



## Report to Transform Bexley Borough on the Bexley Winter Night Shelter project 2016/2017

(Matthew 25 : 35-45)

### Introduction

The idea for this project originated from Transform Bexley Borough (TBB) representing the churches in the London Borough of Bexley sometime in 2014. Rev Jim Charles visited the Greenwich shelter in the early part of 2016 and this gave him an insight to the planning process and the need for a coordinator. So, he advertised in local churches for a coordinator.

On a volunteer coming forward an initial meeting with Jim took place late in July with several people who had already shown an interest in this idea. A “start-up” meeting then took place in November with some 25 interested churches/people attending. It was clear that there was good support for this venture to proceed and a steering committee, including treasurer, was formed by mutual agreement from volunteers stepping forward. This steering committee then sought to take the project forward and to manage it over the next 5 months and was to meet six times. This Steering committee comprised the Venue leaders, Cornerstone, Treasurer and coordinator and have composed this report.

### The Venues

Despite a request across the Borough churches for venues for this project, only three came forward. So the shelters were going to be at the New Community Church in Sidcup on a Monday evening, the Boys’ Brigade hall by Christ Church Bexleyheath on a Wednesday and all the other nights at the Welling Salvation Army hall. Sidcup and Bexleyheath were able to make showers available, while all three had good cooking facilities and plenty of room for sleeping, eating and recreation. They also had the possible advantage of being easily accessible and in public thoroughfares and so were unlikely to cause any problems with residents. We checked with the council if any form of planning permission was required and were advised that this was not the case given the time scale we expected to use the buildings for this purpose.

### The volunteers

Advertising through the churches (TBB) and then word of mouth brought forward some 150 volunteers, not all church attenders. These had to be divided up to cover three shifts viz. an early evening shift (7.00 – 10.30 pm) an overnight shift (10.00 pm – 6.30 am ) and a morning shift (6.00 – 8.30 am) and then dispersed across the seven days- taking into account folk’s preference for the shift, the day and venue. A team leader for each shift on each day was appointed and information on what was to be expected was forwarded.

We had been made aware of Housing Justice - a national organisation both politically and charitably, seeking to improve the situation for folk who find themselves in this predicament for whatever reason. We had “joined up” (£1500 fee) with them and they were able to provide information on the running of shelters, a format for a Volunteers hand book and carried out two Saturday morning

training sessions – one in December and the other in January for some 120 volunteers, hosted at Welling Baptist Church.

### Provision

It was realised early on that whatever we did had to be consistent across the venues and nights. We would open at 7.30, lights out 11.00 and our visitors left the premises by 8.00 am. On arrival the “guests”, as they were to be respectfully known, were provided with a hot drink and then a sit down two course meal around 8.15. This took the form of a set menu over a 9 day rota. Breakfast, along with cereals, was mainly things on toast. These all seemed to be acceptable to our guests with little to no adverse comments. One observation was that guests seemed to be eating less as the weeks went on! A cook book entitled “Feed my Sheep” produce by another Salvation Army unit was used as a basis for recipes and quantities.

All food had to be prepared on the premises (hygiene regulations) and we are indebted to some 12 or so cooks along with the morning catering staff.

For this first attempt at running a Night Shelter we were only able to accommodate men and the most we could cater for was 12 (in fact as reported below we never had more than 9 on any given night). An air bed and a sleeping bag were provided along with pillows at each venue. The sleeping bags were named and kept for each guest at each venue. The donated pillow cases were laundered locally.

After the evening meal guests were free to chat, play games and/or watch TV/DVD’s.

### The Guests

It was recognised early on that there had to be some way of engaging with the “rough sleepers” in the first place, and the need to have some form of assessment as to their suitability for the shelter and if the shelter was going to be suitable for their needs. We were soon made aware of a volunteer organisation called “Cornerstone” which was working out of Trinity Baptist Church with folk who had addictions, mental health problems & homelessness (<http://www.cornerstonebexley.org/sermons>).

This resulted in them drawing up an assessment check list and making arrangements to “interview” potential guests – initially after their food bank session on Mondays and Fridays at Trinity but, later by appointment having established a dedicated phone line for folk to ring. If the rough sleeper was deemed suitable, an “invitation” was issued and an agreement as to the conditions and requirements of the guest had to be signed. Cornerstone then advised the venue leader or team leader of the name of the invited guest. Only folk with a specific invitation were allowed to come into the venue. There was to be no “walk in” arrangement and this procedure worked very well with few hiccups.

Flyers were produced for churches and others (e.g. Council and Police) to hand out to people they came across that appeared to be rough sleepers. Most of the referrals were received via the Council, Colleges, Citizens Advice and word of mouth.

The service and help provided by Cornerstone was pivotal to the project – it would have been very difficult without them. They were also able to take a firm line with any guest that seemed to not be fulfilling their part of the agreement. They assessed some 23 folk, most of whom were deemed suitable and offered an invitation for the shelter. Not all took up this invite and over the 10 weeks that the project ran, some 16/18 guests did come along for at least several nights before they moved on for whatever reason. Although we were able to offer a “dog sitting” service, potential guests were reluctant to leave their animal and in the end, did not access the shelter. Only one guest had to

be excluded and in general, behaviour was respectful, good and settled down once Cornerstone had reiterated the conditions to one or two guests.

The service, support, advice and help given has been recognised by the steering committee - approving a donation (see accounts) to them as a token of our indebtedness.

Beside a safe and warm environment, along with hot meals, we were able to provide toiletries, clothing and haircuts. A little late in the day we were able to ask a volunteering GP to meet with some of the guests. She diagnosed several guests with severe mental problems that were in need of urgent psychiatric assessment and at least one guest had to be admitted to a special unit where he would have to remain for several weeks' treatment.

The volunteers did get alongside guests by chatting to them, playing games and seeking to give support, understanding and guidance. Citizens Advice has also played a large part in helping guests to sort out their circumstances.

However, volunteers were under strict requests not to give money, personal details or agree to help or see guests outside the venue and to keep details confidential.

(see also appendix 1 - Guests statistics and Appendix 2 - Guests feedback)

### Finance and Donations

A Lloyds bank account was opened with several of the steering committee as signatories. Just under £8500 was received by and through voluntary giving and appropriately receipted. We had an expenditure in the order of £4600. The main expenses being £1500 to affiliate with Housing Justice, £1000 donation to Cornerstone, £800 towards bedding and the remainder being for food, heating and lighting. Several churches, schools and hospitals have either donated goods or forwarded funds from collections and various events and so we are again blessed with a good bank balance and sufficient supplies of food and requisites. In addition, Bexley Foodbank provided most of the breakfast essentials.

Both the venues at the New Community Church, Sidcup and the Boys Brigade hall (a joint venture between Christ Church, Bexleyheath and Geddes Place URC) were self-financed through the generosity of their respective congregations and the 14<sup>th</sup> West Kent Boys Brigade.

The excess of income over expenses is therefore available for any future projects of this nature.

### The Winter Night Shelter

After some six months of much prayer, organisation, planning and arrangements the first Winter Night Shelter for rough sleepers in Bexley opened on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2017 – Housing Justice's Homeless Sunday - and ran through without a break to the weekend of 25<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup> March.

We were unable to visit other local shelters (Dartford and Greenwich) prior to opening as they did not open until January. However, on March 21<sup>st</sup> a couple of the steering committee did visit the Dartford project (at Christ Church that night) and found that there were very many similarities in organisation, management and guests needs.

There were obviously some teething problems along with some poor or miss-communications. A great deal has been learnt by all because we stepped forward in faith and received the Lord's constant guidance, door opening and answers to prayer.

This was clearly a worthwhile project undertaken with the Lord's guidance which resulted in a successful project.

### Outcomes and the future

There has been much concern expressed about the future of the guests as they leave the shelter for the last time. Cornerstone is planning to stay in touch not only through their regular Tuesday evening meetings at Trinity but a "tea and chat" time on a Monday afternoon while New Community Church at Sidcup are setting up a weekly "open house" evening meal, also on a Monday, to which the guests have been invited.

The overall outcome we believe was the safety, warmth and the provision of wholesome food for the guests which we pray & trust has given them some breathing space, improved self-esteem and let them know that they matter and are loved. Several issues regarding health, financial concerns, relationships and accommodation were able to be addressed through our connection with the Citizens Advice Bureau.

There were other outcomes we believe, including the compassion, love and concern that went deep into the hearts of the volunteers for folk who find themselves in this "homeless situation", more often than not through no fault of their own. There was also a great team and good will spirit amongst the volunteers and very many were sad to stop, having looked forward so much to their shift. A great sense of unity has been established by church members so lovingly and enthusiastically working together (one of the aims of TBB), and also of course we all gained the experience of running a night shelter (see appendix 3 - Volunteers feedback).

There has certainly been tremendous support and interest for this project and many people are already talking about next winter. To this end a feasibility meeting for next winter is being held on 29<sup>th</sup> April. There is also to be a thanksgiving Service at Christ Church Bexleyheath on May 6<sup>th</sup>.

As one volunteer stated in their feedback said -

"A thoroughly worthwhile Project – Practical application of applying God's word."

*Prepared by Melvyn French on behalf of and with the approval of the steering committee.*

(Paul and Ursula Ayliffe, Jack Merrifield, Jon Doyle, Charlie January, Alexa and Ian Moody)

April 13th 2017

## **Appendix 1**

### **Guest Statistics : Jan – March 2017**

These are the stats Cornerstone have managed to compile from the initial assessments and follow-ups carried out in the final week of the shelter. Some of them are approximate as they are based on information offered to us (but they're pretty accurate).

N.B. We had space for 12 men and we were never completely full at any one time. (Max 11 I think)

Cornerstone assessed 23 Men (another 8 made enquiries but didn't turn up for an assessment).

4 women made enquiries but couldn't be offered a place for obvious reasons.

We had referrals from the following places:

Cornerstone 2

Foodbank 1

Dartford Shelter 2

Council 6

Citizens Advice Bureau 1

Street Pastors 1

North Kent College 1

Another Guest 2

Signpost 1

Job Centre 2

North Heath Baptist 1

Salvation Army 1

New Community Church 1

Thames Reach 1

18 accessed the shelter over the 10 weeks (i.e. 5 didn't use their invite after their assessment)

2 of those came on one occasion but never actually stayed the night.

**The following info is gathered from the 16 guests that accessed the shelter overnight:**

#### **Age:**

Under 30 yrs- 8

30-50 yrs- 4

50+ yrs- 4

#### **Ethnicity:**

White British 13

Mixed Race (Black/White) British 1

Mixed Race (Black/White) Swedish 1

Black American 1

**On first assessments:**

Unemployed 13 (majority for more than a year)

Work 2

Retired 2

**Income:**

Pension 2

Benefits 7

Work 2

None 5

**Background:**

Recognised Mental Health Problem 10

Disclosed Addiction Problems 8

Disclosed Criminal Convictions 8

**Reasons given for homelessness:**

Tenancy Loss (due to poor mental health/addiction/job loss- often can't separate these out)  
8

Problems at home (Family or partner) 7

Fleeing gang culture 1

Former Bexley Residents 12

For half of them it wasn't their first period of homelessness.

**Period of homelessness:**

1 day- 2

1 week- 5

2 weeks- 2

3 weeks -1

1 month- 2

4 months- 2

6 months-1

1 year+ 1

**Progress whilst in the shelter: (Citizen's Advice Instrumental to this)**

Receiving Benefits (no income before) 4

Attending Cornerstone 2

Seen GP 4+

Debt managed 1

\*In addition, travel costs, clothes and other material needs provided for as well as accompanying guests to hospital and police station on occasions. Haircuts also offered. Some support is still ongoing.

### **Accommodation following shelter:**

Housed 3 (and 1 provided with basics through Cornerstone)  
Staying with friends 2  
Admitted to mental health unit 1 (that is progress I promise!)  
Returned home 3  
Still homeless 4  
Unsure 3

## **Appendix 2**

### Guest Feedback Report 2017 (Compilation from the anonymous forms we received back)

#### Assessments:

All the guests said that Cornerstone carried out a quick, professional and discreet assessment and that the venue was easy to find. None of them reported any problems regarding confidentiality. They were all in agreement that the rules they were asked to adhere to were reasonable and one guest suggested an additional rule of no snoring! None of the guests suggested any improvements in the assessment process.

#### Venues:

Guests all reported that the venues were easy to find but a couple of guests expressed a difficulty in travelling between them, particularly as they had no money. All of them felt safe at the venues and felt there was enough to do in the evenings. It was noted that the Sidcup facilities were the best and that a shower at Welling would have been welcomed. One guest reported that the sleeping arrangements were a 'bit uncomfy' and another that the Welling venue was cold, particularly in the mornings. There were a couple of suggestions of opening earlier and one guest thought a Playstation would be nice!

#### Food:

Guests were all in agreement that there was plenty of food available, one guest commenting that he has put on weight. They also all agreed that the quality was good. 2 guests thought there could be more variety and we had some suggestions of steak (!), hash browns, stir-fry and ribs. Another guest thought the food was a bit bland and would have liked a bit more spice. There was also a comment about having too many mince-based meals.

#### Volunteers:

The guests were all made to feel very welcome by the volunteers and were treated with respect. According to the guests, all volunteers were happy to engage in conversation and responded well to any issues that arose. The consensus was that volunteers were friendly, caring and helpful. One guest said that volunteers were "generous with their time" and spoke about them helping with clothes etc, while another said the volunteers were "awesome".

### Guests:

The majority of the guests reported that the relationships they had with the other guests were mainly good. One said that they believed there was a clique and that “some (guests) are idiots”. There were a couple of guests that felt there was an uncomfortable atmosphere at times and one believed other guests were taking advantage of the volunteers’ generosity. None of the men thought that the team could have done any more to help relationships between guests. Despite identifying some personality clashes, the guests believe they all got on quite well as a whole.

### Support:

All the guests said that they felt they received adequate support and advice during their stay and that they had enough opportunity to talk with leaders regarding their needs. One guest was particularly grateful for the work of the Citizen’s Advice Bureau and another said he would have valued more help finding accommodation. They all acknowledged that they had adequate support offered to them for when the shelter closes and knew how to get in touch via Cornerstone.

### Quotes regarding how the shelter has helped to improve their situation:

“Helped me get some breathing space with my landlord and helped me try get a job”

“I have put on weight and been looked after well in the last two months. I have been given clothes and even been helped to find work”

“I feel like it has helped me to get my way back home”

“It’s been a place I can feel like a human being”

“I’ll hopefully be better with my family now”

### Additional comments:

“An interest in my progress was always there”

“Respect to all the voluntary staff and all that they give”

“It’s a pity the shelter can’t be available all year round”

“Hopefully it will happen again”

### Appendix 3

#### Volunteers Feedback (50 replies to date)

Question	YES	No
Did you enjoy the experience?	50	
Would you do it again?	50	
Were you ever frightened or fearful when you were with the guests?		50
Did we have enough volunteers on your shift (Evening/night/morning )?	50 (provided they all turned up !)	
Do you think the food was acceptable in quantity and quality – for the guests?	43 (night shift did not see or partake of the meals)	
Do you think it was worthwhile doing?	50	
Did you experience any in rude or difficult attitudes from the guests towards volunteers?		50
Were the venues suitable?	50 (main comment was lack of showers at Welling)	
Did you have enough information from the training session and or team leaders to make you feel safe and effective?	47	3 were unable to attend training
Was the Volunteer Handbook helpful?	48	2 did not receive handbook