

Neighbourhood health in practice

How a GP-led community café is connecting residents with health, practical support and one another



A case study of the Blackheath and Charlton Primary Care Network Community Café

Healthwatch Greenwich | July 2026

The story in brief¹

The Blackheath and Charlton Primary Care Network (PCN) Community Café shows what neighbourhood health can look like in practice. Twice a month, residents meet in the local Boys Brigade Hall where social connection, practical help and informal access to health and community services sit side by side. GP practices provide clinical leadership, while PCN staff, volunteers and partner organisations create a wider offer.

The café is not an extra clinic. It offers a different route into support: local, informal and built around relationships rather than appointments. This matters because access to health and care is not experienced equally. People with limited income, insecure housing, disabilities, caring responsibilities, language barriers or low digital confidence can face the greatest obstacles in finding and navigating help.

Attendance has grown from a handful of residents at the first café in July 2025 to around 40–60 people at each session a year later. During our visit, residents received help to use the NHS App, access employment support and find local wellbeing activities. They also received basic health checks, met and talked with others, and took part in activities such as drawing and music.

TWICE A MONTH	40–60 RESIDENTS	FOUR GP PRACTICES
First and third Tuesday	Typical attendance	Working as one PCN

Why this matters

Poor health is not distributed evenly, and neither are the conditions that help people stay well. Loneliness, digital exclusion, financial or housing difficulties and not knowing where to find support can contribute to worsening health and reduced independence. These challenges can have a greater impact on people already affected by poverty, disability, discrimination, language barriers or caring responsibilities.

¹ Healthwatch Greenwich visited the Blackheath and Charlton PCN Community Café to identify and share emerging good practice. This report reflects what we heard and observed at an early stage in the café's development. It does not assess clinical outcomes, cost-effectiveness or long-term changes in service use.

The café gives residents access to practical and community support without requiring a formal healthcare appointment. By bringing primary care, volunteers and local organisations together in one place, it helps people understand what support is available and how to access it. This is particularly valuable for residents who find it difficult to navigate separate and often fragmented services.

What difference is the café making²

Stronger social connections

Residents described developing friendships, feeling part of a community and having a reason to leave home and meet others. Elaine initially attended after being encouraged by a friend and has continued to return because of the relationships she has built:

"I kept receiving the invitations (from the GP practice) but never really paid much attention until a friend invited me along. Since then, I've found something really valuable here. I've been through a lot over the last few years, and although my family is supportive, the friendships I've built locally mean everything to me. The people here have become like sisters, and that's one of the reasons I keep coming back."

Elaine, resident

The café provides regular social contact and informal support for residents who may otherwise feel lonely or isolated.

² These examples show the immediate difference the café is making to some residents. However, more consistent information about referrals, follow-up and changes in residents' wellbeing will be needed to understand its wider and longer-term impact.

Earlier identification of health concerns

Basic health checks create opportunities to identify concerns that residents may not have recognised or sought help for. During our visit, one resident was found to have significantly raised blood pressure and was referred for further assessment. This provides a practical example of the café enabling earlier action in a familiar, non-clinical setting.

Easier access to practical support

Residents could get help with the NHS App, employment support and finding local wellbeing activities in one place, rather than having to identify and contact several organisations themselves. This is particularly useful for people who may have limited time, digital confidence or literacy, or who find it difficult to keep pursuing support across multiple services.

"I had vertigo, borderline diabetes, high BP—was on steroids for the longest time. I did not want to take meds anymore... Then, my doctor told me about this place, first, I came here to learn about the app because it is challenging to find right advice for all my problems in one place..."

Delasi, resident

Delasi's experience shows how the café provides an accessible starting point for residents managing several health concerns who may find it difficult to obtain joined-up advice. Although her immediate reason for attending was to get help with the NHS App, the café also created a route into wider health and community support.

A greater sense of purpose through volunteering

The benefits also extend to residents who volunteer. Elizabeth described volunteering at the café as a continuation of the caring role she had during her teaching career. Helping residents feel welcome and seeing friendships develop had given her a renewed sense of purpose in retirement.

“Since retiring, I’ve missed having that caring role. Volunteering here gives me the chance to support people again and feel that I’m doing something worthwhile.”

Elizabeth, volunteer

A partnership with the neighbouring Leigh Academy has also created volunteering opportunities for pupils. Students regularly support digital skills and arts and crafts sessions, as well as spending time talking with residents.

The partnership helps young people build confidence and practical skills while creating valuable opportunities for different generations to connect, learn from one another and reduce social isolation.

How the café works

The café was developed by Blackheath Standard Surgery, Fairfield PMS, Manor Brook PMS and Vanbrugh Group Practice, drawing on learning from similar work in Bromley and nationally. Residents are invited through targeted text messages from their practice, and attendees also bring friends, relatives and neighbours.

Free refreshments, shared tables and activities help the session feel like a community gathering. Volunteers, many recruited from the patient population, welcome people, make introductions and support delivery. Professionals join residents in the room, allowing questions and conversations to arise naturally rather than through formal appointments.

What residents can access

- social contact, activities and peer support;
- informal conversations with health and care professionals;
- basic checks such as blood pressure, temperature and oxygen saturation;
- help to use the NHS App and other digital services;
- social prescribing, advice, signposting and onward referral; and
- support from visiting voluntary, statutory and community partners.



The partnership behind it

Clinical leadership and PCN coordination provide the foundation, but the café's reach comes from a wider network. Partners include Charlton Athletic Community Trust, the Stroke Association, Hearing Dogs, Greenwich Local Labour and Business, Leigh Academy and carers' organisations. The local Marks & Spencer's, practice staff and volunteers provides free refreshments. Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust plans to bring community podiatry to the café from September 2026.

"The success of the café depends as much on what happens between sessions as what happens during them. Coordinating partners, organising volunteers, planning activities, maintaining relationships and ensuring services are ready for each café session requires continuous work behind the scenes. The café is not only a fortnightly event; it is an ongoing coordination effort."

Vishnu Vallamkonda, Digital Transformation Lead and Café Coordinator

What Healthwatch Greenwich found³

Relationships create the conditions for better support

Residents spoke about companionship, familiarity and belonging as well as access to services. Because the café is linked to their GP practices and staffed by people they recognise, attendees described feeling comfortable. Trust makes it easier to raise a concern, accept help or return for further support.

“People appreciate it, they acknowledge it, they welcome it. They feel comfortable attending because it’s linked to their doctor and members of the healthcare team are there. When I see patients who may benefit, I personally invite them to go to the café and check it out and just give it a try, they might like what they see. I think the café has the potential to become a centre of the community for our patients—an informal way of accessing healthcare.”

Dr Nayan Patel, GP and clinical lead

Prevention can happen in community settings

The significance of the health checks lies not only in their availability, but in the setting in which they are offered. Residents can take up a check as part of an ordinary community session, without first identifying a concern or arranging a separate appointment. The raised blood pressure identified during our visit illustrates how the café can create opportunities for earlier detection.

³ This is a qualitative case study, not a formal evaluation. It draws on a semi-structured interview with the clinical lead, observation of the café on 7 July 2026, conversations with residents, volunteers and delivery staff, and a review of supporting information. The café is still developing, so the findings show how the model appears to work rather than proving long-term effects on health outcomes or service use.

“... Community settings like this café allow us to identify people earlier, have conversations before problems become serious and reach residents who might never otherwise access podiatry services—ultimately preventing the need for amputations. That’s why we’ll be bringing our service to the Community Café from September 2026.”

Emma Pearce, Practice Development Lead Podiatrist, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust

Primary care can convene a neighbourhood offer

The café gives different organisations a practical way to work together with residents, rather than expecting people to navigate each service separately. Primary care brings reach and established relationships, while community partners contribute specialist knowledge, practical support and connections to local networks. Trust, however, cannot be assumed. Some communities have good reasons to be cautious of statutory services because of previous experiences of exclusion, discrimination or not being heard. Volunteers and trusted community organisations can help bridge that gap.

Coordination is part of the intervention

The visible café is only one part of the model. Relationships with partners, volunteer support, invitations, programme planning and follow-up all happen between sessions. Behind the scenes, the team keeps in touch with partners, arranges which services will attend, invites residents, supports volunteers, plans activities and follows up any issues raised. This work is what keeps the café useful, welcoming and connected to a wider network of support.

Five principles that make the model work

PRINCIPLE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
Trust	A familiar, welcoming setting linked to local GP practices encourages people to attend, talk and return.
Connection	Residents build relationships with one another, volunteers, professionals and community organisations.
Navigation	Several sources of support are available in one place, reducing the burden on residents to find their way through fragmented services.
Early action	Informal conversations and simple checks can identify needs before they become more serious.
Equity	Partners identify who is least well served, remove specific barriers and check whether those residents are benefiting.

Learning for other neighbourhoods

Start with purpose, not format

A café may work in one place; another neighbourhood may need a different setting or offer. The starting question should not be 'How do we reproduce the café?' but 'Who is least well served here, and why?' Some residents may prefer to engage through a faith group, community centre or residents' network. Others may need outreach in supported housing, translated information, or help with transport to take part.

Involve residents and community partners from the start

Residents, volunteers and community organisations should be involved in deciding what the café offers, how it works and who it needs to reach. Community organisations bring trusted relationships and knowledge of barriers that may be invisible to statutory services. That expertise should be recognised, resourced and given genuine influence. Otherwise, 'community involvement' risks becoming unpaid outreach for decisions made elsewhere.

Use primary care's convening power

GP practices are well placed to bring people and organisations together. Their patient data can help identify groups experiencing poorer outcomes or lower access, while their relationships with patients allow invitations to be targeted.

Primary care can bring clinical and non-clinical support into one setting, making it easier for residents to access help without navigating several separate services. But GP involvement alone is not enough. The model also needs dedicated coordination, community organisations with trusted relationships and volunteers who help make the café welcoming.



Make equity central

Partners should agree which inequalities they are trying to reduce and collect enough information to know whether the café is reaching the intended communities. Attendance totals alone are not enough: a busy room can still leave the most excluded residents outside it.

Protect informality while creating clear pathways

The café's relaxed atmosphere is central to its success. Residents can join a conversation, ask a question or seek support without feeling that they are attending a formal appointment.

When a health concern, safeguarding issue or need for further support is identified, everyone involved must know what happens next. There should be simple processes for consent, referrals, information sharing and follow-up to provide safety and accountability without introducing procedures that make the café feel like a clinic.

Building the evidence

This case study provides encouraging evidence of the café's value, but it captures one stage in its development. An evaluation could examine not only how many people attend and what support is available, but who is being reached, what changes for residents and which parts of the model make the greatest difference. It would also help identify which features are essential to the café's success and which could be adapted for other neighbourhoods.

This could include exploring:

- changes in residents' social connections, confidence and ability to find support;
- if advice, health checks and referrals lead to appropriate follow-up;
- which communities are benefiting and which remain under-represented;
- the experiences and contribution of volunteers;
- how the café supports partnership working at neighbourhood level; and
- the coordination, staffing and resources needed to sustain or adapt the model.



Conclusion

The Community Café offers a practical example of neighbourhood health built through relationships rather than organisational boundaries. Residents are making connections, receiving practical help and, in at least one case observed by Healthwatch Greenwich, having a health concern identified and referred for further assessment.

Its next challenge is to understand who is benefiting, identify who is still missing and continue to adapt and develop the offer. If it can do this, the café will offer useful learning not only about bringing services closer to people, but about changing how those services listen and respond.

Visit Community Café

If you'd like to engage with community café and are a patient of one of the practices, visit their website below, for more information about upcoming schedule.

Websites:

- Blackheath Standard Surgery:
<https://www.blackheathstandardsurgery.com/blackheath-and-charlton-community-cafe-2/>
- The Fairfield Practice: <https://www.thefairfieldpractice.co.uk/blackheath-and-charlton-community-cafe-2/>
- Manor Brook Medical Centre:
<https://www.manorbrookmedicalcentre.co.uk/blackheath-and-charlton-community-cafe-2/>
- Vanbrugh Group Practice: <https://www.vanbrughgps.co.uk/blackheath-and-charlton-community-cafe-2/>

Contact Us

For more information:

- Telephone: 07903 685534
- Email: Info@healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk
- Website: <http://www.healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk/>