



“ I've spent most of my adult life running from my experience of homelessness. Then one day, I stopped, looked back and saw how far I'd come. ”

A word from our CEO

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter, written by our Fundraising and Communications Manager Melody Brooker. Isn't it wonderful to finally be experiencing some sunnier days after what seems to have been a long and dark winter? Of course, it isn't just the weather that has made life difficult over recent months. Whilst perhaps not unexpected, the December lockdown was a serious blow to us all and at times it has been difficult to overcome the inevitable sense of weariness that we have all felt.

Nevertheless, with the vaccination programme now in full force and with the gradual easing of restrictions, the light at the end of the tunnel begins to glow brighter.

In this edition, we highlight the wonderful progress that three of our service users have made over the past year and also reflect with gratitude on the support we have received from within the local community over recent months. We also hear from our Sports Project Worker Sarah Taylor and her own journey from homelessness to her role today as an ambassador and mentor for those within the homeless community.

2021 marks the 30th anniversary of Wintercomfort. Whilst it is deeply regrettable that three decades after the charity was founded, the issue of homelessness is still as prevalent as ever, I am nevertheless proud that Wintercomfort has remained a constant source of support throughout this time.



I am immensely proud of the wonderful team who bring hope and positive change to the lives of so many and it is with great optimism that I look forward to the year ahead.

Sarah

Contributing to the Fight-Back Against Covid

Recent studies have shown that the homeless community are at significantly higher risk of serious illness and death from Covid 19, due to often having complex underlying health conditions.

Wintercomfort were proud to have been able to partner with the NHS to provide both regular lateral flow testing and a vaccination clinic here at the centre throughout February, March and April.

The initiative, overseen by our Health and Wellbeing Project Worker Theresa Pascuzzi, was a vital part of our support in helping to protect our most vulnerable service users.





Photo: Keith Heppell, Iliffe Media

United for Cambridge Sleepout Success!

On Friday 26th March, more than 50 brave souls abandoned the luxury of their beds for one night as part of the United for Cambridge Virtual Sleepout in support of Wintercomfort for the Homeless and Cambridge United Community Trust.

In gardens, in sheds, under canvas, on floors and in the backs of vehicles people from across the city and beyond joined together (virtually!) to raise awareness and funds for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the local community.

A programme of events was hosted live online throughout the evening including a virtual quiz, a raffle supported by local businesses and special guest appearances. A particular highlight of the event was the Bedtime Story Broadcast, when the two winning stories from a story writing competition receiving entries from primary and secondary aged children throughout the region, were read aloud by award-winning children's authors Dan Freedman and Tom Palmer.

The amount raised through sponsorship and the raffle was an impressive £9,000 which will be divided equally between the two charities.



Wintercomfort's Fundraising and Communications Manager, Melody Brooker, who co-hosted and participated in the event with her family said "What was a long, chilly and uncomfortable night for us all, is a nightly reality for far too many in our community. We are so grateful for the amazing support of those who took part in and donated to the sleepout and to our event partners Cambridge United Community Trust. The funds raised will help to continue Wintercomfort's life changing support for rough sleepers and those at risk of homelessness in the city."

Get in touch to find out about future events and to learn how you can support our work.
 Email melodybrooker@wintercomfort.org.uk

Words of Inspiration

As part of the Sleepout event, we had many wonderful Bedtime Story Competition entries from primary and secondary aged students across the region. We think that this poem perfectly sums up the hope that Wintercomfort aim to bring to the lives of our many service users.

Warmth

by Maisie, aged 10

Life is a flower. It can bloom in certain ways.
 Kindness is the sunshine.
 Tears are the needed rain.
 But some flowers don't end up blooming. They get too much rain.
 Homelessness is one of those flowers. It gets rained on until shelter is found.
 Some flowers are lucky.
 They may get rained on, but one little ray of sunshine could burn through a cloud and give much needed warmth.
 Those rays of sunshine are those who care. Those who don't just walk past an empty hat.
 And those who want to provide hope.
 The important thing to remember, it can't be sunny all the time.
 Try and be the sunshine after the storm.

Mel's Journey

It's early April and Mel and I have arranged to meet outside in line with lockdown rules. Despite the clear blue sky, the temperature is freezing and Mel is dressed in a long khaki coloured padded coat with a fluffy hood. "Wintercomfort gave me this" she tells me with a smile as we find a nearby bench and huddle over our coffees for warmth.

Mel's story is difficult to hear. Much more so to tell. But she is keen to share her experiences.

"Things went wrong for me when my son, Solomon, died" she begins. "He was only two and he'd been ill since birth. For two years, I cared for him and his sister (older by two years) around the clock. And then one morning, as I was getting my little girl ready for school, he passed away suddenly. He had developed pneumonia."

Just before Solomon died, Mel had discovered that she was expecting again. "I didn't have time to grieve" she explains "my relationship with the baby's father broke down and as a single parent, I just had to push down my emotions and get on with it.

But then, two years later, as her little boy reached the age that Solomon had been when he died, Mel had a breakdown. She began to drink heavily and her mental health deteriorated rapidly. She lost her job, her children were taken into care and she soon found herself homeless, forced to sleep in the back of her car.

Despite the chaos in her life, Mel did manage to hold down a volunteering role with Each Charity Shop. "Each were an amazing support to me when Solomon was ill" she explains "and I wanted to do something to repay the kindness they'd shown my family". While working there, one of Mel's



colleagues became aware of her situation and offered her a place to stay while she got her life back on track. What was intended as a couple of weeks respite turned into a stay of many months. It was during this time that Mel began to visit Wintercomfort.

"I remember that day so clearly" she recalls "it was an overwhelming experience walking in for the first time. But then I was introduced to my support worker who made me feel so welcome. She sat me down and talked to me about my situation and explained what I needed to do to get myself into some more permanent accommodation".

As well as the housing advice Mel received from the Wintercomfort team, she has been supported with weekly sessions with Joe, our inhouse counsellor and ongoing contact with her project worker Sarah Taylor.

"Sarah and Joe have always been there for me when I've needed to talk."

Mel is in a much better place these days. She's living in a shared house and is employed by

Wintercomfort's social enterprise scheme Overstream Clean and Garden. She's a valued and popular member of the team, holding down regular shifts and participating in ongoing training. She finds the routine of work helps her to keep on track with her recovery.

Yesterday, Mel spoke to her son, now 11, for the first time in several years. It was a huge moment for them both – the beginning of what she hopes will be the rebuilding of their relationship.

"Work is like therapy to me. Now, instead of reaching for the bottle, I have something else to focus on."

Mel isn't where she wants to be yet. She still has significant challenges to face and she knows that the path ahead will not be a smooth one. But she also knows that in Wintercomfort, she has an army of support behind her. People who believe in her and her ability to achieve long lasting change for a brighter future. One step at a time.

A Chance to Give Back

I caught up with Ricky at the end of a busy shift in Wintercomfort's kitchen. He's been working his way steadily through a mountain of sandwiches, preparing packed lunches for service users currently living in temporary Covid accommodation around the city. Ricky has been volunteering within the catering team since March, keen to 'give back' to the team who he considers as having turned his life around.

“*Wintercomfort means the world to me. I'm so happy to be in a position now to do something to pay back everything they've done for me.*”

Reflecting on his life, Ricky believes that his challenges began with a troubled time at school. Although he excelled in maths and PE, he found other subjects more of a challenge and as a result, was forced to repeat a year at school. He began to hide his lack of self-confidence behind a mask of disruptive behavior – inside the classroom and out. “I fell in with the wrong crowd” he says “and when I was 15, I got into a bad fight which led to me spending time in jail”.

It was whilst in prison that Ricky became involved with drugs, to the point that when he was released, he was firmly in the grip of addiction. “It was all I wanted to do” he says “I just saw it as a way to feel good and to block everything else out.”

Directly related to his involvement with drugs, at the age of just 19, Ricky was viciously attacked in an incident so serious, he was left paralysed for 9 months.

Looking for a fresh start, Ricky moved to Cambridge at the age of 20. He managed to get clean and began to feel that his life was heading in a better direction. With a renewed sense of confidence, he decided to return to Bristol to see friends and family.

“That was a mistake” he says “As soon as I got back, I started seeing the people I used to hang around with and before I knew it, I'd relapsed and fallen back into my old way of life. I decided to come back to Cambridge. I knew that I could get clean again once I was back here. I'd done it before and I knew I could do it again”.

That was around six years ago, and he's been here ever since.

“When I first heard about Wintercomfort, I thought it was just a place to get some food and get a shower. Then one day I heard someone talking about making an appointment to get some housing advice and my ears pricked up! That was when I met Aggie and she's been my project worker ever since. She's helped me so much to get to where I am today.”

“*I know how far I've come and there's no way that I'm going to throw this all away. I've got the rest of my life to live now.*”



And where is Ricky today?

He's currently living in hostel accommodation and is close to being awarded a tenancy in his own flat. With the support of Aggie and the Wintercomfort team, he has worked incredibly hard to get to this point. He is now clean and following a treatment plan for his addiction, he is in a loving and stable relationship, receives regular counselling at Wintercomfort and volunteers regularly with the team here.

“I'm so inspired by Ricky's attitude and determination in his recovery to achieve his goals” says Senior Project Worker, Aggie, “and I'm so pleased to have been able to play a part in his progress”.

Looking to the future, Ricky is keen to find permanent work and has been saving up to buy a scooter which will allow him to look for delivery work. Wintercomfort are ready to support him with this next step on his journey towards a more positive future.



Fast forward a few years to her mid-20s and Sarah's epiphany came when, determined to do something positive for herself, she attended a fitness class. Her first experience was not a good one.

"After I'd finally built up the courage to walk into the class, I was greeted by an instructor who just told me to 'stand at the back and watch the fit people in the frontline'. I couldn't keep up, I was panting to the point of dizziness! The lowest point came when the instructor sent two 'fit girls' to buy me a Dairy Milk bar to bring my sugar levels back up!"

Despite this inauspicious start, determined not to give up, Sarah found a new class (with a much nicer instructor!) and vowed to become one of the 'frontline' girls. She flourished within this more supportive environment, soon finding herself assisting the instructor and helping the 'newbies' settle in. When one day, the class instructor was unfortunately involved in a serious traffic accident, Sarah found herself stepping into a more frontline role to ensure that the class could go ahead. Following encouragement from her classmates and the other gym staff, she decided to train to become an instructor herself, embarking on a career path that would change her life.

Fit for Change

Sarah is our Sports Project Worker. Within the wide range of support she provides to service users, she works to promote the benefits of physical fitness in improving mental wellbeing. Sarah has glowing career record in the world of fitness and a loving family including four little grandchildren. She's confident, bubbly and universally popular with the team and those she supports. She also has lived experience of homelessness.

This isn't information that Sarah shares widely. In fact, there will be friends and colleagues who have never known this part of her story.

Sarah's experience of homelessness began in her mid-teens, following her parents' turbulent break up and a subsequent string of difficult events. She went from being a straight A student, living a life of security and stability, full of hopes and dreams for her future, to finding herself forced from her family home. She began sofa-surfing between the houses of different friends and acquaintances and spent time living in a caravan without heating or water. She lived a hand-to-mouth existence, surviving on earnings from odd jobs. On one occasion, she recalls

having eaten in a roadside café and leaving without paying the bill – something she still regrets.

"I never got involved with drink or drugs though" Sarah tells me. "I can understand why people are drawn to that lifestyle as a way of coping, but thankfully, I always managed to keep away from that side of life".

By her late teens, Sarah was married with a young family and doing her best to put the past behind her. Sadly though, her experiences had left her with low confidence and fragile self-esteem.

“ Exercise isn't a way to achieve perfection. It's about helping people to be the best they can be. ”

Sarah brings such positivity to the lives of our homeless service users by helping them to introduce exercise and healthy life choices to their daily routine. Particularly for those working to overcome addiction, regular physical activity can be a powerful tool in their recovery.

“ *I have spent most of my adult life running from my past difficulties and my experience of homelessness. Then one day, I stopped, looked back and saw how far I'd come.* ”

Just recently, Sarah was thrilled to tell the rest of the team about Tom, a recovering alcoholic, who, as part of his recovery process had taken up running at her suggestion. He had just checked in with her to tell her that he had just beaten his PB of 6 miles in 39.08 minutes. Sarah's joy in sharing his achievement was infectious!

Looking ahead to life beyond the constraints imposed upon us all by the pandemic, Sarah will be overseeing an exciting new programme of fitness classes, sports and healthy cooking classes for service users. We can't wait!

Sarah is such an inspiration to those around her. Her achievements following such a time of personal turmoil are testament to her strength of character. She sees her role with Wintercomfort as a chance to her to help others to make a similar transition from homelessness into happy, fulfilled lives.

Alex has recently begun to work in a volunteer capacity alongside Sarah as a Sports Activity Facilitator. I catch up with him and Service User Owen as they get ready to attend their first session together since the re-opening of gyms.



Alex first became involved with Wintercomfort as a Service User back in 2016. Although he was never street-homeless, his living conditions at the time were extremely precarious.

"I often found myself with no money for food or electricity" he explains. At this time, Alex was living with mental health issues which had led to a pattern of self-destructive behaviour. Having been told about Wintercomfort by a friend, Alex began to visit the centre from time to time over the next couple of years.

Then, when Sarah Taylor joined the Wintercomfort team in 2019, she and Alex instantly established a rapport over a shared passion for fitness. "I noticed him arriving at the centre wearing sports clothes" she recalls "and I made a beeline for him!" As Alex's project worker, much of Sarah's work is in helping him to build his self-esteem and to overcome his anxiety issues. She recognised that fitness could be a pathway to his long-term recovery.

In addition to Sarah's support, Alex benefits from ongoing counselling with our in-house counsellor, Joe. The two of them have played an important role in helping him to get his life back on track.

The turning point for Alex came in March 2020. As the world went into lockdown, Alex embarked upon a new career path as a fitness instructor. During the past year, he has studied for and sailed through his Level 2 instructor qualifications and once restrictions allow for him to complete his practical assessment, he will complete his Level 3 accreditation. This will also allow him to provide nutritional advice to those he works with.

"Lockdown has been so beneficial for me" he smiles "it's given me the space to really focus on turning my life around and starting to achieve my goals".

Alex knows first hand the importance of physical activity in achieving mental-wellness. "If I miss a day of exercise, I feel like I've missed my 'medication'" he tells me. Having worked so hard to reach this point, Alex is now keen to share his passion for fitness with the service user community, supporting people like Owen. It's his way of giving back to the team who have played such a key role in his own journey.





The Final Word...

We would like to end this edition of the newsletter by expressing our thanks to all those who help to raise awareness and vital funds for Wintercomfort. We are so grateful to you all.

This is just one example of an amazing local initiative that have supported Wintercomfort in recent months.



At the start of this year, we met the lovely people behind the Karim Foundation, a small, newly established charity founded by brother and sister team Kal Karim and Shahida Rahman, and Shahida's son Ibrahim. The Foundation, named in honour of their late father Abdul Karim, was set up to raise money for people in need of support within

the local community. Having grown up in the Chesterton area of the city, Kal has been aware of Wintercomfort since he was a child and realised that the effects of the pandemic would have had serious consequences for the local homeless community.

One of the challenges we've faced during these times of lockdown and social distancing is a reduced ability to receive donations to the centre. This had left us with a shortage of footwear and clothing.

"Although we're grateful for donations of clothing" explains Senior Project Worker Aggie Garda, "it's often better if we can buy the exact items that we need to make sure we have the correct sizes and quality that we need. We also find that being able to give people new clothes to wear helps to restore a sense of dignity and self-respect which can often be a real issue for our service users."

The Karim Foundation set up a JustGiving campaign titled Stay Warm Stay Safe to raise funds for this exact purpose. Within just a few weeks, more than £2,500 had been raised, principally from within the local Muslim community.

"It was wonderful to work with Wintercomfort, providing essential warm clothing and footwear to locals in need," said Trustee Kal Karim. "We are immensely grateful to everyone that donated to our Stay Warm Stay Safe winter campaign during those bitterly cold days."

We provided the Karim Foundation with a shopping list of urgently needed items which the team purchased on our behalf. Kal and Melody had a very rewarding shopping trip to Go Outdoors who were able to provide further support with a fantastic discount on 40 pairs of fantastic quality walking boots. Additional items purchased were trainers, trousers, T-Shirts and sweatshirts which were all distributed immediately to those in greatest need.

"We had smiles on our faces for days." recalls Aggie "It was fantastic to see the service users taking a real pride in their new shoes and clothing".

Thank you so much to everyone who supported this amazing initiative.