

Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project

Stories from the Merton Homeless Drop-In and Winter Night Shelter

(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. We then offer a hot, freshly cooked meal and a shower, and laundry services. Someone may arrive feeling cold, hungry, dirty and hopeless. They leave having eaten good food, showered and with a haircut, fresh clothes and an emergency food pack. They know that there is somewhere safe that will welcome them and work with them to overcome their situation.

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.

The Merton Winter Night Shelter

2022 saw the Merton Winter Night Shelter come under the umbrella of the Merton Homelessness Project run by Faith in Action, having in previous years been managed by the Wimbledon YMCA. A small volunteer management team has worked tirelessly to raise funds, recruit a full-time paid Shelter Coordinator, and harness the considerable army of 14 faith venues across Merton and their incredible volunteers – all absolutely vital to ensure that the Night Shelter can run every night until mid-March. Not only does the Shelter provide a warm, dry place to sleep every night during the coldest nights of the year, it's a proven way of helping homeless people to move on into secure accommodation and employment.

Shelter guests have somewhere safe and warm to sleep each night, they receive a cooked evening meal and breakfast, and there is good company and fellowship. Crucially, the Shelter also provides ongoing advice and support from professional Night Shelter and Merton Homelessness Project staff, as well as access to local third party agencies such as medical and alcohol dependency services and DWP benefits advice.

COLIN had been visiting the Drop-In for several months. He had been rough sleeping and sofa-surfing for almost a year as a result of fleeing his difficult housing association accommodation. Since his first visit to our Drop-In, staff had been liaising with the housing association in attempts to resolve the problems Colin had been facing at his accommodation, including but not limited to benefit and health matters. During this time, we were able to offer Colin access to our shower and laundry facilities, our delicious home-made lunches, and support with practical items such as clothing and a sleeping bag. With very little progress on the case in the preceding months, a decision was made in January 2023 to offer Colin an assessment with the Merton Winter Night Shelter, which would offer a safe, warm place to stay whilst staff were able to continue working on the case. Colin has recently been working with staff to investigate a management transfer within the housing association, with the case ongoing. Our staff and volunteers will continue to offer practical support and encourage to Colin during this process.

BOB is also someone who has benefitted from a stay with us in the Merton Winter Night Shelter. Until being offered a place with us in the Shelter, Bob had been rough sleeping in Merton due to a breakdown in

his former accommodation. Struggling with both his physical and mental health, Bob was very grateful to be offered a Shelter place, However, he was desperate for further support to access a GP to address his health issues. Bob met with the SPEAR Homeless Health Team at our Drop-In, who were able to support him to register with a local GP, and upon registering and meeting with a GP was given medication to address his health problems. Our staff also offered Bob support to upload fit notes to his Universal Credit (UC) journal, as well as offering regular appointments with our visiting DWP benefit advisor to manage his UC claim. We have also ordered and paid for a replacement birth certificate with the aim of sourcing free photo ID through Citizen Cards UK. We have recently helped Bob to apply for a 60+ travel card, to make it easier for his to travel around during the day. Bob is currently on the waiting list for housing through one of our trusted Universal Credit landlord contacts and has recently been offered an additional short-term hotel placement through our Shelter whilst he awaits the offer of a room viewing with the landlord.

Partnership working

The Drop-in works as a hub for drug and alcohol teams, outreach workers from the Department of Work & Pensions and Merton Council. Medical teams regularly meet homeless people who are often so difficult to contact.

KAMAL had worked in the UK for many years, but when he was injured at work and found his residency permit was expired, he was no longer able to work and he became homeless. His understanding of English was limited and he was extremely vulnerable. Drop-In staff worked with one of our wonderful volunteers who translated for Kamal so we could fully understand his situation. We were able to link him with Merton Council's Homelessness Outreach team and with specialist refugee service. We paid his fares to meet with lawyers who were able to apply for a new residency permit and for a fee waiver. Kamal is now in secure housing and awaiting the arrival of a new permit.

Finding accommodation and a job

We make 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.

Supporting people with physical or mental health problems

JAMES first came to the Drop-In as a rough sleeper. He clearly had both mental and physical health problems. Yet all he wanted help with was to get some ID, which we were happy to help him achieve. He was very reluctant to accept help to register with a doctor or apply for Universal Credit which would allow him to rent a home.

James accepted a place in the Night Shelter during the winter, but returned to living in a tent in the spring, and wouldn't consider any permanent housing. Staff and volunteers at the Drop-In continued to support him and encouraged him to consider applying for Universal Credit and looking for accommodation. Finally he agreed. He needed a bank account, and Faith in Action has a special agreement which allows people recommended by us to open a specific account for homeless people at a local branch of HSBC. Very gently

James was encouraged to look into housing and, after some time he agreed to view a room in a house. He liked the room and was able to finance it through housing benefit. We helped him to equip the room and with the safe and permanent accommodation his mental and physical health both improved. He is now taking a lot of satisfaction from buying little items to make it more homely.

DAVID: Faith in Action was contacted by a family member, desperately concerned that David was homeless and that his mental health was rapidly deteriorating. David hesitantly agreed to visit the Drop-In. Following David's visit, staff were able to arrange a mental health assessment at our Drop-In with EASL (a mental health team supporting homeless people across London). A practitioner from EASL visited to meet with David to conduct the mental health assessment. Upon completed the assessment, the practitioner supported David to contact his GP for additional practical support, and to start a course of medication to alleviate his symptoms. David and his family were then able to address his homelessness – this was a huge step in his ongoing recovery, and to be in a position to visit us on this matter showed just how far they had come. Within one hour of David visiting us, a room viewing was arranged through one of our wonderful Universal Credit landlords for later that day. We were informed later in the afternoon that David had accepted the offer of a room with the landlord, and has since settled in nicely to his new accommodation.

Working with European Nationals and other Migrants

MAREK had lived in the UK for over 10 years. He came to the Drop-In after sleeping on the street for two weeks. Due to ill health, he had lost his job and was unable to pay his rent. The landlord had changed the locks on the doors and wouldn't let him re-enter the property to retrieve his personal belongings nor his documentation. Police seemed unable to help this, so he came to the Drop-In. He was unwell with a hernia, but had a GP. Our Eastern European (A10) worker helped him register and he received medical help and a HC1 certificate which enabled him to get prescription glasses.

The A10 worker managed to arrange with the landlord for Marek to get his important belongings. With these, he was able to apply for Universal Credit quite quickly. Once he attained this, Faith in Action had access to a landlord who could provide him with a room which he could afford with housing benefit. He is now taking care of himself whilst awaiting for his health to improve so he can go back to work. Now that he is in a stable situation, he has begun to help others at the drop-in.

K. Our Drop-In supports high number of homeless and vulnerably-housed migrants with their presenting needs. **K** is a Sri Lankan national with Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK. As a result of their homelessness, and the complex challenges that they face as a result, **K** had lost their extremely important Biometric Residence Permit (BRP). A BRP enables someone to show their immigration status and entitlements whilst resident in the UK. Upon the request for support to obtain a new BRP, a member of staff and volunteer sat with **K** to report their BRP as stolen to the Home Office. It seems at some point **K** had already reported their BRP as stolen, and there was very little communication from the Home Office on how to apply for a replacement.

A decision was then made to refer **K** to the South London Refugee Association (SLRA) for additional advice on how to apply for a replacement BRP. We were able to facilitate a meeting between **K** and SLRA, using an over-the-phone translator from Clear Voice Interpreting Services, to submit a formal application for a replacement BRP through the Home Office. Due to **K** having Indefinite Leave to Remain, they could apply for a free replacement BRP – in some cases it can prove very costly to receive a new BRP – and having visited a Home Office centre in Stratford to provide their biometric data, we are now awaiting delivery of **K's** replacement BRP to our Drop-In address.

Y came to us having spent a number of months living in a church graveyard with a few others. He was there as a result of not having status. We provided him with basic toiletries and sleeping bag - all the essentials for living on the streets. I made a Streetlink alert and he was shortly picked up by them. Between myself and the outreach team, we were able to get Y into a Year-Round Night Shelter, where he is today. Since being in the night shelter, and being supported by them and us, Y has managed to obtain full European Union Settlement Scheme status (EUSS). He has got into education and is studying to obtain the CSCS card. He is claiming benefits but doing everything possible to find work; he has seen health professionals including a dentist who has given him a new set of front teeth - he was previously a heavy drug and alcohol user but is now clean. Y is now in a position where he only comes in if he cannot do something on his own. He has since donated all the items we provided him with when he first came to us to other service users, and goes back to where he used to rough sleep to help those still there in any way he can.

XY couple were living in a van because they did not have Settled Status as a result of ongoing legal complications. When they came to us, we were helping them with EUSS applications and liaising with their solicitor about legal issues. We managed to get a weekly food parcel delivered to them (via the Dons Local Action Group) even though they did not have an address for this type of service. They were also referred to Merton Council who provided them with a flat whilst they sought to get EUSS. They ended up donating their van to others in need; however this caused them issues as the van was stolen and they started getting many parking tickets - we managed to sort some of them out. The female ended up getting EUSS which meant she'd got benefits. We got them in with a GP as well as WDP for a few meetings. Male eventually got his EUSS and they are looking for work after sorting out their financial situations.

Nurturing Full Independence

Lina. On 3 August, a Ukrainian refugee arrived at the Drop-in, having overnight lost her local accommodation, with her host family having decided to move abroad for work purposes.

Lina was extremely upset, and clearly needed immediate support. She had been very proactive in her search for support, and had already visited Merton Council and drafted a list of potential services to contact. Two of our Drop-in team sprang into action, and within a few hours had not only found Lina overnight hostel accommodation at FiA's expense, but also a property viewing with one of our 'Universal Credit Landlords' (who are happy to take tenants in receipt of benefits, as they will be eligible to claim housing benefit). With Lina having been resident in Ukraine immediately before 1 January 2022 and fleeing the Russian invasion, she was eligible to apply for Universal Credit from the day she arrived in the UK. We're delighted to say that, 24 hours later, Lina moved into her new accommodation in Raynes Park. She has continued to visit the Drop-in since her re-housing, and the team are supporting her into work and a stable life in the UK.

Merton Winter Night Shelter ran for 98 nights, offering 11 places per night.

- 18 different people were accommodated during this period.
- 8 Faith group venues for the first part of the winter; 9 different faith group venues for the second. Each venue hosting one night per week.
- The Mayor of London is now funding a month in hotel accommodation, administered by Housing Justice, so our guests are still in accommodation.