—but they also raised some important concerns.

Service disruptions
- Some ad hoc closure of centres due to staff sickness
- The Meals on Wheels service sometimes faces challenges when volunteers aren't available or when clients have urgent needs

Reduction in opening hours
- Centres are no longer open on Wednesdays
- Opening hours have been shortened on other days

Fewer Activities

People miss the activities they used to enjoy—like day trips, which were mentioned often

Worry about the future

People are unsure about what will happen to these services and the community centres in the long term

Fewer people are using the services

People told us that less people are using the services than in the past

Reasons for challenges

People had different ideas about what was causing these challenges.

'Day Centre' stigma	Wider community still view them as day centers, only suitable for older inactive people. Rebrand and building updates requested.	"I don't use the Centre because I'm still active."
People don't know about it	People don't know about the centres and what is on offer. Ask for better advertising, information and promotion.	"Information is too disparate...you have to know where to look and it is not all obvious."
Red tape	People talked about 'overly zealous health and safety'. Viewed by some as being used as an excuses to reduce services.	"There is such a stringent health and safety policy it is almost impossible to help."
Not the right offer	Acknowledgment that the wider community may want a different offer. We also heard from a small number of people who didn't feel welcome at the Centres.	"Want services to tap into. Don't need a place."
Affordability	People mentioned the price of the transport service as a potential barrier for people.	"People can't afford to pay to get to the centre."

04

Future

Different Views on Community Support

People had a wide range of ideas about what "doing well" or "thriving" looks like in Elmbridge.

While the visions were all positive, they were also very broad—highlighting just how many different things people hope community support can achieve. We also heard differing views on what "need" means.

People saw community support as essential for helping people across a variety of areas, including:

Health and wellbeing	Careers / Jobs	Good, affordable, transport
All age support	Local services, including social housing	Financial stability and prosperity for people

Connection was an overarching theme

Connecting with other people was a core overarching theme and fundamental to thriving. Two elements help to achieve this – activities/things to do and shared spaces.

Connection to other people was very important. Whilst people wanted to connect with people like them (of a similar age and background), many people were interested in connecting with people of different ages and backgrounds.

Activities and things to do

Activities allowed people to connect in a safe and unpressured way. People expressed interest in a wide range of activities.

As well as a desire to connect with others, they also spoke about activities improving their wellbeing and gaining value from the activities themselves—such as learning a new skill.

The affordability of these activities was also a key consideration.

Shared spaces

Having shared spaces where everyone could go was important.

For example, having local shops or pubs where you start to recognise people and build friendships in an informal way.

It is critical that these spaces are friendly, welcoming and safe.

Next Steps

Tell us if we got it right.

We've tried to fairly and accurately reflect what people told us during the listening exercise in this document.

We want to test what we heard with you. To make sure we heard correctly and that we haven't missed anything.

Please complete the short survey and let us know what you think.

Once we have double checked what we heard, we will publish a proposal for the future of community support in the summer 2025.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to make sure people get the support they need.

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