

## CHAIR'S END OF SEASON REPORT TO BEXLEY WINTER SHELTER VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPORTERS: JUNE 2023

In 1 Peter 4: 8 – 11 Peter writes: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup> Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. <sup>10</sup> Each of you should use whatever **gift** you have received to **serve** others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. <sup>11</sup> If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone **serves**, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."

More often than not, it's the preacher/pastor/vicar/priest that receives the most recognition, thanks and appreciation for the work they do for & in the church. But Peter reminds us here that you may not have received the gift of speaking; the gift God may have given you may be that of service. And that service may go unrecognised and unrewarded on earth BUT God sees as you serve in His strength and for His glory. Serving is but one aspect of God's grace, which can be in many and various forms. A quote often accredited to St Francis of Assisi is: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words". Service is but one way to preach the Gospel and volunteering at Bexley Winter Shelter is but one way to work out your Christian life.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the volunteer work you have given this year to Bexley Winter Shelter, and thereby the poor in our Borough. I cannot express enough my appreciation for and my admiration of you. The homeless may not be able to repay you but I can say Thank You and God knows and will reward His good & faithful stewards.

The year started much the same as the previous year – waiting to hear whether BWS had received any grant money to enable us to effectively operate in 2023. Eventually we heard that we had received a revenue grant covering three years! This is a blessing in that for the next two years there

will be no repeat of the anxious wait for grant news followed by a mad rush in December to get everything in place for January. We can start proceedings at a more leisurely pace in November <sup>1</sup> with a great deal of certainty. This means that your patience and forbearance should not be so tested as in the past two seasons.

As in the past two years, we settled upon accommodation at 1<sup>st</sup> Bed B&B in Bexleyheath. And as last year, we were allowed to provide communal eating. The purpose behind this is not only to provide meals for our guest but also to help create a sense of community, of friendship, of ownership and to build relationship. We started by providing evening meals each night of the week. For Tuesday night, Trinity Baptist Church offered their premises and on Friday St John Vianney allowed us to eat Fish & Chips in their hall <sup>2</sup>. For the rest of the week, we were blessed by The Salvation Army. This meant that we could provide meals on every evening of the week. However, that didn't mean that our guests availed themselves of this. There is no compulsion to attend the evening meals. The guests are free agents and as such are allowed to choose to do their own thing, which many did, especially at the weekends. It began obvious that the weekend meals did not fit with their lifestyle so these were stopped at the beginning of February. This lack of engagement was a real disappointment to us all but is becoming something we have to accept and learn to live with.

And now some facts & figures:

- The total number of guests was **20**, with an average of **nine** per week.
- We blessed **seven** ladies, **12** men and **one** non-binary
- **Ten** were aged under 35 and **ten** over 35.
- **17** were UK nationals, **two** from the European Economic Area and **one** the rest of the world
- **Half** stayed with us for more than **29** nights <sup>3</sup>.
- **Two** had known alcohol dependency and **one** had identifiable mental health issues. The rest were 'normal', whatever that is.

- **Seven** appear to have become homeless as a result of family or friends no longer being able to provide accommodation. **Four** came to us because of domestic violence and the rest due to various other reasons.
- By the end of the season, with the help of the homeless outreach teams at the London Borough of Bexley (David Bryceland) and at Thames Reach (Ryan Cameron):
  - **Nine** guests were in positive and stable accommodation
  - **Two** guests were in positive but unstable accommodation
  - **Five** were in unstable accommodation
  - And, unfortunately, for different reasons, we do not currently know where **four** now are.
  - If you are talking %, that is a **55%** “success” rate for accommodation. Again, a decrease upon the previous year but each cohort brings its own unique & challenging issues and, in all reality, regardless of what the Government may say, I personally don’t think we will ever end homelessness. All we can do is our best and acknowledge that **20** people spent fewer nights on the street than they would have done if we did not exist. And, whilst not wishing to be dramatic, in the extreme cases, that could be **20** less deaths from violence, illness or the cold.

We give God thanks and praise for all that He has done this past season and for the privilege of being involved in showing His love to mankind, and especially those who experience homelessness

Before I close, I would like to express our thanks to three special people, two who have left BWS and one who has joined us:

- **Steve Wise.** As you may recall, Steve did an excellent job in 2022 as our Guest Case Worker and things were looking good for 2023. Unfortunately, circumstances changed and Steve found it necessary to resign in January. We pray for good things for him in the future.
- **Jim Charles.** Jim had been a Trustee of BWS since May 2020 but in June 2023 found it necessary to step down. We thank Jim for his years of service and wish him all the best for the future.

- **Geraldine Moore.** Geraldine is our new Guest Case Worker. She started in June and will use the summer to familiarise herself with BWS and to undertake training so she can hit the ground running in December. We look forward to working with her.

Our prayers are with all three.

Finally, I would also like to give a special mention to **Ursula Ayliffe**. There are, of course, many noteworthy persons involved with BWS<sup>4</sup> but space does not allow me to mention you all. However, I would like to give a shout out to Ursula. Despite having many demands upon her time & energy, Ursula stepped into the breach when we found ourselves without a Guest Case Worker. And when Cath found it necessary to temporarily take a step back, Ursula again rose to that challenge. It is no exaggeration to say that without her, BWS would not have achieved what we did. She made sacrifices and went beyond the call of duty. Thank you, Ursula.

I personally am truly blessed to have such a great and dedicated group of people behind BWS. You may be a volunteer, on staff, a Trustee or a third-party co-worker but without you Bexley Winter Shelter would not be able to make any impact upon the lives of those experiencing homelessness in Bexley. This is a witness to the ecumenical composition of BWS, of the desire of churches in Bexley to help the poor and of the Community and others to work together for the benefit of those in need.

Thank You and God bless.

**Charlie January**

Chair, Bexley Winter Shelter

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#### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This may give the impression that we would start providing shelter from November 2023. At present, that is NOT the case. The provision of accommodation will run from January to March/April 2024. However, the existence of the grant from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will enable BWS to start seeking locations, enlisting volunteers and initiate training, etc from November 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Fish & chips can sometimes leave a lingering odour and I admire St John Vianney for putting up with the smell.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst their visa is being sorted, we are still helping one guest who has No Recourse to Public Funds.

<sup>4</sup> Each volunteer is a person of note & someone who made an impact and who is worthy of praise.