

Vision Care for Homeless People

BY ALISON GORDON

Vision Care for Homeless People (VCHP) was first established in 2003 with the aim to provide eye tests and glasses free of charge to people living in shelters, hostels or who are sleeping rough. Today, we remain the only national charity to provide this unique service. We operate nine clinics across England, in London, Exeter, Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Gloucester, Birmingham and Brighton. We are delighted to have now launched our first clinic in Edinburgh, Scotland, having become a registered charity in Scotland earlier this year, bringing the number of VCHP clinics to 10.

People experiencing homelessness face formidable barriers to accessing any form of eyecare and they tend to have more eye disease than the general population. There is a great health inequality in that those experiencing homelessness are unable to access the eye tests and glasses that they so desperately need. Many do not fit the eligibility criteria for free NHS services and those that do fit the criteria struggle to make and maintain appointments with high street opticians.

Across the UK those affected by homelessness need access to glasses to enable them to look for work, find accommodation or simply to keep themselves safe. Without support from our free clinics, they would have no other means to access eyecare.

Our clinics operate from local homelessness centres, and, with the help of many companies from across the optical industry, we fully equip an optical room at each centre with all the equipment needed to undertake eye assessments. The clinics open weekly, and they are accessible to all those experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. Most operate on a drop in basis, with no appointment needed.

What makes our work unique is that all our clinics are staffed entirely by volunteers, including volunteer optometrists, dispensing opticians and clinic assistants. Each clinic has a group of dedicated volunteers who share their skills, expertise and time as part

“It’s a cliché but it’s true, you get so much back”



Launching the VCHP Edinburgh Clinic (Wellness Floor, Crisis Skylight, Canongate) funded by Specsavers. (L-R) Jennifer Stephenson (Scottish Divisional Chair of Specsavers), Elaine Styles (Chair of VCHP) and Mark Kennedy (Director of Crisis Skylight Edinburgh) (photo credit Sandy Young).



Sight test – Leeds clinic (photo credit Lisa Bretherick).



Sight test – Leeds clinic (photo credit Lisa Bretherick).

of a rota. Our volunteers tell us how much they enjoy helping patients and describe their time at clinics as friendly, supported, rewarding and interesting. We are in need of some additional help across our clinics so we can ensure we open every week. We welcome enquiries from anyone interested in helping, with vacancies advertised here: www.visioncarecharity.org/volunteers.

Over the past year many of those experiencing homelessness have come to our clinics with varying degrees of prescription, and for some our clinics have been life changing. We have had clients with serious, untreated glaucoma at risk of going blind, an individual who was already blind in one eye from a treatable condition and a person who had not been able to see out of either eye for the past 10 years. Last year we provided eye tests to 694 individuals and prescribed 930 pairs of glasses to some of the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness,

reaching them in their local community and helping them as they put their life back together again. We also made hundreds of repairs to glasses, made referrals to other services, delivered advice sessions and provided dry eye drops to clients.

Our mission over the next few years is to open 14 additional clinics in other city centres so we can reach more people experiencing homelessness. To do this we need the help of our current and future supporters.

To find out how you can help please contact Alison Gordon, Community & Corporate Fundraiser, alison.gordon@vchp.org.uk or visit www.visioncarecharity.org

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