



Devizes Opendoors supports homeless and vulnerable adults towards safe and settled homes.

Introduction

At our 4 weekly sessions we offered practical support including hot meals, clothing, showers, bedding, food parcels, PC, internet and phone access, bus fares to appointments and laundry vouchers. Jan to Dec 2023 we had 250 guests, served 3,923 meals, distributed 1005 items of clothing and provided 195 showers. For comparison, in 2022 we had 183 guests.

Enhanced support helps guests address acute issues such as having no place to sleep; no access to benefits; medical, drug and alcohol problems; criminal court proceedings or probation appointments as well as long term issues. Trust and safety are key to creating an environment where long standing issues can be addressed to achieve significant change in a person's life. Because of the geographical isolation and very poor transport links, guests stay with us for approximately two years, giving us a good window of opportunity to help guests address long term issues. We have strong reciprocal referral relationships with 12 specialist agencies including the Rough Sleeper Team (RST), Turning Point, Nelsons Trust, council housing, probation, debts agency, Foodbank, Nationwide and NHS among others, contacting them 674 times in 2023. We offer one night emergency accommodation for in extremis need.

Guests

We have on average 75 guests per month, (average 51 guests per month in 2022) 78% are on benefits and 44% report poor or very poor health involving mobility issues and 90% have been homeless within the last 5 years (on average 46% of our guests are currently homeless). We are often the lynch pin that ties a multi-agency approach together for a complex individual with multiple issues/needs. Turning Point send a Connect van and two outreach workers to the centre weekly and we have outreach workers from RST for emergency accommodation, Nelsons Trust, as well as Housing First, to secure permanent housing for guest and an outreach worker from Nelsons Trust for vulnerable female guests. Royal Bath Hospital sends a mobile unit on a regular basis for liver screening and general health checks. We attend RST meetings on both a practical weekly level, together with the police and similar organisations and a more strategic leader forum quarterly. We also attend the fortnightly HOPE Public Health meetings involving RST, housing, police, Turning Point, NHS, Nelsons Trust and Wiltshire homeless services like ourselves.

There are other services that we access to meet specific needs e.g. The Dog's Trust HOPE programme offering free vet access for animal companions (including micro chipping and neutering), and Criminal Justice Service referral service for people of no fixed abode to enable communications with probation and the courts and avoid a custodial demand as a result of being homeless - this last is a unique pilot within England organised by our Chair and involving a similar organisation in Chippenham (Doorway) when she became aware that homeless people are adversely impacted by their circumstances within the CJS. In response to a noticeable uptick in Domestic Abuse ("DA") guests and realising Fearless, who hold the council contract for DA in Wiltshire had no representation in Devizes we contacted them. We organised Domestic Abuse Ambassador training with SWA and

DASH referral training through Fearless to enable direct DA referrals to services. Working with the PCC, we intend to develop a more meaningful presence within Devizes for DA.

Over the past year we have seen that guests' accommodation needs are often just one factor in a range of issues they are struggling with that can also include poor educational attainment, family/relationship breakdown, job loss, substance misuse, debt, falling foul of the criminal justice system, domestic abuse and/or physical health issues. The over-arching problem is acute mental health issues, often long term, which, without the proper support, are also the key factor that is holding them back from accessing and engaging with the help they need from agencies to address their issues and achieve long term positive outcomes. In these cases, we are seeing a number of people stay in the stabilisation stage of support.

We have seen a steady increase in demand for our services, not just in absolute numbers, with 53% of our guests homeless in June versus 34% in January (likely SWRP affected) and 46% in February. Session numbers remain steady, average 22, but issues are more complex and/or acute. Turning Point now send a connect van and two outreach workers to the centre but this is for stabilisation work rather than intervention or therapy. Royal Bath hospital sends a regular liver screening and general health mobile unit, which last attend on 15 Nov for flu vaccines, but again this is focused on physical health and prevention with no focus on mental health issues. We have outreach workers from Housing First and the Rough Sleeping team that focus on crisis cases rather than resolution of long term non accommodated and the reasons why. There is little provision for professional mental health workers in the local area.

We are seeing an increase in demand for immediate services, with 270 meals served in January, 357 in June and 324 in October, with 57 items of clothing in January increasing to 100 in June and 71 in October. We are seeing an increase in substance misuse and acute overdose anecdotal evidence, disorderly behaviour and contact with the Criminal Justice System. We have seen an influx of DA victims from the local refuge. There is definitely a clash between mental health driven behaviour i.e. poor anger management, decision making of people and the standards of behaviour demanded by agencies prior to assistance being provided that we are increasingly have to mediate and navigate on behalf of both parties - this includes all agencies i.e. probation, turning point, RST and others. Perhaps as a result of us having our own premises, we are seeing a shift in people's perception who attend the centre that they feel Opendoors is their home which, while it is positive that they trust and feel safe with us, raises questions of dependency.

Often guests present with suspicion and negativity as they have longstanding experience of support services that for one reason or another have failed to make a material difference to their lives. They often have experience of multiple agency intervention and have developed strategies to play one agency off the other as they rarely communicate together. Sometimes, guests just need to talk with someone who will not judge but listen thoughtfully. We often hear guests say that they are not being listened to and that they are being set up to fail. Without a sense of trust and safety it is nearly impossible for people to engage with agency help.

Agency help often has conditions that makes people feel they are being set up to fail, whether physical e.g. a homeless person having to attend Swindon police station as part of a court order (18 miles) at 7pm when there is no return bus available meaning he will be stranded for the night or for counselling or therapy purposes e.g. a single mother who self-soothes with alcohol to manage her travel anxiety induced by the fact of having to travel to Chippenham on the bus in order to attend substance misuse therapy and is summarily refused entry.

Lastly, the increasing digitisation of services access is also impacting already vulnerable and marginalised people, pushing them further to the boundaries of society e.g a homeless guest whose only access to a mobile phone is us and who writes everything on scraps of paper, is really struggling to engage with probation and the requirement for Teams meetings.

Service Development

During 2023 we made good progress in strengthening our services as well as both expanding services to suit guest need and responding to new services on offer.

Following PCC award of £5k, we have invested in a bespoke version of Inform, the industry gold standard of case management for homeless and/or complex need individuals. This will enable us to provide more robust, consistent support for guest, enable us to mediate and track multiple agency interventions to benefit all parties involved, provide better data gathering for reports for fundraising, networking with stakeholders and lobbying through community activism.

Adult learning - Made contact with Wiltshire Council Adult learning department who offered to send a tutor to run free guest single sessions at Opendoors on Discovering Confidence, Managing worries proactively, balancing your budget and online safety. This was funded by government centrally and came through networking with Doorway.

The tutor had significant experience with our guest profile and the courses could handle ADHD, dyslexia and other learning difficulties. Whilst guest interest was strong, attendance was poor and this initiative will be revisited in 2024 following more foundation work among guests.

Domestic Abuse - following our Domestic Abuse Ambassador training that Doorway also attended, we completed the Fearless DASH referral training and are now able to make direct referrals for both victim, perpetrator and family DA counselling. The only refuge in Devizes closed 14 September with no other provision present. There is no other referral in Devizes and we are now a key partner for Fearless who hold the county contract on this. This represents a new service and potentially new guest group and will require some development. Because of the coercive, controlling factor of DA, face to face contact in a discreet location absolutely key to addressing this. In the future, if sufficient numbers are present, Fearless will run counselling at Opendoors. We recently won funding from National Benevolent to develop this service and intend to do so in 2024.

Probation Pilot - Together with Doorway, we approached the Probation service to offer postal address, phone number and email facilitation as the tendency to remand no fixed address offenders in custody when their offence will not incur a custodial sentence is prevalent and is unfair justice. We have been successful, have already hosted a remote pre-sentence report. Structure of pilot needed firming up before wider use.

Staff Support

Our two members of staff are vocationally motivated to work within the sector and we look to provide the structure and support to enable them to work to the best of their ability. The adoption of the BSHF programme offering mental health services is a considerable commitment on our part to support them. In addition, we applied for HR expert support as part of the Lloyds Foundation grant relationship. With the arrival of our new (and first) Operations Manager, as well as a change in Trustee responsibilities for HR, we focused firstly on updating our employment contracts for staff. Our first use of our new contract has been successful and landed well with the staff member. We want to expand this to ensure consistency with other staff members.

In addition, we plan to use the remaining budget of time in updating staff policies. This will focus on a few key policies, and we will use it as a stimulus to updating the way we brief and train staff and volunteers on policy changes.

Premises Development

Following a successful bid to Screwfix, we have built a weatherproof shelter around the picnic table area that will also provide an additional confidential space for guest/supporter interaction. This format will be particularly useful for guests who do not like coming indoors or close proximity to others.

We were successful in our bid to National Lottery to replace the temperamental 35 year old range, the similarly aged dishwasher, extractor and £1k towards our increased food bill. Higos Insurance, a local business, also donated £300 to enable us to replace the standing fridge freezer that was beginning to show signs of failure and would likely mean we would fail a future health and safety inspection.

Strategic Development

Through additional successful applications to Lloyds Community Foundation, we developed a strategic plan development with an external supplier utilising theory of change. We then activated an additional 6 days with Locality to start part 1 one of its implementation - i.e. local research to produce evidence of need in community. Key findings though are that Devizes has higher than average:

- Disorderly conduct incidents including assaults and sexual offences
- Domestic Abuse
- Poor health (together with Chippenham is a hotspot for poor longevity related to health)
- Debt / Money issues
- Accommodation concerns
- Low employment prospects

We are in the process of expanding this work with Locality to include the development of a single sheet 1 - 5 strategy summary i.e. balanced score card and an activities/impact measurement tool i.e. chain outcome.

We have shared the report with the Foodbank in return for being involved in their commissioned large sample (approximately 250) door to door research project which will include questions on Local Housing Allowance, money concerns and accommodation concerns.

In respect of key outcomes of our strategy plan we have achieved the following:

- Evidence based need for service expansion
- Higher than average DA in Devizes vs Wiltshire generally and no DA agency presence. Our work with the women's refuge and Fearless.
- Money issues - collaboration with St James resulting in one day a week one to one access for our guests to citizens advice bureau.

Networking

Homeless Link. Attended focus group for general election lobbying on theme of homelessness.

Nationwide. Presented Opendoors to staff. They are now hosting a bookcase offering secondhand books in premises as well as our leaflets. Likely to send team to sleepout event.

Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee - attended round table discussion hosted by WCF identifying areas of need - highlighted dangers of cashless society and digital banking for marginalised, vulnerable people.

Foodbank. Met with Community activist funded by Foodbank to discuss campaign to address the mandatory removal of curtains and carpets of social housing.

Future Plans

We expect to see the pressure of the cost-of-living crisis to continue which will be reflected in both an increased number of people coming to the centre to access support and also increasing complexity of need.

We expect to see an increase in mental health service support that needs to be provided locally in order to achieve long term positive outcomes. We expect resistance from agencies and their commissioner ie local government, as much of this is centrally located and focused on cost efficiencies rather than individual user outcomes. Currently accessing any substance misuse, DA, probation (anger management, decision making) or DA counselling is either a bus journey away or only accessible via 'smart' technology ie teams.

Following on from above, we expect to see the increasing digitalisation of services to continue to exacerbate already marginalised vulnerable adults positioned on the fringes of society, as many are either do not have digital access or struggle to access services in this way.

We are seeing a decline in volunteer recruitment and retention, likely due to a combination of post Covid compassion fatigue and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

Whilst we have been very lucky in securing funding and have spent significant time reviewing all potential funding streams i.e. local, corporate, foundations, government we expect this to be challenge in the new year as the squeeze from the cost-of-living crisis puts increased pressure on charities and in turn funding available to them. This will potentially impact not only our ability to support our guests but is also likely to affect our ability to respond to new needs or expand into new areas as more time will be spent finding the 'bare essentials' funding needed to fund basic operations.

Financial Update

We had budgeted for a £1,200 deficit but now expect to make a £16,400 surplus. This is largely attributable to us being awarded more grants than we had anticipated, so £48k rather than £29k budgeted. That said, events income was also ahead of forecast by £2,500 and regular giving was about

a third up on budget at £7,900 following a strong push on this to enable us to be more structurally self-sufficient. We let out our premises where possible, more than doubling budgeted income from £1k to £2.6k. We have also enhanced our JustGiving platform during the year which is enabling better analysis and better recovery of Gift Aid. The award of the Lloyds Community Foundation Grant for 2023/24 of £25k is a vital contribution to next year's budget. Other significant grants came from PCC, National Benevolent and the National Lottery.

Our charity holds more than six month's forecast expenditure in cash, as per our Reserves Policy which forms part of our Finance Policy.

On the Expenditure side, wages came in around 10% below budget largely due to changes in staffing in the Summer of 2023. The additional grants enabled us to invest in our Data project and we are rolling out InForm over the next few months which will replace a multiplicity of paper records and standalone PC records, which will greatly improve the quality of our actionable data and make our processes more efficient. We also made much-needed repairs to the structure of our premises. Expenditure on core activities – eg food - was somewhat ahead of forecast but reflective of the overall growth in demand for our services. Laundry, utilities, cleaning and other basic expenditure was on budget and target. We expect a smaller surplus next year given a tightening grants environment but we have built financial resilience and would expect to break even or score a low surplus, as we maintain cost controls.

In Conclusion

We will continue to operate as we are and look closely at what services are needed when considering expanding our services as we plan to do with DA in 2024, for which we have secured funding. We will continue to work closely with agencies and guests, mediating and lobbying on their behalf to ensure they are able to access the services they need, providing the communications and IT facilities if needed. Academic research and our own data show that people engage best face to face within a safe space i.e. their local community and with the presence of peers or practitioners they trust. We need to lobby decision makers in order to bring services face-to-face to Devizes so that people have the best chance of engagement and completion of counselling/therapy to achieve resolution of issues and long-term positive outcomes. Our experience with the relatively low risk probation pilot took a year to get approved and is still not running properly, which indicates the enormity of this goal.

We are seeing demand from guests to become volunteers at the centre and 'give back'. This is likely a reflection of their emotional attachment to the centre, the fact many of them are local and resident in the area for the majority of their lives and also a mark of the success of the addressing of their issues to achieve long term positive outcomes. Their needs are different to other volunteers, and we intend to put together a strategy and policy to enable guests to transition to volunteers.

All these aims are only made possible by our volunteers and staff and the enormous well of goodwill and affection they hold for Opendoors and its guests, that extends into the community as a whole. We are very thankful and lucky to be in this position and need to work to maintain it. We will continue to run appropriate training to ensure our volunteers are effective and safe within the Opendoors environment and enable them to engage and participate in Opendoors operations through representation on committees e.g. the Operations Committee and various What's Apps groups as well as organise social events twice a year. We will continue to inform the local community of our activities and needs through social media channels and newsletter.