



# Swale Community Centres Consultation



Swale Community & Voluntary Services

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## Background

In 2012 Phoenix House was first threatened with closure. After protests and petitions from both the centre users and the local community it was given an initial extended lease until February 2017. The future of Phoenix House therefore remains uncertain and with the existing building nearing the end of its life the Trustees of Swale Community Centres felt that it was important to ensure the future of a community centre in central Sittingbourne. They believe that such a facility in the centre of Sittingbourne is still very much needed and that funding will need to be secured for a New Build centre that can continue to serve the groups and members of the community currently using Phoenix House.

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## Strategic View

The threat of closure has come about due to the proposed regeneration of Sittingbourne. As Phase 2 and 3 of these plans have now been delayed, this has resulted in a stay of execution for the centre until 2022. However, the distinct possibility of closure is still real and it is important to continue with the location of a central site for a new build, together with seeking funding to ensure this happens.

This facility is important to the town of Sittingbourne – a central community hub which is widely used by all ages of people. With the proposed regeneration, it will be even more a priority to retain such a facility in a central location to ensure the essence of ‘community’ is not lost and allow the already vibrant voluntary sector in Swale to continue to thrive.



Heritage Advice  
Counselling Drop Slimming  
-In  
Youth Social Central Hub  
Information Faith  
Support Community  
Disabilities Craft  
Training Exercise Art  
Health Companionship Meetings



Swale Community Centres (Phoenix House) secured an Awards for All Lottery grant to undertake a consultation exercise aiming to establish evidence of need for such a facility in Sittingbourne. Swale CVS has worked with Swale Community Centres to gather the opinions of local people.

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### Methodology

Swale CVS developed a variety of questionnaires to collect data from both the groups using Phoenix House on a regular basis, the users of those groups and the wider community. The aim of the data collection was to show the need for a community centre in central Sittingbourne, and the impact should the facility no longer exist. Also people were encouraged to put forward ideas of services they would like to see operate from a new community centre.

We produced a consultation document that provided background information and invited people to the focus groups being held. We distributed the documents locally.

Staff from SCVS visited Phoenix House to meet with users during and following their group activities and completed the questionnaire with willing individuals keen to give their views. We also held 4 daytime and evening focus groups for users and group leaders to discuss their ideas.

A Family Fun Day was held in July 2015, with the aim of attracting new people to Phoenix House. The event was free to attend. The event saw a good number of families enjoying the day and SCVS staff were on hand to complete questionnaires with people.

The opportunity was also on offer throughout the consultation to complete questionnaires online via Survey Monkey. Questionnaires were also available from the office at Phoenix House and via email. More than 100 responses were received.

This document has been produced to show the data collected.

Phoenix House is currently a very well used facility in Sittingbourne, with its accessibility being crucial to its users.

Individuals surveyed and those attending the focus groups clearly had a passion to secure its future in the town centre. A comment was made in one focus group that seemed to encapsulate the feeling of many - Phoenix House is 'the Spirit of Sittingbourne.' This comment was made in reference to the Sittingbourne regeneration plan of the same name and indicated that it was important to keep a local community centre as part of any future development

The favourable hire costs, the availability of both large and small rooms with flexible uses, along with the helpful and friendly environment, makes Phoenix House an ideal venue for the Voluntary Sector groups it mainly supports.

It is welcoming to users of all ages. From parents and babies attending baby sensory, teenagers attending the new Youth club through to the elderly enjoying various groups. Phoenix House is a life line to so many Sittingbourne residents and its closure would be a huge loss to the community.



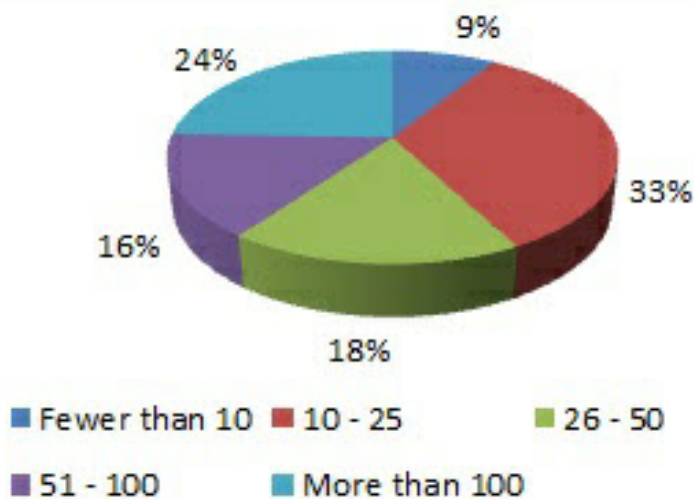
- User group surveys show that around 80% of groups using Phoenix House are well established groups having been in operation for more than six years. With 34% of groups being in existence for over 20 years.
- Over half of the groups have more than 50 members, and only 12% had fewer than 10 members.
- Support groups, Information and Guidance and Health and Wellbeing groups are the highest proportion of services offered. These are vital services for the most vulnerable members of the local community.
- For both groups and their users the central location of Phoenix House was the main benefit and factor for its use. With the favourable hire costs being a close second for Group organisers.
- Of the users surveyed the highest percentage of individuals felt that they most benefited from the socialising and friendship aspect they gained from attending a group at Phoenix House, helping to reduce social isolation significantly.
- Crucially, 64% of users believe that they will be unable to access their groups and services elsewhere if Phoenix House were to close.



## Group User Results



Number of Members



**Firstly, groups were asked how many members they had.**

The largest section (33%) had between 10 and 25 members.

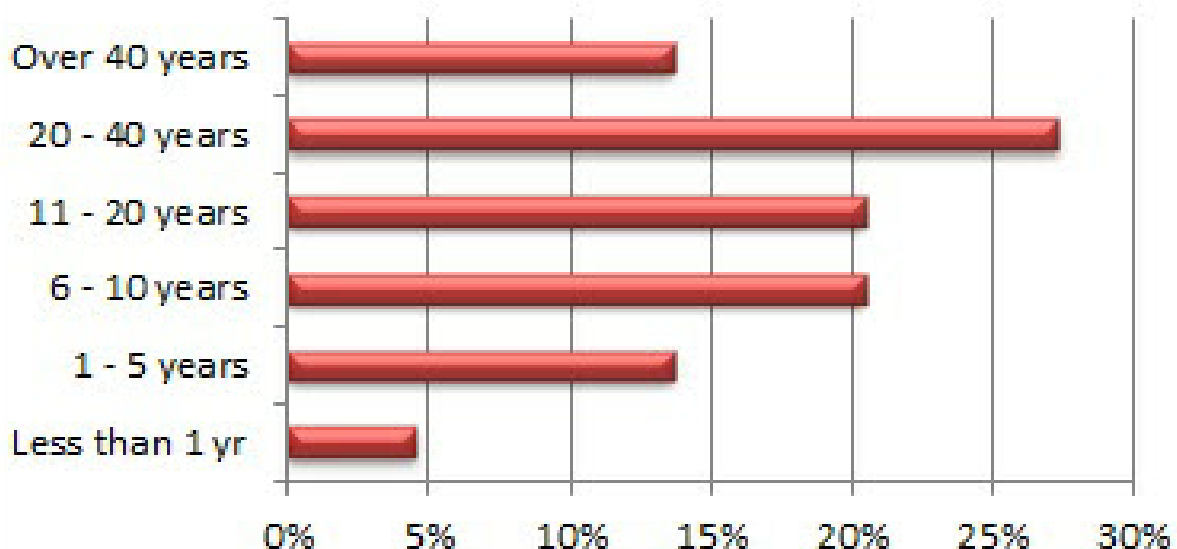
Almost a quarter of groups had more than 100 members.

This shows that users of Phoenix House feel comfortable holding larger meetings as well as smaller ones and the range of meeting rooms available can accommodate their needs.

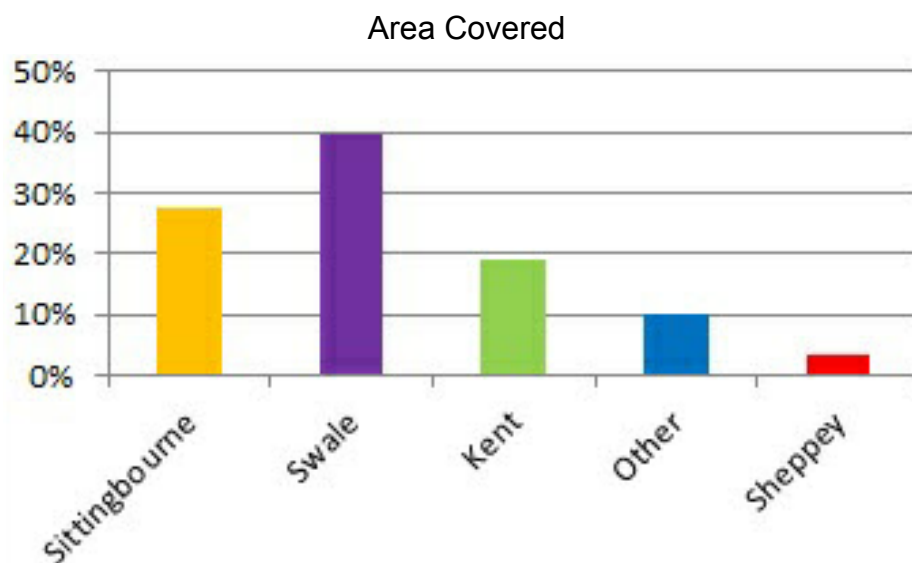
**The next question was about how long the groups had been operating.**

Only 4% of respondents had been operating for less than a year, perhaps indicating that fewer groups are starting up. The rest of the responses were fairly evenly spread over the date ranges, with the exception of groups having been established for more than 20 years (27%) .

Years in Operation





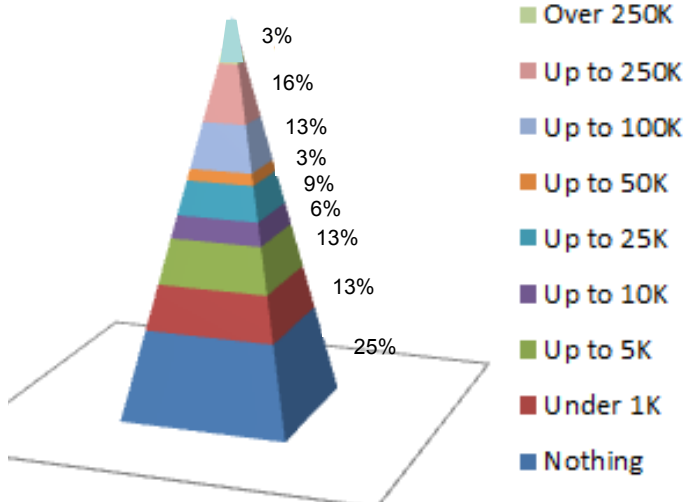


## Groups were asked to explain what area their services covered.

Obviously all groups meeting at Phoenix House covered Sittingbourne, but 28% covered only Sittingbourne. Many additionally covered the rest of Swale (40%), some extended to the whole of Kent (19%), and a few reached right into London (10%). 3% also covered Sheppey but not Faversham.

The fact that 40% of the groups meeting in Sittingbourne covered the whole of Swale shows that groups consider Sittingbourne to be centrally located and convenient for their members.

## Annual Income



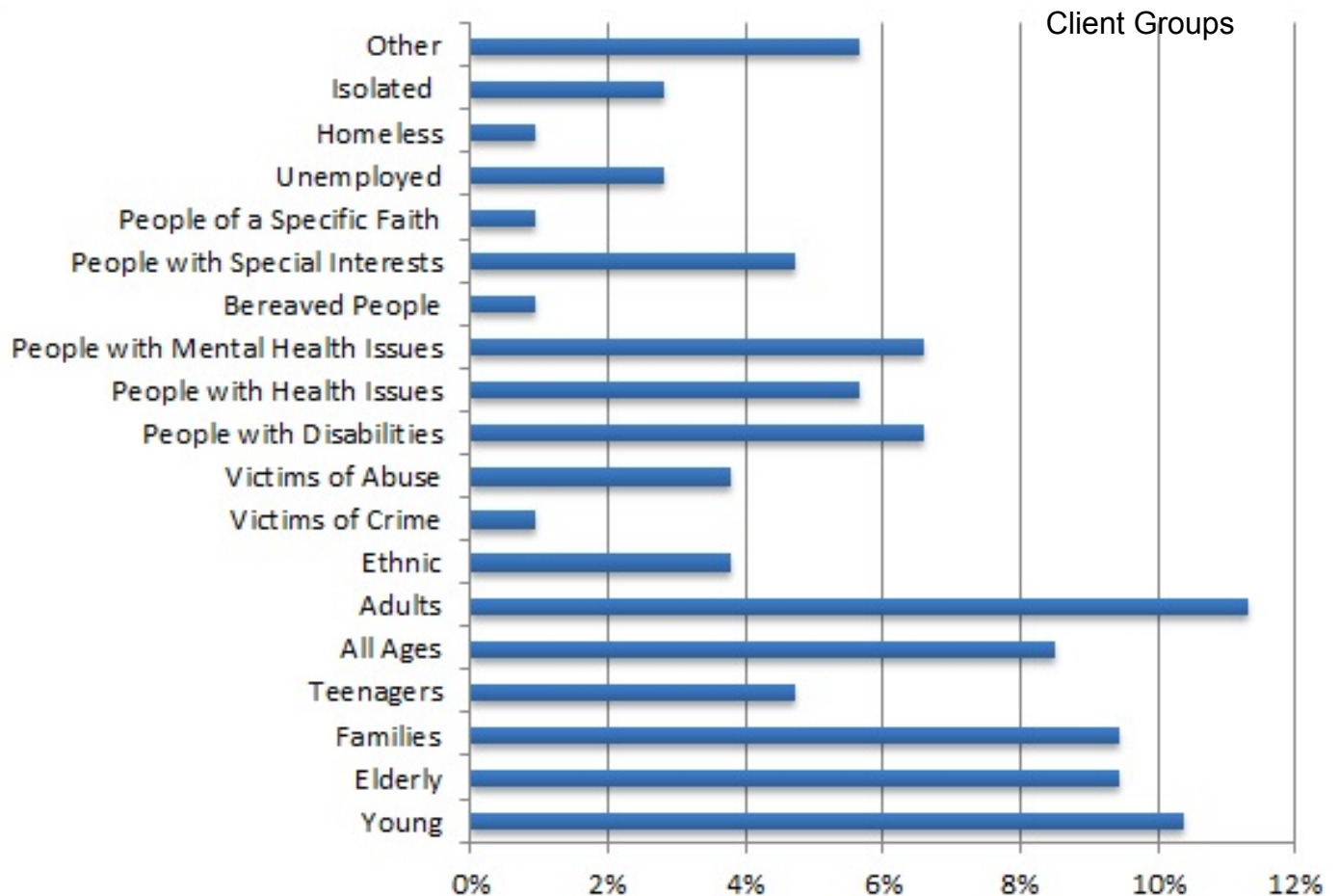
## Groups were asked to state which income bracket they fell into.

Several groups preferred not to disclose their income, leaving the question blank.

¼ of the respondents stated that they had no income at all. The remaining groups were fairly evenly distributed across the income ranges with the exception of the £25k - £50k bracket (3%), and the Over £250k bracket (3%).

This shows that despite having more income to spend, groups still prefer to attend Phoenix House for the benefits and convenience it can provide.





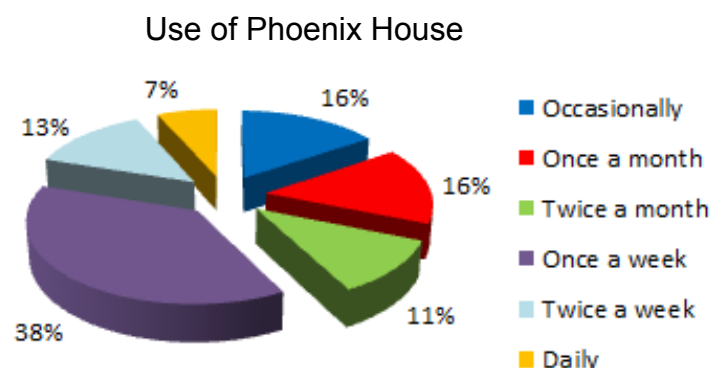
## Respondents explained who it is that they provide services for.

The answers to this question were wide and varied. Many different groups of clients are given support, with some groups supporting more than one type of client. Phoenix House also provides a meeting place for many more groups who did not respond to the questionnaire.

## Groups were asked how often they use Phoenix House to meet.

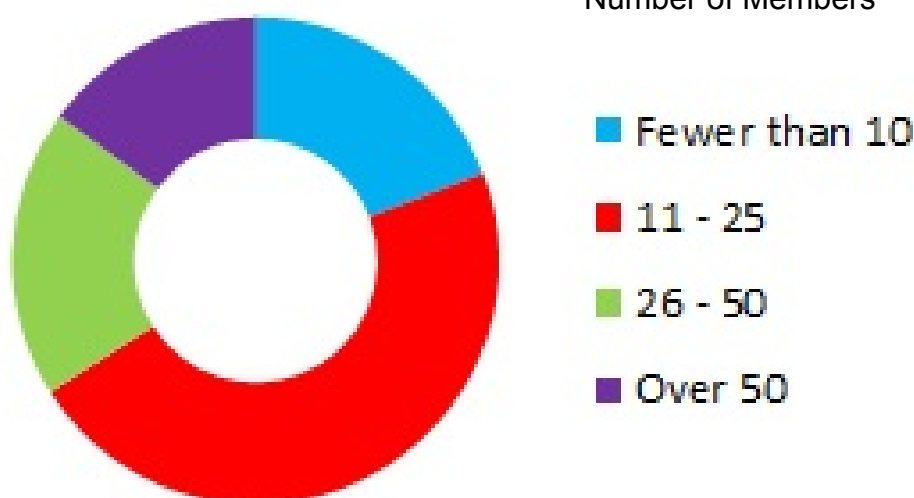
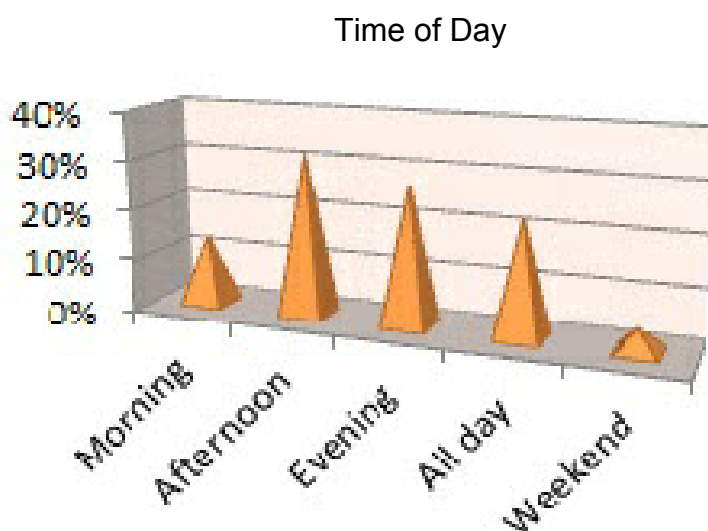
Over a third (38%) of the respondents meet weekly.

Nearly 60% meet at least once a week.



### Groups detailed what time of day they meet.

These answers show Phoenix House to be slightly busier during the afternoon, and least busy at the weekend. It should be remembered that bookings for the whole day include both morning and afternoon bookings and these figures could be added to the morning bookings (making 37%) and afternoon bookings (making 55%).

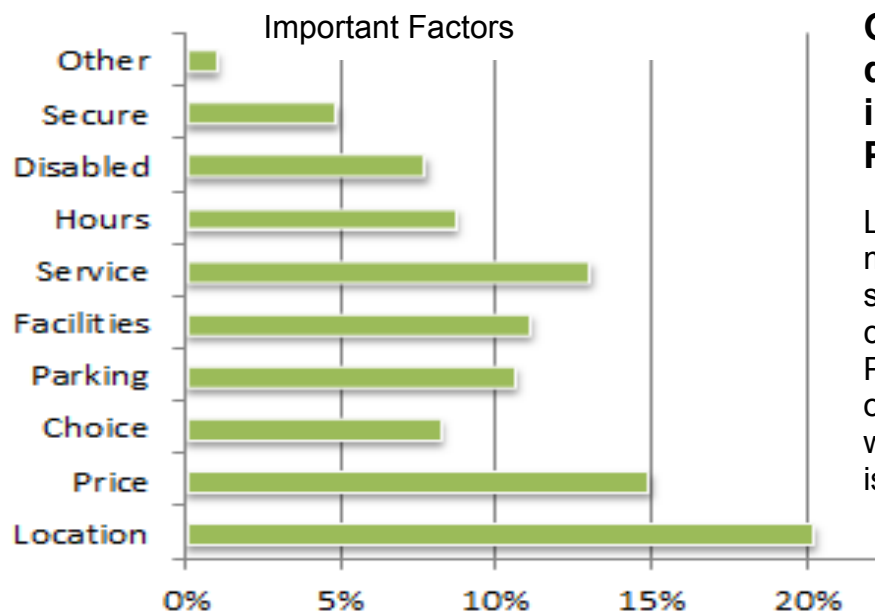
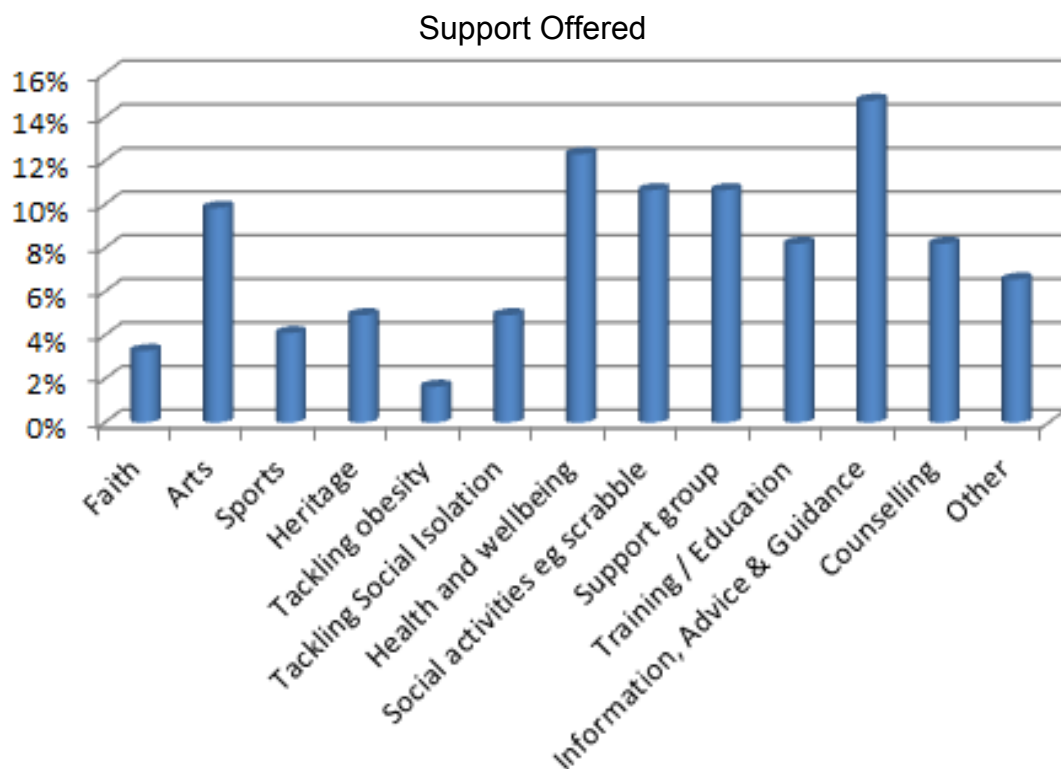


### Groups were asked how many of their members attend their sessions

Over half of the respondents suggested that between 11 and 25 members attend their meetings. 19% have less than 10 attendees, 47% have 11 - 25 people attending, 19% of groups have between 26 and 50 attendees and 15% have over 50 attendees.

## Groups were asked what type of support they offer to their clients

There was a huge range of support on offer to the clients at Phoenix House. The largest sectors were information and advice, support and social groups and health and wellbeing. 'Other' included activities such as job searching, walking, play activities for children and mediation.



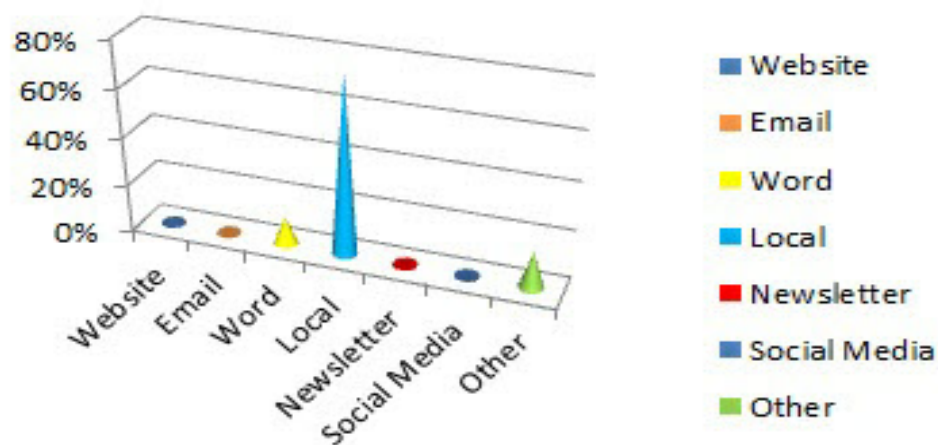
## Groups were asked to describe what was important to them about Phoenix House

Location was the main issue for most groups, with over 20% stating that they based their choice of venue on this factor. Price (15%) and the services offered by Phoenix House (13%) were the next most important issues.

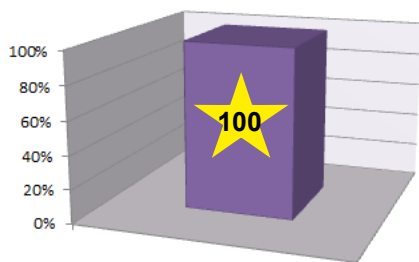
## Respondents explained how they first heard of Phoenix House

Despite having a new website and employing the latest marketing techniques, most groups (74%) who use Phoenix House do so because they are local and know it is there. 15% of respondents replied 'other' and explained that previous post holders had also used the venue or they used to have an office there. One was referred by the Local Authority. The final 11% heard about Phoenix House through word of mouth.

Heard of Phoenix House



Networking

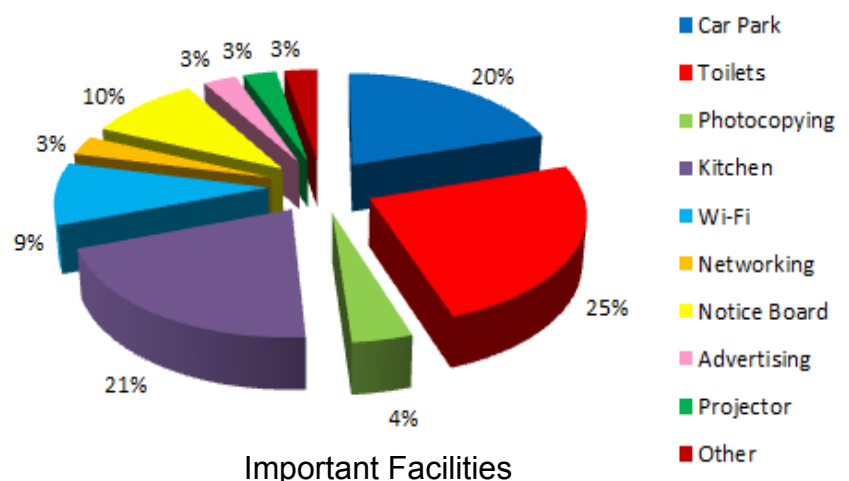


## Interacting with other groups

100% of the respondents stated that they usefully network with other groups while they are at Phoenix House. Whilst this facility isn't high on their agenda when thinking about venues, it is recognised that it is a positive benefit of being in a social hub.

## Respondents detailed the facilities which were important to them

Car parking, toilet facilities and use of a kitchen were the top considerations. 'Other' comments included having someone at reception makes them feel safe and having the room set up and put back means you don't have to be fit to hire the room!



Important Facilities

## Groups were asked what they would do if Phoenix House closed



### Groups detailed how far they would travel for meetings if Phoenix House closed

Percentage of people who would travel 1 mile or less	30%
Percentage of people who would travel up to 2 miles	4%
Percentage of people who would travel up to 5 miles	17%
Percentage of people who can only meet in central Sittingbourne	39%
Percentage of people who would relocate anywhere in Swale	9%

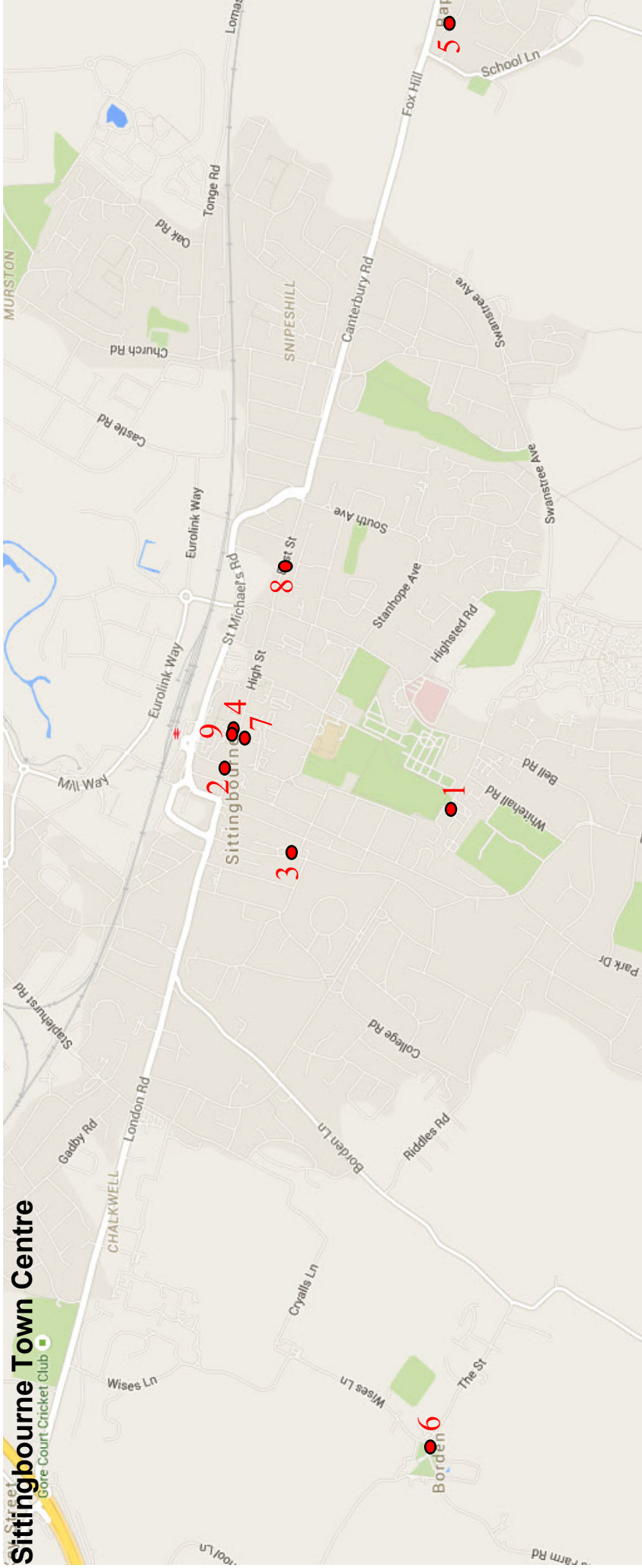
### Research into comparable room hire locally

Over 100 groups use Phoenix House on a regular basis providing a diverse range of services for all ages. Many of these groups would not be able to exist without the use of such a central facility – ease of access by public transport, car parking availability and competitive rates for the voluntary sector are of high importance. Research has shown that larger groups would find it difficult to find rooms ample enough to accommodate them at such competitive rates. Whilst there are other facilities, centrally located, most are unable to accommodate larger groups or are unaffordable to the Voluntary Sector.

After looking into other facilities within the Sittingbourne area, many would have to move to halls on the outskirts of Sittingbourne – for example Kemsley Community Hall, Tunstall Village Hall, Bapchild Village Hall – to access the same facilities and same rates. This would cause difficulties for attendees as our user surveys have indicated that a large majority of users would not be able or prepared to travel a distance due to poor public transport links.

There are also specialised services operating from Phoenix House, which if unable to relocate, would have difficulty in operating in the town – for example the Baby Sensory Programme – the Sturry Social Centre in Canterbury would be the nearest option.





1. King George V Pavilion	Small room £10 / hr	1. 1 mile
2. Pulse Cafe	Large room £15 / hr	2. 0.4 mile
3. Carmel Hall	£16 / hr	3. 0.6 miles
4. Avenue Theatre	Small room £5 / hr	4. 0.2 Miles
5. Bapchild Village Hall	Large room £14.70 / hr	5. 1.5 miles
6. Borden Village Hall	Large Room £15.35 / hr	6. 2.1 miles
7. UK Paper	Large room £25 / hr	7. 0.3 miles
8. United Reform Church	8.	8. 0.3 miles
9. Swale CVS	Large room £8.50 / hr	9. 0.2 miles

**Phoenix House comparable Rates**

Small rooms - £5.50/hr (2 or 3 people)

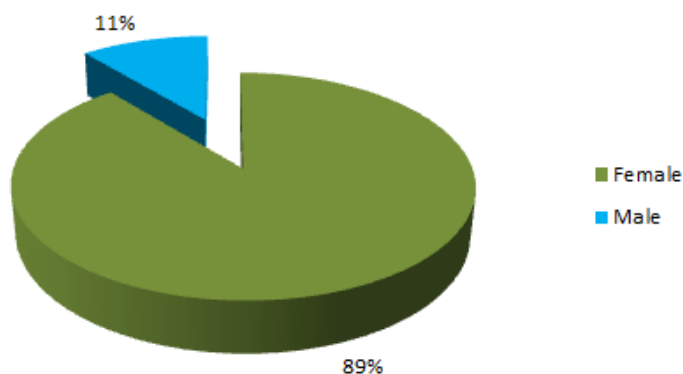
Medium size - £6.50/hr (up to 15 people)

Larger meeting rooms (15 – 25) - £7.50/hr

Large Hall (up to 80) - £8.50/hr



## Users by Gender



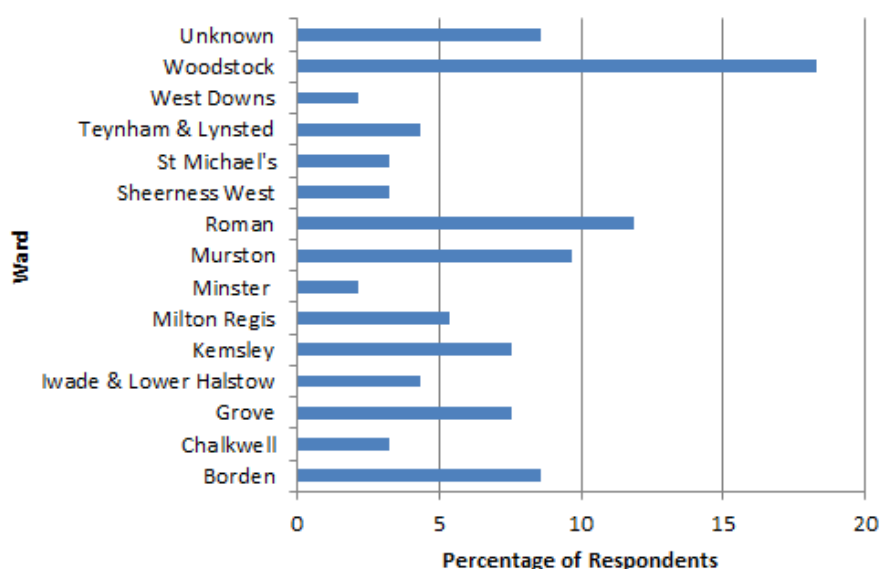
Individual users of Phoenix House were split into males and females. It was found that the vast majority of users were female. This is in comparison with figures from the NCVO which states that: 'More than two-thirds (68%) of the voluntary sector workforce are women'.

Source: UK Civil Society Almanac 2012

<http://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac12/who-works-in-the-voluntary-sector>

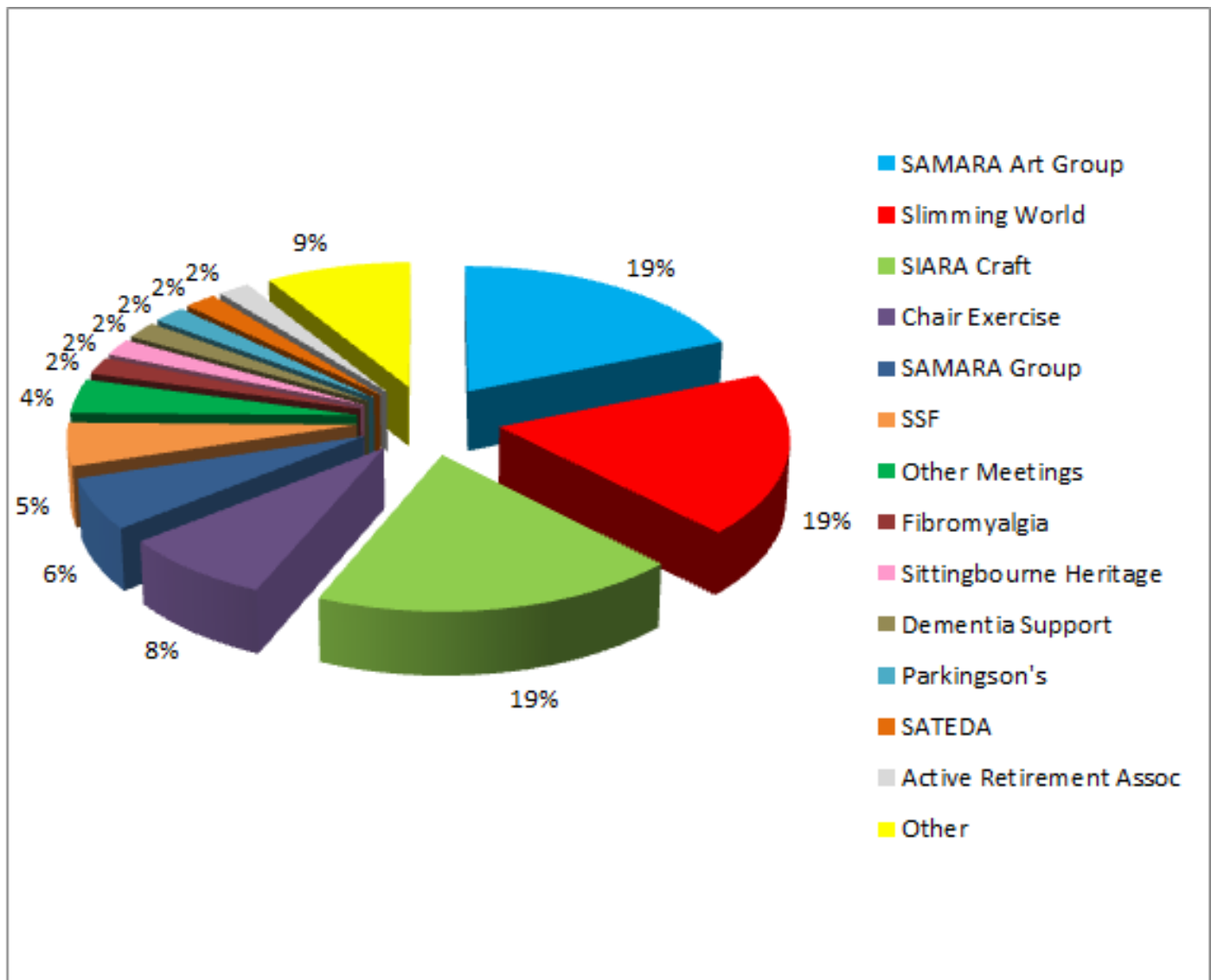
Ward Name	%
Borden	9
Chalkwell	3
Grove	8
Iwade & Lower Halstow	4
Kemsley	8
Milton Regis	5
Minster	2
Murston	10
Roman	12
Sheerness West	3
St Michael's	3
Teynham & Lynsted	4
West Downs	2
Woodstock	18
Unknown	9

## Users by Ward



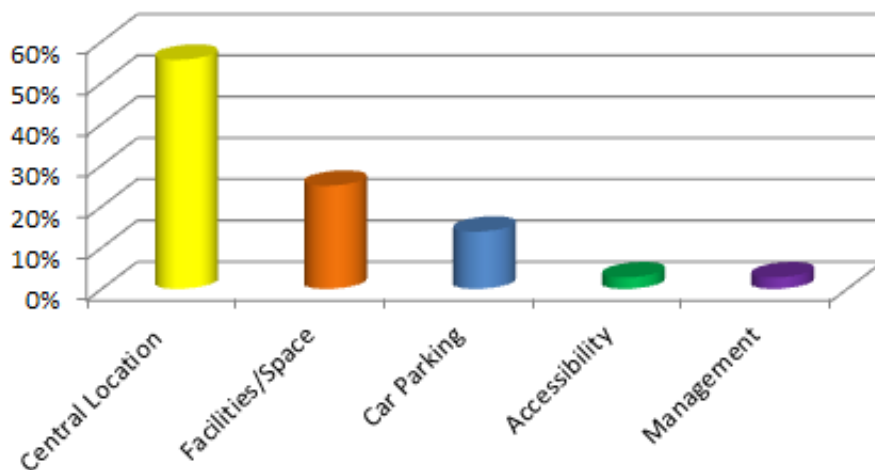
Individual users of were asked to specify the ward they belong to. Responses were fairly evenly split across the wards, with the highest number of people coming from the Woodstock ward.

## Groups and Services Accessed



Individuals were asked to specify which group they attended or services they accessed. The three largest groups were Samara Art Group, Slimming World and Siara Craft. Together these accounted for more than half of the respondents. The remaining groups had very few respondents and 'other' is made up of single users of various groups.

### What is Important?

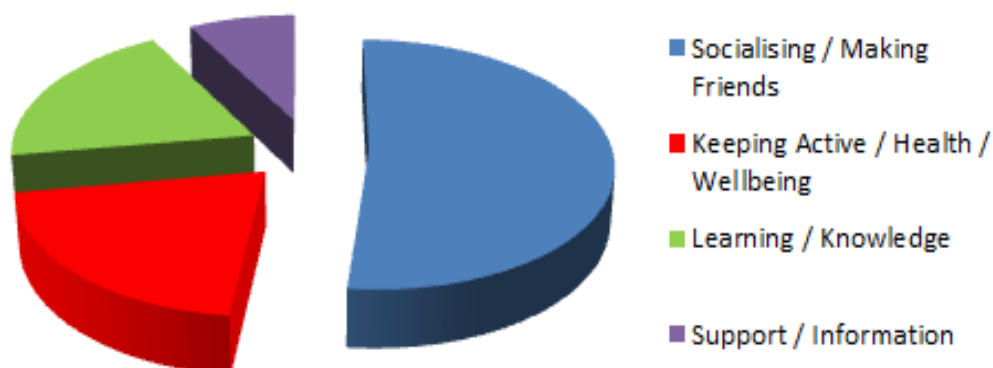


The questionnaire asked individuals what they thought was important about Phoenix House. More than half of the people surveyed thought that a central location was the most important factor to consider.

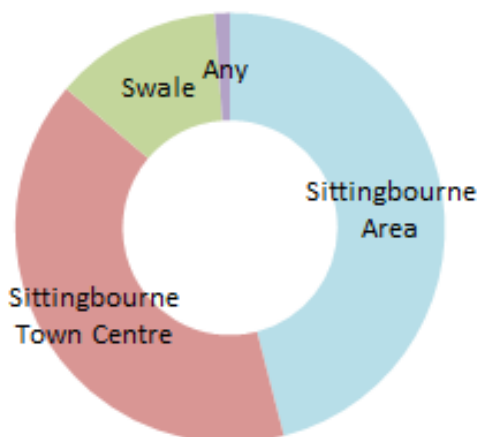
Individuals were asked about the additional benefits of attending Phoenix House.

More than half of the individuals enjoy the social and networking side of attending their group. They stated that it makes a difference to their life.

### Benefit of Using Phoenix House



## Location



### Location Prepared To Travel To

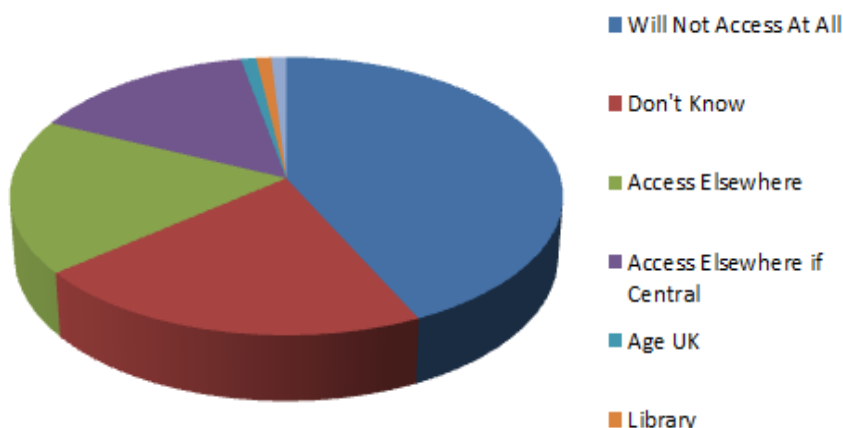
Sittingbourne Area	46%
Sittingbourne Town Centre	40%
Swale	13%
Any	1%

Individuals were asked where they would want to travel to in order to access their services. The above chart shows that this is an important issue to people with over 80% not willing to travel outside Sittingbourne.

## Where Will You Go If Phoenix House Closes?

64% of respondents felt that if Phoenix House closed they didn't know of an alternative place to access their services. The majority of these people would stop attending altogether.

In addition to this, although a further third would be willing to access services elsewhere, they were not sure where it would be. Only 3% had an idea of where else they could go to access services.



Will Not Access At All	43%
Don't Know	21%
Access Elsewhere	18%
Access Elsewhere if Central	15%
Age UK	1%
Library	1%
Online	1%

Focus groups were held from April to June 2015. In total, 38 attendees contributed opinions and views.

Attendees were asked why they use Phoenix House. A sample of the responses are below.

Rooms are set up and  
cleared for you

Its anonymous thereby  
maintaining privacy

Long opening  
hours

Favourable charges

One stop social hub

You can bring your own  
refreshments

Easy by public  
transport

Service users  
can pop in  
when they like

Phoenix House nurtures  
the 'Spirit of Sittingbourne'

Flexible

Central Location

Facilities are good



Attendees were asked what the new building should be like.  
A sample of the responses are below:

## General Facilities

- Open reception area
- Café
- Garden
- Proper catering kitchen
- Coffee machines
- Buggy Park
- Cycle storage
- Car park
- Wi-Fi throughout
- Conference Facilities
- Internet café
- Community rest area

## Community / Heritage

- Keep the name 'Phoenix House'
- Presentation / pictures of old Phoenix House
- Volunteers to help people get on-line
- Local artists to decorate the centre

## Room Facilities

- Soundproofed room for privacy / music practice
- Flexible room sizes
- Cheap office space to encourage others
- Flexible and multipurpose
- Eco friendly

## Disabled Facilities

- Hearing loop
- Disabled toilets
- Brightly coloured sensory room
- Easy access
- Central location

### Further Discussion Points

- Phoenix House is a sound structure with no major problems.
- Over 100 groups operate from Phoenix House.
- Some people expressed concern that Phoenix House was still destined for closure, following all the efforts to save it in 2013.
- People felt it was important to have notice of closure to give them time to warn their members and find alternative venues.
- With regards to the proposed new community centre, it seems that the land has been earmarked on St Michael's Road, but the money to finance the build needs to be secured.
- General feeling was that the community should decide on what the new building should be like and not Kent County Council.
- West Faversham Community Centre was used as an example of a purpose built community centre that is really well used.
- Up to 1400 people per week use Phoenix House. Now open until 9 -10pm in the evening and at the weekends. Numbers are increasing.
- Phoenix House lost some groups with the previous threat of closure. However some of these groups are now returning.
- The Demonstration/ March in 2013 can be used as evidence of the passion felt by local people towards Phoenix House.
- The focus group spoke about producing a presentation of Phoenix House through the years ( once was a girls' grammar school). Possibly produce a booklet.





