

Chairman's Report

for the year ended 31 December 2020

This report summarizes the activities of the CHS for the year to 31 December 2020. It includes a review of the activities of our two principal services, namely the Helpline and the Mental Health Services Centre. However, it also looks at other equally important aspects of the CHS, notably the running of our office in Avenue des Phalènes, as well as our financial results and publicity activities.

2020 will long be remembered as the year of the COVID pandemic. The virus has impacted every aspect of our personal lives and, not surprisingly, has had an equally pervasive impact on the activities of the CHS. As we welcomed in the New Year, there was a sense that 2021 would be a better year than its predecessor. However, it is already clear that there is a long way to go before our lives can return to normal, despite the promise of vaccinations in the near future. At the time of writing, we have applied to the Minister of Health and Social Affairs to see if CHS can be recognized as part of the wider health system in Belgium. This would provide access to the accelerated vaccine system for our office volunteers and Clinical Team members who are still conducting personal sessions on a regular basis.

The CHS Office

Before commenting on our main services, it has never been more appropriate than now to say a few words about the CHS office.

All aspects of our activities are managed by our Office Administrator and the team of volunteers. Throughout the pandemic they have managed to keep our doors open, albeit on a partial basis, to provide much needed services to the community. Rigorous procedures have been established to ensure that all governmental guidelines are met – hand sanitizers, face masks, social distancing, office ventilation and regular cleaning of surfaces both to protect our own personnel and provide a safe environment for our clients. Most of this activity has been behind the scenes and largely invisible to the rest of us. On behalf of the entire CHS family, I would like to thank the team of volunteers for the tremendous efforts they have all made during this difficult time.

The Helpline

This has been a busy year for the Helpline, although total calls (including silent calls) of 4,471 are somewhat lower than the record of 5,515 last year. Some of this reduction can be attributed to the fact that a few regular callers are now limited to a specific number of calls per day, but most of the reduction is probably pandemic-related in some way.

Given the confidential and anonymous nature of the Helpline, the statistics we maintain on the calls we receive are relatively modest. However, of concern is the notable 62% increase in calls that are classified as “distress”. Whilst there are challenges in deciding when a call shifts from “Support” to “Distress”, calls involving self-harm and suicide will fall into this latter category.

Despite the pandemic, the Helpline has continued to function on a 24/7, free, confidential and anonymous basis throughout the year. Whatever the nature of a caller's problem, a CHS volunteer (recruited, supervised and supported by two professionals from our Mental Health Services Team) has been available to listen sympathetically and provide emotional support and advice or helpful information. Inevitably, there are times when the Helpline answerphone has had to be turned on (e.g., during the holiday season when many volunteers are, themselves, away enjoying a well-earned rest). However, up-time during 2020 when the line has been actively managed by a volunteer was around 98%. This is an amazing achievement in what has been an exceptional year.

Looking to the future, with the prospect of a new phone system, we hope to be able to collect some additional, more informative call metrics such as call volume (i.e., length) or discrete callers (i.e., number of callers that eliminates multiple callers). Logistical issues with transferring the Helpline number from one volunteer to another should be simplified.

Another exciting development is our membership of Befrienders Worldwide, an umbrella organization bringing together over 340 independent emotional support centres in over 30 countries. Discussions are in progress with the UK Samaritans, another BW member, to secure access to their Core Development training programmes. This will undoubtedly enhance the quality of our existing training materials.

In my report last year, I mentioned some of the barriers we face in recruiting and retaining Helpline volunteers, the biggest of which was the need to attend physical meetings on a weekly basis. However, as the result of COVID, all such meetings have had to be held on Zoom. Whilst the benefits of face-to-face contact cannot be completely replaced by technology, it is evident to the CHS Board that weekly Zoom meetings are likely to become the rule, not the exception from now on. That said, we are in the process of installing state-of-the-art equipment in the CHS Offices that will enable hybrid meetings (i.e., part Zoom on screen, part face-to-face) to take place in the near future. We hope this will give us the best of both worlds.

We ended the year with a total of 26 Helpline volunteers, a 25% increase on last year despite having had to say goodbye to a number of our long-standing Helpline supporters who have moved on to other things. Our Helpline volunteers are all anonymous so I will not name names. Suffice it to say, our team of Helpline volunteers and their two Clinical Team supervisors do an amazing job and we are all indebted to them.

The Mental Health Services Centre

Given that the CHS offices have been operating with a reduced number of volunteers for a large part of the year due to the pandemic, the number of intakes this year of 1,054 is truly remarkable when compared to last year's record-breaking year of 1,183. In line with our prior year experience, our intakes represented over 40 different nationalities, although the UK, USA, Belgium and Germany continue to account for the majority of these individuals. A slight increase in Belgian clients (with a corresponding reduction in UK nationals) may well be the result of Brexit as long-term expats obtain a second nationality.

These unprecedented levels of demand continue to place a certain amount of strain on the entire CHS team – therapists and office staff alike. Although total intakes are slightly lower than 2019, it seems that

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those that are currently seeing a therapist are staying longer in therapy than was the case before. As a result, the Clinical Team is working at full capacity and doing their very best to manage these intakes in-house rather than refer them to third party professionals.

During 2020, the Clinical Team has remained relatively stable with 18 therapists divided between the Children's Team and the Adult's Team. We also have four "Affiliated Members" who provide a range of complementary services (e.g., an Art Therapist, a Dietitian, a Family Mediator and a Global Health Coach). We hope to be able to add an Occupational Therapist to our team of Affiliated Members before long and we are looking for a psychiatrist for the Adult's Team to replace a recent departure.

At the end of the year, the Clinical Team directorate of Lisa Classen, Marie-Thérèse Kastl and Chana Schneps stood down and have been replaced by Alessia Cianni, Berta Figueras and Niki Josephson. On behalf of the CHS Board I would like to thank Lisa, Marie-Thérèse and Chana for their many years of service to the CHS family. I would also like to welcome the new team of Alessia Ciani, Berta Figueras and Nikki Josephson.

We are all grateful to the entire Clinical Team who, due to the pandemic, have been unable to use the CHS consulting rooms as frequently as they would have liked but who, nevertheless, have continued to provide crucial financial support to our ongoing activities.

Financial Results

The last two years have seen the CHS return to a surplus and, despite the challenges of the pandemic, we have been able to generate another surplus in 2020. Current indications are for a surplus of €18,880 compared to €23,762 in 2019. Having moved to an accruals basis of accounting in 2019, this year's results fairly reflect our activities in 2020 and the income and expenditure arising therefrom.

A brief summary is shown in the table below:

	Total CHS		MHSC		Helpline	
	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019
	€	€	€	€	€	€
Receipts	136,133	146,876	103,576	112,822	32,557	34,054
Expenditure	(117,253)	(123,114)	(90,139)	(91,784)	(27,114)	(31,330)
Surplus (Deficit)	18,880	23,762	13,437	21,038	5,443	2,724

The Mental Health Services Centre continued to perform strongly in 2020 although income levels were down largely due to a pandemic-related rebate given in May to compensate for the partial closure of the CHS offices. Costs were only slightly lower than the previous year, despite the lockdown, but this merely reflects the fact that the vast majority of MHSC costs are largely fixed, notably rent.

The Helpline generated an increased surplus over 2019. Whilst income from events completely dried up during the year, sponsorship of the CHS Website and advertising revenues from the CHS Calendar totalling €13,075 were well ahead of expectations. In part this reflected some unaccrued income from 2019, but the overall result was pleasing.

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Unlike the experience with the Mental Health Services Centre, Helpline costs were much lower than budget primarily due to the shift to weekly Zoom meetings (as opposed to in-person meetings) and the fact that travel allowances were no longer being paid to our volunteers.

During the year we drew down €13,993 (2019: €16,462) from the cumulative US Dollar and Euro funds held on our behalf by the King Baudouin Foundation. Although donations into these funds are received on a regular basis, they are only taken to income when physically received into the CHS bank account. As at 31 December 2020 there was approximately €24,000 (2019: €12,000) and US\$ 800 (2019: US\$5,000) still held by KBF and available for draw down in future years.

Other matters

Given the absence of events during the year, there has been little opportunity for Board Members and other volunteers to promote our activities in the broader community. That said, our free 2021 Calendar has been well received and our stocks are virtually depleted. With the ongoing support of ING who cover the costs of printing, we plan to increase the number of calendars published in 2022 as it continues to contain a wealth of valuable information that is essential to anyone moving to Belgium for the first time.

The CHS website and Social Media sites continue to be a primary source for contact with the wider community. The website enjoyed over 50,000 page views in 2020 and in the month to mid-December 2020 over 10,000 people found the CHS on Google. Our Facebook page continues to increase its effectiveness reaching over 1,500 people in November 2020, a 200% increase over the previous month. However, there is much more that can be done to improve and expand our Internet presence, especially on media platforms which reach a younger audience. We are all grateful to our new Publicity Coordinator, Markaya Henderson, who has taken over this important area.

Conclusion

2020 has been a year of challenge but a year in which much progress has been made. Our Mental Health Services Centre is working at near full capacity; our Helpline has more active volunteers than has been the case for many years; our finances continue to improve and there are some exiting projects in the pipeline that will further enhance the quality of the services we provide.

In closing last year's report during the first lockdown of 2020, I reflected on our role and concluded that there was never likely to be a time when what we did would be of such relevance to the wider community. At that time, lockdown was a new experience for us all. But in its early stages we actually saw a fall in intakes to the Mental Health Services Centre as well as reduced calls to the Helpline. But as the pandemic has continued, way longer than anyone originally predicted, we are now seeing the impact that sustained restrictions can have on people's mental health. Not only are Helpline calls increasing again but the nature of those calls is changing, with an increasing number of people in distress. This puts pressure on everyone in the CHS family.

2021 will be another difficult year for everyone. But I am convinced that the CHS is in excellent shape and ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

Jeremy Jennings
Chairman – April 2020