

This is the second Annual report of New Comfort Zone.

Having successfully completed our first 12 months as an independent organisation based at St Thomas's Parish Hall we were able to look forward in faith and plan ahead with the benefit of a healthy bank balance, a reliable and committed group of volunteers, as well as the essential ongoing support of donors, and the positive relationships that were being developed with the church representatives and others in the local community support network.

The principle aims of New Comfort Zone remain the same; those of serving the vulnerable and homeless community in the Blackpool area by provision of food, drink, essential clothing items and support at our weekly drop-in breakfasts at a suitable local venue.

Our initial informal charity status became formalised through registration with the Charity Commission in March 2020, giving us a more professional profile and enabling access to a variety of grants and other support, in addition to the benefit of Gift Aid contributions on appropriate donations. We are supported and overseen by a Board of Trustees who are accountable to the Charity Commission.

Our funding continues from the voluntary donations of money, food and goods via individuals and a variety of organisations, with an annual fund-raising event organised by our volunteers. This year's planned event in July unfortunately had to be cancelled due to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, regular requests for contributions made in social media, and prayer requests through local churches help to provide a steady income stream whilst informing the wider community of the ongoing day-to-day needs of those we seek to serve and how we try to address these.

We are financially secure, having sufficient funds to operate for at least six months, thanks to our regular donors (who kindly continued their standing orders during lockdown), and occasional donors. Our Board of Trustees have also been successful in their bids for some relevant grants.

In the lead up to Christmas we were delighted to welcome the young and inspiring grandchildren of one of our volunteers whose creative, energetic, collection had contributed greatly to additional food supplies and seasonal extras for our clients.

We also had a visit from local participants of the Prince's Trust, enabling them to see our operations and actively participate in the provision of breakfast and clothing supplies.

In February a few of our clients and volunteers participated in a short video production, arranged via Together Lancashire in conjunction with the local college. Our contribution was part of a wider effort to raise awareness and inform local politicians of the plight of the vulnerable people in the community, and, importantly, how, based on experience in other parts of the UK, services could be introduced or adapted to meet a variety of pressing needs.

However, as progress on many fronts early in 2020 seemed positive, we were overtaken by the impact of the Covid-19 virus in March which necessitated temporary closure of our weekly service. When restrictions were being lifted in the summer we initially operated a takeaway food provision with a smaller group of volunteers, following guidance from local Department of Public Health to ensure a Covid-safe environment. In the autumn, as further restrictions were eased, we were able to operate indoors, as a 'brunch' rather than at breakfast time, albeit with reduced numbers seated at safe distances while eating. We returned to an outdoor takeaway service when lockdown returned. Throughout this period we have been mindful of the wider circumstances and concerns both in the local community and beyond. Fortunately we have managed to avoid any known outbreaks of the disease within our community, mainly by adapting to changing circumstances. We are thankful to our clients for their co-operation and our regular and reserve volunteers who adopt all new policies without problems.

The Management team of active volunteers meets regularly throughout the year to ensure the smooth running of the project and attend to a variety of issues that arise, such as ensuring there will be enough volunteers each week as well as a good supply of food, drink and all the additional items we offer. They liaise with the Church venue representatives, relevant agencies such as Housing Options, Fulfilling Lives, Horizon etc. and attend any relevant meetings which, this year, have all been online. They also take responsibility for Health and Safety and Safeguarding issues.

A New Comfort Zone website was brought online to inform enquirers of our work and to regularly update information. This works well, in tandem with our own Facebook page.

Our group of around 20 volunteers has adapted, both to their own needs for isolating due to Covid, and in ensuring sufficient members are available each week. Some have assisted our prayer time during morning briefing, some via telephone links enabling them to feel included as we focus our thoughts and efforts in providing a welcoming, safe and comfortable environment. Some volunteers completed an online Food Hygiene Course; other training was suspended due to Covid restrictions.

Co-operative working and mutual support form the basis of our team spirit which is especially important when seeking to address the presenting issues of many of our vulnerable clients, such as homelessness, social isolation, poverty, mental health and drug and alcohol dependency.

This year has seen an increase in all these issues; the Local Authority and other local and statutory organisations have been heavily involved in attempting to address them while the most vulnerable were housed in emergency, supported accommodation during the first lockdown.

We continue to learn from our weekly experiences and work to develop policies and support, attempting to meet the needs of both clients and volunteers.

The numbers of new and regular clients attending each week varies, but we usually plan for around 50. Whether we serve indoors or as a takeaway our clients always receive a hot brunch and drinks, with bags of food to take away, plus access to emergency items for the homeless, warm clothing, toiletries and advice.

Although the overall numbers of rough sleepers has reduced over the year, partly due to the Local Authority implementing their 2020 mandatory obligations to supply safe accommodation and support during the first lockdown, we regularly see a few people each week who are either sleeping rough or temporarily staying with friends, often in precarious circumstances. We help by supplying sleeping bags and other essential items as necessary.

(The Council also offers emergency accommodation during specific severe weather conditions)

Whilst operating the takeaway service we have provided a bacon barm cake and hot drinks, as well as an extra bag containing a frozen meal, fruit, a choice of sandwiches and many more items supplied by Blackpool Food Bank which has expanded its facilities over the year. Occasionally they also supply Covid protective items.

Thanks to generous donations from various organisations and Churches we are also able to give out a wide choice of essential tinned food and toiletries.

At the end of another successful year we are pleased to have been able to continue to serve our community, whenever Covid restrictions allowed, despite the many challenges presented in ensuring clients and volunteers were moving in a Covid-safe environment according to Public Health instructions.

As a faith-based charity we trust we will be able to continue to meet the needs of those who seek our help, for as long as may be necessary.