

Homelessness, swept under the carpet?



Some of the team supporting the Tunbridge Wells Winter Shelter talk to Reflections.

Churches in Tunbridge Wells have been running a winter shelter for the last four years.

Churches in Tunbridge Wells have been supporting a winter shelter for the last four years. Volunteer Karen Senior (pictured above) said,

"This is an ecumenical project so it runs with the support of a number of churches that are not all Church of England and with volunteer members of the community who may not be church members anywhere. No one church would have the capacity to host the winter shelter consistently."

Perhaps surprisingly, some people who look for help at the winter shelter are in paid employment. The reality is that renting in the private sector is very expensive, and for some people on the national living wage, they just don't earn enough. For those not working, the daylight hours in the freezing rain and the harsh winter cold can be especially cruel. Rev Canon Jim Stewart said, "We have been concerned about homelessness in Tunbridge Wells for many years; long before it was acute. We saw people around who needed support and so we started the shelter. Our real concern is to move people forward in a positive way. I think the Church sees a gap in the system and love of our neighbour and a concern for social justice allows us to step in."

The reality is that men are more likely to be living on the streets than women.

Karen said, "There are more men using the winter shelter than women, but there are some women too. Everyone booked in for a bed must have met the project manager, Wendy Hogg beforehand. A person can't just turn up and take a place because the shelter can only accommodate 12 guests at a time."

Wendy meets the guests individually and finds out about their backgrounds and their circumstances. She works very hard to find them permanent places to move on to and this year, has found homes for

some but not all of the guests. Other organisations such as Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Social Services, Porch Light and the Bridge Trust also try to accommodate the homeless. Peter Dunning organises the volunteer rota. He said,

"I worked with the shelter as a volunteer at first and it is in my nature to solve problems. I am now the project manager, and I coordinate some 230 volunteers over 7 nights a week utilising around 11 venues over 3 months. It's the biggest spreadsheet I have ever seen in my life!"

Church volunteers need to be recommended to Peter by their Vicar and there is a wide range of people who come forward. Karen explained, "Some mums

from a primary school group put the duvet covers on, for example. There is a range of people who help out. The volunteers who do the overnight stint are the heroes, they can't really sleep and they don't leave until everything is tidied away again in the morning at 0900. All volunteers have to attend a training session, so they are safe."

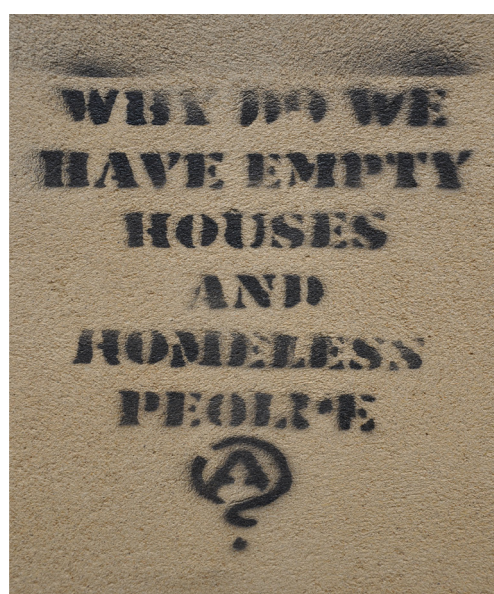
The volunteer training day includes speakers advising on how to manage people with mental health problems, or those with drug and alcohol related problems. They also speak about how to assist with housing the homeless, give details on how the winter shelter actually operates and explain some of the necessary policies and procedures.

Peter added, "This is Christian outreach. It is a calling to assist those who are less fortunate than we are and in need. I have found evidence of prayers being

answered over the last 3 years. The perception that homeless people are there by choice or that that they are all drug or alcohol addicts is completely wrong. This year, we have seen more mental health issues than anything else. Often, this is because of stress and relationship breakdown, which can be linked. If job losses follow, it's all too easy for a person to lose their home."

"That said, alcohol and proscribed drugs are not tolerated in the shelter because it is important that all of the guests and each of the volunteers feel secure."

Wendy explained, "If people are just too risky for us to help, we assist them by giving them the addresses and phone numbers of other organisations who may be better placed to help them. Karen said, "We have 12 camp



beds and each church has its own duvets and bed linen. The volunteers are amazing, and they take responsibility for the bed linen which is washed and dried fresh for each night."

The Tunbridge Wells Winter Shelter opens at 1930 each evening with the team setting it up having arrived earlier than the guests. As part of Church hospitality, the heating is kept on throughout the night. Guests are given a two course hot meal each evening, with guests and volunteers dining together. Karen said, "We are fortunate in that Pret a Manger in Tunbridge Wells often donate food to the shelter at the end of the day. That can include a variety of filled wraps, some salads, croissants and a variety of pastries. These are often used for breakfast with a variety of breakfast cereals, toast, juice, tea and coffee. Sadly, the guests have to leave by 0800 each morning, no matter what the weather is doing. It never fails to strike me how nice, grateful and polite they are."

The challenge comes when places at the Winter Shelter are over-subscribed. Peter said,

"We operate with a Borough Council that is really supportive, but unfortunately, we do have to prioritise those who have a connection to the local borough which we can verify. We will help others from outside the UK if we have space, but that is more complicated."

Rev Jim added, "We really need a permanent resource centre offering a range of confidential services from debt advice, hot food, help with finding work and of course, finding shelter. I would love to be able to offer people a hot shower and the facility to wash their clothes when they need to. There are very few places that a homeless person can take shelter in during the long, winter days. It would be wonderful to have a day centre. Helping the way we do gives us an opportunity to put our faith into practice."

Hopelessness and bleakness sometimes overwhelm the homeless, especially in a relatively affluent area like Tunbridge Wells. Wendy said, "Understandably, sometimes people don't trust us when they seek our help but then they meet people who genuinely lavish them with care and food. I have seen lives transformed with a little help."

"Some people have never known love and care like this before; it's an extraordinary love which reflects God's love for us all. It's a privilege to walk alongside people when they are at their most vulnerable."

The Tunbridge Wells Winter Shelter has been recognised with the Housing Justice Award of Excellence.

For more information please visit:
<http://tunbridgewellswintershelter.co.uk/>