

Consultation on RBBC's community centres: understanding and meeting local needs

June 2021

Introduction

Reigate & Banstead Borough Council has embarked on a project to transform its three community centres at Banstead, Horley (also referred to as Regent House) and Woodhatch (in Reigate).

To progress the transformation, RBBC needs to:

- Develop the centres to meet local needs and interests
- Continue to support the needs of existing centre members, including reviewing the membership model.

To inform this work the council wanted to find out about residents' needs in the areas surrounding the centres, existing users' needs and what services the centres could offer to meet these. The council also wanted to understand the perception of the centres among users and the wider community and users' views on the topic of membership.

Through research, the council wanted to understand:

- Residents' awareness of the centres and the services they provide/have provided in recent years
- Residents' and members' preferences of services that could be provided through the centres
- Centre members' views on membership
- Feedback from current stakeholders in the centres on the existing community centre offer
- Ideas for new services
- Barriers to using/making more use of the centres

The council was also interested in how these factors differed between the three localities and among different demographic groups, such as age or gender.

RBBC has carried out three strands of research to meet these requirements:

- Demographic and geodemographic data analysis of each locality
- Exploratory qualitative discussion groups and interviews with centre stakeholders
- Quantitative surveys with centre users and residents.

These activities followed previous engagement with community centre staff and complemented other research, for example, into alternative models used elsewhere in Surrey and beyond.

Terminology

Current users of the centres were a key target audience in this research. The centres' users are mainly its members, that is, individuals who pay an annual membership fee and who use the services provided by each centre. However, in this report, the term users also includes volunteers who help run the centres and carers who assist friends or relatives use the services.

Additional context

This research has taken place during the Covid pandemic, specifically in the third lockdown. We do not know what impact the effect of the pandemic has had on participants' feedback and experiences

although some suggestions are discussed under Limitations (below). However, the council felt it was better to carry out the research sooner, taking into account possible influences of the pandemic on the results, rather than delay research altogether.

Methodology

Data analysis

RBBC completed two analysis exercises using publicly available datasets (e.g. census data from the Office of National Statistics) and geodemographic data from Mosaic, a consumer classification tool which gives more detailed insight into the demographics, lifestyles and behaviours of adults.

The first exercise analysed the membership databases of each centre and the second, a catchment area around each centre.

From the analysis, profiles of each group were produced, giving an overview of the age, gender, lifestyles and health of the centres' members and localities, and providing some context as to how services might need to evolve to meet future needs. See slides 2 and 3.

Interviews and discussion groups

To hear a range of perspectives of people closely involved in the centres, RBBC completed:

- 12 one-to-one, semi-structured phone interviews (four per centre) with volunteers and users with enhanced knowledge or experience of the centre. (Dec 2020 to Jan 2021)
- 3 group discussions (one per centre) over Zoom with 10-14 participants per group (Jan 2021)

The telephone interviews covered participants' involvement with the centre, what they thought the centre did well and less well, what they would miss if they did not go to the centre, who else in the community they thought could benefit from using the centre and how this support could be offered.

The discussion groups comprised current stakeholders of the centres and representatives of the wider community. To maximise the range of interests and experiences across the three groups and reflect the different types of locality each centre is based in, the composition of each group varied slightly.

Each session was attended by the relevant centre manager, the local RBBC community development officer and members of the former management committee from the centre. Other participants included committee members, hirers who had run activities, classes or other services, representatives of community or voluntary organisations, members and volunteers. The head of Community Partnerships observed each session which were run by the transformation manager for community centres and the consultation and insight officer.

The sessions were run as semi-structured discussions with a short presentation giving an overview of the community and the centre itself using the outputs of the data analysis exercises. Questions invited views about the centre's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities to meet other local needs, pros and cons of possible membership models.

Quantitative surveys

RBBC ran two self-completion surveys (15 Feb-22 March 2021). The results of the data analysis, interviews and discussion groups helped develop the questionnaires.

Survey 1: General public

- Paper survey delivered to 1,000 homes near each of the three centres (3,000 homes in total) with a covering invitation letter and Freepost return envelope

- Addresses selected using GIS data and local knowledge.
- Weblink provided in the letter to enable participants to take part online
- Weblink further publicised through RBBC's social media posts and other publicity such as a press release and item in Borough News.
- Question topics: awareness, use/barriers to use of the centres, preferences/ideas for current and future services, participants' demographics (e.g. age, gender, disability, postcode)

Survey 2: Centre members and volunteers

- Paper survey posted to all community centre members and volunteers with a covering invitation letter and Freepost return envelope (online access to survey available on request).
- Three versions of the survey produced: one for each centre (other than including the centre name, the questionnaires were otherwise identical)
- Number of surveys distributed: Banstead – 599, Horley – 127, Woodhatch – 480.
- The consultation was publicised in advance through the centres' newsletters.
- Question topics: use and barriers to use of the centre, reasons for using the centre, preferences and ideas around current and future services, views on membership, information about the participant (age, gender, disability, connection with the centre)

Timeline

Activity	When carried out
Data analysis	Dec 2020
Interviews	Dec 2020-Jan 2021
Discussion groups	Jan 2021
Surveys	15 Feb-22 Mar 2021

Limitations of research

The following factors may affect the findings and prevent the results being fully representative:

Self-completion methods introduce bias: e.g those with low literacy levels may be precluded from taking part, certain demographics more likely to participate. Participants were filtered through the survey according to their responses, therefore not all participants were asked all questions.

Covid: The restrictions presented by the pandemic have both influenced the methodology (preventing in-person face-to-face methods) and may have influence participants' feedback. E.g:

- Social isolation: with opportunities for social contact drastically reduced, those already experiencing isolation may have experienced this even more (or may be more used to it than other groups) while others might have experienced it for the first time.
- Closure of services: the community centres have largely been closed since March 2020. Other community services have also been closed intermittently during that time.
- Memory: centre users were asked about services they have not used for some time and this may affect their recollection. However, the survey asked about how important or valued the services were (which may be easier to recall) rather than factual details about them.

Participation

A full break down on completion numbers and rates is on slide 4. Below is a summary:

Survey 1: Centre members and volunteers

Using membership data for each centre, all users of each centre were surveyed, that is, current members, carers of members, volunteers.

In total, 1,206 people were invited to take part across the three memberships resulting in 500 responses – a mean response rate of 42%. Note that the Horley membership (127) is substantially lower than that of the other two centres (approx. 550). A detailed breakdown of participation is available on slide 4 of the results.

Survey 2: General public

Using the council's geographical information resources, a cluster of approximately 1,000 homes were mapped in the streets located most closely to each centre. This formed the primary sample for the survey of members of the general public. However, a weblink to the survey was also promoted to local residents through social media. The online link was available to anyone to use, including those who had received a paper copy of the survey through their door. Note, it was possible for individuals to complete the survey online and on paper (though we think this is unlikely). Therefore, it is not possible to calculate an overall response rate although slide 4 shows indicative rates based on completed paper surveys.

About our participants

Detailed demographic breakdowns of participants in the survey among the general public are available on slides 17 to 20. Based on home postcodes provided by participants, these are divided between the three localities to show an analysis by each area. By looking at all participants among this survey, it is possible to compare the breakdown with the borough's demography.

Based on mid-year ONS estimates for 2018, this table shows some groups are under-represented.

	General public survey participants	Borough
Gender: males are under-represented	Male: 27% Female: 71% Prefer not to say: 1%	Male: 49% Female: 51%
Age: Young people are under-represented	18-24: 0% 25-34: 5% 35-44: 15% 45-54: 17% 55-64: 20% 65-74: 21% 75-84: 14% 85+: 6% Prefer not to say: 1%	18-24: 8% 25-34: 15% 35-44: 19% 45-54: 19% 55-64: 15% 65-74: 12% 75-84: 7% 85+: 4%
Ethnicity: Black and minority ethnic groups are slightly under-represented.	White: 90% Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: 0% Asian/Asian British: 3% Black: African, Caribbean, Black British: 1% Other: 0% Prefer not to say 4%	White: 90% Mixed/multiple ethnic groups: 2% Asian/Asian British: 5% Black: African, Caribbean, Black British: 2% Other: 1%

Results

Detailed results from the survey showing key facts from the data analysis, survey headline result, charts and tables for survey question topics and additional analysis are on the attached slides. See

slides 5 to 10 for the results of the survey among residents' and slides 11 to 16 for the members' survey. An overview summarising the main findings is below.

Key findings

There is good awareness of the existence of the centres: around 80% of residents were aware of the council's community centre near to where they lived.

The current membership makes regular use of the services: 70% attend their centre at least weekly.

Among non-users, a lack of awareness of what the centres offer was most commonly cited as a reason for not using the centre, particularly among younger age groups (under 45s).

The user interviews and discussion groups suggested the services provided by the centres are not as well known in their communities as they should be with signage and marketing key areas to address.

There is a strong public perception that the community centres are for 'old people'. Definitions of 'old people' appears to link both to specific age groups (e.g. 65+) but also to negative culture views about ageing, for example, losing independence or deteriorating health/abilities.

Of the services provided in the current offer that people were most likely to say could be of use to them or their families were day trips, social activities and gentle exercise.

However, preferences varied by age and to a lesser extent by locality. For example, under 45s were more likely to select room hire as helpful while for the over 65s, day trips, foot clinics and gentle exercise were the priorities.

Looking ahead, residents felt support for loneliness would benefit their communities along with support for older people and those affected by dementia but views varied by locality.

Across localities, there was mostly a consensus in the services that were most important. There were some specific services favoured in certain areas. For example, Horley residents were more interested in poverty support when compared to other areas (slide 10).

There was little resistance to any of the suggested services, either among centre users or the wider public. However, a small minority in both groups felt some types of support should not be offered through the centres. This included children's and young people's services, support for people looking for work and support for people with mental health problems.

Other suggestions for activities included food banks/clubs, Citizens' Advice-type services, a plethora of social, health and educational activities.

For those who used the centre less frequently, being too busy and a lack of choice of activities were their main reasons. Cost, transport/access difficulties and lack of information about activities were barriers to some.

Among non-members, those who worked stated that the daytime operating hours of the centres meant that they could not make use of the current offer and that, e.g. evenings or weekend opening times would enable them to use their local centre.

Members cited company and companionship, physical activity and keeping mentally as key benefits.

Like the wider public, members' views of the services on offer and proposed varied slightly between the localities. However, members said they were looking forward to social activities, day trips, special events and gentle exercise when the centres re-opened. Services such as the hairdressers and hot meals were also frequently mentioned.

User interviews indicate that the centres (staff, volunteers, services and buildings) are highly regarded by users across all three areas.

The discussion groups and interviews revealed dual benefits to the community of using volunteers: first, they are a vital asset to the centres and, second, volunteering benefits the volunteers themselves. However, flexibility is needed to make best use of them, to balance their wants and needs with those of the centres, and more is needed to recruit, retain and involve them.

Some aspects of the centres received particular praise in the user interviews: e.g., in Horley the food and the centre staff, the management at Woodhatch, the celebratory lunches in Banstead.

Views about membership varied between the three centres, with Banstead members most likely to state that it was important. Woodhatch and especially Horley's membership are less supportive.

For those who felt it was important, this tended to be around commitment and a sense of belonging. For those who did not support membership, reasons were around opening the centre up to a broader range of people. There were also some concerns around affordability.

Recommendations

- Build on services currently provided which are well received by current users and introduce new ones to broaden the appeal of the centres to reach new audiences.
- Build on the assets of well-regarded volunteers and staff to aid the transformation.
- Review and invest in the marketing of the community centres, particularly in relation to perceptions of the centres being exclusively for older (70+) people.
- If needed, consider the impact that the negative perceptions around being old has on encouraging older people to use the centres.
- Consider testing the combinations of services highlighted through the analysis with stakeholders, such as with community development workers, or community members.
- Carry out further engagement research into the needs of men, younger people and minority ethnic groups and how these needs could be met.
- Continue engagement with current users as the centres transform.
- Feedback supports the idea of a locality-centred approach to developing the centres; although there was plenty of common ground across the three areas, there were also differences between the three areas.
- Both the qualitative and quantitative research revealed different views about membership between the localities. Finding an approach that suits most members may be a challenge and will require careful engagement and communication among the existing membership if the council is to retain them.
- The proportion of people who selected proposed services that they did not think should be offered is small – less than 10% in each case – but there is some consistency across the surveys, discussion groups and interviews. If the council plans to introduce these services (children's/parents/young people's activities, support for people looking for work, support for people with mental health problems), it may be worth finding out more about people's concerns and/or giving careful consideration to services are planned or promoted.
- Consider further exploring themes of companionship and loneliness. Both are current 'hot topics' in the media although loneliness has been of interest to the council pre-Covid. Exploring these further might give valuable additional context.