



Experiences of Wandsworth Mental Health recovery cafés

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Summary

Background:

We wanted to speak to people to find out their experiences of a relatively new type of service - Recovery Cafés. Recovery Cafés aim to offer peer support, therapeutic activities and a place to talk for people moving towards, or who are currently experiencing, a mental health crisis.

What we did:

We carried out surveys with people using the Hestia Recovery Café in Tooting, and with people with mental health issues at community groups who had not used the cafés. This report is based on the views of 29 people who use the Recovery Café and 18 who attend a community group.

What we were told:



Most people who use the Recovery Café use it frequently and value it highly. Most said it helped them in a crisis (23 of the 29 participants).

The most valued aspects are:

- knowledge and friendliness of staff
- peer support from other users
- the range of activities offered
- the availability of a ‘safe’ place where people are accepted and not judged.

Some of the benefits for people using the service include location, ease of transport and the range of activities available. As well, people felt that they are able ‘to talk’ in a space that was both safe and supportive.

People also reported seeking and receiving help from their local GPs in times of crisis, however, we also had concerns from people about the ways in which they can manage their mental health by themselves to prevent a future crisis from happening.

Hardly anyone in either group were confident in these services for longer-term planning or support.



Findings:

The people who use the Recovery Café said it has become a vital service for their mental health needs and support. They feel it stops a crisis from happening.

Location and opening times are important factors determining the use of Recovery Cafés. People want the Cafés to have extended opening hours (i.e. open daily on weekdays).

Recommendations and next steps:

There are two recovery cafés available in South West London. Our findings indicate that having a service that is close by or easy to get to and open long hours was seen as helpful.

Many felt that the services provided would be improved or those who don't use the service might attend if:

- **there were more locations.**
- **opening hours were extended (i.e. open daily on weekdays).**
- **it was clear if the café is intended for people during crisis or if people are welcome to use as they continue to try to avoid a future crisis.**
- **to help people prevent a crisis there should be consideration about how this service might fit into longer-term planning and support**

We did not interview any younger people. It is not clear whether the Recovery Café model is suitable for younger people. More work is needed to investigate the needs of people under 25.

This report is being sent directly to the people who decide on the design of these services locally who will use these findings to inform local services.

Background

Recovery cafés provide a safe space for people to get assistance if they feel they may be moving towards, or are currently experiencing, a mental health crisis. Crisis means “a time of intense difficulty”.

South West London and St George’s Mental Health Trust hold the contracts for [two recovery cafés](#): one in Wimbledon Chase run by CDARS and one in Tooting run by Hestia. They serve the whole of South West London.

Recovery cafés work on a drop-in basis. There’s no need for an appointment. The aim is that people are met by a listening ear, and benefit from companionship and engaging in therapeutic support. The cafés provide:

- Group activities.
- One-to-one support.
- Chill out space.
- Advice, information and signposting.
- Subsidised hot meals and drinks.
- Drop in from local mental health teams.

The opening hours are Monday to Friday 6pm - 11pm, and Saturday, Sunday and Bank holidays 12noon - 11pm.

What we did

Local people have told us that mental health should be a top priority for us to focus on this year. As a service which could be very important to people with a need for this kind of support, we felt it was important to hear how the service is working. So, we worked with the project manager for Wandsworth Care Alliance’s mental health project to designed a survey to find out the views and experiences of the people who use the recovery cafés. We also attempted to speak to people who have mental health issues but have not used recovery cafés.

People’s views were sought with a view to finding out:

- How the recovery cafés are used.
- What people think about them.
- What barriers there are to people using the cafés.

Two related questionnaires were developed: one for current users of the service, and one for people who did not use the service.

The surveys asked people about their experiences during a mental health crisis, what services they used during those situations, and what is important to them when experiencing a crisis.

Between June and September 2019, the Healthwatch Wandsworth team visited the Hestia recovery café in Tooting four times. They talked to the people there, and if people wished to participate, they worked through the survey with people, recording the answers for them.

To find the experiences of people who did not use recovery cafés, Healthwatch Wandsworth visited three community groups which support people with mental health issues. However, some people who were interviewed at the community group had also used a recovery café.

We would like to thank Sound Minds, particularly Canerows and Mama Low's Kitchen groups and the Certitude Voice Group for helping us arrange to talk to people at these groups.

What we found

About the people we talked to

Of the 29 people we talked to 18 identified as female, 9 male and one as transgender. 7 participants stated that they are White British, 5 Black British, 5 Caribbean, 2 mixed race (White and Black Caribbean), 3 of Asian heritage, 1 Polish, 3 of other mixed backgrounds and 2 of other backgrounds. The majority (15) identified as Christian and 7 people stating they had no religion. The majority (22) said they were heterosexual and most (18) said they are single.

One said that they were caring for children under 5, and five people said they were acting as an unpaid carer to a family member or friend.

Unsurprisingly, 18 people stated that they had mental health issues, but 7 people said they had a learning difficulty or disability. Only 4 participants stated that they had no disability.

The participants did not include many younger people. Only 2 people were under 30 years old, and 12 out of 29 were over 50 years of age.

People's experiences of mental health crisis

Most people we spoke to who were attending the recovery café had experienced a mental health crisis in the last two years (of 29 people, 22 reported a recent crisis). But recent mental health crisis was also the experience of 7 of the 18 people we talked to in the community groups who had not used the service. Many highlighted that crisis was a re-occurring part of life:

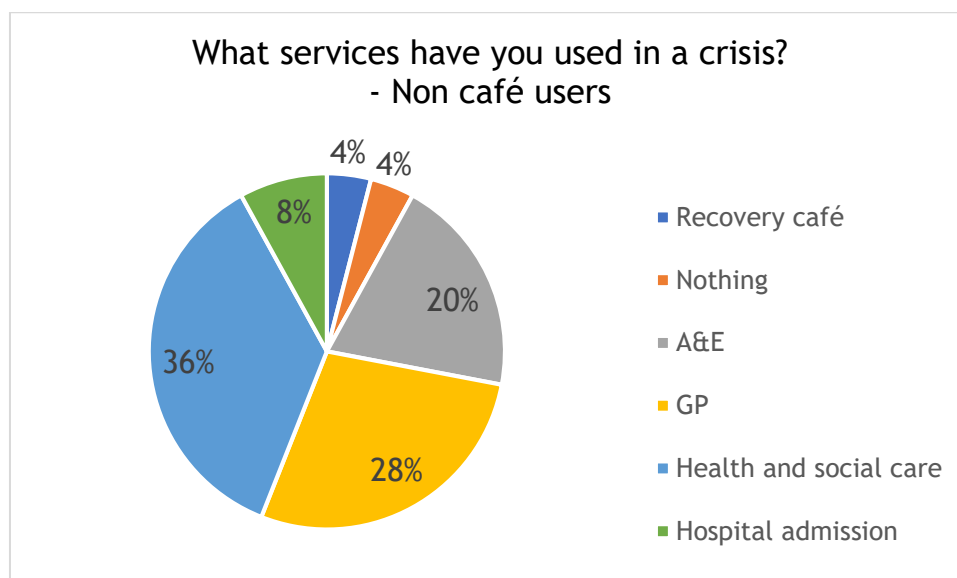
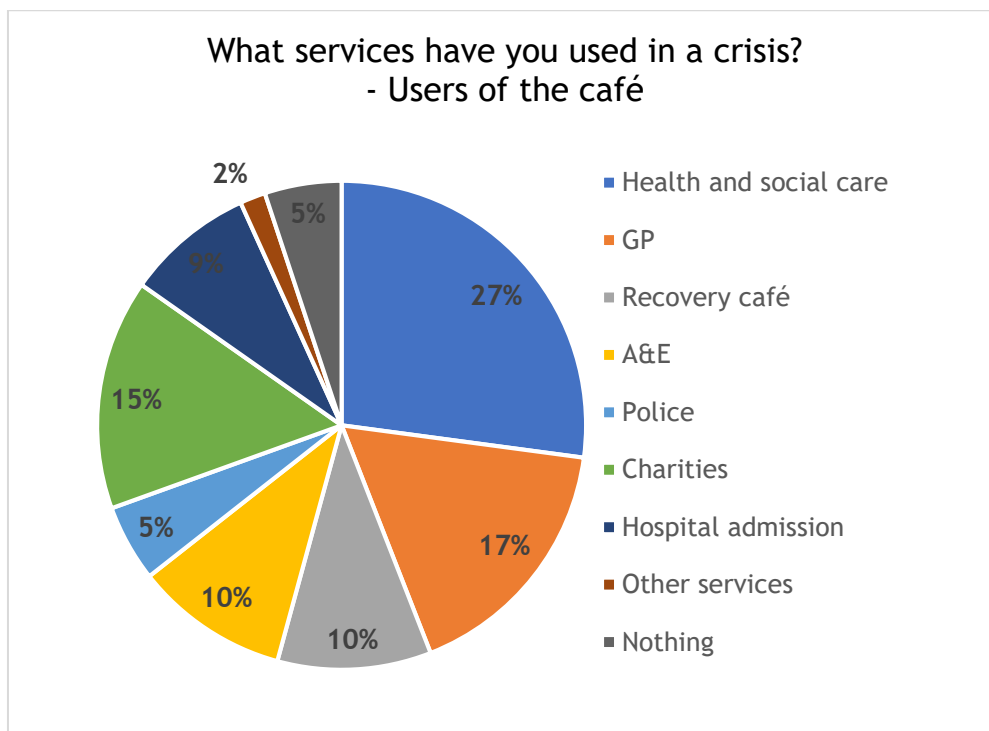
“More than 1, Nov admitted to hospital, since then still had crisis points and keeps me out of trouble, a lifetime for many people.”

What services have you used in a crisis?

Most people in both groups sought support at a time of crisis from health and social care services. The **most used service** for both groups of people was the **GP** (10 out of 28 people interviewed at the recovery café and 7 out of 18 people interviewed at community groups). The range of other services mentioned was similar across the two groups and included care co-ordinators, social workers, community mental health teams and home treatment teams, as well as other services delivered by the mental health trust.

Many tried to get support from a variety of places to continually manage their mental wellbeing and avoid a crisis.

“I still use one of them - Wandsworth MIND. I also come to Mama Low's (Sound Minds) on a Friday. I go to these places because I like the atmosphere and I feel safe. I've been to Hestia [recovery café] on a Sunday evening (mainly).”



Six people interviewed at the Recovery Café and one at the community centre reported using the recovery café at a time of crisis.

Visits to A&E, the police and hospital admissions also featured in the experiences of people who had used the Recovery Café. These experiences were not usually positive.

“I now know to avoid the police.”

“A&E was a waste of time.”

These people often reported that the support they received was out of their hands.

“I’ve never gone to them, they come me.”

“I haven’t gone to help - they come and arrest me.”

Some people from the community groups (4 out of 18) also mentioned A&E, but were more likely to mention the GP and other health services such as Community Psychiatric Nurses (CPNs) (10 out of 18 participants).

Charities were mentioned by people in both groups. Charities included churches and the Samaritans. Three people at the Recovery Café mentioned other specific services such as an employment support worker and victim support.

Although some people reported services as being helpful, hardly anyone in either group were confident in these services for longer-term planning or support.

“A&E and GP were helpful but did not help to prepare plan.”

“These services are touch and go, [as they are] there when in immediate danger but in the long run [are] not really effective as can't pop in every day.”

A small number of people (3 at the Recovery Café and 1 at the community group) reported managing the crisis by themselves and not having any support at all.

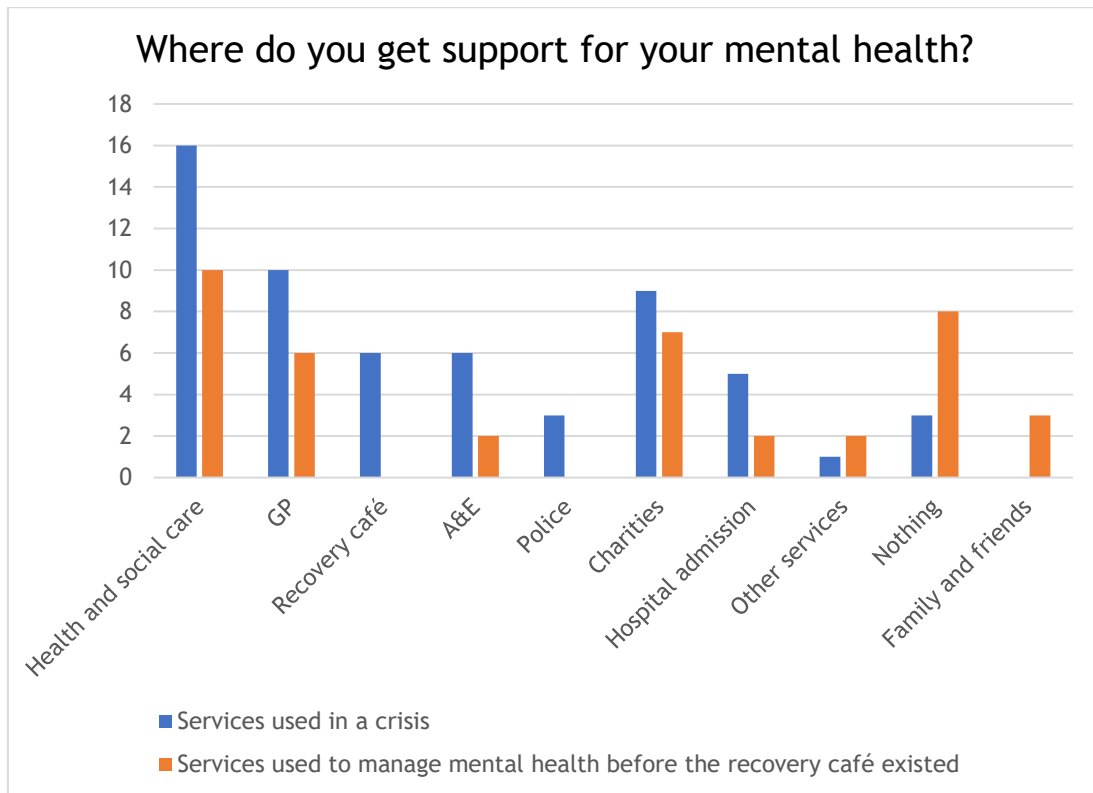
“Initially I was unaware and wanted to keep it secret.”

People's experience of mental health support

We also asked people about their experience of mental health support.

For people at the Recovery Café we asked them to think about where they got support before the Recovery Café existed. Generally, people mentioned using more services for support when asked how they manage a mental health crisis than when asked what service they used to manage mental health before the café existed. Of the 29 people who had used the café, 8 people said they used nothing to help them manage mental health before the café existed and 3 relied on family and friends. One person said:

“[I] Didn't, I came here after 2nd admission. I don't have an alternative, this is the place that keeps me safe and gives me structure. If I wasn't here, I wouldn't be breathing”.



People in both groups talked about mental health services such as CPNs, community mental health teams and home treatment teams, and also talked about charities such as the Samaritans. There were a few mentions of A&E and hospital admission in response to this question in both groups.

However, only one person at a community group mentioned the GP, while there were 6 mentions of the GP from the people at the Recovery Café.

Experiences of using the Recovery Café

We asked users of the Recovery Café if they felt the café helps them when they are in crisis.

- **23 of the 29 participants reported that the Recovery Café helped them in a crisis.**
- Two people said it had not.
- Two people did not know.
- One person said that they didn't have the motivation to attend during a crisis.
- One participant was unclear about having a mental health issue.

We asked people what made the Recovery Café useful:

- 9 people mentioned the staff or the importance of **having someone to talk to**.
- 7 people mentioned the **activities** on offer (including Zumba, art, yoga, and music).
- 7 people described how they felt the café was a **safe place**, or somewhere where they could **relax, or be themselves, be accepted and not judged**.
- 5 people mentioned the **importance of meeting other people**.
- 3 people talked about **practical support and planning**.

“I came here a few months ago, someone (staff) to talk too and calm me down and help with next step plan (crisis plan).”

“There trained to understand mental health, so they are not surprised when someone is unstable or the weirdness of the situation.”

“Karaoke at Christmas was good for lifting spirits. Counsellors there. Could eat if didn't have money. Liked therapeutic. Fed you emotionally and physically.”

The two people who felt that the café had not been helpful in a crisis mentioned being excluded: one because they lived in supported housing and one because the staff ‘implied we used this place as a social club’ (this person said that the café in Merton felt more welcoming with less rules).

Frequency of use

We asked Recovery Café users how often they attended.

- **18 of the 29 participants** reported going to the café at least once a week.
- **12 of these** said they went to the café at least three times a week.

“At the moment every day as on edge of crisis for a while / for last month every day / a safe place.”

For others the frequency varied, with three participants saying that they didn't think that they needed the Recovery Café services. Most answers indicated that they use the café to stay well, but life events including physical and mental ill health had meant some couldn't attend the café.

What's good about the Recovery Café?

Responses to this question were similar to those given by Recovery Café users about using the service during a crisis, although more information was given about specifics such as food, location and opening hours.

- **Staff** were mentioned by most people (14 mentions).
- **Peer support and meeting friends** was mentioned by 12 people.
- **Activities** by 9 people.
- **Feeling safe** was mentioned by 6 people.

“Staff amazing, peer support amazing, everyone understands. Activities are great very recovery focused / health and wellbeing / something everyday. First time I feel I have a friend, can be me and accepted.”

- **Food and refreshments** were important for people (mentioned 8 times).
- Four people said the Café was **somewhere to go or a reason to get out of the house**.
- **Location** was a positive factor in attending for 4 people.
- Convenient **opening times** were mentioned by 4 people.
- Three people mentioned **using computers** and two **the quiet space**.

Many people talked about their living situations and their lives, and talked about the café as a welcome place to feel safe, eat and to feel they are among supportive people in contrast to elsewhere in their lives.

“I know them and they know me. I like that it’s not clinical, I feel safer as not clinical. I wouldn’t come if clinical. Good is open late as helps, I come after work, a place I can decompress, feel safe to have a crisis here so I don’t take it home. I don’t have an alternative.”

“I hope this place is around for a long time as saved my life many times / kept me out of hospital, been a life saver.”

Improvements to the service

We also asked Recovery Café users what could be better about the service and what makes it difficult for them to attend.

Four participants could not think of anything that would improve the service.

- The issue that was mentioned the most (9 times) was **opening times**, which was linked to the building being used by a different service during the day.
- People also had **issues with specific staff members and other users of the café** (6 people).

“It would be nice if it was is open more during the day for those not working as crisis happens in the day too.”

“I thought that it would be a nice place to meet people, but everyone keeps to themselves - they’re sort of closed off.”

Other more specific comments were:

- Two people mentioned that there were too many or too strict rules.
- One person wanted more structure.
- Two people were unhappy with the food.
- Four wanted more classes or different activities.
- One wanted more comfortable seating.
- One person wanted days out.
- One person mentioned working more closely with other services.
- One person felt excluded because they live in supported accommodation.
- One person mentioned **disabled access** to the upstairs.

People’s knowledge and expectations of a recovery café

We asked people in the community groups if they had heard of recovery cafés and what help they would want if they used a recovery café during a crisis.

The majority of people (12 of 18) who we talked to at the community group who hadn’t used the cafés said that had heard of recovery cafés. Five people reported having visited the Tooting café informally.

Although people mentioned a range of things (**activities, food, transport**) they might expect from a recovery café, the majority (14 people) mentioned **‘someone to talk to’, ‘talking therapies’, or meeting people.**

What would encourage people to attend?

- 7 people mentioned **location, ease of access or transport.**
- 5 mentioned **staff.**
- 3 mentioned meeting people.
- 5 mentioned **activities of different kinds** (computers, art, dance, group talks, zumba).
- 3 people said they would like to **talk to someone who had used the service or staff beforehand.**
- 2 mentioned **timing or opening times.**
- 1 mentioned food.

“To meet people who have gone through the same thing as myself.”

“Easy to get to - bus to take”

What are the barriers to attending?

We asked people at the community groups who did not use the café to tell us if they felt there was anything stopping them from going to a café.

- Five people mentioned **location and transport issues.**
- Three mentioned **opening times.**
- Four mentioned their **personal health or motivation/confidence issues.**
- One person mentioned staff.
- One person found the word ‘recovery’ difficult.

“When I’m depressed, I find it difficult to do anything that I don’t have to do.”

“Not going during the dark.”

“Recovery seems like a negative and a difficult word to say if you have a learning disability or if English is not your first language.”

Findings

The people who use the Recovery Café value the service very highly.

- Without the service they feel they would be left to cope on their own or with family and friends or limited supported from a range of professionals.

A&E and GP services are felt not to be suitable for people experiencing a crisis.

“The café has saved my life - if I couldn't come here I would have ended up hurting myself. In a way its self-therapy, informal dip in and out. Come here more when crisis and less.”

- Users of the café particularly value it as a ‘safe’ place where they can meet other people like them and be supported by knowledgeable and friendly staff.
- Although some people found interacting with specific staff and fellow users difficult, the majority of people felt that the most of the staff and users were helpful and supportive.
- People also value the range of activities that are provided and the food.
- Most people use the service frequently and rely on it.

“I try to come a minimum of 3 times a week. I come to relieve loneliness, and feel a sense of belonging.”

- Users want the opening hours of the café extended.
- **Location and opening times** are important factors for both existing and potential users. More than one person mentioned that **the nature of mental health conditions can mean that attending any service is difficult. Having a service that is close by, or easy to get to and open long hours was seen as helpful.**

“It's a wonderful service and there should be more of them in our communities.”

The unpredictable and continuing nature of having a mental health condition also was highlighted in the many of responses. Many users of the café have to balance between using the Recovery Café in times of crisis and using the service to stop a crisis from occurring. During our conversations we found that the term ‘crisis’ was understood differently between individuals and in different contexts and references of experience which may account for the diverse comments about services which had been used in a crisis. This may have been the reason for the discrepancy between seven people reporting using the cafés in a crisis in answer to one question, whilst 23 reported that the café had helped them in a crisis.

“My understanding is that this is a service just for people in crisis, where in reality some people need regular help to stay out of a crisis.”

The complexity of providing such a service to prevent a crisis is reflected in the fact that people’s mental health and motivation also affected whether they go to the cafés.

Recommendations and next steps

There are only two recovery cafés available in South West London. These surveys indicate that having a service that is close by or easy to get to and open long hours was seen as helpful.

Many felt that the services provided would be improved or those who don't use the service might attend if:

- **there were more locations.**
- **opening hours were extended**
- **it was clear if the café is intended for people during crisis or if people are welcome to use as they continue to try to avoid a future crisis.** Nearly half (7 of 18) of the people we spoke to in community group settings said that they had had a mental health crisis in the last two years but hadn't used the recovery cafés.

The most important aspects of the services for those who used them and those who might were as follows and the service should continue to review how these suit current and potential users:

- **knowledge and friendliness of staff**
- **peer support from other users**
- **the range of activities offered**
- **the availability of a 'safe' place where people are accepted and not judged.**

This report will be sent to the commissioners who design and deliver the recovery cafés to inform their future planning of such services. We will discuss with them what people have told us and ask how this will be used to influence the shape of services in the future.

We did not interview any younger people because the service is not designed for younger people. Although the people we talked to mostly valued the service, it is not clear whether the recovery café model is suitable for younger people. Only two participants that we interviewed at the recovery café were under 30 (one aged 20 and one 28). More work is needed to investigate the needs of people under 25.