



# CAROLINE'S CHRISTMAS LETTER

*As 2023 draws to a close, I have been reflecting on the last 12 months ...*

Perhaps many of you reading this – like me – find it hard to comprehend the need for our services in an area like Elmbridge. Personally, it is devastating to hear of families grappling with the cost-of-living crisis, that even though many are working families, their income simply isn't sufficient to put food on the table for their families. As a result, many parents must make difficult choices such as eating or heating their homes.

During the summer holidays we saw a week-on-week increase in the number of families accessing our fresh foodbank, peaking at 112 in the fourth week. This is up from the 95 families who accessed this service during Easter. This Christmas, alongside our hamper service, we have been awarded extra funding to provide a greater number of food vouchers for families referred to us by local schools to get them through Christmas. All this illustrates the impact of the holidays on household budgets: more people at home, means more mouths to feed, which means more money is needed to purchase food when funds are already tight. And at Christmas, this financial pressure is even more acute. I ask myself, how, in an affluent borough, in a developed country, can this be okay?



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### **Critical support for victims of domestic abuse**

Tighter budgets have in turn put greater pressure on families already struggling with mental health issues. Tragically, we are also seeing the effect of financial pressures on households where domestic abuse prevails. Providing crisis support to those affected by abuse is paramount when social services are so depleted. We are the ones who are answering the phone to a client in distress in the evening when a crisis hits – not their designated social worker. We are the ones liaising closely with Children's Services, schools, health providers and other charities to ensure these families are properly monitored, that they are given the right support to enable them to move on with their lives. It is truly a collaborative effort to ensure these families are in a safe place and get the help and support they need.



### **Helping our clients - from victim to survivor**

When I think about those families who have escaped abusive situations, I am in awe of their bravery and determination to rebuild their lives. It is by no means easy. Some of the women I have seen have been so conditioned by their abusive partner, that leaving them feels like cutting away a lifeline. Only once they leave, do they recognise the damage inflicted by their partner, the effect it has had on their mental health, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as the impact on their children. However, with the specialist support of the Outreach team and our in-house specialist services, we share their journey from victim to survivor and watch with pride as these women become resilient and empowered to make positive changes to their lives and the lives of their children.



### **Benefits of the Freedom Programme ...**

In September this year we ran the Freedom Programme for victims of domestic abuse. Run by our trained Facilitators, we have welcomed the sense of community fostered in these sessions, the friendships forged between participants, and the learning that each of them have taken on board to help them deal with past abusive partners, as well as avoiding future abusive relationships. I am very much looking forward to the Freedom Programme Reunion in January 2024 which brings together past participants of this programme. It is wonderful to see how much these individuals have grown in confidence.



### **Benefits of Therapeutic Arts**

We are grateful to our counsellors who are giving their time for free to provide in-house counselling to many of our clients. Those who feel uncomfortable talking about their trauma have instead registered for our Therapeutic Arts programme. With 16 participants enrolled, we have already seen the powerful effect of these twice-weekly sessions. By continuing this course over 2024, we hope to see our clients acknowledge their trauma, the effect it has had on them personally, and the effect that it has had on their loved ones and their journey towards self-care and ultimately, recovery.



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### **Bubbles of joy in our nursery!**

In all the situations that my team and I manage, my heart goes out to the children involved. They are innocent bystanders with no influence on their homelife. I am thankful that we have our onsite nursery so that we can provide a loving, happy and safe place away from home. At the time of writing, we have 17 children currently enrolled in our onsite nursery. It has been wonderful to see the pre-school children settling in – many of which come from challenging home environments. At the start of their time with us, they are often quiet and withdrawn, sometimes exhibiting difficult behaviour. Thanks to the fantastic nursery staff, within weeks they begin to come out of their shells, interacting positively with the other children, their confidence blossoming. Last week they thoroughly enjoyed their Christmas party with a special visit from Father Christmas bearing plenty of gifts!



### **Danes Hill School support**

We are so fortunate to have Danes Hill School support us as their chosen charity for the Autumn term. The staff and children have been busy raising money for us through Christmas stalls, The Big Draw, Santa Dash as well as their Christmas Jumper Day. They are also helping us to pack Christmas Hampers – as I write, there are 100 cardboard boxes lined up in their sports hall ready to be packed by the Year 7 & 8 children and their form teachers with food and treats for our families.



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### It truly takes a team ...

Coming to the end of this newsletter, I could not have got through this year without the team behind me. The people who work at this organisation are the bedrock of what we do. Without them, I would not be able to provide the support vital to vulnerable families and children. It is truly a people-driven organisation – all of whom are warm-hearted with, importantly, lived experience which means they really can empathise with the plight of those who come to us. My sincere thanks also to our Board of Trustees who work tirelessly to guide us through the many challenges we face as a small charity, as well as helping us to raise the funding we need.



### And thank you ...

The staff and I wouldn't be here if wasn't for the generous support from you, our community and the grant-making organisations who help to fund Oasis. As highlighted in the past, other than limited early years education funding for our nursery, we are wholly reliant on donations and grants. Every year we need at least £300,000 to operate. You may have seen our 2023 Christmas Appeal – **The Gift that keeps on Giving** – advertised along the High Street in Cobham, the link on our email footers, as well as our formal Christmas Appeal email. It is still not too late to donate. If you would like to contribute, but haven't done so, please scan the QR code below.

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*Wishing you and your loved ones a Happy  
Christmas and New Year.*

C A R O L I N E

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