

Rural Leisure Focus Group Summaries

In spring 2022 Maidstone Borough Council conducted focus groups in each of the five rural service centres.

Representatives from sports clubs and community groups who use facilities in the rural service centres were invited to share their thoughts on the provision of sport and leisure in the area. The findings from each rural service centre are summarised here.

Harrietsham

A total of 11 representatives attended representing 9 local groups.

Activities represented by those attending included Tennis, Tai Chi, Cubs & Scouts, Bowls, Horse riding, aerobic fitness, and crafting.

What are the good things about sport in your area?

The Village Hall – This was highlighted as being accessible and having good parking facilities. One group considered this to be an attractive venue to local groups and those from outside of the immediate local area.

Recreational grounds – It was considered that the recreational grounds provided opportunity for many different types of activity.

Interest – There is good interest locally in attending clubs. Specific clubs/interests mentioned:

- Beginners to Runners
- Horse riding
- Bowling
- Beavers & Scouts

Communications – There is a Parish Magazine (Harrietsham Network Link) – this publication had previously ceased but is restarting. Previous versions have included details of local clubs and activities on the back page.

It was also outlined that the local area has beautiful scenery and good access to the countryside.

What do you dislike about sport in your area?

Membership – Some groups find it difficult to attract new members or volunteers (Scouts). There is currently a waiting list for Scouts due to a lack of available volunteers. It was also noted that covid had impacted group's ability to engage with people.

Venues – Many groups do not have their own venues and have to hire them. Participants noted the Village Hall can be expensive to hire and since covid last minute cancelations have increased making some groups less sustainable.

Facilities – Some felt there was a lack of facilities that were provided as standard (no need to join a group), such as pitches and tennis courts. It was highlighted that the village has no Youth Club or funding to provide one and there is not one nearby that the local population could use. It was also noted that there was no Active Retirement group locally with these activities seemingly based in Lenham. There were also comments about the lack of shared community outdoor facilities, with a note that the play area at Saxon Place requires replacing.

Resources – There was a feeling that resources are not distributed evenly amongst different groups, here S106 funding distribution was mentioned. Some groups mentioned the need to travel to access resources that some felt should be available locally e.g., tennis court and swimming pool. It was noted that the Culture Centre was in the Town centre.

Travel & Traffic– Travel to Maidstone Town centre by public transport is limited and often not at the right times, therefore there is no choice but to drive. However, it was noted that groups themselves can in inadvertently cause issues with traffic, with Station Road reported as being an issue when the Scouts meet.

New Developments – It was felt that new developments lacked open spaces.

What is missing or what would you change about your area?

Communication – Many groups lack funds to advertise, with some groups relying on word of mouth. Information available online is fragmented. It was felt that improved information sharing would benefit all groups. It was suggested that a network of sports and recreational clubs would assist in improving communications and help with join up, as well as possibly attracting new members. It was also suggested that the Parish Magazine would be a useful tool for advertising groups and clubs.

Facilities – There were requests for shared facilities, with comments that existing facilities or new facilities need to be bigger and flexible. It was noted that the local nursery does not have its own premises and currently uses the church hall which was unfit for this purpose. It was also commented that outdoor play equipment is required for the new developments. It was felt the pavilion should be replaced or updated, and that it could be a community hub that could be used by local groups. It was also highlighted that there is fencing that needs repairing by the Pavilion and recreational ground.

Travel – It was felt there was a lack of active travel options i.e., footways or sideways linking facilities and also a lack of bridleways. It was highlighted that there are existing footpaths and bridleways that require maintenance. However, comments were made that stiles are not accessible to all and are a barrier to people accessing the countryside.

Ground up approach – There was a feeling that local groups and clubs have little to no involvement in the decision-making process, with the Parish Council either making decisions or being consulted rather than clubs or groups having an input. It was suggested that a more joined approach is taken to spending funds to maintain benefits for all of the community.

What would make the biggest difference to your club/organisation right now?

Facilities – Participants said that the cost of hiring venues limited the availability of some activities. It was suggested that there should be a shared club house or an indoor facility that could offer activities regardless of the weather.

Parish Council – There was a suggestion that the Parish Council could be more approachable and provide greater support for local groups by helping identify funding for local groups.

Volunteers – Several participants outlined that they struggled to recruit volunteers, and that increasing the number of volunteers would reduce waiting lists for groups.

Communications – Several clubs mentioned they struggle with the cost of advertising. Some groups rely on word of mouth or Facebook.

Join-up – A more joined-up approach between groups would create efficiencies that would help maintain benefits.

Funding – Participants requested support in identifying funding that can be applied for to support providing activities to excluded or hard to reach groups. But also wanted more information about how funding allocated to the village was being spent. They felt that S106 money was not fairly distributed.

Headcorn

A total of 11 representatives attended representing 14 local groups.

Activities represented by those attending included Bowls, Football, Cricket, Badminton, Scouts and Horse riding.

What are the good things about sport in your area?

Activities – It was highlighted that there are a wide variety of groups and clubs in the village. It was noted that the Football teams locally were well attended and supported. Headcorn also has clubs for Tennis, Bowls, and Cricket within the village. In terms of other activities nursery groups, scouts, bell ringing and table tennis were mentioned as well as allotments.

Village Hall – Attendees were positive about the village hall, they noted that it has high ceiling which allows a table tennis club to operate there.

Communications – There is a Headcorn Magazine and website which is produced by the Parish Council. This features events going on in the Village

What do you dislike about sport in your area?

Activities for Young people – It was highlighted that there is no Youth Club locally, with the new developments in the area, attracting more families this was identified as a need.

Facilities – It was stated that there is no suitable facility in the village for the less popular or niche activities, it was felt this was a barrier to new start-up clubs or groups. A location for a nursery was also mentioned. There were some concerns about potential future damage and maintenance of facilities, statements that facilities were expensive to maintain and at risk of vandalism. It was noted that clubs locally are popular, and many cannot meet demand, or have the space to run activities locally. This results in facilities being hired outside of the village.

Football – It was commented that the local football club house is quite old and is running out of space. They are expecting three teams to be coming through but need more full-size pitches and adult volunteers to support the running of the club.

Swimming- Although the local Primary School has a pool facility it is not available to the general public. Therefore, if you want to go swimming you need to travel.

Transport – It can be difficult to access facilities within the village due to safety concerns about the traffic along the routes. It was mentioned that cycling in the village is dangerous and that there is a need to drive to get to the 'club house'. It was noted that there is no footpath to the tennis and cricket clubs. Traveling by train to use facilities in Ashford was also mentioned.

S106 Funding – Groups were aware of S106 monies being awarded to the Parish Council; however, attendees did not feel that it was being distributed appropriately in regard to sports and recreational facilities.

Communications – It was suggested that links between the local school and the clubs that are in the village could be improved.

Open Spaces – It was noted that the area is at risk of flooding (across the railway lines) and that drainage of pitches/grounds is expensive. Comments were made around the loss of open spaces for club use due to housing developments. It was stated that there is a waiting list for allotments and currently a lack of parking for these.

What is missing or what would you change about your area?

Multi sized sport club/hub – This would take pressure off the village hall. Participants considered it would need to be big enough to offer activities such as trampolining and dancing. There was a request to form a Youth club. Other specific facilities requested were 3G Pitches, Netball Courts, and a Skate Park.

Transport & Access – It was suggested that better links with groups that have transport, or a volunteer minibus service would improve accessibility. A footpath to the cricket and football clubs was requested. Maidstone Leisure Centre was mentioned as being hard to get to and difficult to hire.

Join-up – Discussions were had about the facilities that are available in the village. It was noted that join-up with other groups, outside of the village, would increase participation. There was a suggestion about join up with the school to allow sports facilities to be used outside of term time and another suggestion about local sports clubs opening up their facilities to other activities (not sports).

Volunteers – Participants mentioned a need to attract younger volunteers, often people are happy to participate but do not want to help support in delivering activities. There is also bureaucracy around engaging volunteers i.e., insurance and background checks. While there is an understanding of the need to have the correct processes in place, it places additional demands on the volunteers.

What would make the biggest difference to your club/organisation right now?

Communication - A central online platform to promote facilities through council website and clubs was suggested. This could be circulated in Headcorn so local residents are aware of what's available and those outside the village to bring users in.

Facilities- As outlined above a bigger, multi-use community hub was requested to enable different types of sports and recreational activities to take place in the village. For any new facility flexibility of use was important to participants. There was also a request for more space for football.

Safe access to Tennis and Cricket Clubs – This came up throughout the session, with the facility being open day and night with a lack of safe access without a vehicle. Participants mentioned the need for a footpath to alleviate this issue.

Volunteers - In addition to wanting to attract more volunteers, there was a request for more support to be available to volunteers.

Funding - Groups said that more access to funds would have a big difference on their groups. With requests for consultation around the spending of S106 monies as well as requests for guidance and signposting for relevant funding streams.

Diverse and Inclusive Groups – There were requests for a Women’s club and a club for people with disabilities.

Lenham

A total of 10 representatives attended representing 7 local groups.

Activities represented by those attending included football, cricket, bowls, and karate. The local social club and parish council also had representatives that attended.

What are the good things about sport in your area?

Community Centre- The local community centre is reasonably large and has lots of rooms that can be hired for use. Other recreational groups use the Community Hall such as the Knitting and Crochet Club, the Dance School and Gardening Club. The Community Centre was considered accessible locally and participants commented they did not have much need to travel further than Harrietsham or Bearsted for activities.

Activities – Participants felt that the range of activities available in the village was quite diverse with football, cricket and bowls highlighted. It was noted that football plays a big part in the community and that there is an agreement with the parish council to maintain some pitches – this arrangement was mentioned as working well. It was also mentioned that the village is a popular hub for cyclists in the evenings and at weekends.

Facilities – Participants commented that the local 3G pitches were well used throughout the week and were available for partial hire i.e., Hire half a pitch. It was mentioned that three of the local play areas contained outdoor gym equipment and that there was access to a gym based at the school. All of these facilities were considered valuable assets to the village.

Communications – It was highlighted that Lenham Focus, the parish magazine, is delivered to households in the area and contains details of all the sports clubs and groups.

Schools – It was noted that the local schools have lots of sports facilities.

What do you dislike about sport in your area?

Hard court sports & Athletics – It was mentioned that there is a need to go outside of the village to participate in hard court sports such as tennis or netball. It was also highlighted that there is no place locally to do athletics or play squash.

Volunteers – Some participants said they found it difficult to recruit new members. It was noted that football had been turning people away due to a lack of volunteers (and space). A lack of support for volunteers was also highlighted with safeguarding and first aid highlighted.

Attracting New Members – The bowls team mentioned difficulties in attracting new members, in particular younger people.

Cost of facilities – The cost of participating in some spots was considered to be expensive with football and bowls specifically mentioned. It was noted that there is not shared sporting facility.

Improvement to existing facilities – It was mentioned that the football teams have issues with parking and need more space, it was also mentioned that the Bowls Green could be improved.

Join up – Participants commented that there is a lack of join up or co-ordination between groups.

What is missing or what would you change about your area?

Facilities - More space was highlighted as missing, with additional facilities requested including more pitches, hard courts for tennis, netball and basketball and storage space for equipment. An indoor multi use space was highlighted as a need to allow activities to take place in the winter and provide large meeting space (50-100 people). It was commented that a lack of available space to hire contributes to people not being able to participate.

School Facilities – Sporting facilities are available at the local school; however, they cannot be used during the day. It was suspected that this leads people to go outside of the area such as Ashford for activities.

Costs – It was mentioned that the cost of community gym was on par with that of Maidstone Leisure Centre and is not affordable for all.

Youth Club – It was noted that there is no youth club locally and that there could be more activities for young people. Previous youth club was held at the school but now there is nowhere for teenagers to go.

Toilets – There are no public toilets locally. Certain toilets are only available when sites are in use.

Links – It was felt that there could be better join-up between the Parish, MBC, and local groups to support volunteers and help identify funding streams.

Demand & Availability – The availability of the 3G football pitches was highlighted. The school that controls them uses an external booking company and often they are booked up well in advance so clubs in the village are not prioritised. It was also noted that too much interest when there are no resources to deliver activities suppresses group expansion and leads to people going outside the area.

What would make the biggest difference to your club/organisation right now?

Volunteers – Participants said they need more volunteers in order to expand activities or allow for more members. Guidance and training on safeguarding issues for volunteers was mentioned as being required and possibly something

that could be undertaken with other groups across the borough, if they have aligning needs. This would also impact on costs of training which was highlighted as making a difference. There was a suggestion for a dedicated support team for volunteers either through MBC or the Parish Council, this team could identify funding, organise training and provide a contact point for volunteers.

Funding – To support the volunteers at clubs. This could help costs for equipment, volunteer checks, and first-aid courses. One participant also mentioned printer and printing costs. It was noted that access to administration support for volunteers was a barrier to volunteering and that sometimes small costs are passed onto the volunteer e.g., printing, petrol which can add up. There were also mentioned of support required in identifying funding streams.

Facilities - Access to school facilities during the day was requested as well as new tennis court, as the previous one had been developed for housing. There were also requests for more space that can be hired locally at reasonable rates.

Join-up – Participants mentioned that the links between local groups and the parish council could be improved. Although there is a community hall in the village participants were uncertain about the activities that go on there, stating that they don't see anything advertised.

Marden

A total of 19 representatives attended representing 17 local groups.

Activities represented by those attending included bowls, golf, yoga, cricket and hockey, other groups that were represented included the Motor Club, Dementia Society, the Horticulture Society, Marden in Bloom and the Local Parish Council.

What are the good things about sport in your area?

Variety– Participants highlighted a wide range of sporting activities that are available within the village including hockey, tennis, cricket, badminton, football, cycling and bowls. It was also noted that Marden has two private gyms and many play areas and open spaces. There is also a local scout troop and a bell ringers' group.

Accessibility – Some of the activities within the village do not require a membership fee and are free such as bell ringing and a weekly walk.

Communications – Local groups and clubs are active on social media and there is also a parish newsletter.

What do you dislike about sport in your area?

Access – Some participants mentioned the need to go outside the local area for certain activities. It was mentioned that the nearest swimming pools were in Tonbridge and Cranbrook. Restrictions due to availability of public transport were also mentioned by the participants as well as difficulties in accessing the co-located cricket, hockey, and tennis clubs for those who do not drive. It was also noted that the bowls team rely on street parking when they meet.

Memberships costs – Although there are some free activities in the village most require a subscription or membership fee and often there is no pay as you go options which could be a barrier to larger families and those on lower incomes.

Facilities – There is no dedicated sports hall or large area to bring the community together and it would be difficult to expand existing facilities.

Activities- Some activities within the village have ceased to be available. It was noted that the darts club had stopped and the clubs/groups that operated from the library have stopped.

Join-up – Participants highlighted that most of the groups and clubs work in silo, and that there could be opportunities for shared efficiencies.

Communications – Although there are two local magazines (Church & Parish) that are published locally however sometimes it can be difficult to identify and contact group administrators with queries or interest in joining. Social media is used locally to communicate with a weekly email mentioned.

Capacity – It was mentioned that yoga and Pilates were at full capacity and that there is a waiting list for scouts (due to lack of volunteers).

What is missing or what would you change about your area?

Access – There were requests for a footpath to improved access to the co-located cricket, hockey, and tennis clubs. Improved public transport with more frequent buses that go straight to Maidstone Town Centre.

Facilities – Participants mentioned skate park, toddler gym/soft play, swimming pool, sports club, football pitch and spectator facilities as being missing within Marden. An expansion to the scout hut was mentioned as being needed as well as a need for allotments that are accessible to people with mobility and sensory issues.

Communication – It was suggested that magazine editors could include the contact details for groups in their publications and there could be more consultation with groups over accessing and providing facilities. It was suggested that both publications could increase the amount of space given to details about sports and leisure groups in the village.

What would make the biggest difference to your club/organisation right now?

Volunteers – Bowls, Hockey and Scouts have a shortage of volunteers and coaches. It was noted that the Bowls team had advertised on social media for new members and was planning a leaflet drop.

Space – Participants requested a bigger hall, purpose built, for community activities.

Administration Support – There were requests for support in undertaking checks and training of volunteers as well as support in raising the profiles of the groups in particular online presence.

Access – For the joining up of the co-located hockey, tennis, and cricket club via a footpath from the village.

Staplehurst

A total of 14 representatives participated representing 8 local groups.

Activities represented by those participating included football and golf. The local Horticultural Society, Girl Guides and Parish Council were also represented.

What are the good things about sport in your area?

Variety - Participants commented that the variety of sports and leisure activities available in Staplehurst was good. Sports included football, cricket, badminton, boxing, horse riding and running. It was noted that the skate park and football attracts visitors from outside of the village. In addition, various recreational and leisure groups are active in the village including WI, Bridge club, Horticultural club as well as a variety of church groups.

Communications – There are several publications that are circulated to villagers including a Parish Magazine that goes out three times a year and a school newsletter. It was mentioned that there was previously a local carnival which was good advertising for local groups and clubs.

It was also highlighted that a new Youth Group was being set up through the Parish Council.

What do you dislike about sport in your area?

Facilities – It was commented that space for new activities is limited and that due to a lack of facilities some groups no longer operated in the village e.g., Trampolining and storage. The local community centre was said to be in a good location that made it walkable for older residents however, the facilities within were mentioned as being out of date and expensive to book. There were also comments about the availability of swimming, with participants stating that there used to be three swimming pools locally but now there are none.

It was highlighted that the drainage and condition of the outdoor grass football pitches was poor and that there were no 3G pitches in the village. The football team was said to be limited on space with the local teams needing to hire pitches.

Volunteers – It was commented that it tends to be the same people that volunteer and that it is difficult to recruit new volunteers.

Accessibility – Participants commented that traffic locally was heavy and that without any bridle paths horse riders were forced to use roads – which adds to congestion.

What is missing or what would you change about your area?

Facilities – Participants commented that indoor sports facilities are lacking e.g., basketball. It was suggested that the skate park could be expanded to include outdoor gym equipment and a park area for free running. There were also mentions of limited parking, a lack of wi-fi and a lack of toilets at the community centre.

Section 106 Funding - There were comments about the distribution of S106 funding. With comments that S106 monies should be distributed more fairly. It was noted that certain areas e.g., Jubilee field attract more attention than other areas of the village.

Accessibility – There were requests for more transport routes including footpaths and bridleways, to allow people to access facilities better without driving and increase the safety of pedestrians.

It was commented that Facilities alone will not increase participation, this should be demand led and that facilities need volunteer support to operate. Participants said that it was fair that parishes share facilities and for residents to travel for their leisure activities.

What would make the biggest difference to your club/organisation right now?

Facilities – There were requests for a multipurpose indoor facility as well as space/land for current groups to expand e.g., more football pitches. A roof for the tennis courts and a swimming pool were also mentioned. The Golf club said they had immediate pressure for toilets.

It was highlighted that all of these types of spaces need to be safe, clean and have adequate parking, toilets, and storage facilities.

Accessibility – There were requests for better infrastructure throughout the village, including bridleways and footpaths as well as measures to make the roads safer to encourage cycling and walking.