

**Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project
Stories & Statistics from the Merton Homeless Drop-In and Winter Night Shelter 2023-4***(all names have been changed)*

**Merton Homeless Drop-In**

**Providing basic care**

*People sleeping rough may have gone for weeks without a wash or a decent meal. We provide a warm welcome. We 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.*

**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 encouragement to **Colin**during this process.

**Preventing homelessness**

*Not all our Merton Homeless Drop-In 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.*

**ANNA** had worked for many years in low-paid jobs such as cleaning, when a serious lung condition stopped her from being able to undertake this work. She is a carer for her son, who is himself unable to work. Anna has sought help from the Drop-In before when she was homeless and we had been able to help her. She returned to us again when she was struggling to pay her bills and provide enough food for herself and her son. Trained Drop-In staff were able to advise Anna that she’d be entitled to Attendance Allowance and helped her apply. The £68 per week made all the difference for Anna from between being unable to manage her finances, to being able to pay her bills, buy food and heat her flat.

**Partnership working**

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

**PATRICIA** came into the Drop-In in a very distressed state. She was to be evicted from the room where she had been staying, and had nowhere else to go. Patricia had never visited the Drop-In before, but had heard we might be able to help. The Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project has partnerships with many specialist organisations which run sessions at the Drop-In, and Patricia was able to see a specialist housing lawyer straight away. The lawyer acted immediately and identified that the eviction was not legal. The eviction was stopped, and Patricia was able to return to her accommodation temporarily.The same specialist lawyer helped her apply for permanent accommodation, where she could build a new life and feel secure.

**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. He 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 and Winter Night Shelter guests 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 online forms. We are pleased to report that we haven’t seen several former service users and guests recently because they no longer need us.*

**Supporting people with physical or mental health problems**

*Sometimes helping people to overcome their problems can take a very long time.*

**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 Merton Winter 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 James 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 Davidwas homeless and that his mental health was rapidly deteriorating. David hesitantly agreed to visit the Drop-In. Following David’svisit, 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 Davidto 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 theyhad come. Within one hour of Davidvisiting 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**

 **ALEX** has been attending the Merton Homeless Drop-In for over three years. He is a European national and had been living and working in the UK for ten years. His drinking had got out of control and he found himself homeless. He felt totally lost – homeless, with no right to remain in the UK or claim benefits – so he had no income and was too chaotic to hold down a job.
The staff and volunteers at the Drop-In worked to win Alex’s trust, and little by little helped him to sort the chaos. Our specialist staff helped him to obtain settled status, which allowed him to access benefits. He was able to open a bank account with the help of FiA’s arrangement with a local bank that provides bank accounts for homeless people. One of our volunteers introduced Alex to AA, where he could begin to address his drinking. With our help, he moved into a hostel, but he began drinking again, and lost the place. However, he continued to engage with the drug and alcohol team which runs sessions in the Drop-In, and last year he began treatment – detoxing from alcohol and moving to a rehabilitation centre. This intelligent, sensitive man now plans to train as a counsellor to support others with alcohol-related issues.

**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. Marek is now taking care of himself whilst awaiting for his health to improve so he can go back to work. Now he is in a stable situation, Marek 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). ABRP 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. We made a Streetlink alert and he was shortly picked up by them. Between us 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 into the Drop-In if he cannot do something on his own. He has since donated to other service users all the items we gave him when he first came to us, and goes back to where he used to rough sleep to help people 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 (European Union Settled Status). 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 woman ended up getting EUSS which meant she’d get benefits. We got them registered with a GP as well as WDP for a few meetings. The man eventually got his EUSS, and they are looking for work after sorting out their financial situations.

**PIOTR** had lived and worked in the UK for many years and thought of it as his home. However, his drinking had meant that he was unreliable at work and eventually he became homeless. As a Polish citizen, he was not entitled to any financial help from the government, and this made it very difficult for any other homeless charities to support him into housing or help with his alcohol problem.

When Piotr first came to the Faith in Action Merton Homeless Drop-In, he had been sleeping rough for some time. Initially he was able to shower, clean his clothes and have a hot meal, and he soon realised that our ‘A10’ staff could provide specialist assistance. These staff help people from the European Community who have lived in the UK for over five years to obtain Settled Status; this gives them similar rights to British citizens to work, study and claim benefits.

When someone has been homeless and in casual work, providing evidence that they have been in the UK continuously for over five years can be a huge challenge. Our Polish-speaking worker spent time with Piotr to help him identify where he could find official evidence that he had been in the UK. Our worker then made phone calls, sent emails, and looked up records and paperwork which would be accepted by the Settled Status Scheme. Eventually Piotr’s claim could be submitted. While the claim was being processed, Piotr contacted the Drug & Alcohol team which visit the Drop-In regularly, and began to plan his treatment for alcohol addiction. Piotr also had access to dental care and opticians who attend the Drop-In.

Last month, Piotr was granted Settled Status, and he can now get treatment for his alcohol problems. He can work legally and claim housing benefit. The Drop-In staff could help him open a bank account (we have a special arrangement with a local bank branch) and submit a claim for Universal Credit. We can refer Piotr to a landlord who can offer him a room, so he can begin to get his life back on track.

**Nurturing Full Independence**

**LINA:** On 3 August, a Ukrainian refugee arrived at the Merton 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. 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 rough sleepers**

*We are seeing increasing numbers of people at the Drop-In who are sleeping rough – about half the average attendance of 60. Many of our service users choose to conceal themselves, hiding maybe in undergrowth or an unattended outhouse, and may not be included in the official figures. The Night Shelter can provide assistance – see below.*

**Merton Winter Night Shelter**

*Night 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 continuing 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 Department for Work & Pensions benefits advice****.***

**BOB** is 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. Bobmet 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.

**RICHARD** used his time in the safe space of the Night Shelter to study, and gained his Level 3 Bookkeeping qualification and his Level 2 Forklifting qualification. He was subsequently offered a job in a warehouse thanks to his forklifting qualification. The extended Night Shelter period provided under the ‘Spring Transition Fund’ allowed Richard to settle into work and start saving, so that by the time the Shelter closed in May 2023, he had found and moved into accommodation near to his work. He hopes to continue with his studies and achieve his goal of becoming an accountant.

**Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project Statistics 2022/23**

**Merton Homeless Drop-In Statistics**

**In the year 2022/23, our services delivered:**

* 4112 service user visits
* about 4500 hot meals
* 1575 showers
* 559 loads of laundry, together with provision fresh clothing
* 82 sleeping bags, blankets and tents for people sleeping rough
* 78 housing referrals (this includes referrals to the Winter Night Shelter)
* 21 StreetLink alerts to enable rough sleepers to contact local outreach teams.
* 110 meetings with a Department for Work & Pensions Outreach worker
* 135 lots of travel costs for crucial appointments
* 43 advice and support sessions for service users to access health services, including GP registrations, referrals to local drug & alcohol teams and specialist mental health services
* 14 occasions when a service user met with their drug and alcohol support worker at the Drop-In.
* Training and employment advice to 41 people
* Applications for ID documents for 49 people
* 18 people opened No Fixed Abode bank account with a local bank.

**Merton Winter Night Shelter 2022/23 Statistics**

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

There were eight Faith Group venues for the first part of the winter, and nine different faith group venues for the second part of the winter. Each venue was hosting one night per week.

19 different people were accommodated during this period.

2 were reconciled with family, or are now staying with friends.
8 are now housed
9 returned to the street in the summer, and continued to receive support.