CAPS Collective Advocacy & Edinburgh Community Voices

Community Drop-in Services in Edinburgh Report

CAPS

Edinburgh Collective Advocacy

Contents

About CAPS

CAPS is an Independent Advocacy organisation. Independent Advocacy helps people to have as much influence and control as possible over their lives. It's about people having the right to a voice: addressing barriers and imbalances of power and ensuring that human rights are recognised, respected, and secured.

We provide Individual Advocacy to people from East Lothian and Midlothian who have mental health issues or are using drugs or alcohol. We also provide advocacy for children and young people (5-18) going through the Children's Hearings process, in these areas. We also provide Individual Advocacy to people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and live in Edinburgh, East Lothian or Midlothian. We provide Collective Advocacy to groups of people across Lothian with mental health issues so they can come together and voice their experiences in order to bring about change for others or improvements in services.

Welcome to our report on Community Drop-in Services in Edinburgh!
Who are we?

We are Community Voices. We are a Collective Advocacy group for people with lived experience of mental health issues living in Edinburgh. Over several years we have come together with the shared goal of improving services in Edinburgh for people with mental health issues. In previous years we have worked on projects including contributing to reports on: COVID 19 and the impact of services; side effects of medication; and input into the Scottish Mental Health Law review. Over the last year we have been involved with responding to consultations including Edinburgh City Council consultations on services and budget decisions and the Health and Social Care Draft Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

One of the most important issues to the group has been considering the current provision of drop-in services provided in Edinburgh. They are concerned about the eroding of these services, especially noticeable following COVID-19 lockdowns. This report looks at why drop-ins are important and what the group thinks needs to be done to improve accessibility to them.

What are drop-ins?

The group began this piece of work by capturing their own definition of what they meant by 'drop-ins'. This is what they came up with:

"Drop-ins are free or donation-based events in the community, that do not require booking. They often run on a regular basis, with a focused activity or purpose, e.g. a coffee morning or a crafts session. Some are directly related to groups of people e.g. mothers, men, LGBT+. Others might be mental health related and focus on supporting those who join. However, drop-ins can also have the sole purpose of meeting and socialising. They might be staffed or non-staffed and they can take place in a variety of settings, such as a community centre, library, religious spaces, or GP practices."

Why are we doing this survey?

The group's main concern was with **community spaces and drop-ins in relation to mental health.** Initially, all members noticed how it can be hard to access drop-ins within the community due to lack of information about them. Although there are various online directories, members highlighted that these were often incorrect and not updated. Especially after COVID-19, many drop-ins and community spaces closed. Many people found that a drop-in they had got to know was closed at short notice and with no follow-up, leaving the community it served without an alternative space.

The group felt that drop-in spaces are often dismissed as just being places 'for a cuppa and a chat'. But in fact they play a crucial role in keeping people connected to their communities and in maintaining their mental wellbeing, often helping people to avoid crisis. The group also felt that drop-ins serve a different purpose to bookable services, as they are more open and accessible. They believe that having spaces in the community where people have opportunities to stay connected is crucial in maintaining good mental health. The group think that a lack of or reduction in these spaces would have a large impact on people's mental health.

The group felt that the impact of drop-in spaces hadn't been recorded in a way that covered all of Edinburgh, so they decided to do a dedicated piece of work to achieve this.

The issues raised have become even more relevant since October 2024, as several community spaces and drop-ins are under threat of closure or reductions to funding.

This report is especially important at a time of great uncertainty for community drop-ins and the people who use them.

How are we using this report?

We will circulate and present this report to funding bodies, community centres, and service providers. The results of this survey will enable the voices of people to be heard – specifically in relation to their mental health. The responses help us understand what is available in Edinburgh, and what is lacking. They are a record of why these spaces are so important to the people of Edinburgh, and why they should be protected. We hope this report will influence provision of services and urge decision-makers to take people's views on drop-ins into account.

Taking part

The survey was open to anyone living in Edinburgh aged 16 years old or above. The group wanted it to be accessible so designed the survey so that it should take no more than ten minutes to complete. Taking part was voluntary. It was made clear to people that deciding not to take part or withdrawing from the survey would not affect them in any way, and that their responses would remain completely anonymous.

Methods

The first thing Community Voices did was discuss their own views and experiences of using drop-ins.

The process of designing the questions was facilitated by a CAPS Collective Advocacy worker but the group members designed the questions. The survey was divided into two sections:

- **section one was aimed at people who already attend drop-ins;**
- **section two was aimed at people who do not attend drop-ins or do not know about drop-ins.**

This reflected Community Voices' interest in both examining the available spaces and in exploring what people need and want from drop-in and community spaces in Edinburgh; what doesn't work and what they would like to change. The final survey included a total of 29 questions.

These included demographic information such as gender, age and location to allow us to get a good idea of the spread of engagement.

Methods (continued)

The data was collected across Edinburgh´s community centres, libraries, places of worship, cafes and other places hosting drop-ins. Data gathering spanned from January to June 2025.

We advertised the survey on CAPS' social media and asked other services and organisations around Edinburgh to do the same. CAPS workers and group members visited local community facilities, talked to them about the project, left posters and leaflets and offered to support people to complete forms. This helped to ensure accessibility. CAPS workers made time to chat to people and arranged times to return or meet one-to-one to complete the survey. This personal approach meant that **we were able to gather over 100 responses** across a wide spread of localities. The recruitment area was divided into four locations – North West, South West, North East and South East.

Methods (continued)

The group were interested in answering some specific questions about what's important to people. In particular looking at the idea that:

"the more people use drop-ins the more their mental health improves."

Other questions were:
- *are people who don´t have to book prior to the drop-in more likely to attend?*
- *do more women than men and trans/non-binary people attend drop-ins?*
- *are older age groups more likely to attend drop-ins compared to younger age groups?*
- *do people feel more involved in their community the more they attend drop-ins?*
- *how do most people get to know about drop-ins?*

Results

There were 107 responses in total. There was a spread of responses across all four of Edinburgh's localities. The map of Edinburgh below shows the neighbourhoods respondents told us they lived in.

Purple markers indicate 15-20 responses; yellow 5-10; pink <5.
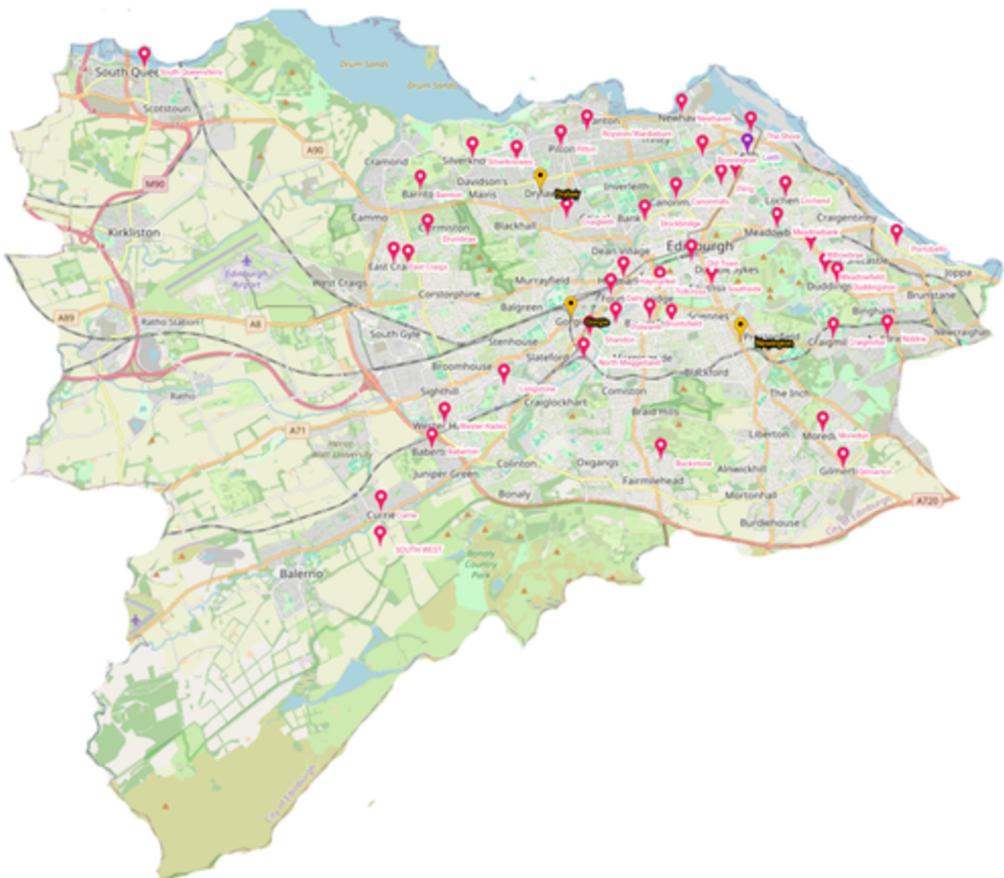
[Image shows map of Edinburgh populated with markers of different colours identifying number of responses in each area.]

Results (continued)

When looking at who answered the survey we can see that **most respondents were women - 77%** compared to 14% men and 5% trans and non-binary. It has been observed how more women than men are generally more willing to fill in surveys[1], especially surveys related to social health. However, this number might also reflect a lower participation in drop-ins by men and people with other gender identities.

[1] e.g. by Becker et al., Slauson-Blevins & Johnson

What is your gender?
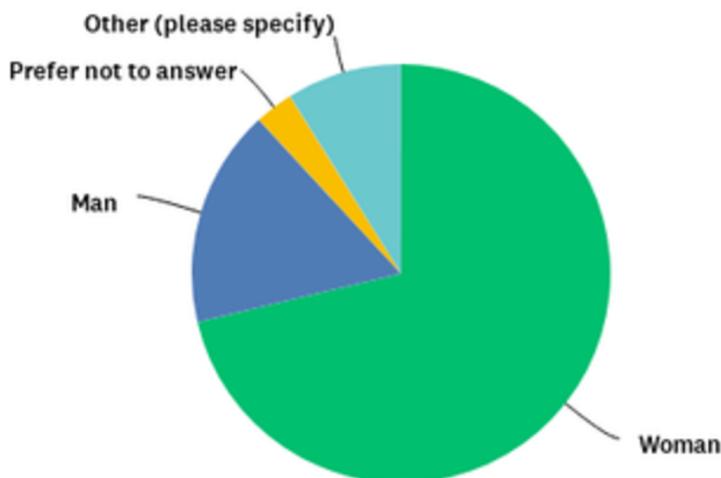
Results (continued)

Most respondents belonged to the 55-64 and 65+ age groups. This once again reflects research around survey responsiveness: 65+ are most likely to respond, followed by 50+, while young adults have the lowest participation. It's difficult to say if this means that younger people don't access drop-ins or whether it relates to answering surveys. But the group thought this was an interesting question and could be worth doing more targeted consultation.

What is your age range?
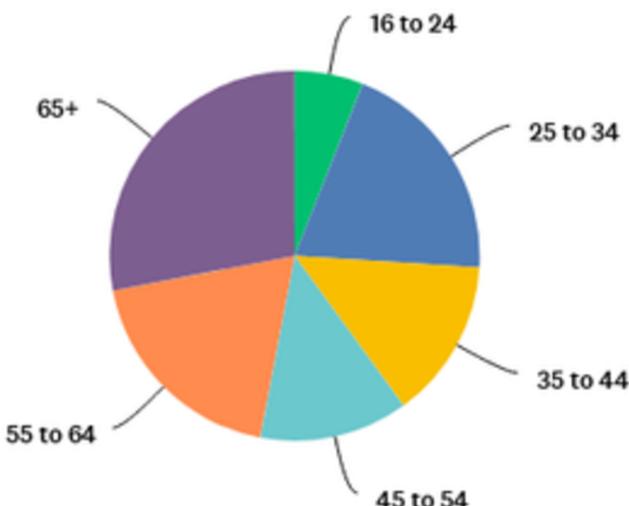
What do people want from drop-ins?

The most common places people said they would like a drop-in to be in were **community centres followed by libraries.** We can see here that health settings and places of specific religious worship were not as popular. Other suggestions highlighted by respondents were **local cafés, schools, museums, leisure centres, shopping centres, sports clubs, or community gardens**, all of which are places that can be viewed as **welcoming and non-threatening and with social purpose**. Some people did, however, specify that they would prefer a space that is quiet and confidential. Online drop-ins were also mentioned as a safe option for people with disabilities or immune suppression.

What type of space would you like your drop-in to be in?
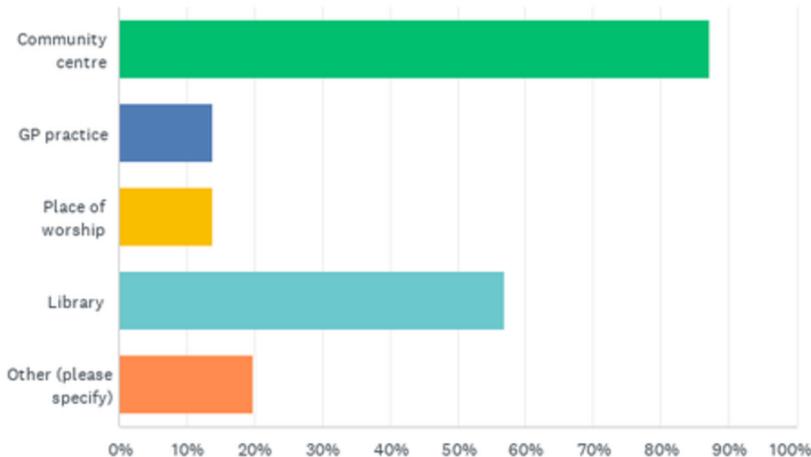
At venues that host community-based activities (like Out of the Blue Drill Hall)

"I am disabled so think it is necessary for people like me to have access to online as I am immuno suppressed and can't go out a lot!"

"Local School premises or Council-owned building"

What kind of drop-in do you attend?

When we asked people who currently attend drop-ins what kind of drop-in they attended, a wide variety were chosen. They included socialising, activity based, community meals or coffee mornings, specific groups for people of different identities, and mental health drop-ins. **The most common response was that people would like to attend activity-based drop-ins.** Alongside this when we asked the question to **people who do not currently attend drop-ins** what they would attend if it was available, **66% said they would like to attend a mental health support drop-in**. This would raise the question of whether they know about current mental health drop-ins and whether these are well advertised or whether there are not enough mental health drop-ins available.

What kind of drop-in do you attend?
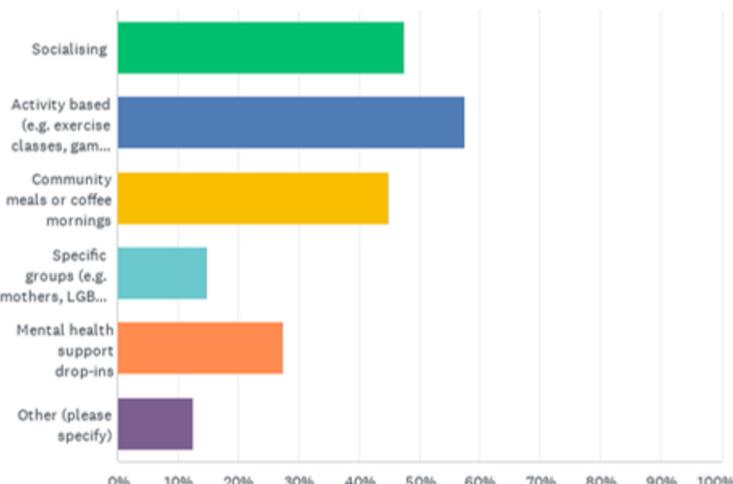
What time of day would you prefer?

When we asked people what time of day they would prefer, there was very little difference in the number of responses for each option. There was however a clear difference in preference for time of day between people who told us they do currently attend a drop-in and those who don't. **People who attend drop-ins at the moment, prefer mornings, and evening was the least preferred.** For **people who do not attend a drop-in currently, the opposite was true – evening was the most popular time, and morning was the least.** Perhaps this would suggest that if there were more drop-ins available in the evenings, those who don't currently go to any would consider attending.

What time of day would you prefer?
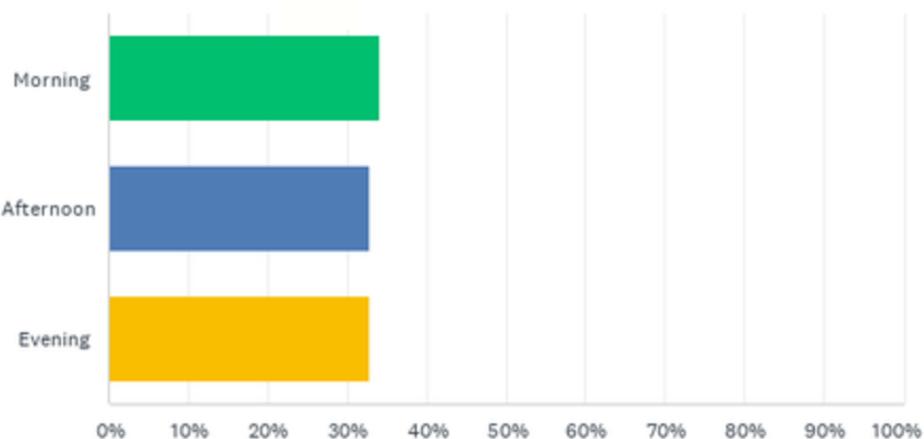
How often would you like your drop-in to take place?

Again there was a clear split between people who are involved with drop-ins regularly and those who do not use these services. Most **people who answered that they would prefer a weekly drop-in (as seen in the graph) were people who use drop-ins regularly**. A factor behind this could be that people who are not currently attending drop-ins are working or have other commitments during the day and would not be able to attend weekly. However, the group found it interesting that there was still an appetite for drop-ins to be available, indicating that the act of **having them available is important to a significant proportion of Edinburgh residents.**

How often would you like your drop-in to take place?
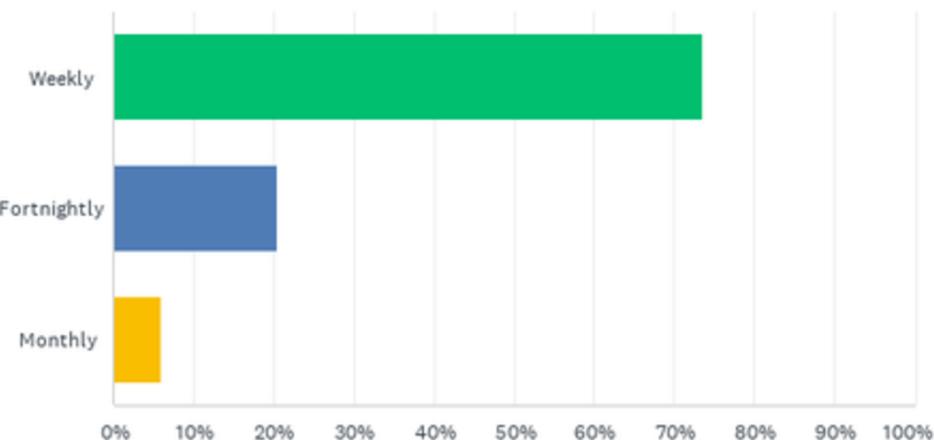
What's most important?

The most common response when we asked what was important to have at drop-ins was **adequate staffing** or volunteers to facilitate well. The second most common thing people mentioned was having **the opportunity to meet people**, whether that was existing friends or new connections, along with **not needing to book to attend**. Other important factors were being **affordable or free** of charge, especially in areas with more financial difficulty. They also mentioned that having **refreshments** was important as well as **planned activities**, which some people said was a motivation to attend and made it easier to chat to new people. **Being nearby and accessible by public transport** was also important to people, as well as being in spaces that are **accessible to people with disabilities**. People also were very clear that having a welcoming, supportive, safe space was very important to them, that is **comfortable, warm, and non-judgemental**.

"Welcoming and inclusive atmosphere often generated by skilled staff and tea/biscuits. I think its vital also that it is near to where you live"

"Teas, a warm smile on arrival, a way of informing us if it's cancelled"

"Affordability and facilitators to enable folk to connect without the anxiety of going to a new space and feeling unsure of what to do / how to approach people. I think activities are good for this too!" A way of informing us if its cancelled"

"A theme or activity so I could meet others with a common interest."

"Having an open and welcoming community space where everyone feels free to engage how they prefer (within reason is incredibly important."

"I think it's important to have spaces where people can socialise in a multitude of ways, so having people being mindful of how others might want to use the space…."

"Prefer activities that are not for a particular age group. I prefer intergenerational"

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Is there sufficient information for accessing drop-ins?

The most common way people first heard about the drop-in was **word of mouth**, closely followed by **community centres.** This may show some evidence that people are more likely to attend a drop-in if someone has recommended it. Or it could be, as people highlighted, that **better up-to-date promotion or advertising** of drop-ins is needed. Information about services was often not easily available, or information was inaccurate and hadn't been updated.

How did you first hear about the drop-in?
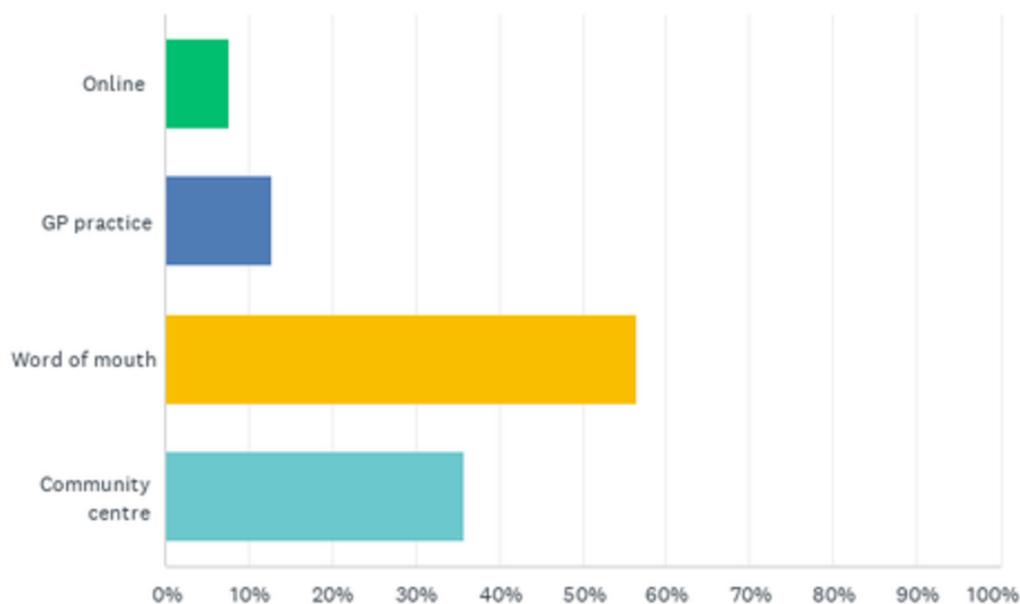
"A severe lack of information about such centres and many of these opportunities are age specific or illness specific so very limited to those sectors of the population."

"Info on what the drop-in entails specifically, welcoming atmosphere, and most importantly visibility - it's really hard to find drop-ins unless you're actively searching for them, and even then it can be hard."

What's available at present is not advertised widely enough so people don't know about it. I find a lot of what is available is only available online but many of us don't have iPhones or computers. Some of the information online is not correct - wrong date or day of the week named. Websites need to be kept up to date and corrected. Some of the information listed is many years out of date!"

What does attending a drop-in mean to people?

When we asked how important it was for people to attend a drop-in, the graph shows clearly that drop-ins are considered very important. Of those already attending drop-ins, **67.50% said it is very important for them**, and 27.50% said it is important.

How important is it for you to attend a drop-in?
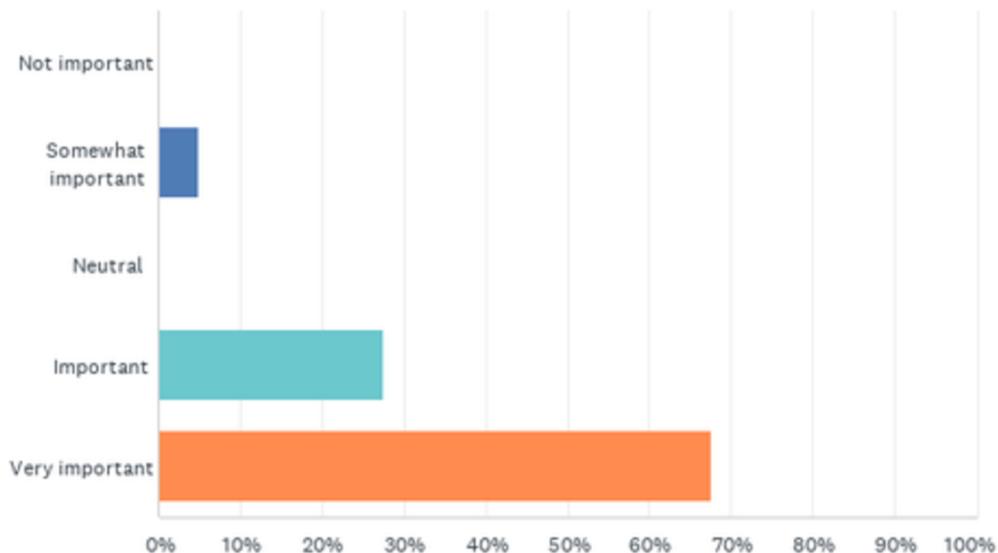
Impact on mental health

When we asked people what kind of impact drop-ins had on their mental health, a massive **72.5% said, 'very positive', and 27.5% said 'positive'**. Nobody answered that the impact on their mental health was 'negative'. As we see throughout the report many more said they feel they would become isolated and that their mental health would decline without access to the drop-in they attended. **This is a significant finding to support the idea that these low impact, peer spaces are a vital part of community mental health and wellbeing resources.**

What kind of impact do drop-ins have on your mental health?
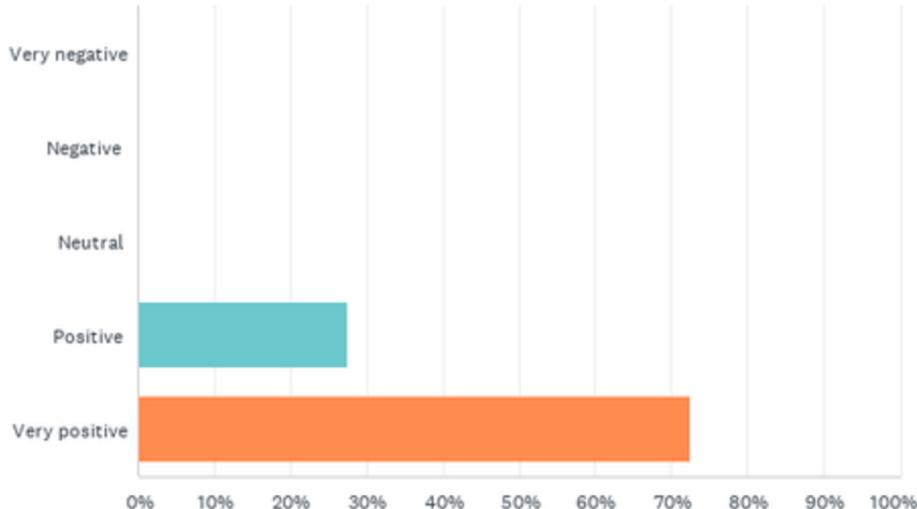
"Mentally it would devastate me and my family, [I would feel] isolated myself from the community"

"Last week - I was feeling down [...] but when I came here I felt better. We support each other and pick each other up."

"I have completed this survey as I think the concept is important. There are services in my area, however I think there is work to be done in normalising the concept i.e. not just for folk who are really struggling. I was struck by the number of folk who were at the canal festival recently and the very positive atmosphere. I wonder how that inclusiveness could be replicated regularly. This is by no means a criticism of the services being offered, but a musing about how to change people's mindset so that going out to socialise in this way becomes a more regular part of day to day life. Clearly this could have huge knock on benefits re mental and physical health as I'm sure you're aware"

If the drop-in you attend or the community space you access were to shut down, how would that affect you?

Many people told us they would be negatively affected should the drop-in they attend shut down. People used words like **'unhappy', 'sad', 'stressed', 'devastated', 'depressed'** to describe how it would feel to have a drop-in shut down. Some people told us that it was their only reason for leaving the house. People said a drop-in shutting down would have an impact on their ability to care for children and family, due to the community support that is felt at drop-ins. When describing why drop-ins are so important, people used words like **'lifeline', 'vital support',** referring to '**community spirit you can rely on'.**

A few people told us that they could find another drop-in, but others said they would find this difficult. Some people highlighted that having a drop-in further away wouldn't be accessible to them, and that **having one in their local community was important.**

[they provide]"community spirit that you rely upon for the rest of the week until the next session"

"I'd be climbing the walls. The drop-in is the only time I get out of the house."

"The council is busy cutting community provision and it's v worrying and short sighted... We need more community spaces and things for people of all ages"

"For some people it is clearly a lifeline."

"Pull my hair out. Greet. I'd be very sad and unhappy."

"I complained to the NHS Lothian about the closure of this drop-in but to no avail. I was told that it was a staffing issue. No attempt was made to consult with the people who went to the drop-in. Often up to 30 people would attend."

Do you know of a drop-in or community space that closed down recently?

People told us they knew of many community centres and drop-ins that had already closed, namely:

- drop-in run by REH chaplaincy at the Augustine United Church;
- Wishes women's group;
- community space at Westside Plaza;
- Craigroyston Community Centre;
- Growing not Waiting;
- Seasons group;
- Blackhall Library – temporarily closed;
- Now Action;
- Shrub Co-op;
- Hillcrest Hub;
- Stand Alone.

"Drop-in organised in partnership with NHS Lothian's Spiritual Care Team (Chaplains) and Augustine United Church meeting on a weekly basis. There was time for reflection at the end of the drop-in. Up to 25-30 people would attend on a regular basis"

Do you know of a drop-in or community space that closed down recently?

And they went on to tell us of drop-ins that they were concerned about. They were aware that some had problems staying open or had been threatened with closure in the past;
• Muirhouse Millenium Centre;
• Alma project;
• Contact Point;
• The Prentice Centre on West Granton road.
Some of these spaces have previously been at risk of closure or have changed organisations. People told us that there is a lack of communication with communities, or mixed information available online.
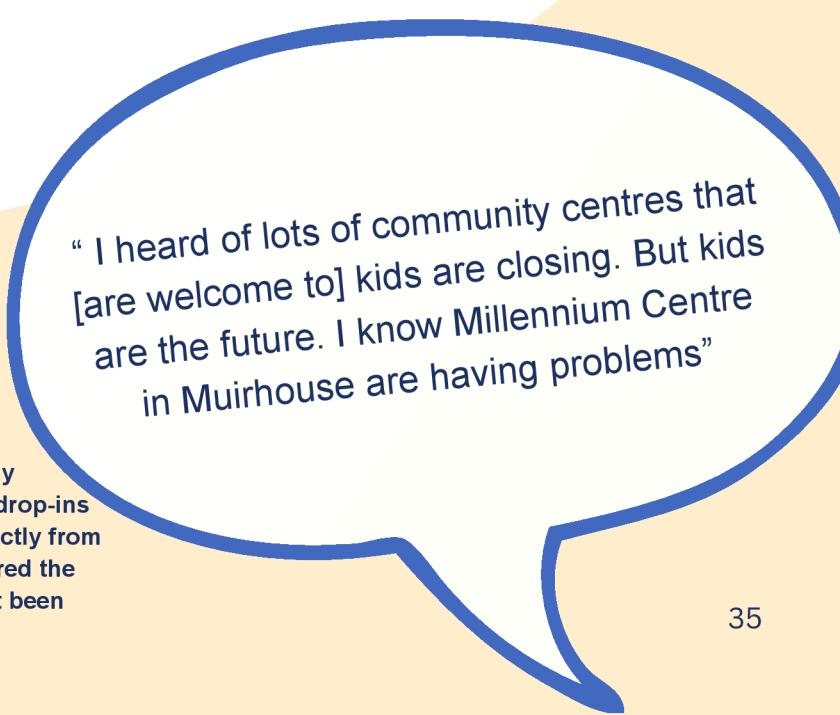
" I heard of lots of community centres that [are welcome to] kids are closing. But kids are the future. I know Millennium Centre in Muirhouse are having problems"

Please note that any information about drop-ins closing comes directly from people who answered the survey and has not been verified by CAPS.

"There used to be a community space in westside plaza, but it was closing just as we moved to the area. That must've been about a year ago now, it was a shame to miss out on that sort of resource, especially while the library was closed for renovations"

What are the impacts of drop-ins on communities?

The group were keen to ask people how involved they felt with decisions in their community about the spaces that are available to them. Also whether they felt part of their community, in order to help understand if being involved in decisions had any affect on how involved people felt.
The result of the first question showed that across all the responses received, **less that a quarter of people (23.1%) felt involved with decisions about community spaces.**

Do you feel involved in decisions about community spaces and drop-in services?

Unsure

Yes

No
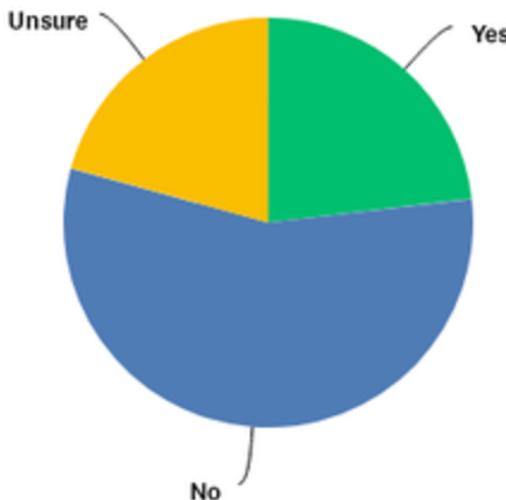
We followed this up by asking people if they felt a part of their local community. **People who told us that they currently attended a drop in were far more likely to express that they did feel a part of their local community than people who did not attend a drop in.** Several of the people who did not attend drop-ins expressed a desire to be more involved with their local community in their answers. This would suggest that drop-ins are a good way for people to feel more a part of their local community, and that there is a desire amongst people to pursue this.
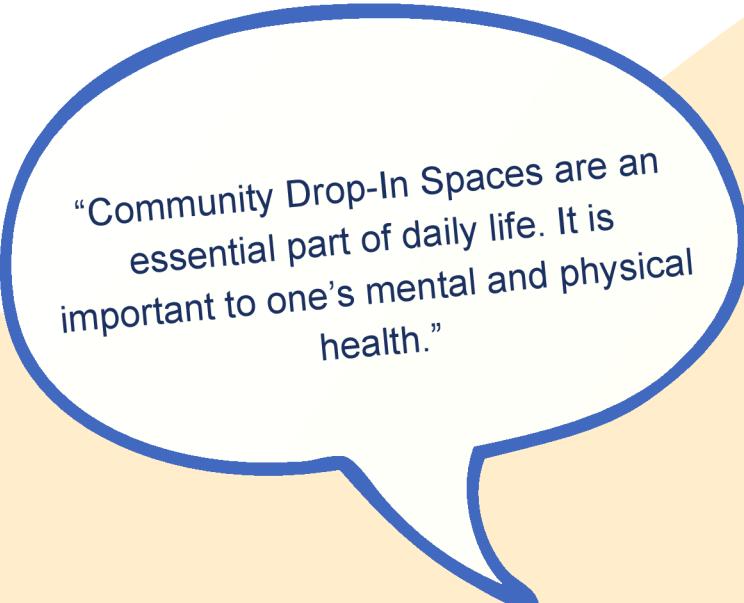
"Community Drop-In Spaces are an essential part of daily life. It is important to one's mental and physical health."

"Here yes. Outside of this I don't feel as much. The drop-in I attend is quite important to feel part of the community."

"I think people are very much feeling lonely and in need of community nowadays, so I can see the benefits of these drop-ins quite strongly. Thanks for your hard work!"

"yes, because at the moment I get involved in a few groups."

"I really think it is vital to have accessible community spaces available from personal experience and also from my role as a mental health nurse. I am concerned with the growth in Edinburgh's population e.g. through new build housing estates but without the associated provision of community spaces as it has the potential to increase social isolation and disconnect within the new community."

What could be better?

Many people told us that **better, more sustainable funding** for drop-ins would be useful to address many of the issues raised in this report. The fact that funding seemed to be sporadic and time limited seemed to add to the issues raised. For example, popular drop-ins disappearing or changing purpose without sufficient consultation or time to reflect on the impact.

People also said they think the **opening hours of drop-ins should be longer or more frequent** and that **more staff** would be an improvement at drop-ins they attended. The group were interested to see that people who do not currently attend drop-ins did not say it was because they didn't want to or didn't need them. It was often due to other restrictions such as time and distance from their community. It was also suggested that **training should be offered to staff, including on handling conflict.** 'Having a named person to support newcomers to integrate to the group' was a suggested idea. It was noted that people appreciated a **welcoming, non-judgemental space** and that having somebody there whose job it was to create and maintain that environment was extremely helpful and inviting.

What could be better?

As noted in the survey results a **'purpose' or 'activity'** was high on the list of reasons to attend a drop-in. And some people suggested they would like more activities such as board games, workshops, seated exercise and organised visits to be a part of the planning and provision in drop-ins.

"There is work to be done in normalising the concept i.e. not just for folk who are really struggling.

"If funding was guaranteed it would make things better."

"More training for staff and volunteers on how they can talk with people at drop ins.

Themes

This consultation was able to reach a wide and diverse range of Edinburgh's population. It provides a wealth of information of the different aspects of what drop-ins within communities can provide for people, how they are being used, who is using them and where the gaps are. The main themes that arose from the consultation are:

- **there is a connection between how important people feel it is to attend drop-ins and how positive they feel drop-ins are for their mental health - 67.50%** of those already attending drop-ins said it is very important for them and 72.50% of those attending drop-ins said that attending a drop-in is very positive for their mental health;
- there is a significant proportion of people in Edinburgh **who do not currently attend drop-ins that believe that attending a drop-in would have a positive effect on their mental health - 93.61%**
- **lack of or inconsistent funding is a major concern for people** and that the closure of well established popular drop-ins has a negative effect on people's mental health;

Themes (continued)

- **lack of or incorrect information** about drop-ins is one of the major causes of people not attending due to either not knowing they exist or being let down if times or locations change without informing people;
- **sufficient staff or facilitation** of drop-ins is a very important factor in their success. Having a friendly independent person there to manage and oversee the drop-in can give people peace of mind and create a feeling of safety;
- it is important for drop-ins to be **free of charge and not require booking** – to be true to the spirit of 'drop-in';
- it is valued to have activities and purpose at drop-ins that are not compulsory but are available.

Whilst we cannot conclude that there are not enough drop-ins in Edinburgh from this consultation, what **we can say from the results that drop-ins that are currently open are of great importance to people** and they want them to be protected from closure. **If provision of drop-ins were to reduce in the wake of third sector cuts, this would have a negative impact.** And there are people who would value the opportunity to access drop-ins that cannot or do not at the moment for a variety of reasons, including time, distance and accessibility.

Recommendations

Following group discussions about the results of our survey, Community Voices would like to make the following recommendations:

- **funding bodies should work towards more reliable and sustainable funding models,** that do not result in abrupt closures of community spaces and projects that run drop-ins. The assessing of these spaces should include their value to people who use them, rather than only financial value;

- **we would recommend better signposting and sharing of information on drop-ins,** as keeping information up-to-date seems to be an issue. Organisations should always inform people and communities of information on drop-ins via multiple methods (e.g. social media, text, posters), to ensure good communication. We would also encourage more frequent communication between organisations responsible for the upkeep of directories and those running drop-ins, to ensure information is up-to-date. This will result in clearer signposting, making services more accessible to people;

Recommendations (continued)

- **ensuring that drop-ins have staff/facilitators and that they are well-valued and encouraged to participate in training**. As a new idea, opportunities for staff and volunteers at different drop-ins to exchange skills and opportunities could be a positive development;

- **further steps to encourage more people to get involved with volunteering at their local drop-ins,** as this could make for more positive experiences of community drop-ins, while maintaining lower costs;

- **the voices of people should be reflected in decision making on what happens to community drop-ins**. We would recommend that stakeholders take the data in our report as a starting point and further consult and communicate with people about their views on community drop-ins, to inform how best to provide these services.

What next?

This report will be available to everyone on our website. We will:

- **show this report to stakeholders** and those involved in decision making about community drop-ins;

- **use the information we have gathered as evidence** to challenge proposed cuts to community drop-ins;

- **send this report to organisations** who run community drop-ins, third-sector organisations, public bodies and other decision makers;

- **use this report to amplify voices of lived experience** on this topic.

- **encourage drop-ins to refer to the information** we have gathered as a resource.

We will also run an event to share and promote our findings, which will be open to the public and to professionals who have an interest in community drop-ins. This will be a chance to ask questions to those involved in producing the survey and report. It will also be an opportunity to reflect on what needs to be done to support and develop drop-in spaces, with a focus on lived experience involvement.

Thank you

We would like to thank everyone who completed the survey, engaged in conversations and gave their views on this topic.

CAPS
Independent Advocacy