

Croydon Churches' Floating Shelter (CCFS) Annual Review 2021

Homelessness and the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on provision for the homeless nationally. Last winter the government's policy was to move all rough sleepers (including those with no recourse to public funds) into single-room accommodation. That policy ended in June 2021. In spring 2021 central government issued a ban on all floating shelters for the coming winter in order to restrict the spread of the virus. Itinerant dormitory-style accommodation with inevitable close-contact socialising was no longer safe, particularly in a sector of the population where vaccination levels were known to be exceptionally low at only 30%.

The Pandemic in Croydon

Croydon Council's bankruptcy has had a devastating effect on services to the homeless. With limited funds the council can only fulfil its legal obligations. It cannot offer any support to those with no recourse to public funds nor to those who become voluntarily homeless. Furthermore, Covid restrictions have affected many voluntary support services: lunchtime and evening drop-ins around Croydon providing meals were suspended for a period but have now returned only to open-air provision and the Crisis Skylight Centre in Surrey Street, which formerly offered a range of services such as courses and medical help, now operates by telephone contact or by appointment only. The result is that many avenues of mutual support and community life are closed off.

The Floating Shelter

Croydon Council has been keen to work with the CCFS despite the ban on floating shelters. We were asked to consider running a static shelter using sleeping pods for each guest so that all could sleep in their own airspace. All co-ordinators consulted in their own area but no building could be found which could be used daily for an extended period. Furthermore, government guidelines on running static shelters were so stringent that it was clear this initiative was beyond our competence. So the Floating Shelter as an accommodation provision had to be abandoned in what, for Coulsdon, would have been its 10th year of operation.

New Ways of Support

Discussions have continued with Croydon Council on different ways we can support the homeless. These have included a befriending scheme giving lonely individuals a safe person to talk to. Such a scheme would involve some training and could take shape after the current wave of the pandemic has abated. In the meantime we have pursued the following initiatives.

Meals for the Hub

The Hub is a temporary hostel in Croydon which formerly had dormitory accommodation for 17 people. Covid measures mean that they can now provide single-room accommodation for only five people with no cooking facilities. The CCFS churches have provided daily meals according to a precise brief to the Hub since November 2019. One volunteer cooks and delivers a meal for five. We in Coulsdon have, in addition to our normal Thursdays in November and December,

covered a day per week in April, September and October. Volunteers have been particularly enthusiastic about this work which requires absolute individual reliability: if someone forgets their job the guests receive no meal that night. Sometimes we are able to provide additional appropriate gifts and treats which are always well received. The following New Year message was received from the Hub managers:

We just wanted to say a very big thank you to all of the wonderful people who have brought meals to the Hub this year. It has been so much appreciated and has made a huge difference to our clients, many of whom have not had a home cooked meal in a very long time, it has been wonderful to see how much it improves their health and wellbeing. Please pass on our thanks and warmest wishes for a very happy New Year.

From everyone at the Hub

Donations to Nightwatch

Nightwatch distribute hot food and sandwiches to the homeless every evening of the year in Queens Gardens, Croydon. They had experienced an unprecedented demand for food which was causing a great drain on funds as in the past they bought in the sandwiches. The CCFS churches last year took on the sandwich making and this year we increased our provision to 100 sandwiches per night. We in Coulsdon took on our normal Thursdays in November and December. In addition we have sent in weekly large consignments of groceries collected for us by St Mary's, Old Coulsdon. Many of our parishes contribute similarly through other routes.

Coulsdon Volunteers

Our own Floating Shelter church reps maintain good contact with all their volunteers. This year 45 volunteers from our churches have been involved in the above initiatives, either through making food, delivering it or administrating the system. Many more volunteers have been on standby for emergencies. ('They also serve who only stand and wait.') It has been particularly good to have the enthusiastic support of some young people who sought us out on their own initiative: Jessica Booth (St Aidan's) who has been cooking for the Hub; and Ashanti Proctor (St Andrew's) and Ciaran Shaw (St Aidan's) who have been making sandwiches on a more or less weekly basis.

Prayer

Carol Russell has continued her invaluable work in praying for the homeless in her regular Zoom sessions with her prayer companions and through her circulated prayer notes.

Donations

Waitrose in Coulsdon has again donated a generous £666 to the CCFS. This was unexpected as they had announced the closure of the Green Token scheme and had told us that their charitable donations were to be dealt with centrally by the company. This was a welcome windfall.

The Future of CCFS

This was discussed at the autumn AGM of the CCFS. The conclusion was that it was too early to predict what government policy would be next year and we would have to wait to see if the type of accommodation we can offer will ever be acceptable again.

Leonie Wilding, CCFS Co-Ordinator