

How have the charities we support through our Outward Giving coped during the pandemic? The last in our series of articles looks at the Guildford Town Centre Chaplaincy.

Guildford Town Centre Chaplaincy



The Guildford Town Centre Chaplaincy (GTCC) (www.gtcc.org.uk) encompasses three projects – **Street Angels**, **Community Angels** and **Volunteer Chaplains** – their joint aim being to ‘enhance understanding, trust and cooperation between communities of work, faith, leisure and society; and to provide a caring, listening and supportive presence for anyone who lives in, works in or visits the town centre’. As lockdown loomed because of Covid-19 the Chaplaincy decided in mid-March to suspend Street Angel duties and those of the Volunteer Chaplains.

The work of **Community Angels**, however, increased dramatically and by June referrals were up by around 300%. Community Angels are volunteers who befriend and support lonely and isolated adults and help them to reconnect with their local community. With visiting at home no longer being possible, support is now offered by telephone. Earlier in the year some 29 people were being supported but by July this number had gone up to over 70, including refugees and victims of violence. Chris Britton, Chair of Trustees of GTCC, says he ‘cannot see that trend doing anything but continuing upwards’. Luckily for the valiant Community Angels, new recruits came forward, among them several Street Angels who, unable to go out on the streets as usual, undertook further training so that they could ‘transfer their giving hearts to a different need’. Telephone support continues, but the Angels are now moving towards face-to-face meetings with clients again, in accordance with a strict risk assessment. The need is great. A 50-year-old man experiencing high anxiety and long-term depression, shielding during lockdown owing to breathing problems, said: *‘I don't think I would have got through lockdown without your support, I would have been hiding in a room.’*

After their first absence from the streets since 2008, **Street Angels** were back at the end of July. Though operating with smaller teams and for limited hours (originally 8pm till midnight

but now 9.30pm till 1.30am), they received an enthusiastic welcome from bar staff and customers alike: *'It's an absolute pleasure to have the Street Angels back in town.'* Much work has gone into drawing up safety guidelines, and Pubwatch and Experience Guildford have generously undertaken to cover the cost of PPE until Christmas. At the moment Street Angels are using St Mary's as a place to meet and pray before setting out, and Chris Britton writes: *'The use of St Mary's as a temporary base has been extremely valuable and the space has wowed everyone who goes into it! Thank you!'* Another Angel says: *'It gives a much needed reminder of who we are and what we're doing . . . Whatever the future holds . . . there will always be a need for a listening ear, for a smile, a lolly, a chance to confide, to encourage and uphold those we meet. Sharing the Love of God through the care, compassion and concern that we can offer to all those we encounter remains a vital part of the "new normal".'*

The **Volunteer Chaplains**, normally to be found in department stores, theatres and banks, in the Fire Station and Police Station and alongside the homeless, have been available via telephone or email during lockdown and a number of them are now back supporting one-to-one with social distancing. With shops and businesses likely to close it is anticipated there will be an ongoing need for support in the future.

*Anne Marriott – Parish Friend
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