



# FAITH IN ACTION

helping with homelessness

## Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project

### Stories from the Homeless Drop-In (all names have been changed)

#### Providing basic care

*People sleeping rough may have gone for weeks without a wash or a decent meal. We provide a warm welcome and show them we care. They have a square meal and a shower, and have their clothes washed. Not surprisingly, this can make them feel very much better.*

#### Preventing homelessness

*Not all our service users are actually homeless. Some are vulnerable people with continuing needs, and in meeting these needs we are preventing them from losing their accommodation.*

**Donald** is a friendly and helpful local man with learning difficulties which prevent him from finding regular work, or indeed from appreciating what he needs to do in order to survive in 21st-century Britain. Donald is not actually homeless, but is in constant danger of losing his accommodation if he does not complete his workbook to show the Department of Work & Pensions that he is trying to find work. If he doesn't fulfil the DWP requirements he will be sanctioned, and lose the benefits he needs to pay his rent. Faith in Action gives Donald the small amount of assistance he needs to maintain himself in his current cheerful state, where he makes no further demand on community resources.

#### Finding accommodation and a job

*We are making every effort to help our service users register with the agencies they need to help them get off the street and into accommodation and a job. All this now has to be done online. We have six laptops with internet access, and are grateful to volunteers who help service users fill in the online forms. We are pleased to report that we haven't seen several former service users recently because they no longer need us.*

**Gary** had been a heavy drinker for many years and had attended the Drop-In for some time. Gradually, by discussing his drinking with staff and volunteers, he developed the motivation to seek treatment. He arranged detoxification and rehabilitation through the Merton Drug services. This was successful and he has now returned to us to help with some publicity talks. He is working in schools, teaching children about drugs and alcohol and now has his own small flat. He has managed to stay sober for over a year.

**Darren** had been homeless for three weeks following the breakdown of his marriage. He is a skilled craftsman, but could not work because he was so overwhelmed by the problems of homelessness. Darren kept saying how he couldn't believe that someone who had worked all their lives and paid their taxes would not be able to find somewhere to live when he needed it. The Drop-In workers sat with Darren

and went through his options – a referral to No Second Night Out, to a housing provider in London, or the possibility of housing in the North-East of England. Darren decided that he wanted to apply directly to the housing provider so an application was done then and there, and he has now had an offer of somewhere to live. Once he has this he should be able to get back into work.

**Arthur** was another local man who had lost his job and wasn't able to pay rent to a friend he was leasing a room from. He was sleeping on the night buses because he couldn't bear to sleep rough. This posed a problem, as we couldn't report where he was sleeping to an outreach team. However we were able to arrange for another organisation offering outreach to meet with Arthur in the Drop-In and do an assessment there. They arranged to phone him in the middle of the night so he could meet them off the night bus. They were then able to take him directly to No Second Night Out, and he is now in temporary accommodation with the plan to move back to Merton.

**Walter** considered himself a hopeless case. He was an alcoholic, he said. He had lost everything – wife, good job, family because of his drinking, and he didn't have any reason to stop. His one concern was how much his mother worried about him, but it wasn't enough to stop him drinking. The situation seemed entrenched until, during a routine medical check arranged by the FiA Homeless Drop-In, he was diagnosed with a serious infection and had to spend two months in hospital. The Homeless Drop-In liaised with Walter and the medical teams to get him into hospital, where he had to be carefully detoxified from his alcohol use. As he stayed in hospital, eating regularly and sleeping well, he began to see things differently. When his friends visited him, he said, he could smell their arrival because of the fumes of alcohol before they came through his door.

When Walter left hospital, he was offered some accommodation and he soon found a good job as a driver. He is not drinking and recently came to the Friday Drop-In alcohol support group, to help the leader and inspire others who consider themselves hopeless. And he now speaks to his mother regularly, and plans to visit her as soon as he can.

### **Supporting those with physical or mental health problems**

**Sue:** following the death of her husband Sue found herself unable to cope – not eating, not paying bills, not able to work, and therefore receiving no income at all. We offered Sue a freshly-cooked lunch and gradually uncovered her story. The Drop-In hosts many outreach workers from other organisations, and Caroline from the Department for Work & Pensions could help her with her queries about claiming benefits. We helped Sue to make an application for benefits, referred her to a specialist bereavement service, and helped with many practical problems. Sue is now attending the Drop-In regularly to eat a nourishing lunch, and to address each new problem as it comes up.

**Ahmed** had been a source of great concern to everyone in the Drop-In. He was a young man who would come into the Drop-In without shoes, dressed in dirty clothes and very confused. He clearly had mental health problems and was waiting to be assessed as an asylum seeker. We did all we could for him practically – giving him shoes, fresh clothes and food. We negotiated with his solicitor to try to deal with

his mental health problems as well as his asylum claim. After a few months we didn't see him again. Imagine our delight when a young, well-dressed man came into the Drop-In to thank us for all we did for him. Ahmed said that he had paranoid schizophrenia which had been treated and he was now well, had refugee status, was living in his own accommodation and was about to begin an engineering course at university.

**Keith** was brought into the Drop-In by a member of the public. Although only in his 40s, he was almost blind with severe cataracts and had been sleeping rough. He quite simply had 'fallen through the net'. Over the following weeks staff and volunteers worked together to completely transform this man's situation by getting him medical treatment (including successful operations on both eyes), temporary housing and – perhaps most importantly – helping restore his self-respect and give him confidence to rebuild his life.

### **Nurturing full independence**

**Jan** attended the Drop-In for over a year. He had been traumatized by his experiences as a soldier in his home country and was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He had trouble controlling his temper, was drinking heavily, and was unable to hold down a job. Gradually Jan came to trust the volunteers and staff, and always helped to set up and clean the Drop-In which gave him some stability. He began working in a fast food restaurant and could rent a tiny room. He then moved on from this to a skilled job as a carpenter. This enabled Jan to move to an area he liked and which gave him a peaceful environment. Jan is now volunteering at a Homeless Drop-In in the area where he lives, as well as working full-time.

## **Merton rough sleepers**

*We are seeing increasing numbers of people at the Drop-In who are sleeping rough – about half the average attendance of 64. The official street count of Merton homeless follows strict government criteria and counts those visible on the streets. However our experience is that many of our service users choose to conceal themselves, hiding maybe in undergrowth or an unattended outhouse, and may not be included in the figures.*

**Kevin** has been working as a craftsman on building sites. He found that the work was increasingly short-term contracts – two weeks here, six weeks there. He couldn't pay his rent with such unreliable work so had become homeless. Kevin was too proud to claim benefits, but was struggling to find work while he was sleeping rough. The workers at the Drop-In offered him practical help at first – showers, laundry, hot food, and the respect to let him make up his own mind. After some time, he agreed to claim benefits for a brief time, just to get back on his feet. We referred Kevin to a housing provider, and he was offered a room in a shared house. We just heard that he was about to return to work and was acting as a mentor to a 20-year-old in his house, helping him to find a new beginning.

**Josh** had come from Wales to take up a job in London. After working for a month, he was sacked and was not paid for the month that he had worked. He was sleeping rough under a thin blanket. He found his way to the Drop-In. We could offer him practical help – a good breakfast, a hot shower and shave lifted his spirits. We charged his phone, provided a laptop for him to use, and before lunch he had sat with one of our volunteers and begun looking for work. By the time he left the Drop-In he had arranged an interview for a job with an immediate start

## **Working with Winter Night Shelters**

*The Merton Winter Night Shelters are run by the YMCA with local churches, synagogue and mosques from early December to mid-March. Most of the 12 or 14 places available are taken by Homeless Drop-In service users who would otherwise be sleeping rough. The Shelters provide a good supper, secure sleeping-bag accommodation and breakfast, and make every effort to help the guests find somewhere to live. Last winter several guests got up early and went off to work with a package of sandwiches, their work too low-paid and/or insecure for them to find accommodation easily.*

**Daniel** came in to the Drop-In to thank us for the help we had been to him. He had really struggled to find work and had ended up homeless. He was referred to the Merton Winter Night Shelter where he began to get on his feet. He told us that he is now working in Knightsbridge, renting a flat and is settled for the first time.

## **Trevor – homeless in Wimbledon**

*This is a story of Community Police, Merton Winter Night Shelters and the Faith in Action Homeless Drop-In working together.*

Trevor had only been on the cold street six nights when two Community Police officers were called. He was sleeping in someone's private covered parking space and they wanted him out.

The police brought Trevor round to the Winter Night Shelter, in a local church hall that night. Could they take him in for the night?

Come the morning Trevor needed somewhere to go next, and for someone to help him get off the street and back to having a job and a home. The Community Police reappeared, very anxious to help this fellow human being in trouble, and a Winter Night Shelter volunteer who also volunteers at the Homeless Drop-In Centre contacted Andy the Manager.

Andy came round to the church hall on his way to work. He collected Trevor and his stuff, and a volunteer drove them both round to the Drop-In at the Salvation Army in Kingston Road.

At the Drop-In Trevor was welcomed and fed in a warm room. He had a shower and there's a laundry for his clothes. When Trevor was ready he could talk through his problems and be helped to find a way ahead. Trevor is a qualified plumber, and we provide internet access and help with filling in online forms to register on the Job Centre website. We liaise with outside agencies who may be able to help people like Trevor find accommodation.



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## Homeless Drop-In Statistics (previous year in brackets)

During the 12 months to March 2017 there were 6657 (6200) service user attendances, averaging 69 (60) people per session, with 269 (276) new people attending during the year.

### **We have provided:**

- 7500 (7200) breakfasts and lunches
- 2748 (2623) showers
- 1256 (1184) laundry sessions
- 237 (229) pieces of work related to helping service users into employment
- 210 (100) people with help into housing
- 115 (143) medical-related interventions including GP registration and health checks
- 117 (84) sleeping-bags

[www.mertonfaithinaction.org](http://www.mertonfaithinaction.org) • [www.justgiving.com/faithinaction](http://www.justgiving.com/faithinaction) • [twitter.com/mertondropin](https://twitter.com/mertondropin)

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## Help for Homeless *and Vulnerable* people

If you are suddenly homeless and have *nothing at all*, what would the Drop-In Centre offer you?

- A warm welcome
- Hot or cold drink and breakfast
- Somewhere to shave, shower and trim your hair
- Washing a load of laundry
- A delicious (and nutritious) two-course lunch
- Computer access and assistance with filling in online forms, preparing a CV or applying for work online
- Full assessment of what help you need; advice workers can help with applications for benefits and make referrals to housing services
- Access to the Job Centre Plus outreach worker
- Help with getting essential identification papers such as a passport or birth certificate
- Access to a teacher of English as a foreign language or a literacy teacher
- Help to register with a GP, testing for TB, and flu inoculations and health checks
- Somewhere to charge your phone, or use our phone to make important calls
- Sleeping bag or fresh clothes if you need them
- Somewhere to relax and play ping-pong or bingo or a table-top game
- A listening ear, a shared joke, or formal advice
- And *above all* .... somewhere you are safe and there's someone on ***your side***.

**All this costs £17 per person per day.**

**Careful management by our professional staff and volunteers means *we make every penny count.***

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**Please support our work for the homeless and vulnerably housed**

**[www.mertonfaithinaction.org](http://www.mertonfaithinaction.org) • [www.justgiving.com/faithinaction](http://www.justgiving.com/faithinaction)**

**Merton Faith in Action Homeless Drop-in Centre  
Wednesdays & Fridays at the Salvation Army in Kingston Road, SW19 1LT**