

Plymouth Soup Run – 2021 Summary Report

Plymouth Soup Run is a volunteer-led service, providing hot food and drinks every night of the year to homeless and other vulnerable clients. We also support clients in practical ways and connect them with other services, as well as participating in city-wide activities to seek solutions to homelessness and its impacts. This report summarises our main achievements and challenges of 2021:

- During 2021, Plymouth Soup Run served 24,668 meals, averaging 63 per night Monday to Saturday on the 4-stop mobile Run, and 96 on Sundays when there is also a Soup Kitchen at Shekinah. In addition, food was delivered to the night shelter and food parcels were provided directly or via other voluntary services in response to requests received.
- We received food donations from individuals, supermarkets, community groups, education establishments, local small food businesses and restaurants. There was an overwhelming response to our 'Reverse Advent Calendar Appeal', and we have received generous cash donations from individuals (including past clients), families, community groups and businesses, enabling us to buy sleeping bags, rucksacks and clothing.
- Those in need were provided with clothing throughout the year, including warm coats, hats, gloves and scarves during the colder months.
- 589 sleeping bags or blankets were given to rough sleepers, an average of 49 a month or 11 per week. Recently, we have helped rough sleepers take care of their possessions including medication, documents and sleeping bags by providing rucksacks.
- Via the New Beginnings Fund jointly administered with Plymouth Access to Housing (Path) and from our own funds, we have provided ad hoc support at short notice for clients experiencing exceptional circumstances, such as help to attend a relative's funeral, to replace lost glasses, or settle an electricity bill to avoid having power cut off.
- Relationships lie at the heart of what we do, be it the joint efforts of our teams, our work with other voluntary, charitable and statutory services, or the relationships of trust forged with clients. Our volunteers come from church, community, workplace and social groups. We were often joined during 2021 by people from other organisations, e.g. Alliance members, Shelter, the Salvation Army, StreetVet and local businesses.
- We have collaborated with health-related university research projects and hosted students training in medicine, dentistry and dietetics, providing valuable experience in community engagement. Islamic Society students regularly joined us at the Sunday Soup Kitchen, helping serve food and providing toiletries
- Since the Soup Run is often the last service other than emergency services out on the streets every night, we have been able to use that unique position to help link Path, the police, probation, Plymouth City Council and others reach vulnerable individuals on many occasions. Our strong collaboration with the Path Rough Sleepers Team is particularly effective. We made 287 rough sleeper referrals during 2021 (an average of 24 per month). As well as bringing housing support expertise directly to clients, the presence of a Path worker at the Sunday Soup Kitchen from July 2021 is allowing development of a comprehensive picture of the client group and their level of need.
- Prompted by the situation of rough sleepers who have nowhere to go indoors between Friday afternoon and Monday morning, and the limited access hours of the night shelter, Soup Run and Alliance volunteers have been piloting the opening of Shekinah for 3 hours on a Saturday morning. Both rough sleepers and night shelter users come in for a cooked breakfast and take-away lunch, and the opportunity for a shower and a change of clothes. The environment allows for in-depth conversations, signposting, rest and companionship.

- Concerns for the health and wellbeing of clients have been reported frequently by teams. Physical health issues were often addressed by medically qualified or first-aid trained volunteers or by Community Outreach nurses attending the Sunday Soup Kitchen. In more serious cases, paramedic assistance was sought, on average once a month.
- The mental health of clients has been a cause for concern throughout the year, with anxiety and depression evident, sometimes accompanied by reckless behaviour, self-harming ideation and threats to others. Teams offer a listening ear and have signposted clients to services including the Mental Health First Response team and outreach GPs.
- Preventative work has been carried out by the Community Outreach nurses and by staff of the Hepatitis C Trust who regularly attended the Soup Kitchen to carry out blood-borne virus testing and, where needed, arranged treatment for clients and supported them to attend medical appointments. On Sunday 10th October, World Homeless Day, a particular effort was made to support clients' health. The nurses saw 21 clients and the Hepatitis C Trust saw 15.
- Five Covid vaccination drop-in sessions were arranged by the NHS in locations around the city for homeless and vulnerable patients during the year. The Soup Run helped publicise the events, talked to clients who may have had concerns over getting vaccinated, and provided refreshments to clients and vaccinators.
- Soup Run volunteers met bi-monthly throughout the year via the Soup Run Development Group, to share experiences and concerns, to ensure that we provide a coordinated service, and to plan future activities. Soup Run representatives attended meetings of e.g. the Rough Sleeper Strategy Intervention Group, Plymouth Homelessness Prevention Partnership and those of the PCC-coordinated Changing Futures project, as well as risk management meetings. These provided welcome opportunities to share insights into the level of need and gaps in services, and thereby contribute to strategic development.
- Soup Run teams have modified the way they work to promote Covid safety through the wearing of facemasks, use of sanitiser and serving from tables to facilitate social distancing. Not a single night's service was missed during the pandemic, which was crucial for clients with few other options for food and support.
- A number of memorial services were held for individual clients, plus a candle-lit service of remembrance outside Plymouth Methodist Central Hall on December 21st 2021 to commemorate all who had experienced homelessness and had died during the year.
- Volunteers have been helped to manage situations and support clients appropriately during the year through training: in de-escalation by a skilled former volunteer; in naloxone use by Harbour; in housing service options by Path; and on vicarious trauma, by Plymouth Trauma Informed Network. 'Natasha's Law' governing ingredient and allergen labelling of food items came into force on 1st October 2021. Teams have benefited from on-line training and information sharing in order to comply with the law.
- Despite our best efforts, we have not always been able to resolve problems encountered. For example, whilst we could on one occasion work swiftly with Path and BCHA to secure emergency accommodation for a woman at risk who had lost her accommodation on the day her partner died, we have more than once been unable to arrange accommodation for prison leavers who end up rough sleeping. We are grateful for opportunities to bring such concerns to the table in discussions with other services in the hope that together we may enhance support for vulnerable clients.