



An Interview with the ARK Service Manager,
Caroline Oswald.

ARK Eastleigh was started in 2008 when Wyvern Technology College, Fair Oak, asked St Thomas Church to help a family in need. Since then the work has grown and in July 2014 we registered with the charity commission.

Our Christian faith inspires and directs all we do.

What is ARK?

ARK Eastleigh is a christian charity that serves the vulnerable and excluded in our community through practical acts of kindness, befriending and advocacy. We work in partnership with other local organisations to connect families and individuals with the support they need to find hope for the future. We are funded entirely by donations from local churches, businesses and individuals.

In the first case ARK ever took on Mum was suffering from mental health problems and the school was struggling to engage with her. The school was washing the 13 yr old son's clothes and allowing him to shower at school. Their home had been deemed a health hazard which meant that no one from the housing association would enter the premises to help them clean it up. They were living in one room. The kitchen was not accessible, they only had cold water and the rest of the house could not be used as it was full of rubbish. There was dog excrement everywhere, discarded food, thick grime, rats and filth.

ARK volunteers cleaned and redecorated the house. The son gained a college place and Mum has been helped to develop a relationship with social services, so she can get the help she needs.

Essentially ARK will help wherever there is a need and this means some fairly unusual help such as taking vulnerable women on a trip to walk with Alpacas and even organising a wedding!

As we help families, we are helping the parents, young adults and children in our community get back on their feet. We also help vulnerable individuals who have no family support and who often slip through the net of help offered by other agencies.

I like to think that ARK is an extension of Jesus's hand as it seeks to help people through the storms of life and give them a new start.



Why is ARK?

There are many reasons why our community needs an ARK: poverty, mental illnesses, disability, illness, we could go on. ARK works on a referral basis from any agency that feel ARK could assist.

ARK is also a response to God's extravagant love for us. Actions often speak louder than words and this is our way of demonstrating God's love to our community. Everyone wins. Our clients find hope, the wider community see the love of God demonstrated and that speaks volumes to those working for statutory agencies and other local organisations. As a volunteer you are just as blessed as you step out in faith and see God's promises are true case after case.

We seem to fill a gap where there is no help available or agencies have not been able to engage with clients. I believe the difference is that we can create a relationship with our clients and therefore are able to gain their trust. We are not there saying this is what you need to do we say let us help you achieve that and then let us continue our relationship with you because you are important and special and Jesus wants to love you through us.

When is ARK?

The ARK office is open on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. We are currently working at full capacity and dealing with some very challenging situations. In the future we'd love to be able to grow our team so that we can offer services throughout the week.

Where is ARK?

ARK Eastleigh has supported families and individuals in Fair Oak, Bishopstoke, Eastleigh and Chandlers Ford. We would love to be able to work with many more churches in the Borough so that we can provide more help across the area.

Who is ARK?

Our team is made up myself, Caroline Oswald and Sarah McFarlane, our administrator.

We have a wonderful team of dedicated volunteers who clean, declutter, do DIY, chat, take people swimming, give lifts for hospital appointments, visit those who are isolated and we also have a small group of volunteers who clear and tidy gardens. Jungle clearance may be a better description and extreme gardening is required when they are full of rubbish. House and garden clearance is often required as part of child protection plans for children at risk. We also organise much needed days out so families can enjoy being together and young people can experience fun activities in a positive environment. We've



loved seeing some of our clients become volunteers as they too want to give back out of the love that they've been shown.

Recently I recognised how we create a bespoke package and respond to the individual needs because no two cases are ever the same. The situations maybe similar - children at risk or addiction or a family fleeing domestic violence - but the circumstances will vary, the needs will be different and mental health issues will manifest in a variety of ways. We need to be gentle, discerning, resourceful, creative and very patient. We need to listen so we support the person and not the presenting need.

The volunteers are really the most incredible, flexible, long suffering group and amazing people. Some volunteer on a weekly basis giving us their time on a Monday morning for example. This is incredibly helpful as it helps us plan in advance. Others offer their time once a fortnight or give us advanced dates. Some volunteer their skills, carpentry, gardening, caking baking, sewing etc. Some volunteer during school holidays which again is so helpful as many of a regular volunteers cannot help during holiday periods as they care for their own children.

At present the volunteers come from **10 different** congregations and **5 different denominations**. What a powerful Christian message.

We are also very blessed to be supported by many congregations who are unable to help in a practical way but support through prayer, finance and our annual Christmas Hamper Blessing.

If you feel you would like help **fund** us or find out more about us please visit www.arkeasleigh.co.uk