



## **Faith in Action Open Evening 20 March 2023**

### **Drop-in Project Manager's Report**

Recent figures released by the Combined Homelessness and Information Network highlighted a 21% increase in people sleeping rough across London between October – December 2022, compared to the same period in 2021. During this same period, there was also a 29% increase in the number of people sleeping rough on London's streets for the first time.

Immediately, these worrying figures bring to the fore the impact that the cost-of-living crisis and runaway rents are having on low-income households and highlights how many have been pushed to the brink. With very limited social housing stock, and the ongoing impacts of austerity, there is very little protection for struggling households who cannot make ends meet. This is of particular significance in our post pandemic climate as levels of poor mental health have soared; and as we are all aware, in hard times it is the most vulnerable that bear the brunt of this impact.

It cannot be understated how brutal and dangerous living on the streets really is - rough sleepers are 17 times more likely to be a victim of physical violence and 15 times more likely to suffer verbal abuse. Couple this with the increasing number of studies highlighting the correlation between insecure/unsuitable housing and poor physical, mental, and financial wellbeing; it really is the most challenging of times for those who are visiting us for assistance.

This is where Drop-in spaces like ours are continuing to provide the most essential of services for some of the most vulnerable in our society.

With a largely new team of trustees overseeing the management of the charity, with me replacing the former Project Manager Andy Fairbairn, and with the aforementioned impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, 2022/23 has proven to be a year of uncertainty, transition, yet in some quarters growth for Faith in Action. Donations have decreased whilst our operating costs continue to increase, however, most significantly after 10 years under the guardianship of YMCA St Paul's Group, Faith in Action successfully merged with the Merton Winter Night Shelter. We will shortly be hearing more on this from Robin.

We have also witnessed a considerable increase in the demand for our services in the last year. We have moved from a daily average of 27 visitors in April 2022, to 49 in February 2023. This is an 81% increase. In total we have welcomed 3969 visitors in the last 12 months, with 216 people visiting us for the first time. Since our reopening after several Covid-19 lockdowns we have transitioned to a more comprehensive system of support and are now offering a considerably higher amount of follow-up work, which is putting a greater strain on our capacity to offer such advice and support to all who visit us.

We have been working tirelessly to rebuild relationships with our partner community organisations and to develop new ones. Our staff: Angela, Maria, Krysia, Viv, Sara, Ashling, and Chantelle continue to offer practical advice and support on a range of presenting problems, assisting our service users with a variety of homelessness and accommodation issues, employment and training advice and financial assistance, as well as support for those navigating the enduring treacherous waters of the post-Brexit EU Settlement Scheme. We have also been supporting people of all nationalities to apply for new photo ID, and to open bank accounts through the invaluable HSBC No Fixed Abode scheme.

It goes without saying that the work we do would not be possible without our dedicated, and incredibly talented team of volunteers, who work tirelessly to provide breakfast and a two-course lunch for our service users; run our shower and laundry service; sort through the very generous donations of food and clothing we receive from within our community; and who always provide a warm welcome, a friendly smile and unfaltering encouragement to all who visit us.

Collaboration is at the heart of everything we do here at Faith in Action. We have continued to be a critical link between our service users and other specialist services, with our drop-in providing the opportunity to engage with the team at Merton Council housing options and indeed other local authority housing options teams. We hold weekly visits from Gemma, Duane and most recently Jade from the Westminster Drug Project team. We also have Sinead from the Department of Work and Pensions visiting us weekly to assist our service users with their benefit queries and problems and have direct referral routes with two wonderful local landlords accepting eligible people in receipt of benefits.

More recently we have formed a partnership with the South London Refugee Association, providing a simple referral route for people who require specialist immigration advice and assistance; and have welcomed Mariela from the St Mungo's Link Worker team to assist us with immigration queries, and continue to work alongside the East European Resource Centre and South West London Law Centre on EUSS matters. We have also introduced a paid over-the-phone translation service to

enable our staff to better communicate with those who struggle to communicate effectively due to the language barrier.

Last March, I came in with a determination to further offer opportunities for our service users to engage with specialist health and wellbeing teams. We have been working closely with the Homelessness Inclusion Team at St George's Hospital regarding homeless adults who have unfortunately been admitted to hospital, and more than ever are supporting our service users with access to primary healthcare providers. We have welcomed the NHS Find and Treat team who have offered flu and Covid-19 vaccinations, and chest x-rays. This year, from our Drop-In we have facilitated the provision of 12 Covid-19 vaccinations, and 31 flu vaccinations. Given the vaccination hesitancy and scepticism amongst the homeless population, we feel this is a great achievement.

We have been working closely with One You Merton, a local NHS wellbeing charity, who have visited on numerous occasions to offer general health and wellbeing advice and blood pressure checks as well as training to staff, and we have also welcomed EASL, a specialist pan-London mental health charity to conduct mental health assessments for those in need additional support with their mental health troubles.

Since January we have been working alongside the Spear Homeless Health Link Team to address the ever-increasing health inequalities for some of the most vulnerable adults in our community. Grace and Lawrence have been visiting our Drop-In weekly, providing additional advice and encouragement for those experiencing difficulties with their health, and this has concluded in us facilitating, for the first time at our Drop-In, two health and wellbeing days alongside Spear. These events brought together health and wellbeing services across the statutory and voluntary sectors, all with the common goal of addressing the health inequalities experienced by our homeless cohort. In total we welcomed 115 people experiencing homelessness and isolation across two incredibly successful health events, providing the opportunity for them to meet with volunteer GP's and dentists, opticians, podiatrists, mental health professionals and a local vaccination team. Liver fibre scans, chest and lung x-rays were available, as well as drug and alcohol advice and blood borne virus testing.

I thought I would finish by simply providing some of our key statistics and work completed from the last 12 months at our Drop-In.

- **Over 4200 two-course lunches prepared.**
- **1519 showers provided.**
- **939 loads of laundry offered.**
- **80 sleeping bags given out.**

- **84 housing referrals.**
- **39 StreetLink alerts made.**
- **At least 26 people accommodated (excluding MWNS).**
- **Benefit advice from our DWP outreach advisor given on 102 occasions & benefit support from our staff given on a further 250 occasions.**
- **48 benefit applications made.**
- **126 people supported with travel costs to important appointments and work.**
- **271 people supported with health-related matters outside of our Health and Wellbeing days.**
- **61 people assisted to contact the WDP for support with their drug and alcohol use.**
- **195 people supported with their EU Settled Status matters.**
- **At least 7 people granted some form of Leave to Remain (the legal right to live and/or work in the UK).**
- **77 people received specialist employment and training support.**
- **48 ID documents applied for.**
- **18 bank accounts opened through the HSBC No Fixed Abode Scheme.**

To summarise, all associated with Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project, including our trustees, staff and volunteers are striving to build a sustainable future for the charity, at a time when its services are desperately needed and the demand for them is escalating. Whilst 2022/23 has had its challenges, we can all be extremely proud of the work we have done and will continue to do to support some of the most vulnerable adults in our community. Thank you.

**Ashdon Morgan, Homeless Drop-in Manager**