

Winter Night Shelter Project Report

5th January to 30th March 2011

Introduction

FirmFoundation is a 'not-for-profit' organization, supported by several Christian churches in Harrow.

On 5th January 2011 FirmFoundation opened the doors for its first ever Winter Night Shelter at the Welldon Centre in Central Harrow. Our aim was to provide a warm and friendly environment, with dormitory style overnight accommodation, over the winter months, for up to ten male guests per night. We also provided a good quality, 2-course evening meal, breakfast and a packed lunch. Hot shower and washroom facilities were also available on site.

Taking into account the availability of the Welldon Centre, our initial plan was to be open for six nights per week between the hours of 7pm to 8am, for twelve weeks. However, during the first week the venue availability changed and we were immediately able to be open for seven nights per week, although the seventh night opened at a later time of 9.45pm.

The shelter took referrals from Harrow Council and other London homeless services who were able to contact us through the Homeless link website. www.homeless.org.uk

Our intention was not only to provide overnight accommodation, but also to offer assistance to any guests wishing to access local services, such as benefit offices and mental health care, as well as helping them find long term accommodation.

Shelter Summary

- In total we provided overnight accommodation for thirty one male homeless guests.
- Well over one thousand, two hundred meals were served at the shelter, offering a great opportunity for friendships to be built, many of which are still ongoing today.
- Fifteen homeless guests had a local connection with Harrow. A 'local connection' requires a person to have lived in the borough of Harrow for a minimum of six out of the last 12 months prior to being homeless. During the shelter period the shortest time that someone had lived in Harrow before becoming homeless was three years and the longest was forty six years.
- Sixteen homeless guests, from the neighboring London boroughs of Ealing and Brent, were mainly referred to us through the major homeless charities, Thamesreach and Crisis.
- Of the thirty one guests, five people had no recourse to public funds, which sadly meant that we were unable to offer much help in finding them long term accommodation.
- We had homeless guests from ten different countries; Afghanistan, Algeria, England, Ireland, India, Pakistan, Poland, Sri-Lanka, Romania, and Russia.

Additional Services Offered

For the duration of the twelve week shelter, we provided a laundry service. With help and support from a local launderette, we set up a washing voucher system, whereby guests were able to do their own laundry. Each week, guests were entitled to a voucher that provided one free machine wash and dry at the launderette. Over fifty vouchers were issued during the course of the project.

We also provided assistance with travel, by distributing over forty Oyster Cards, containing a weekly bus pass. This enabled the guests to travel to day centres and attend medical appointments as and when required. Some guests also chose to travel into central London to access additional support from larger homeless charities.

It was a privilege also to distribute numerous items of clothing, from socks to thermal coats, along with a variety of toiletries which were gratefully received by all the guests.

For those we were able to re-house, we provided fourteen Home Starter Packs, consisting of food, toiletries and cleaning products, as people moved into their new accommodation. New bedding was also provided as required.

Accommodation

One of our key objectives was to find accommodation for any guests wishing to end a life of rough sleeping. It was, therefore, a delight to help fourteen guests move into long term housing.

Mental Health Care Support

A number of the guests who came to the shelter had varying degrees of mental health issues. Owing to our relationship with MIND in Harrow, four people were able to access specialist mental health support with relative ease.

Drug and Alcohol Support

Four of our guests were able to access specialist alcohol and drug support programs. With the help of EACH (Ethnic Alcohol Counseling in Harrow) and COMPASS in Harrow, these guests were able to get the necessary support they needed.

Meal Only

In addition to the thirty one people who stayed overnight, seven guests came regularly to the shelter for the meal and to use the shower facilities, but preferred to 'sleep rough' through the night. Although we encouraged them to stay for the night, we respected their decision. Thankfully, we also able to give them advice with accessing local services.

Volunteers

During the twelve week period, over one hundred and fifty adult volunteers, from across the seven core church groups, attended the shelter in the evening, befriending the guests and serving up the food. A further twenty one male volunteers were on a rota to sleep on site, offering a supporting role to the shelter's overnight staff.

Comments and Feedback

We received plenty of encouraging comments from both guests and volunteers, the following quotes are just some examples of how the shelter helped both volunteer and guest alike

"...I can't thank you guys enough for what you've done for me..." (Guest. January 2011)

"I was sleeping on the night buses before the shelter opened but I couldn't really sleep for fear of being robbed or attacked. Since being at the shelter I've had my first proper night sleep in months. I feel safe here. It's amazing that people would volunteer to do this for the homeless." (Guest. January 2011)

"...you've given me help and hope, but above all safety. Thank you..." (Guest. February 2011)

"...without you guys I'd be freezing on the street, or even worse..." (Guest. February 2011)

"...I couldn't bear going back to the streets, so God bless you..." (Guest. March 2011)

"If I'm honest I didn't know what to expect when volunteering for this but the experience with being with these guys has totally changed my outlook on the homeless and people with addictions. I would distance myself from them, now I just want to help them" (Volunteer March 2011)

During the shelter, the Harrow Observer newspaper, which is freely delivered to the majority of Harrow residents, came down to visit and the following report was published.

<http://www.harrowobserver.co.uk/west-london-news/local-harrow-news/2011/03/22/harrow-homeless-shelter-making-a-difference-116451-28384942/>.

This offered the shelter a most welcome level of exposure to the community and we received several offers of help and requests for further information about our work with the homeless via our website, citing the article as stirring their interest.

Conclusion

Overall we believe that the winter night shelter was an overwhelming success. Although the problem of homelessness in Harrow and across London is very complex and substantial, we believe that we have played a small, but significant part, in providing a safe place to sleep, offering genuine friendship and help in accessing services, which has resulted in fourteen men coming off the street and into long-term accommodation.

The Future

At FirmFoundation, we are very committed to providing ongoing care and support for the homeless throughout the year and therefore, are employing Michael Scott for two days per week towards this purpose. A number of the guests asked FirmFoundation to provide ongoing friendship and support, once the shelter had come to an end. Therefore, we are establishing a weekly 'get together', providing an evening meal and social time which is to be held at the Welldon Centre. This will also give us an opportunity to befriend and help other homeless people, that we meet in the months to come.

Following this year's success, we are already planning our Winter Night Shelter 2012, which will again be held at the Welldon Centre, for a similar period.

If you would like to support, financially or otherwise, either the ongoing work, or specifically the 2012 shelter, please do get in touch. We would love to speak with you about joining with us as we serve the homeless and marginalized in our community.

Winter Night Shelter Accounts

Please find enclosed a summary of the accounts for our Winter Night Shelter 2011.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go to all the churches in Harrow who contributed to the success of the winter night shelter. Namely, Trinity Church, Hindes Road; St. Paul's, South Harrow; Harrow International Christian Centre; St. Peter's, West Harrow; All Saints', Harrow Weald; Elmfield Church, North Harrow; St Mary's, Harrow on the Hill; Our Lady and St. Thomas of Canterbury, Harrow on the Hill; St. John's, Greenhill; St. Alban, North Harrow; Roxeth Green Free Church; Harrow Baptist and King's Church; Harrow.

We are deeply grateful to all the those who have personally contributed financially to the shelter, as well as the following donators who provided grants towards the project:

- Addleshaw Goddard Charitable Trust
- Albert Hunt Trust
- All Churches Trust
- Churches together in Pinner
- Churches together in Wealdstone
- Church Urban Fund
- Lawton Trust
- London Catalyst
- North West London Community Foundation (Evening Standard Fund)
- Marsh Christian Trust
- Souter Charitable Trust
- THATCH
- William & Christine Eynon trust