

Annual Report for the year ended 31 December 2023

This report summarizes the activities of CHS for the year to 31 December 2023. It includes a review of the activities of our two principal services, namely the Helpline and the Mental Health Services Centre. It also looks at other important aspects of our activities during the year including our financial results and our governance review.

The CHS Helpline

The Helpline ended the year with 32 volunteers, one of the highest levels for many years. This has helped to ease the burden of handling calls, especially given the increasing number of suicide-related calls which the Helpline takes and which can be particularly difficult for the Helpline volunteers.

We continue to use the UK Samaritans training materials which are excellent. The basic training is supplemented with regular training and refresher courses on topics of interest or relevance as and when a specific need is identified by our two professional supervisors, Chana Schneps and Simon Dwyer. Our ongoing relationship with Google, where suicide-related searches drive a link to the Helpline phone number, has increased the need for regular suicide training but a range of other issues have also been addressed such as dementia, euthanasia, LGBTQ plus and dealing with cancer.

In terms of activity, there were 4,860 calls taken by volunteers during 2023, an 11% reduction over 2022. A large part of this reduction is due to a significant reduction in calls from a limited number of regular callers for whom the Helpline is more of a lifeline. A better measure of activity is the amount of time spent by volunteers in talking to callers. In 2023, this came to a total of 1,084 hours which is a 5% increase over 2022 despite the reduction in call numbers.

Roughly 75% of all calls to the Helpline are made from mobile phones. Whilst there is nothing remarkable in this statistic, we know from experience that the quality of a call is also dependent on the strength of the mobile signal at the location of the caller. In the early days of using the new Destiny system, there was a tendency to attribute poor call quality to the new system which was not always the case.

Whilst not a totally accurate statistic as it is based on a sum of twelve monthly summaries which may include some duplication, there were 1,957 unique callers to the Helpline in 2023, a 30% increase over 2022. It is encouraging to see more people accessing the line, in part due to the reduction in calls from our regular callers who can monopolize the line to the detriment of others. That said, there were still 1,730 calls to the line that could not be taken because the on-duty volunteer was already talking to another caller. Whilst this is a 12% reduction over 2023, it is still high and may warrant closer scrutiny in 2024.

Despite being a service provided in English, our Helpline continues to attract non-native speakers both within Belgium and located in other countries. Roughly 7% of calls in 2023 were received from non-Belgian phone numbers, a slight increase over 2022. Whilst the use of a foreign number does not necessarily mean that the caller is calling from that country, anecdotal evidence from discussions amongst the volunteer group confirm that the CHS Helpline is more than a national service.

COMMUNITY HELP SERVICE ASBL

Avenue des Phalènes 26
Nachtvinderslaan 26
1000 Brussels
Tel: +32 (0)2 647 67 80

office@chsbelgium.org
www.chsbelgium.org
IBAN: BE83 4388 1352 9115
RPM: 0408.409.887

It is a tribute to all our Helpline volunteers that they have continued to support not only our community here in Belgium but an increasing number of callers from outside Belgium.

The Mental Health Services Centre (MHSC)

Over the past year, notwithstanding some recent challenges, the MHSC has been able to focus its attention on doing what it does best – providing top quality mental health service to the international community in Belgium. Intakes for the year totalled 1,056 (2022: 1,155) of which 46% (2022: 57%) led to appointments in the CHS offices and a further 10% were taken over by the private practices of CHS therapists. Whilst referrals to non-CHS practitioners are slightly higher than the previous year, the significant demand for psychiatric services coupled with limited availability of our own psychiatrists meant that the CHS office had to stop taking (and recording requests) to see a CHS psychiatrist. Such requests were automatically referred out to external psychiatrists.

At the end of the year, the Clinical Team numbered 18 therapists with one of our psychologists, Linnea Hook, away on maternity leave. However, we have two new therapists in the pipeline, one of whom is a psychiatrist, who we expect to start working in early 2024. We also have a further four Affiliated Members who offer complementary services. These include a dietician, a mindfulness coach and a family mediator. During the year we welcomed Emily Riley to our team. Emily is a certified career and orientation coach. However, we are always on the look out to expand the diverse services we can offer. A new Affiliated Member, due to start at the Centre in February 2024, is a certified Yoga Therapist with a focus on mental health.

Following the advice of the CHS Governance Working Group, the role of Clinical Director has been replaced with a Clinical Directorate of up to three therapists, each of whom become Ex Officio members of the CHS Council and also members of the smaller CHS Executive Committee. The Clinical Directorate is responsible, inter alia, for the operations of the entire Clinical Team including professional and regulatory compliance. From January 2024, this role will be paid which reflects the importance which the CHS Council places on regulatory compliance and oversight including issues such as GDPR and the move toward Electronic Patient Records being maintained by the individual clinician.

At the meeting of the CHS Council in December 2023, a revised set of Internal Rules were reviewed for adoption by the Clinical Team. This was another element of our Governance review. In addition to the creation of the new Clinical Directorate, the CHS Council agreed to remove oversight of the Helpline from one of their responsibilities as this is already being performed by two paid Helpline supervisors. Our lawyers had also stressed the importance of keeping separate the activities of the Helpline and the MHSC, albeit with common oversight exercised by the CHS Council.

We also deleted the long-standing but rarely used Weekly Duty Officer function where one member of the Clinical Team was available “on call” to assist Helpline volunteers. As a better alternative, members of the Clinical Team will routinely present themselves and their respective areas of specialisation to all Helpline volunteers at the regular Helpline meetings.

The MHSC continues to function well thanks to the excellent work of the Office volunteers who handle requests for a first appointment at the Centre, as well as taking care of the many other tasks essential to the smooth running of the organisation.

COMMUNITY HELP SERVICE ASBL

Avenue des Phalènes 26
Nachtlinderslaan 26
1000 Brussels
Tel: +32 (0)2 647 67 80

office@chsbelgium.org
www.chsbelgium.org
IBAN: BE83 4388 1352 9115
RPM: 0408.409.887

2023 was a year of reflection and consolidation. The MHSC is now well placed to focus on the ever-increasing mental health challenges that lie ahead.

Financial Results

In recent years, CHS has consistently reported an operating surplus although 2023 sees this positive trend coming to an end. It is also worth noting that our surpluses have been getting smaller year on year and 2024 will prove to be much more challenging. It is for this reason that the CHS Council established a new working group in December 2023 to look at the twin objectives of fundraising and increasing awareness of the CHS Helpline.

The deficit for 2023 was €204, effectively a break-even situation. Whilst this is a significant reduction over 2022, this was largely anticipated and is actually better than budget by roughly €3,600.

A brief summary is shown in the table below:

	Total CHS		MHSC		Helpline	
	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022
	€	€	€	€	€	€
Receipts	150,302	155,440	112,308	117,531	37,994	37,909
Expenditure	(150,506)	(140,601)	(114,544)	(105,009)	(35,962)	(35,592)
Surplus (Deficit)	(204)	14,839	(2,236)	12,522	2,032	2,317

In terms of our income, we were under by roughly €8,500. The majority of this variance was the result of a decision by the CHS Council to not index the amounts due from therapists to reflect the impact of inflation. There has been the perception that these charges were out of line with the market. In addition, the Council agreed not to apply indexation in 2024 but will start again with effect from 1 January 2025.

The other income shortfall relates to our website and calendar sponsorship, both of which are lower than prior years. This will be an area of focus for our newly established fundraising working group.

On a more positive note, our expenditure for 2023 was nearly €12,500 better than budget. We saw savings across all expense headings, partly due to over prudent budgeting but also as energy costs stabilized after the hiatus in 2022 following the invasion of Ukraine. For most of 2022 we had assumed that our rent would not be indexed given that there is no PEB for our building. As such, we were slightly surprised to receive a demand from our landlord's agent in December 2023 of over €10,000 relating to 2021 and 2022. We have reflected this expense in the 2023 results and have also included a separate provision for rent indexation in 2023. However, we are checking these calculations with our lawyers, Sidley Austin.

Other matters

(a) Governance

A major focus in 2023, as mentioned elsewhere in this report, has been on the way we govern ourselves. The first task of our Governance Working Group was to look at the CHS statutes. In any event, these needed to be updated to reflect recent changes to the laws governing an ASBL, but it was also a good opportunity to change some practices which seemed a little out of date.

COMMUNITY HELP SERVICE ASBL

Avenue des Phalènes 26
Nachtvinderslaan 26
1000 Brussels
Tel: +32 (0)2 647 67 80

office@chsbelgium.org
www.chsbelgium.org
IBAN: BE83 4388 1352 9115
RPM: 0408.409.887

One of the most important changes that was adopted at the Annual General Meeting in June 2023 was to redefine who is a member of CHS. In the past, only members of the Board were members of CHS. This resulted in a strange situation where the Board approved the annual financial statements at a regular meeting and then held an Annual General Meeting to go through exactly the same process. The new Statutes define a member of CHS as any member of the CHS family – office volunteers, Helpline volunteers, Clinical Team members and Affiliated Members – subject to some time-related requirements. All of these individuals will be entitled to vote at the Annual General Meeting. This will create some added accountability for former Board members who will now become members of the newly-named CHS Council.

A second important change was to expand the number of representatives on the Council from the Helpline and Clinical Team. These have been increased from one to three, respectively. From the Clinical Team, all three members of the newly created Clinical Directorate become Ex Officio members of Council as well as the smaller Executive Committee, albeit on a rotating basis. From the Helpline, the existing Representative to Council will be joined by the two Helpline Supervisors. However, as these individuals are effectively paid consultants to CHS, only the Helpline Representative to Council will be a member of the Executive Committee in order to be able to exercise some independent oversight of their performance.

Having adopted revised Internal Rules for the Clinical Team, the last remaining task of the Governance Working Group will be to update Job Descriptions for some of the most important roles within the organization.

(b) Domain and Website updates

Following the tragic death of a long-standing supporter of CHS, Jan Taljaard from Pelican Dream, we realised that hosting of the CHS domain name needed to be transferred to a new host. Under the circumstances, this was not without its challenges. However, with the support of Jan's widow and another CHS supporter, Pierre Van Goethem, we were able to make this change.

A similar issue arose with the CHS website. For many years we have been using Joomla software as the basis for maintaining the website. However, this software was becoming obsolete making it almost impossible for us to make changes to the content of our website. With the support of Pierre Van Goethem and an external web consultant, Malvina Reyns, we have successfully transferred the old CHS website onto the WordPress platform.

Neither of these changes could have been accomplished without the dedicated support of our team of Office volunteers.

(c) CHS 2024 Calendar

Under the inspiring leadership of my predecessor, Geoff Brown, and his team of helpers the 2024 CHS Calendar saw the light of day in the Autumn of this year. I was delighted to see another painting from a St John's International student appearing on the cover of the Calendar. Regrettably, for financial reasons, ING decided to stop sponsoring the printing costs of the calendar. As such, the 2024 calendar has now become a net cost to CHS rather than a provider of net income. This is a disappointment because the calendar is a super product. I hope we will find a new sponsor before too long.

COMMUNITY HELP SERVICE ASBL

Avenue des Phalènes 26
Nachtvinderslaan 26
1000 Brussels
Tel: +32 (0)2 647 67 80

office@chsbelgium.org
www.chsbelgium.org
IBAN: BE83 4388 1352 9115
RPM: 0408.409.887

Conclusion

2023 has been a year of positive change and improvement to the way CHS operates on a daily basis. Our finances are sound and our operational practices have been upgraded. The Helpline has the strongest volunteer base we have seen for many years and the professionalism with which they manage the Helpline service, under guidance from the two Supervisors is remarkable.

The Mental Health Services Centre continues to perform well and is extremely busy. Nevertheless, the atmosphere within the team is excellent. Our thanks to Vanessa Goodman and Marta Noordhoek for taking over the heavy mantle of the Clinical Directorate role. With a new psychiatrist and a new psychologist joining the team, we are confident that we can better handle the ever-increasing demand for our services.

My thanks to the entire CHS family, as always, for everything they do to support our community here in Belgium and beyond, and to our many donors and sponsors without whose generous support we would not be able to do what we do.

Jeremy Jennings
President – April 2024