



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. The first thing we provide is 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. Not surprisingly, this makes them feel better about themselves. They know there is somewhere safe which 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 the Drop-In, staff liaised with the housing association in attempts to resolve the problems Colin had been facing. Staff also helped Colin with his 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.

Value of rapid intervention by Merton Homeless Drop-In staff

It's obviously a terrible experience to find oneself suddenly with nowhere but the street to spend the night. Reducing the time a person has to sleep rough makes it easier for them to recover from this trauma and resume their previous life. Working with partner agencies, Faith in Action can quickly put people in touch with the right services. It doesn't always happen as quickly as it did for Lal, but it's such a help when it does. It's rewarding for Drop-In staff too.

LAL: The Drop-In Manager was contacted by a lady from a community support group. She was concerned a young woman who had been granted asylum but had then been evicted. Lal had spent one night sleeping out and was very scared. The Drop-In Manager told the contact what Faith in Action could do to help, and suggested that Lal should come to the Drop-In that very day. Lal did not need to book an appointment, just arrive as early as possible. Lal duly came to the Drop-In. After discussing the situation, we were able to refer her to the Merton Council Rough Sleeper Outreach worker who was in the Drop-In that day. The Outreach worker did their own assessment of Lal's situation, and managed to find her accommodation the next day.

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 do this work. She is a carer for her son, who is himself unable to work. Anna had sought help from the Drop-In before when she was homeless and we had been able to help her. Anna 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 buy enough food, heat her flat, and pay her bills.

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 difficult to contact.

JOHN moved down from Glasgow 30 years ago to work as an engineer in London. He was successful in his career and raised a family. However, a traumatic marriage breakdown left him reeling – without accommodation and drinking heavily. He managed to find accommodation in a shared house, but a fire left him homeless and he could not get the help he needed to find accommodation or treatment for his alcohol problem.

John came to Faith in Action Merton's Homeless Drop-in last autumn, and says that he was treated with respect and humanity by the staff and volunteers. He could shower and find clean clothes. He valued leaving the Drop-in looking (and feeling) 'like a normal person'. He was offered a place at the Winter Night Shelter where he could be safely off the street during the coldest months. The staff worked intensively with John to help him address some of the issues holding him back. He was able to meet with the local drug and alcohol team at the Drop-in, and also to meet up with the mental health nurse who visits the Drop-in regularly. These teams of professionals use the Drop-in as a base where they can meet with homeless people whom they would otherwise have trouble finding.

John fulfilled all the stages he needed to have residential treatment for his alcoholism. A member of staff gave him a lift to the rehabilitation centre where he is taking the first step towards his new start in life.

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.

SAM attended our Drop-In, having been made homeless. Sam came to every Drop-In session from West London, making the journey because the Merton Homeless Drop-In was the friendliest place available. Sam had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and this was being managed with medication by the GP. Sam was working in a fast-food

restaurant, and until being evicted had lived in social housing for over 10 years. Sam was assessed by a Drop-In support worker, and it was clear that the eviction shouldn't have happened. Could Lawstop help Sam? After looking into the case, a Lawstop paralegal wrote to the Council, and Sam was placed in accommodation two days later.

ARJUAN had come to the UK from India, but he had no official papers and was unable to work or claim benefits. The refugee charity he had consulted had not been able to resolve his situation. He was sleeping rough and his health began to deteriorate. He had Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and was in and out of hospital. Arjuan turned to the Merton Homeless Drop-in to help him. Our experienced worker helped him in his decision to return to India. Collaborative working with St George's Hospital Homelessness Intervention Team and St Mungo's resulted in Arjuan completing all the necessary paperwork to allow him to return to India. He was found accommodation while waiting for his flight to India.

NELSON lived in a shared flat, but unpaid rent meant that everyone was forced to leave and Nelson had nowhere to go. He was staying with a variety of friends, but getting increasingly desperate. He sought help from the Drop in. As Nelson had no drug or alcohol issues and few support needs, he was offered a place at the YMCA where he can work with staff there to find permanent accommodation and stability.

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 Homeless 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 helped 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 apply for Universal Credit and look for accommodation. Finally he agreed. He needed a bank account, and Faith in Action has an agreement with HSBC so suitable people can open a special account for homeless people. 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 his housing benefit. We helped him to equip the room, and with the safe and permanent accommodation his mental and physical health both improved. James is now taking a lot of satisfaction from buying little items to make it more homely.

Finding accommodation and a job

We make every effort to help our Merton Homeless Drop-in 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 has to be done online. The Drop-In has six laptops with internet access, and we 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.

LINA is Ukrainian refugee who arrived at the Drop-in, having lost her local accommodation because her host family were moving 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 found Lina temporary overnight hostel accommodation at Faith in Action's expense. We organised a property viewing with one of our 'Universal Credit Landlords'; these will take tenants in receipt of benefits, as they will be eligible to claim housing benefit and pay the rent. 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 as soon as she arrived in Britain. We're delighted to say that Lina moved into her new accommodation the next day. She continued to visit the Drop-in after her re-housing, and the team supported her into work and a stable life in the UK.

ALEX had 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 Faith in Action's arrangement with HSBC, which provides bank accounts for suitable 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 Merton drug and alcohol team which runs sessions in the Drop-In. Last year he began treatment – detoxing from alcohol and moving to a rehabilitation centre before finding his own place to live. This intelligent, sensitive man now plans to train as a counsellor to support others with alcohol-related issues.

Returning to say thank you

Many service users disappear when their needs have been met and they can move on with their lives. It is very encouraging for Merton Homeless Drop-in staff and volunteers when someone returns to tell us how they are and to thank us.

DANIELLE attended the Drop-in during 2018 and 2019. She is Austrian, and said she came to England because she loved the Queen. We were able to support Danielle with food and showers, a postal address and a safe place to be. But although she clearly had mental health issues, she would not consider any psychiatric support. As Danielle's mental health deteriorated, she was picked up by the police and taken to a psychiatric hospital where she was detained and treated. Danielle is now living in Austria again, working as an upholsterer. She is well and says she loves her work, loves her family, and is enjoying life again. It was sad that we were not able to persuade Danielle to accept mental health support sooner, but she is very grateful to us for the support we offered which kept her healthy until she was able to be treated for her schizophrenia.

One-off initiatives for individual needs

Faith in Action sometimes has unforeseen costs when it's obvious that a little expenditure can make a major difference to someone.

FREDDIE depends on his bike; he literally carries his life on it! Freddie arrived at the Homeless Drop-In with a flat front tyre, and asked if we could help him get it fixed. A Faith in Action Trustee went with Freddie to the bike repair shop, where the bike's front wheel was condemned as unsafe. By a stroke of luck the bike shop owner, understanding the situation, produced an almost identical bike and offered to sell it to Faith in Action for the price he had paid for it. Freddie took some convincing to accept the bike as a gift – he thought it belonged to someone else! His face lit up when he realised the bike was for him! We will continue work with Freddie to build his trust in us, so we can continue to try to make his life just a little bit easier.

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. 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 he was given medication to address his health problems.

Our staff also helped Bob with uploading fit notes to his Universal Credit (UC) journal, as well as offering regular appointments with our visiting DWP benefit adviser to manage his UC claim. We ordered and paid for a replacement birth certificate so Bob could acquire free photo ID through Citizen Cards UK. We helped Bob to apply for a 60+ travel card, to make it easier for him to travel round London. Bob now has a room through one of our trusted Universal Credit landlord contacts, and continues to visit the Drop-In for the support he needs.

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 Mayor of London's Spring Transition Fund allowed Richard to settle into work and start saving. This meant that by the time the Shelter closed in May, Richard had found and moved into accommodation near his work. He hopes to continue with his studies and achieve his goal of becoming an accountant.

Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project Statistics 2023/24

Merton Homeless Drop-In Statistics 2023/24

- 564 individuals supported
- 5100 hot meals (at least)
- 2230 showers
- 1316 loads of laundry for service users
- 2500 items of clothing distributed
- 82 sleeping bags for people sleeping rough
- 32 individuals (at least) found accommodation
- 236 people provided with housing advice / information.
- 296 people supported with DWP Universal Credit applications
- 61 Benefit applications made
- 157 GP / medical referrals
- 39 Covid / flu vaccinations facilitated
- 105 people supported for their drug and alcohol use*
- 88 people received specialist employment and training support
- 85 ID documents applied for
- 194 people supported on EU Settled Status matters
- 35 people opened HSBC No Fixed Abode bank account.

There were on average 52 service users at each Drop-In session in 2023/4.

*Faith in Action works in partnership with the Westminster Drug Project and the London Borough of Merton.

Merton Winter Night Shelter 2023/24 Statistics

The Night Shelter ran for 98 nights, offering guests a total of 1176 bed spaces.

There were twelve Faith Group teams at ten different venues, assisted by people from another five faith groups. The project operated in two consecutive blocks of seven venues, opening their doors for the same night each week for seven weeks, offering up to twelve bed spaces each night.

23 different people were accommodated during this period.

4 people were reconciled with family, or moved to stay with friends

8 people were housed

11 people returned to the street in the summer, and continued to receive support.