

# 'WE ARE HERE FOR YOU', SAY NEW COMMUNITY CENTRE FOUNDERS

Food pantry and counselling service among Our House initiatives to support local residents

THE founders of a new community centre in Walton Village are keen to let the local residents know they are there to "walk alongside" them and to help and support them with their needs.

Set up with the aim of providing practical support to local people according to their need and empowering them to achieve their goals, the Our House Walton Community Hub on Heathcote Road has already established a food pantry, help into work advice, and a support group for men, with a host of other services in the pipeline including one-on-one counselling. Above all the community interest company's (CIC) directors and volunteers hope it will become a heart of the community, a place where everyone feels welcome and valued and have a sense of belonging.

Founded by John and Jo Abela-Collins, Our House was set up last year and opened in April just after the nation went into lockdown. The project adapted to the crisis by teaming up with Home Cooked CIC, providing free meals to 78 families weekly until the beginning of August, when restrictions were eased.

Though the pandemic was thrust upon them, responding to people's needs rather than provide a prescribed set of services is exactly what John and Jo hope to achieve, however.

For that purpose they distributed surveys asking local residents what it was they wanted help and support with. Through that they learnt that mental health was the most significant issue and as a consequence, they set up the support group for men and will be providing free counselling sessions.

The men's group is a collaboration with the Walton Amateur Boxing Club which also meets at the centre and involves providing men with exercise and friendship. The counselling sessions are a collaboration with a local college which trains counsellors.

Through its work with Home Cooked, John and Jo found that the need for food is much higher than expected so they are continuing to support the community with the 'Hope Pantry'. For £3.50 members can choose 10



John and Jo Abela-Collins (right and centre) with Julie Brown at Hope Pantry

items, or for £5 choose 15 items, from a selection of fresh and non-perishable named foodstuffs.

When Covid 19 restrictions permit, visitors to the pantry can also enjoy a free cup of tea or coffee along with some toast and chat with staff and other visitors. The relaxed and friendly atmosphere also provides an opportunity for local people to share their concerns and for staff to find out their needs.

#### Faith in action

John and Jo are Christians, attending Liverpool One Church in Everton. John, who is originally from Maghull, works full time for a housing association - working from the office at the

community centre. While Jo, who is from Walton, is a full-time mum to their four children. She also runs Christian courses for inmates at a local prison and together with John runs a Christian outreach to sex workers in the city.

Though the work at the centre is not a Christian ministry, John says they are motivated by a desire to give and to help meet people's need as Jesus did.

"The centre came about because Jo and I have always wanted to give something back to the community," he said, "We are Christians but the community centre is not Christian led.

"We know that during Jesus' ministry he met and saw people where they were at and that is

## Hope Pantry

Hope Pantry is open every Wednesday but due to the pandemic members are required to make an appointment.

There are no qualifying criteria but anyone interested in using the service is required to register. This can be done online or by visiting the centre.

Food can be delivered in circumstances where members are not able to attend the centre.

For more information about the Hope Pantry and other services at Our House see website [www.ourhouse-walton.co.uk](http://www.ourhouse-walton.co.uk) or call 0151 521 7722.

very much what we went to do. If we can help and empower you to get on in life then we will and right now we are here to meet your need to get through to the next day."

The centre's founders say that while they had been contemplating setting up such a facility for about ten years it was the experience of organising a number of community benefit events that strengthened their resolve. Then when they learnt the premises on Heathcote Road were available they pulled out all the stops to make it happen.

"In 2017, our church gave us the use of the auditorium and alongside their City Care initiative we provided a silver service Christmas dinner for the vulnerable, isolated, elderly and homeless," John said, "A theatre company put on entertainment and we laid on transport to bring everyone and then take them home afterwards. We got such a selfish reward in our hearts from watching them treated as guests of honour, eating, socialising and enjoying themselves that we made up our minds that this is what we wanted to go forward.

"Then in October of last year Jo and I, whilst leading our church's City Care initiative collaborated with Convoy of Hope from America to organise a completely free outdoor event in Newsham Park, just to show love, by providing a host of services and food for adults and children. We planned for 500 visitors but got 1,600. That just blew us away."

Despite the free events they have laid on, John is keen to stress, however, that the community centre is not about giving handouts.

"We have always said we are not here to fix people problems for them but to empower them to fix them themselves," he said, "And it's not about money either. Sometimes if you give too much you can hurt.

"We just want to help people get back on their feet and to support them. And if we can't provide the help people need, either through our own services or through one of our partners, we can help by signposting people to where they can get the help they need.

"We are a community and we will walk alongside you."

by calling: (0151) 0151 247 6409, emailing: [communications@liverpoolccg.nhs.uk](mailto:communications@liverpoolccg.nhs.uk), or texting: 07920 206 386.

Dr Fiona Lemmens, Chair of NHS Liverpool CCG said:

"These past months have seen the NHS facing the greatest health challenge in its 72-year history. Although the local health system has coped well with the extra pressures that coronavirus has created, we also know that changes to services have had an impact on patients.

"We want to hear about people's experiences – both good and bad – of accessing NHS services in Liverpool during the pandemic. Whether that's GP appointments, a planned operation in hospital, maternity services, mental health support, community clinics, or the care that you receive in your own home - it's really important that we understand what worked well, and what might be better."

## What they say

Margie, a pensioner who travels from Orrell Park to use the food pantry, said: "It's an excellent service. It is so well organised and everybody is so nice and so friendly. "It's a good help and there is a good selection of food."

Local resident Julie said: "We are very lucky to have the pantry. It is well worth it."

Terry volunteers at the centre two days a week. "Everybody is so kind to us and that to me is the best thing in the world," she said, "We meet lovely people and I genuinely look forward to coming in."

Also volunteering is Toni, who is on furlough from her job at the Princes Trust. She said: "I have never walked into a place where I feel so welcome. John and Jo are like guardian angels. You feel it when you come through the door."

Our House  
Walton  
Community  
Hub  
on Heathcote  
Road.



Volunteer Julie Brown, who lives in Whiston, said: "The lockdown has created so much loneliness and isolation especially for the elderly.

"Our big thing is to connect the community again and to give people a sense of belonging. "As I have spoken to people since we have been out of lockdown they say it just so nice to have people to talk to, to come somewhere and get out of the house."

## Share your view on NHS care during pandemic

THE local health authority is asking people to share their views - whether good or bad - about using health services during coronavirus pandemic.

NHS Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) is seeking to understand the experiences of individuals who have accessed health services in Liverpool since March 2020 to present, either for themselves or for a family member, or someone they help care for.

People can share their views up until Friday October 30 by filling in a questionnaire – either online at: [www.liverpoolccg.nhs.uk](http://www.liverpoolccg.nhs.uk) or by requesting a paper version of the questionnaire