NOAH chief executive Jim O’Connor says collecting his MBE from Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace was one of the most memorable days of his life.

The charity boss – awarded the honour for services to the homeless – added: “Everyone, recipients and guests, was made to feel special and treated with great courtesy.

“There were also lovely touches of humour, like ‘Don’t forget to let go of the Prince when he shakes hands with you.’”

Jim said it was inspiring to speak to some of the other awardees: “One has worked with abandoned street children in Calcutta for the past 15 years and another had fostered 80 children over the last 25 years.”
“Prince Charles was charming and spoke to every one of the recipients with genuine interest and concern.” Jim joked he’d tried to recruit the Prince as a volunteer and added: “The award is a great reflection on NOAH, our work and the people involved, past and present – be they staff, volunteers or benefactors and in particular those we support and have supported.”

The Luton-based charity has been working in Bedford for the past 18 months. During this time it has helped 287 homeless people and assisted them to find private accommodation.

Jim said: “We’ve also helped relocate a number of Eastern Europeans. We have some current funding to pay for that. Mainly it’s people from Poland and Romania with occasional returns to Bulgaria and Lithuania. We attempt to make contact with family and where appropriate agencies in their home country.”

The man who joined NOAH 16 years ago admitted he was increasingly concerned about poverty in the community and its impact on the most vulnerable in our society.

He explained: “It is at its most severe on those with complex needs, those suffering from a mix of homelessness, mental ill health, addiction, chaos and despair, as well as those who have come from the expanded European Union over the last eight years.

“They come in the expectation of making a better life only to find their aspirations are not realised and that work is not available to them as they thought. They have no access to the welfare system and are literally penniless.

“Maintaining and growing our services to meet this need will not be easy, particularly in the face of increasing difficulty in obtaining funding.

“But there is a huge opportunity for NOAH and other voluntary sector organisations to work together in constructive partnerships with statutory agencies to meet our common goals regarding extreme poverty and its consequences. “The onus is on all of us to work together more intelligently and draw on our experience, skills and resources to improve the lot of those we seek to support.” He added: “Developing such a partnership is one of my most ardent wishes for 2016.

“In the meanwhile we at NOAH will continue to make every effort to maximise income from our trading activities. That’s vital in order to operate what are often life-saving services for those on the margins of society, so that they’re never abandoned or left without hope.”

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