

# **The Living Room**

## **Annual Report**

### **September 2023**

**The Living Room is a small day centre close to the Oxford City centre, offering hospitality and compassion to those experiencing homelessness.**

**The Living Room is part of the Oxford Winter Night Shelter – Registered charity no: 1175750**

THE LIVING ROOM

[www.ownsoxford.org.uk](http://www.ownsoxford.org.uk)

***"This place is a blessing. I really don't know what I would do without all the facilities on offer, and the staff are always kind and helpful."***

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# **Introduction from Mary Gurr, OWNS Chair of Trustees**

As many of you will know, The Living Room opened September 2021, initially for three days, rising to four in the following February. We had hoped to open for a fifth day sometime this year, but plans have had to be put on hold for this, as we are experiencing a considerable drop in funding.

It is worth noting that we are reliant on the generosity of donors, most of whom are local, and our thanks go out to all of them.

The Living Room has proved a valuable place for many homeless people, and this report will give the details. It has been a contributing factor in enabling our guests to regain their self-esteem and be in a better place to engage with the agencies that can help them.

We couldn't do this without our volunteers, who play cards, scrabble and chess, make hot drinks and serve snacks and, most importantly, listen to our guests with sympathy and encouragement. Sometimes these conversations are heavy and heart breaking, but we also value more mundane discussion, such as the exorbitant price of some doughnuts! It has become a sanctuary for those people who have been considered hard to reach. Some of our volunteers have agreed to be shift leaders, which has meant The Living Room can continue running when Russ is away.

We have recently installed a freezer so we can offer the occasional ready-meal, take advantage of food bank donations, and even have a stock of ice lollies for the hot weather. Thanks to the Vesper branch of Abingdon Rotarians, some guests enjoyed a day's outing on the Kennet and Avon Canal.

It is my fervent hope that rough sleeping will become a thing of the past. However, I fear that is not likely to happen soon. While people continue to find themselves homeless, The Living Room will continue to help those who are so marginalised, into safe and settled housing. By offering access to a shower, and clothes washing facilities, our guests are – in the words of one of them – “able to go out into the city and not look homeless.”

# Our Impact

For a project new to Oxford, we are extremely proud of what we've achieved in such a short space of time. The Living Room is small and intimate which allows us to provide a supportive community

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**75**

The number of guests we've been able to serve with love and compassion since we opened

**1520**

**Total number of volunteer hours in the past 12 months from just 40 loyal volunteers**

**85%**

**The percentage of guests who arrived in our project that no longer rough sleep in Oxford**

**(Over a 2 year time frame)**

# 1600

The approximate number of showers and laundry loads we do in just one year!

The number of hours spent with just one of our guests this year. That's 380 hours of listening and support while they find their way forward.

# 380

**Research shows that homeless people experience some of the highest rates of loneliness and isolation amongst the UK population**

# 10000

The very approximate number of cups of tea/coffee we drank at The Living Room this year alone

# Volunteer

# Perspectives

Without our volunteers, The Living Room couldn't run. Since opening, we have never had to close due to volunteer shortages. The dedication and commitment they show is heart-warming. They always show up ready and willing to get involved in any way they can, holding space for the guests and making their stay as safe and enjoyable as possible.

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*"I feel lucky and happy that the Living Room has become a comfortable and fulfilling part of my retirement routine. One of the aspects of my probation career was that it enabled me to be paid to learn about human nature and learn about myself. The Living Room has become an extension of that process."*

Geoff - Volunteer

"It is a safe, peaceful environment where all are accepted and respected"

Hilary - Volunteer

"I feel that our guests are so accepting and amenable in spite of how they have to live, and I often wonder how I would cope in the same circumstances. It has also, I hope, helped me not to be so ready to give labels to people and their behaviour."

Ray - Volunteer

"Knowing that I will be there always puts me in a good mood. I feel very lucky to have the chance to spend time there."

Ileana - Volunteer

# Guests

At The Living Room we believe in people, not projects, being at the heart of all we do. We recognise that homelessness, is by its nature, dehumanising and there is no 'typical' homeless person. Each guest is unique with their own journey, personality, struggles and strengths.

***Our guests are individuals with a story to be heard.***

## Wayne's story

Wayne had already been known to OWNS before he arrived at The Living Room, staying a season at the night shelter before the pandemic hit.

Wayne was raised in the care system and began rough sleeping in early adulthood. He had a diagnosis of autism and learning difficulties as well as depression and anxiety.

Despite the challenges he had faced in life he always came to us with a beaming smile. He was, despite his circumstances, happy and optimistic.

During the time he spent at The Living Room we quickly learned from the hours we spent with him why housing in the past had been difficult. He often felt unsupported or found himself in projects where he was exploited.

Often, when it came to making decision on his future, he felt like he wasn't being listened to.

Through the trust we built with him, we were able to present a long term solution to social services and they found the perfect project for him.

Wayne is the reigning "Living Room Scrabble Champion"

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Research conducted with a number of charities found that the rate of autism in those experiencing homelessness was **around 12%**

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## **Matilda's story**

Matilda had all but given up on finding a home when she first arrived at The Living Room. Six years of sleeping rough in Oxford had seen her pass through almost all of the homeless projects and day centres in the city. She was anxious about how many more winters she could handle now she was in her 50's

The truth is that there were reasons why the homes being offered weren't suitable for her, but nobody was there to listen to the reasons why.

Over the year we got to know Matilda, we came to understand her story, where it all started, what her current situation was and where it was she wanted to go. Matilda spent close to 1000 hours with us at our project. We were here to listen without judgement, and provide a consistent safe space.

Through collaboration with St Mungos, we were able to support Matilda in registering for "Housing First", a revolutionary approach to combatting homelessness in Oxford.

The idea is simple. First provide shelter and then work towards individual goals.

Matilda has been in her current accommodation for over a year now but still finds the time to pop in for a coffee and a catch up.

Matilda is the reigning "Living Room Chess Champion".

# Guests' Perspectives



A SHORT POEM ABOUT THE LIVING ROOM

The living Room is Sanctuary  
The living Room is Space  
The living Room has Continuity  
The living Room has Grace.

J.W



Dearest friend Russaul thank you for your support with the day center when the lows of **homelessness** has made me feel sadness Alone you have given me your company and it is a joy along side these other men and women whom I have been in the day center with.....

Thank -u for All Your support at Living Room without you there I'll be LOST + Struggling A Big Thanks

**Thank  
You!**



# **Collaborations**

The Living Room is part of a wider homeless support community that includes many other projects in Oxford and across the county. We would be lost without their support and guidance.

St Mungo's, Crisis, The Gatehouse and The Porch are all projects that can refer guests in to The Living Room.

We are all part of the Oxfordshire Homeless movement who aim to ***"bring together everyone addressing homelessness in the county"***

Being a part of this wider network is essential for the guests that visit us on a regular basis. We can often act as a voice for them when they need to communicate their plans and goals for the future.

***"Since the Living Room opened it has been providing our clients with a very valuable place of safety and day comfort. This is especially appreciated in inclement weather. Clients report finding it very convenient to have clothes washing and shower facilities. What they value most though is the "no questions asked" and laid-back approach The Living Room provides.***

***Russell has gone above and beyond for our mutual clients and continues to go that extra mile every week with our outreach rounds, which serves as precious link between new rough sleepers and becoming TLR members. "***

***St Mungo's Outreach Co-ordinator***

***“The Living Room is an organisation that sits neatly within the Oxfordshire Homeless Movement (OHM) partnership offering a warm and welcoming place for anyone experiencing homelessness in Oxfordshire. There is a very precise role that they play in the community and they are a totally non-judgmental place to seek help, advice, get a shower or clean clothes or simply just to talk to someone. We are lucky to have a number of day service providers locally and the Living Room runs alongside these services very smoothly. Having spoken to guests who have spent lots of time there, they feel genuinely listened to and valued. ”***

***Yvonne Pinner – Oxfordshire Homeless Movement***



***“The Living Room provides a safe haven for our Housing First clients who have traditionally been excluded. Housing First is a service for clients with complex support needs who are entrenched rough sleepers with long histories of being excluded from services. The Living Room is one of the few places our clients can go where there are really caring and kind staff/volunteers for them to speak to and feel heard and seen. They don't require anything from our clients and they treat them as equal members of this community project, this is extremely rare for these clients who are used to being in institutional settings with strict rules where they are not treated as equal people with agency over their lives. One of the most helpful things about The Living Room is that clients can come in and out but are always welcome, meaning their difficulties in committing to something full time or their sometimes chaotic lifestyles aren't a barrier for them to access the support they need. Russell and his team are so kind and committed to what they do, it is a pleasure to work with them and see the benefits they have to offer our clients. ”***

***St Mungo's Housing First Coordinator***



**What do the neighbours think?**

**I fully welcome the homeless project in St Clements.**

**Anything that can be done locally to help the homeless is a great idea and I feel would greatly benefit a range of homeless people in the area.**

**Thanks to all those who have worked hard to create this essential resource**

**•  
– A local resident**

# Reflections

I have been fortunate enough to be the manager of The Living Room since it opened back in 2021.

Since then I've grown alongside the project and had the pleasure to meet, including our volunteers, over 100 beautiful souls.

What I hope I have presented in this document is the truth of homelessness according to The Living Room. That doesn't mean it's the whole truth. But it's ours.

I believe that the strength of this project lies in the community it creates and sustains. It lies in the individuals that bring who they are to the space and receive no judgment for being themselves.

They are perfect humans that radiate love and beauty and I hope in some small way myself and our volunteers reflect some of that back towards them.

What I've learnt on this journey is where the edges of homelessness lie. From the harshness of life on the streets to the person sleeping on a friend's sofa on the verge of losing it all. It's at this outer edge their stories blur into mine.

It's my hope that The Living Room continues to be a community those in need can fall back on.

With all my love

Russell Hemmings  
Manager

# Support our work

## Volunteering

The Living Room is completely reliant on the volunteers who give their time to come and serve, it would be impossible to continue our provision without them.

If you are interested in volunteering you can sign up on our website [www.ownsoxford.org.uk/register](http://www.ownsoxford.org.uk/register). No previous experience is needed as training is provided but all we ask for is a real desire to work alongside us in offering respite to rough sleepers, and the desire to show compassion to all.

If you are not able to commit to volunteering at The Living Room then there are lots of creative ways you may be able to help! If you have an idea or just want to chat to us more about this then please email on [manager@ownsoxford.org.uk](mailto:manager@ownsoxford.org.uk).

## Financial Giving

All donations to OWNS are greatly appreciated. You can donate via our website [www.ownsoxford.org.uk/donate](http://www.ownsoxford.org.uk/donate) or if you wish to send a cheque, please make it out to

‘Oxford Winter Night Shelter’ and send it to:

The Secretary OWNS,  
c/o The Living Room,  
57C St Clements Street,  
Oxford  
OX4 1AG

Regular giving by standing order is also very helpful for us as we can plan ahead. If you are a UK taxpayer and give through standing order, you can complete an OWNS Gift Aid declaration online.

# Thanks and Acknowledgments

Firstly a huge thank you to **St Clements Community Property Trust** who have provided such a wonderful space to build our project.

[www.stclementscommunity.org.uk](http://www.stclementscommunity.org.uk)

To our partners and everyone else in the homeless pathway offering us and our guests support and guidance

**St Mungo's  
Crisis  
Oxfordshire Homeless Movement  
The Porch  
The Gatehouse**

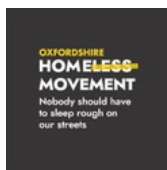
Thanks to **The Oxford Food hub** for supplying food and drinks weekly to our guests. Not to mention bouquets of flowers to brighten the space up! Your smiling volunteers are always warmly received!

Thank you to **The National Data Bank** for supplying data loaded sim cards to those most in need!

Anyone who donated money or resources towards the project, your kindness has made a huge impact

To our **volunteers** and shift leaders who allow The Living Room to operate with a welcoming smile

Finally, and most importantly, to our **guests**. Each person brought something unique and special to The Living Room. You are forever in our hearts.



# The rules of our "favourite" card game

(If you know you know)

10 = Burn

Can't Put An 8 on Top of 8 or 9

Can't Put A 9 on Top of 8 or 9

2 = Can go on anything

Ace = Highest card

9 = higher than

8 = Lower than.

