The past year at Carecent has flown over. We seem to be busier than ever – with new faces accessing our service, as well as old faces that we saw years ago. People seem to be struggling now more than ever, and the need to access foodbanks/community cafes and services like ourselves has only grown.

We have no real statistics to compare to, but on average we are getting around 60 people through our gates on a morning within the 2.25 hours we are open. This is a mixture of those who are homeless and sleeping on the streets; those who are sofa surfing; those who are in temporary resettlement accommodation; and even those who have their own council properties. What is great about Carecent, is that individuals can access what they need from us – individuals come for different reasons; we have the groups that come and stay for the full shift as it is a place they feel safe and have a sense of community; we have those that literally just come for a breakfast and shower and then leave. We have those that access simply for the support from staff/volunteers. As much as we are known as ‘just a breakfast centre’, we are so much more to a lot of people.

As you are all probably aware, we still have regular drop-ins from hairdressers and podiatrists. Within the last year we have also organised consistent drop-ins with York’s sexual health clinic and Hep C Trust (who will test for Hepatitis C & B, offering treatment and follow up support when necessary) – trying to strengthen the gap between a lot of services and our customers. We also have a regular drop in with GamCare, who offer support to those with gambling addictions, or those who are close family/friends with someone who is gambling.

We have also linked up with City of York Council to provide a housing drop-in 3 mornings per week during our breakfast service with the Housing Navigators who can place in temporary accommodation and on emergency crash pads. This means that those ‘new’ to rough sleeping in York, or those needing housing advice in general are signpost directly to them at Carecent.

We have also linked up with TEWV (mental health provision) and now offer a weekly Hearing Voices Group (started May 2024). The group is for those who hear voices, or have other unusual visual/auditory experiences – we have two mental health nurses and a handful of volunteers to facilitate the group. It is amazing to be able to offer this provision as mental health services have such a high threshold and rigid boundaries that a lot of our customers would not be able to work within. ‘Statutory services’ are sometimes too overwhelming and structured for those who access Carecent, if you miss 3 appointments you get discharged from the service; a lot of the time those who use substances are told they need to reduce their usage before meaningful work can be done… all things that cause barriers to our customers accessing support. The fact that we can offer a HV Group in a more informal way will hopefully allow those who could benefit to access the group.

In regard to our afternoon sessions, we have taken over Judith’s Wednesday provision and Choir, as well as a Tuesday afternoon. So now Carecent offers Tuesday afternoons as ‘art class’ and Wednesday/Thursday afternoons as ‘enrichment sessions’ where we do jigsaws, baking, crafts, pizza making etc. On the 3rd Tuesday of every month we also run a ‘walking group’ – led by John Hodgson who is also on the Carecent Exec. For the last 6 months or so we tend to go on a walk and then head back to Carecent for some soup, we are hoping if the weather gets nicer we can have a longer walk with a stop off for a picnic!

Last year we also joined with a drama group called Night Light CIC to offer a 10 week workshop – the group that participated absolutely loved it, the growth in confidence and self-esteem was evident to see throughout each workshop. The group even put on a performance in the final week. We are currently 5 weeks into another group and have also linked up with Lydia at York Theatre Royal so if the same people want to participate in another drama group, they will do it at YTF. This enables a transition period, hopefully to then get people involved in other armature community drama groups.

For the last 3 years we have had students from York St John University come to Carecent on a placement for their Occupational Therapy Course. This year they chatted to our customers, ran different sessions, as well as spoke to the volunteers about what else Carecent could be doing, or what we needed to ensure that everyone could access Carecent and feel as comfortable as possible. They came up with some amazing ideas – within the main room we now have velcro boards up which shows what is on offer each week; image posters so that those who struggle to read can still find out relevant information; we are coming up with ‘customer roles’ that people can get involved in if they want to give them a sense of purpose as a lot of customers offer to help with different tasks and feel proud to be actively helping within Carecent.

Within the Carecent community we have a lot of deaths - a lot of the time our guys are not able to attend funerals, so we have held multiple ‘services’ to offer a space to mourn the loss of friends, family and those we know through Carecent. This was absolutely beautiful – there was a mixture of customers, professionals and other charity volunteers who came, we invited people to say the names of those they wanted to remember, tell stories and memories they had.

Now the boring part, some figures to think about – as previously mentioned we seem to be getting busier and busier as the weeks go by. The increase in need, is evident on our food usage - on average we have been going through 384 tins of beans per month (that’s 96 tins per week / 16 tins per day). Which may not seem like a big deal, but if you then think of it as 4,992 tins for the year, which would cost £2,496 just on baked beans (I went mid-price range).

I was going to sit and work out the breakdown of all the food, but felt like I would have lost interest. The point is that we seem to be ordering more through our weekly ASDA shops and spending more money on buying food for our sessions. Part of this is down to not having the storage space that we have had in previous years, and therefore when it comes to Harvest asking for monetary donations compared to actual food donations. Although again, we have no statistics of how to look at how much donations came in throughout previous years and whether there is a reduction/increase. We are currently working on a budgeting plan, to look more in depth of where we spend our money, what reserves are needed and what we could allocate to different sessions, activities, items etc.

**Carecent’s future/current needs**

Carecent currently has 2 rooms, our main room which is the kitchen and dining, and the clothing store. We currently use the clothing store for all drop-ins with hairdressers, podiatrists, sexual health, NHS vaccinations etc as it is the only other space that we have to offer. This is beginning to cause some issues as it means that the clothing store is not accessible to those who need it when we have a drop-in. There also is not a lot of room within the clothing store itself as it is full (yes, you guessed it, of clothes!). It is the only confidential space that we have, so when it is in use you cannot have a private conversation and usually when our customers want to talk to you, or disclose something, we have a small window of opportunity.

Part of the recent Exec meetings have been around looking towards the future – one thing that was agreed upon was that we need more space. A rough plan was drawn up to show how we could expand using the outside store buildings – this could potentially make two extra rooms. One being for when we have drop-ins, so that it does not encroach on the other services we offer, but also to create a safe space for people to go to should they feel like the main room is ‘too much’. We have a variety of people who access Carecent, all with different needs and when someone is struggling of getting frustrated, the slightest thing can make them react. For example, we currently have a young male who accesses Carecent and struggles with his mental health, he tends to keep himself to himself and likes his own space. When it is busy and noisy, he becomes overwhelmed and feels like people are too close to him and can react by shouting. We tend to have to ask him to leave as there is not another space that he can go – whereas if we had an alternative room, he could go there and sit where it was less busy, and it would make him less excluded. Carecent is here for those who a lot of the time, are unable, or uncomfortable accessing anywhere else. If would be great if we could make it more inclusive and offer a variety of spaces to ensure that needs are being met and people are feeling safe. It's worth noting that within the research the occupational therapy student conducted, this was feedback from those who access Carecent, as well as volunteers.

Another thing that was discussed was a part time staff member (16-20 hours). As we take on more sessions and groups it seems beneficial to have a staff member to run them – why can’t volunteers do this I know you are wondering? Individuals volunteer for different reasons, a lot of the time they just want the ‘nice stuff’ and to not get involved in the shouting, fighting, overdoses and all the other more challenging aspects. Which is understandable. However, to make sure Carecent is safe, we need someone who is comfortable doing all the ‘dirty work’ throughout the shifts, and I cannot be around all of the time. Having a part-time member of staff would mean that I can comfortably take annual leave and know that someone is still ‘overseeing’ the service. It would also mean that we can look at strengthening our afternoon sessions and looking at what else we could be offering. (One of the ideas is a healthy eating/cooking on a budget group – looking at what you can get to last a month on universal credit and the different meals you could make / or looking at what you get in a foodbank parcel and the different recipes you can make).

The ideas have been run past Church Council and approved; everyone is on the same page thus far. It is an exciting, busy time for Carecent, with these developments we could push forward and expand the services even more.