

Annual Report

for the year ended 31 December 2021

This report summarizes the activities of the CHS for the year to 31 December 2021. 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 Offices in Avenue des Phalènes, as well as our financial results and publicity activities.

This time last year as we prepared for the roll out of the COVID vaccination program, we wondered whether this could be a sign that our lives might soon return to normal. Regrettably, that optimism proved to be short-lived and 2021 has been just as challenging as its predecessor. Although there are, again, positive indications that we might have turned the corner, one would be a brave person to predict that 2022 will be an easier year!

Throughout 2021 our offices at Avenue des Phalènes have been open for business. Our team of office volunteers have all done an amazing job at supporting the many people wishing to book an appointment with one of the CHS therapists. At the same time, in order to safeguard the physical health of these visitors (as well as our volunteers and clinical team), a whole suite of COVID-related rules have had to be respected. These were not always convenient but everyone accepted them with good grace.

The Helpline

This has been a year of great change for the Helpline which, when overlaid with the pressures of the ongoing pandemic, has really tested everyone without exception. It is a tribute to all our Helpline volunteers and their two professional supervisors, that they have continued to provide much needed support to many thousands of individuals in such a challenging environment.

After last year's reduction in calls, 2021 has seen a significant increase in activity with total calls to the Helpline reaching nearly 7,000, well in excess of the 2019 record of 5,515 and nearly 50% more than 2020. At the end of 2021 we had 24 volunteers (2020: 26 volunteers). During the year we also said farewell to Lise Skinnebach, one of our two professional supervisors, who had been with CHS for many years. We all wish her well in her new ventures and hope to see her back in Brussels before too long.

We also welcomed Simon Dwyer as a new Helpline Supervisor. This was an easy transition as Simon had been the Helpline Representative to the CHS Board for a number of years. His former role has now been taken over by Anca Crisan. My thanks to them both for their support. It was also great to see Chana Schneps, our other Helpline supervisor, elected as an Honorary Member of CHS at this year's AGM.

After a couple of false starts, the Helpline finally transitioned away from Proximus to Destiny Mobile with effect from the beginning of the fourth quarter. This was a quantum change for our volunteers, each of whom received a dedicated mobile phone and SIM connected to the Destiny network. Whilst the benefits of this new system were evident from the start, the transition was not without problems. The use of 2G phones to avoid data download charges resulted in poor call quality, especially for Helpline

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volunteers living in areas with weak mobile signal strength. However, a move to 4G phones and, finally, to Motorola smartphones that can use the Destiny WiFi-based Connect Me application, has not only addressed most call quality concerns but has also opened the door for other improvements in the future.

The statistical data that we now receive on a weekly basis is incredibly informative. For example, on average, our volunteers spend 80 hours a month talking to callers to the Helpline. Nearly 90% of calls to the Helpline come from mobile phones which can also be a contributing factor to call quality if a caller is in an area with weak signal strength. Roughly 20% of calls to the Helpline come from people using a foreign mobile number. Many of these callers are not physically located in Belgium. This was a real eye-opener for many of us and demonstrates the global reach that the CHS enjoys.

It is also clear from the statistics that a small number of individuals rely on the CHS Helpline as a lifeline. They call the Helpline multiple times a day which places additional constraints on our volunteers. Although we can now place limits on the number of calls to be accepted each day from these callers, they still account for roughly 30% of all calls.

Our analysis of calls by time of day indicates, not surprisingly, that calls tend to peak around 1pm, 7pm and 10pm. In future, and depending on our volunteer resources, we might consider having multiple volunteers on these “busy” shifts, something we could not do with the old telephone system. Furthermore, an analysis of average call duration by hour provides additional interesting data. The longest calls to the Helpline are those received between midnight and 4am – nearly three times as long as a call at other times of the day. Such calls tend to be from callers in significant distress which is why our more experienced volunteers are usually scheduled to cover night shifts.

Looking to the future, we now have access to the Samaritans On-line Core Development Training Program. This has been quality reviewed by a small number of our volunteers and we will be taking an initial group of five mentors through the materials by the end of March 2022. These mentors will then train another group of mentors with the goal of then training all remaining volunteers (including future volunteers) by the end of 2022.

The Mental Health Services Centre

The number of intakes in 2021 of 1,402 has reached record levels. This represents a 33% increase over 2020 and 18% greater than the previous record set in 2019. By the end of the year, the Clinical Team numbered 19 therapists with a further 5 Affiliated Members. The large increase in intakes this year is, in part, COVID-related and has placed an enormous strain on all concerned.

As the Mental Health Services Centre is operating at full capacity, it has not always been possible for us to accommodate such a large increase in requests. Accordingly, roughly 55% of all intakes had to be referred out to other medical practitioners, as compared with 35% in the previous year. Although the net figures of 630 in 2021 compared to 685 in 2020 suggest a slight reduction in people receiving a consultation with a CHS therapist, as we noted at the end of last year, one of the phenomena of the COVID pandemic is that people are staying in therapy far longer than they did before the pandemic.

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. Our thanks, too, to the Clinical Directorate of Alessia Ciani, Berta Figueras and Nikki Josephson, who ensure the smooth running of the MHSC.

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Financial Results

The last three 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 2021 of €22,767 compared to €18,880 in 2020.

A brief summary is shown in the table below:

| | Total CHS | | MHSC | | Helpline | |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------|--------------|
| | 2021 | 2020 | 2021 | 2020 | 2021 | 2020 |
| | € | € | € | € | € | € |
| Receipts | 147,555 | 136,133 | 115,152 | 103,576 | 32,403 | 32,557 |
| Expenditure | (124,788) | (117,253) | (92,862) | (90,139) | (31,926) | (27,114) |
| Surplus (Deficit) | 22,767 | 18,880 | 22,290 | 13,437 | 477 | 5,443 |

The Mental Health Services Centre continued to perform strongly in 2021 with income growth coming from a larger group of therapists and affiliated members than in the previous year. Cost increases were mostly of an inflationary nature recognising that the vast majority of MHSC costs are largely fixed, notably rent. In view of the net surpluses being generated, the Board agreed not to increase therapist contributions during 2021, nor will they be increased in 2022.

The Helpline effectively broke even during the year. Whilst income from events continued to be a challenge during the pandemic, our 50 km sponsored walk to recognise our 50th Anniversary managed to generate nearly €6,000 in surplus. This was a fun event and something which we will repeat in 2022. Donations during the year of roughly €35,000 (some of which is still retained in the KBF) were ahead of prior year and reflected some generous contributions from Bright Expats, the Sharkey Family Foundation and our friends at the BBKA. Our sincere thanks go to them and our other donors during the year.

Helpline costs continue to benefit from having fortnightly Zoom meetings (as opposed to in-person meetings) and the fact that travel allowances continue to be unnecessary. However, we expect this to change before too much longer. Other costs were broadly in line with budget although the change from Proximus to Destiny and the associated capital costs for new telephones has resulted in a charge of €4,700 in 2021 compared to €900 in 2020.

During the year we drew down €15,000 (2020: €13,993) 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 2021 there was approximately €37,600 (2020: €24,000) and US\$5,936 (2020: US\$800) still held by KBF and available for draw down in future years. Cash balances at 31 December 2021 are strong at just over €158,000 excluding our rental guarantee.

Other matters

Given the absence of events again during the year, there has been little opportunity for Board Members and other volunteers to promote our activities in the broader community. That said, and following a decision last year, we increased the print run for our free 2022 Calendar. These are always well received but this year's edition is rather special as the front cover reflects an original painting by a student at St

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John's International School, with whom CHS has a long-established relationship. We are now reflecting on whether we can establish an annual Art Competition to create a cover for future CHS Calendars. This will be an excellent opportunity for us to strengthen our links with the international school community. Our thanks to ING for continuing to cover our printing costs and to our advertisers for their continuing support.

The CHS website and social media sites continue to be a primary source for contact with the wider community. However, audience and page views during 2021 were markedly lower than the previous year with page views down by 13% and audience views down by nearly 30%. There is no obvious reason for this reduction. On the other hand, a couple of significant peaks in page views during the year can probably be attributed to anticipated government rule changes related to the pandemic. On a brighter note, our recent contacts with Google have been encouraging and they are now in the process of increasing our visibility for free and providing a direct link from a Google search to the Helpline phone number.

At CHS Board level we have had to say goodbye to Elaine Purves, Head of St John's International School, who returns to the UK to head up another school. We wish her well in her new role. We are also delighted that Simon Vanderkelen, also from St John's, has agreed to join the Board.

We also welcomed Marc Hansen, a recently-retired lawyer from a major international law firm, to the CHS Board. Marc will be playing a crucial role in helping us manage and mitigate the many regulatory burdens we face, not least being GDPR and the whole area of data privacy. We will also be looking in more detail at new and upcoming Belgian legislation and regulations of medical practices and practitioners, including the implications of the 2018 Quality Care Act.

Conclusion

2021 has been another year of challenge but a year in which further progress has been made. Our Mental Health Services Centre continues to work at full capacity and our Helpline had a record-breaking year whilst successfully migrating to a new telephone system that generates a wealth of valuable information. The roll out of the UK Samaritans Core Learning materials will enhance the existing skillsets of the Helpline volunteers and help us attract more active volunteers in the future. Our finances continue to improve and there are some exciting projects in the pipeline that will further enhance the quality of the services we provide.

The pandemic has served to further underscore the importance of mental health support and CHS has found itself at the sharp end in servicing the mental health needs of an expanding community. Over the past year, as wave followed wave with a seemingly endless stream of COVID variants, the CHS family has experienced, first hand, the impact that sustained restrictions have had on people's mental health.

2022 will be another difficult year for people in Belgium and beyond. But I am convinced that the CHS family will be there to support them whatever their needs.

Jeremy Jennings
President – April 2022