

Annual Report

for the year ended 31 December 2024

This report summarizes the activities of the CHS for the year to 31 December 2024. 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 important aspects of our activities during the year including our financial results and our fundraising activities.

The Helpline

This has been another challenging but successful year for the Helpline. We ended the year with 29 active volunteers, slightly less than in 2023 as we had four new joiners during the year but six volunteers left us. We also had the untimely death of another volunteer, Angela Oestmann, who will be sorely missed by us all. We are actively seeking to recruit more volunteers to the Helpline which will help to reduce the number of missed calls when the line is busy. This planned increase in volunteers will place additional pressure on the Helpline mentors – a small number of experienced volunteers – who help ensure that all new joiners receive the training they need to take the line. We are hugely indebted to our mentors and all of our volunteers who do a fantastic job under sometimes difficult circumstances.

When looking at activity, it is a little misleading to look at total calls to the Helpline or total calls handled by our volunteers because there are so many reasons why these numbers can be distorted – silent calls and hang ups being but two reasons. However, every year we have a small number of regular callers for whom the Helpline is part of the way in which they cope with their personal mental health issues. In 2022, just four individuals accounted for 57% of calls to the Helpline; in 2024, they accounted for half that number. If one excludes these calls, then call numbers have been remarkably consistent at 3,150 calls for each of the past three years.

A better measure of activity is the amount of time that our volunteers spend speaking to callers. This amounted to 1,150 hours in 2024, up 6% over the previous year and the highest amount recorded since moving to the Destiny system in 2021. The average length of a call has also increased by nearly 16% over the previous year. Whilst this is another statistic that can be distorted by the number of regular callers (as these conversations tend to be relatively brief), it does underscore the fact that we continue to receive difficult and demanding calls from people contemplating suicide - on average our volunteers receive one such call every day. This presents two challenges. Firstly, to ensure that all volunteers receive regular training in how to handle these calls; secondly, and equally important, to ensure that their own mental health is safeguarded.

We are grateful for the excellent work of our two Helpline Supervisors, Chana Schneps and Simon Dwyer, whose role it is to ensure that our volunteers are well prepared to handle these difficult calls. We continue to adopt the training programme of the UK Samaritans and also draw upon the skills of our Clinical Team who provide regular training on topical issues as and when they are identified.

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 continue to be received from non-Belgian phone numbers. 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.

Another positive development this year has been a comprehensive overhaul of the Helpline Webtool (Intranet) to enhance its functionality, intuitiveness and clarity. In addition, the Helpline Committee undertook a thorough revision of the Handbook, effectively the rules and procedures for the Helpline, which had not been updated since the introduction of the Destiny system for calls and changes brought in as the result of the Covid pandemic.

Given everything that has been happening behind the scenes this year, 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)

This has been a year of stability for the MHSC. The Clinical Directorate of Vanessa Goodman and Marta Nordhoek has done a great job in coordinating the work of the Adults' and Children's teams throughout the year. Whilst the number of people applying for a consultation in 2024 of 932 is slightly lower than in previous years, the significant demand for psychiatric services coupled with limited availability of our own psychiatrists meant that the CHS office often had to stop taking (and recording requests) to see a CHS psychiatrist. As such, we have reduced the amount of publicity we give to the MHSC and are focussing on raising awareness for the Helpline.

At the end of the year, the Clinical Team numbered 19 therapists. We welcomed Chris Grogan, a clinical psychologist, who joined our Children's Team during the year but we are still looking to recruit a psychiatrist to join our Adults' Team as well as two additional psychologists, one for each team.

Our team of Affiliated Professionals now numbers 4 and includes a dietitian, a family mediator, a mindfulness and meditation teacher and a career and orientation coach. Their diverse skills are a perfect complement to the work of our MHSC.

Overall, 2024 was a year of reflection and consolidation. Our revised Internal Rules for the Clinical team were adopted mid-year. These followed on from the comprehensive update of our Statutes in 2023.

Financial Results

As anticipated at the end of last year, 2024 was a challenging year. We continue to see pressure on our donation income and are becoming increasingly dependent on an ever-smaller number of donors. During the year we lost the main sponsor of the CHS calendar which meant that we had to cover the printing costs ourselves. As a result, the calendar turned into an expense rather than a source of net income. For 2025, and after much discussion within the CHS Council, we have decided not to continue with the calendar. Whilst it will be much missed by a certain "older" segment of the international community, we have to recognise that the vast majority of our clients (including callers to the Helpline) represent a younger population. For them, a paper calendar is not of much use or interest even if the informational content was always of great quality. Our sincere thanks go to my predecessor, Geoff Brown, and his

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team of enthusiastic volunteers, who have dedicated so much time and energy to producing our calendar over the years.

Despite the above, we have been able to keep our costs under tight control such that we have ended the year with another surplus.

A brief summary is shown in the table below:

	Total CHS		MHSC		Helpline	
	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023
	€	€	€	€	€	€
Receipts	141,273	150,302	110,827	112,308	30,446	37,994
Expenditure	(132,543)	(150,506)	(93,006)	(114,544)	(39,537)	(35,962)
Surplus (Deficit)	8,730	(204)	17,821	(2,236)	(9,091)	2,032

As can be seen from the table, our income is lower than 2023 due to the previously stated challenges in securing donations. As mentioned in last year's report, we established a Fundraising Working Party during the year to seek ways to generate additional revenues. This resulted in a targeted mail shot to 150 organisations in the Brussels area which helped raise just over €5,000 towards the costs of running the Helpline. Whilst this was a positive outcome, and a sincere thank you to the organisations that contributed especially FIPRA, Acumen Public Affairs and Amcham EU, the response rate was very low. As more fully discussed under other matters, the fundraising focus has shifted towards raising awareness about the Helpline and CHS more generally.

Despite the reduction in our income, our costs were also lower. The principal reason for this, and as flagged in our 2023 report, was the successful conclusion in 2024 of discussions with our landlord over back-dated indexation of our rent. In line with the accounting convention of "prudence", we had accrued for the full potential indexation charge at the end of last year. However, following our agreement, we were able to release €14,000 of the provision to income in 2024. We also benefitted from lower energy costs.

Each year we ask for a grant from our funds held by the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF). These funds represent donations to CHS for which the donor receives a tax deduction. We only recognise these donations when received into our bank account following a grant application that must be approved by the CHS trustees. In the past, we have requested funds to ensure the Helpline breaks even. But as these requests are made in October to allow sufficient time for the approvals process to be completed, we often find ourselves recording a Helpline surplus. This is because we tend to receive a disproportionate amount of donations in the final months of the year. In the last five years we have recorded Helpline surpluses of €12,000 as a result of this timing difference. In 2024 we deliberately reduced our grant demand by a similar amount such that the Helpline shows a deficit. This also helps preserve the funds in our KBF account for use in future years. As of 31 December 2024, we have roughly €25,000 in reserve which is enough to cover our Helpline costs for about seven months.

In terms of liquidity, we finish the year with cash and short-term investments of just over €170,000, although this includes our rental guarantee of roughly €10,000. Whilst this seems like a satisfactory buffer against future costs, a significant uncertainty lies ahead of us as we enter 2025. Our lease of the offices at Avenue des Phalènes expired in September 2024 and our landlord has decided to put the

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building up for sale. Whether a new owner will keep us as a tenant remains to be seen. But the costs associated with a move to new premises together with the costs of fitting out these premises to provide for soundproofed consultation rooms for our therapists should not be underestimated.

Other matters

(a) Communications

Our communications efforts were enhanced this year with the development of a dedicated CHS strategy that led to several initiatives aimed at increasing public awareness of the Helpline. These included the placement of Helpline posters in all 60 Brussels metro stations, the launch of a new Instagram account and increased activity on LinkedIn to both promote the Helpline and support CHS fundraising efforts.

A major focus in 2025, in line with our new communications strategy, will be to completely upgrade our website. At our December Council meeting, a project proposal from ZN Consulting was discussed and adopted. Their work is planned to start in the early New Year. Although CHS has had a Facebook account for a number of years and now also has an Instagram account, we have always struggled to make any real impact on the social media scene. This requires a sustained and coordinated approach which, for many reasons, has been a challenge for us. However, following the outreach campaign of our Fundraising Working Group, it became clear that raising awareness of CHS in general and the Helpline more specifically, should help us raise more donations in the future.

Under the leadership of a new CHS Council member, John Chalmers, our publicity team will be actively expanding our social media activity with regular posts. We are fortunate to be able to add some additional resources from communications experts at the European Commission to complement our own team. Once our website has been revamped, we plan to leverage an upgraded LinkedIn subscription to better enable us to reach out to specific segments of the business community, notably Human Resource and Corporate Social Responsibility experts. Our previous Helpline posters have been replaced by a suite of thirteen new designs that better reflect the diverse community we serve. Created by ZN Consulting, these artworks are also suitable for social media and feature calls for Helpline volunteers, alongside images aimed at raising public awareness of the Helpline itself.

We are grateful to John and the publicity team of Beverley Warner Keltjens (CHS Office Administrator), Caroline Johnson (CHS Publicity Co-ordinator), Owen Prevost and Ingrid Owens for all their efforts on our behalf.

(b) Darkness into Light (DIL) – 10 May 2025

Another exciting development for CHS has been the decision by Pieta House Ireland to nominate the CHS Helpline as the exclusive beneficiary for all DIL fundraising activities in Belgium in 2025. CHS has long been an active supporter of this annual event, but without being able to benefit from a financial standpoint.

The 2025 event will be launched in early March and provides the CHS family with a unique opportunity to use our many friends and supporters to participate. The event aims to raise awareness about suicide and self-harm with a walk starting at 5.00am in the morning of 10 May 2025, just as the sun begins to rise, symbolic of moving from a dark place into the light. Given the Helpline's experience with suicide-

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related calls, it is particularly pleasing for CHS to be the beneficiary of this wonderful event. For more details do access the Pieta Ireland website at <https://www.darknessintolight.ie/about/the-details>

Conclusion

2024 was a good year for CHS albeit relatively uneventful when compared to previous years. Both the Helpline and MHSC have continued to do what they do with dedication and professionalism and without too many external distractions.

However, 2025 is likely to be very different! A possible move to new premises will, for sure, raise our collective stress levels. We have a wonderful location at Avenue des Phalènes and the facilities we enjoy dovetail well with what we do. It is hard to imagine better premises for the same amount of rent we are currently paying but time will tell.

On the plus side, we are all excited by the potential of our new communication strategy which, when combined with the Darkness into Light event, could be a real game changer for us. Watch this space.

Another novel experience in 2025 will be the first ever CHS Council elections in accordance with our new statutes. Whilst I am not expecting a huge turnover in the composition of the CHS Council, particularly given the number of Ex Officio posts, it is an important governance principle that there be a periodic review of membership.

Finally, 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 donors and sponsors without whose support we would not be able to do what we do.

Jeremy Jennings
President – 17 February 2025