

Annual Assembly of Churches Together in Coulsdon

Saturday 18 January 2020

Floating Shelter Review 2019

The shelter in Coulsdon ran for 7 Thursdays between 7 November and 19 December. As always overnight accommodation in a safe and caring environment was available for a maximum of 14 guests who also received a three-course evening meal, an evening of socialising with volunteers, a cooked breakfast the following morning and a hearty packed lunch to take away with them, so they were fully provided for until they arrived at the next night's shelter on the Croydon Churches' Floating Shelter (CCFS) circuit. All guests are referred to us through Croydon Reach from a number of organisations helping homeless people in Croydon to get accommodation, benefits, healthcare, training and employment.

Guests

This year we welcomed 26 people (23 men and 3 women) into the shelter during the course of our seven-week season. A further 4 guests were referred in to us but either did not show up or were unable to be admitted on arrival. We opened with a small group of 5 in our first week, increasing to 10 in our second and maintained a more or less full guest list of 14 for the remainder of the season. Over the season we provided 76 guest nights of accommodation.



We got to know about a dozen of the guests very well with a few of them staying all or most of the season with us. A few moved into shared accommodation with the support of their referring agencies and the possibility of additional support from the CCFS who could help with the purchase of start-up essentials. Several guests chose to stay only a short time in the shelter before leaving voluntarily and a few more had to be excluded as they were unable to adhere to the basic agreement of behaviour that they had signed up to at the start. For

those who used the shelter well it was a realised opportunity to take a step forward in their lives along a more stable path of employment and a valued home life.

As always, after a week or two of shelter living some episodes of tension and aggression arose and attempts to flout the rules were made but for the most part the evenings in the shelter were spent in an atmosphere of calm and good humour. Once again our discreet but firm enforcement of the rules and thorough system of supervision helped to maintain a generally peaceful and healthy atmosphere.

One all-too-familiar source of friction was the volume of snoring. This year there were some impressive performers, including one guest who was eventually allowed to set up his bed in the foyer – an arrangement which was to the benefit of the person concerned as well as the other guests (and the overnighters!).

The exceptionally good food on offer was greatly appreciated, conversation flowed easily enough around the table and those who chose to remain reserved or found it difficult to converse were made welcome in discreet ways and were able to show gratitude for that. There were notable examples of particular rapport that developed between guests and volunteers, whether over the chessboard, over a regular manicure or in individual conversations. It was particularly gratifying that several guests repeatedly expressed their appreciation of the care they felt surrounding them, and at the end of the season the group presented us with a lovely Christmas card signed individually by all of them.



Volunteers

We had 106 active volunteers this season which included a steady trickle of new faces. Nearly all the teams benefited from someone new to their ranks. Overnighting is always (understandably) the most difficult job to fill so one new member of that team was particularly welcome. They take quite a responsibility, arrive in good time to be briefed on the events of the evening and the potential problems of the night and engage with guests as they are settling down to the night. We are lucky to have such a strong team to deal with this unpopular task (and some of them have to go to work the next day!)

The retirement from the shelter last year of laundry co-ordinator Judy Earl left us with a challenge that took some time to meet. The solution was to divide the job: Mary Archer (St Aidan's) took up the baton of laundry contact and rota organiser, whilst the delivery and collection of laundry to homes is now efficiently covered by several volunteers on a rota basis. This approach has proved to be very satisfactory.

Our hairdresser, Julie Millett, once again spent an evening with us offering her much appreciated services to our guests.



All the teams functioned with a high degree of efficiency. As always we were plagued with unexpected illness at the onset of winter and many volunteers were called upon to stand in for others at short notice. So many people rose willingly to this challenge. The unsung backroom jobs such as collecting bread weekly from Coughlans in Thornton Heath and breakfast supplies from Bashford & Co. in Sanderstead continue to be carried out by Dan Beckwith (St Aidan's) and Wendy Burton (St John's) respectively. Mary Blamires (contact for St John's) carried out extensive work this year in support of other shelters on the circuit in her capacity as CCFS trustee.

The St Aidan's music group came to sing carols on our last evening, ably supported by Rev. Paul Roberts on the accordion and Fr Peter on the tin whistle. This made for a lively, good-humoured party feel to our last evening when Christmas gifts were distributed.

Sadly this year saw the passing away of four staunch shelter supporters: Colin Hadley (St Aidan's), who had been heavily involved in the shelter over many years since preparations began for it in 2010; Mark Downey (Whitethorn Avenue Methodist), a devoted member of the chatting team and much loved by volunteers and guests alike; Sylvia Pendleton (Whitethorn Avenue Methodist), until recently a regular launderer; and Peter Emslie (Whitethorn Avenue Methodist), a loyal supporter of his wife's work on the casseroling team. We remembered them all in our prayers.



Administration

Working relations with Croydon Reach have greatly improved this year with new staff handling our referrals. This made it much easier to run the shelter and we enjoyed the support of Croydon Reach staff visiting for the evening on many occasions.

Income and Donations

We started the season in a financially healthy position owing to the generous donations and fundraising work of previous years. Added to this was the income of £350 we received from the CCFS central fund to be spent directly on the running of the shelter for the benefit of our guests. An additional sum (also £350) was paid from CCFS direct to St Aidan's Church towards expenditure incurred by use of the hall; a £5 donation was also received from a private individual.

Donations of goods were, as ever, plentiful. The children of Coulsdon supported us well and took the opportunity to learn something about homelessness: St Aidan's School once again took part enthusiastically in the shelter project by collecting food and other useful things at Harvest Festival time; the 9th Coulsdon Brownies put together 15 wonderfully stocked Christmas gift bags and we have come to rely on the 2nd Coulsdon Rainbows to provide us with a beautifully presented collection of wrapped homemade biscuits for guests' lunch packs on their final day with us.

Local companies supported us generously: as usual Coughlans provided bread, sandwiches and pastries from their Thornton Heath depot and Bashford & Co. in Sanderstead provided eggs, bacon and sausages for breakfast... with black pudding thrown in as a special treat! Elite Renewables from the Ullswater estate delivered to us a large stock of highly appropriate warm fleece jackets and sweatshirts which proved popular with guests. Any surplus goods were passed to other charities at the end of the season.

We took part in fundraising for the CCFS central fund by singing carols in the Whitgift Centre, raising £1,006 (increased to £1,250 with gift aid) and by taking part in the Waitrose green token collection which raised a fantastic £600, thus outstripping our 'competitor' charities in December by some considerable margin. The CCFS was grateful to be a nominated charity for donations at the funeral of Mark Downey.



Expenditure

We have not needed to buy any major equipment this year so all expenditure has been directly on our guests, providing fresh food to supplement donated items and general extras to increase their comfort. Once again we gave all 14 guests a £20 Primark voucher for Christmas which was hugely appreciated by them.

Prayer



Carol Russell continued to play a central role in co-ordinating the prayer life of the shelter. Once again she used the Prayer for Coulsdon session before our first night to focus on the work of the shelter and the volunteers. Weekly during the season she gathered the chatters for a short period of reflection before we opened our doors and followed up each evening with prayer notes based on the evening's outcomes and conversations. These notes were circulated to all who wished to receive them and were much appreciated as a means of keeping everyone's needs in mind during the ensuing week.

Leonie Wilding

CCFS Co-Ordinator