

Vibrant centre promotes cohesion and skills

Stella Wiseman reports on how Hale Community and Youth Centre is building connections, supporting residents and helping people gain confidence and new skills.

EVERY year the Mayor of Farnham picks a charity or two to champion — and this year a vibrant Hale hub has been in the spotlight.

For the past 10 months, the current mayor, Cllr George Murray, has been raising money for the Hale Community and Youth Centre.

Based at 130 Upper Hale Road, the aim of the centre, in the words of its manager Melissa Salisbury, is “to create community and enable the local population to take part in activities that inspire them and to learn and develop new skills”.

Hale has a mixed demographic with wealthy and middle-income families alongside those living with deprivation, some with multiple disadvantages.

Melissa said: “We are here to support people and to encourage community cohesion so that everyone has the chance to understand their neighbours’ challenges.”

To this end, events are set up to encourage mixing. There are drop-in sessions and the Wednesday ‘pay what you can’ lunch is particularly good for this. The lunch runs alongside the Community Fridge, held three times a week to redistribute food which would otherwise go into landfill, and Citizens Advice representatives and a financial

adviser are often around on Wednesdays to offer free advice.

Melissa said: “We see people come to the lunch and sit on their own the first time but within a few weeks they are sitting and chatting to others. We also see people who come to the centre at the lowest of their lows and start coming out of themselves. Some have even become volunteers.”

All this involves a huge amount of work, but Melissa’s approach is: “When an opportunity arises I say ‘yes’ and see how we can make it work. We have a fabulous team of staff and volunteers who help us do this. Without the volunteers we would do only 30 to 40 percent of what we do now. They are invaluable.”

One volunteer is Lynn, who came to the centre after the Covid pandemic. “I wanted to find new things to do and meet new people and I liked the idea of some of the classes. The staff and volunteers talk to you and find out what your interests are, what you need and suggest things you might do.”

There’s plenty of choice both indoors and out. Volunteers who turn up every Tuesday afternoon have made the gardens bloom, while others are inside cooking, serving food, helping with craft or supporting young people, helping



Joyful Greens participants at Hale Community and Youth Centre.

with the ‘stay and play’, sometimes learning new skills or putting existing ones to good use. Carol, for instance, started volunteering soon after the pandemic.

“I wanted to do something to help people and I really enjoy it,” she said. “There is plenty to do. I organise the collections of food for the Community Fridge from places like Aldi and KFC and from the charity FareShare and I go and pick it up to bring it to the centre. There is always something that needs doing — fridges and freezers need cleaning, tables wiped, the crates of vegetables need to be put out.”

The food available is always gratefully received. Among the happy recipients is Andrew, who broke off from taking part in the Joyfull Greens cookery course to say: “It is always so well organised. You get a membership card and it’s also a social get-together.”

“I was made redundant and a friend told me about it and I really like it. The people are helpful and polite and they look after everyone’s needs.”

The Community Fridge has grown since its inception in 2020 and offers free food for anyone within a five-mile radius of the centre. As well as Wednesday

lunchtimes it is open on Fridays, 1pm to 2.30pm, and on Sundays, 5pm to 6.30pm.

Bread and vegetables are also available on racks in the centre’s reception area, and cakes and pastries are given to the Clothing Giveaway café at St Mark’s Church, Hale, on Mondays, 9am to 11am, a joint project between the centre and the church.

The centre provides support to young people, so much so that one of them has joined the staff team. Tilly, who used to attend youth groups there, is now a part-time youth worker. Among those offered support are young carers in years six to nine, and Melissa would like to expand this as not everyone who is a young carer actually realises they are.

“For example,” said Melissa, “they might have a sibling with SEN or a parent or someone in their extended family being cared for in the home. They are welcome to come along and join in, have some time and space for themselves.”

‘Young Carers’ is in the youth centre on Tuesdays, 6pm to 8pm in term time. There are also clubs for all youth aged 11 to 19, a keep-fit class for ages seven to 11, children’s cooking sessions and a chance to learn computer coding.

Some of the young people have heard about the centre through sessions run by the youth team at Farnham Heath End School on Thursday lunchtimes. These provide a place to unwind and someone to chat to and are working so well that Melissa hopes to expand them when funding is available.

Much of the provision is term-time only, but the centre arranges events and outings during holidays, including on April 1 when they will be off to Surrey Sports Park to try new sports.

The day before there will be puppetry workshops for families, and on April 9 there will be two ‘Bloom-in’ Kids workshops offered at the centre by Farnham Town Council. There will also be youth drop-in sessions and an Easter activity session for families.

Volunteers are key to all this but so is funding, and Melissa is always on the lookout for new sources of revenue.

“It costs us around £350,000 a year to run and our main income is through hiring out our rooms; we have a lovely facility for hire at reasonable rates.”

“We apply for grants, of course. Farnham Town Council has funded the Partnership with Heath

End School and we receive money from Waverley for some projects and from our Surrey county councillor, Catherine Powell’s, community fund.

“She has just given us money to pay for training in youth mental health as well as a battery for solar energy. Hubbub environmental charity has just funded solar panels for the centre. We already had some but our inverter had failed so we needed a new one and took the opportunity to add 10 more panels.”

“We’ve also had lottery funding for our youth and wellbeing work and I hope that we can be part of the Big Give in June but we haven’t heard yet.” The Big Give is a match-funding platform through which charities can receive double donations during campaigns.

Then, of course, there is Farnham’s mayor, Cllr Murray, and the way he has supported the centre since last May. “Being his chosen charity has been really helpful,” said Melissa. “It has raised our profile and valuable funds.”

To find out more about the centre, how it works with the community to offer support and opportunities, and how to support it, call 01252 722362 or visit www.halecommunitycentre.org.uk.