**ALSAGER COMMUNITY SUPPORT CENTRE**

**Annual Report 2018**

**a project of**



#

**Supported by**



**Alsager Community Support Centre: Annual Report 2018**

The number of people visiting our centre and using our services has continued to grow substantially during the past year, with 1895 recorded visits, compared with 939 in 2017, an increase of 102%.

Most of these visits were for quick enquiries, where we provided information, leaflets, etc. There were 101 enquiries concerning lost property, 84 visits to use our free phone or internet services, and 404 were people making donations of food, clothing or toys at Christmas. A substantial amount of help and support was given to clients by our own volunteers on 182 occasions. Examples of these are people in financial difficulties, domestic abuse, homeless, assistance to claim benefits, etc. A further 185 people were helped by professionals at their own drop-ins, including 18 clients given Disability Advice, and 120 people attending the free legal advice sessions provided by Poole Alcock.

We know from experience that it can take some people a lot of courage to come through our door to ask for help. Sometimes people come to us in a state of despair, not knowing where to turn to solve their problems. In such cases we are able to take time to listen to them over tea and biscuits and then begin to suggest a way forward, which may involve contacting other agencies, or helping them to take practical steps to improve their situation. If the client wishes our volunteers will keep in contact to offer further help and encouragement.

This year we have seen many more clients struggling to provide for their families, largely due to the implementation of Universal Credit. New claimants usually have to wait several weeks before they receive any money at all, and then have the challenge of adjusting to variable monthly payments, often when they have been used to budgeting one week at a time.

It is particularly pleasing to note that our small team of information volunteers have all remained with us for the last two years: Ian, John, Patricia, Pia, and Sarah have continued to give an extraordinary level of commitment and dedication, helping to make a real difference to people’s lives. During the year three members of the church, Graham B., Mary and Jenny, have joined us as reception volunteers, able to deal with quick enquiries and uniform requests etc. We are all pleased to welcome two new information volunteers, Rachel and Robbie, who have joined the team in the last few weeks.

This year we have improved our paperwork recording systems and we have made some changes to meet with the new GDPR regulations. We hold regular staff meetings where we discuss any new plans and developments, share information and seek to improve our knowledge and skills.

We were very sorry to have to say goodbye to two people who had worked with us almost since we opened in early 2015 - Nicola from Career Connect, and Yvonne from Disability Advice Bureau, who both left their organisations to move on to do other work. In April Citizens Advice moved their service from our building to Alsager library, in line with their policy in other towns.

We have continued to work with, and have regular visits from, professionals from many different organisations, including Cheshire East Council, Alsager Health Centre, Children’s Services, Social Services and the local PCSO’s. Some of these visitors call in to find help for their own clients, calling on our volunteers’ expertise, local knowledge and our support systems, often where no other support is available.

A new service which we have introduced this year has been assisting people to fill in benefit forms. Several other agencies used to offer this service, but most of them have withdrawn it because of funding cuts. Application forms for benefits are often very complex (some are 40- 50 pages long) and our volunteers use their skills to encourage clients to answer each question fully and honestly, so that they stand the best chance of succeeding in their claim. During the last 9 months of 2018 we assisted with 31 benefits claims, and the feedback we have received has been very positive.

Our most popular service is still our school uniform recycling scheme, which is available all year round from our centre. During 2018 over 420 people called in to exchange or buy clothing for a small donation (we suggest a minimum £1 per item). A total income of £1391 was raised from uniform sales during the year, (this does include money from the sale of some new uniform, which we were given after a local uniform shop closed down). All pre-owned items are checked for quality, then sized and either hung on rails or put in boxes in our store room. We would like to thank Amelia for her help with this. Naturally, the scheme has proved to be extremely popular with parents, and I have calculated that in the last year they will have saved a total of at least £18,000 over the cost of buying new. As well as uniform we also keep supplies of coats, shoes, wellies, socks, tights, hats, gloves & sports equipment.

We continue to have a steady stream of enquiries for our Lost Property service, although we are sure that it would be more successful if more people were aware of what we do. Lost or found items are put onto our Facebook page, and sometimes in Alsager Chronicle, and this year we have produced posters with photos of items which have been handed in to us. It is always a good feeling when someone calls in to claim something, especially when it is of sentimental value.

In May we took part in Dementia Action Week by producing some bags of useful leaflets, including our own local dementia information sheet, which we offered to Carers, giving us the opportunity to talk with them about their needs and offer help. We decided to make the bags available all year round, and over 40 bags have been distributed so far.

Once again this year we were overwhelmed by the response to our Christmas Toy Appeal. All through the month of December local people kept calling in with donations of new and nearly new toys, which thankfully we were able to store in the church this year. Several volunteers from the church and the support centre spent a rewarding day helping to sort and pack 566 toys, and over 650 stocking fillers, which were distributed to the parents of 149 children in 71 families who might otherwise have struggled to provide them with gifts.

Graham B (and earlier in the year Len) have been called upon several times as part of our Helping Hands Service. This offers vulnerable people help with practical tasks. This year they have helped put up shelving and curtain fittings, taking broken items to the tip, helping move furniture, and in one case helping a disabled lady with moving home.

We have increased our use of Facebook this year, as it is a very useful way of getting messages across to a large number of people. I would like to thank Alyssa for her help with this during the summer months. We now have 737 regular followers, and our messages often reach over 3,000 people. Our press coverage has also been good, with several articles published in Alsager in Focus and the Alsager Chronicle.

We are very grateful to Alsager Town Council who once again granted us £1,000 towards our running costs, and to the Satellite Club for their donation of £500.

I continue to manage the project on behalf of the church for an average of three days each week, working in the support centre all day on Fridays, and from home on other days. I also attend events and meet with other organisations to ensure that our volunteers are kept fully informed and up to date in all areas. I spent a huge amount of time in November and December preparing our application for funding to Cheshire East Council’s New Homes Community Fund. I am pleased to report that we have been granted £30,137, which will enable us to employ a full time Project Development Worker, who will be responsible for much of the work I have been doing, as well as implementing new services. This post will be initially for one year, but I have already been exploring ways to obtain further funding for subsequent years. I will continue to manage the project on behalf of the church, reducing my workload to just one day per week once we have our new person in post and sufficiently trained.

When I look back at the start of the project over 5 years ago, I am amazed at what has been achieved by our small team. ACSC is now an established and well respected organisation locally, with an excellent reputation amongst professionals in the Cheshire East area. Our volunteers are well thought of by many clients who have benefited from their compassion and expertise. I would like to thank everyone for their contribution to this vital work, and look forward to extending our work in the future.

Liz Pinkney, Manager March 2019

**From our Comments Box**

*I came to ACSC with a problem which was really worrying me. Within ten minutes the gentleman on duty has sorted it out and I couldn’t thank him enough. Mrs S.B.*

Thank you so much for all your help.  It has really been a huge relief for me.  Absolutely fantastic! It has lifted a huge weight off my shoulders.  I could not have done it without you.  I really cannot thank you enough. Your help has been a lifesaver! J R-W.

*I have received so much help and support from all the team at the centre. They have all been so helpful and always been kind and lovely. I wouldn’t have managed without all their help this year. Fantastic, wonderful people. Anon.*

They’ve done a great job! G.B.

*Many thanks for all your help in completing the Attendance Allowance form. E.O.*

You all formed an integral part of getting a roof over my head, obtaining benefits and food to eat, not to mention the medical assistance and emotional support. I cannot thank you enough for all you have done for me, a total stranger. You have all been so kind and more than that, your quick thinking and quick actions to assist me were amazing. I.P.

*Just to say thank you for helping me to fill in the forms for the night allowance and for phoning the pensions office when I hadn’t heard anything. It is all settled now and I could not have managed without your help. Anon.*

------------------------------------------------------------

**Alsager Community Support Centre provides a free, confidential service for people in any kind of need in Alsager and surrounding areas**. **The Centre is run by experienced volunteers in partnership with professionals from other organisations**.

**We welcome donations towards our running costs** - **cheques should be made payable to Alsager Community Church, marked “ for Community Support Centre”**.

**If you are interested in volunteering for us, please call in to the Centre for further information**.

**01270 876605**

**info@alsagercommunitysupport.org.uk**

**Like us on Facebook: alsagercommunitysupport Twitter: @Alsagersupport**