

CHAIR'S MESSAGE ABOUT THE 2021 SEASON

With the introduction of Covid-19 Health & Safety Regulations, the 2021 Bexley Winter Shelter ('BWS') season was always going to look different from previous years. You will doubtless recall, with fond memories, that in the past, BWS's model was based on providing safe night-shelter during the months of January to March for men experiencing homelessness. At a different church hall each night, an evening meal & breakfast would be provided, guests would sleep communally and support was provided by a large volunteer base of over 200.

Covid-19 pushed us into uncharted territory for the 2021 season. Government guidance in the form of 'operating principles' for winter shelters was published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ('MHCLG') in mid-October 2020. This confirmed that communal sleeping spaces would be very hard to make safe and were to be strongly discouraged in favour of self-contained or single room options. To assist shelters in making such a transition, the Ministry provided grants. BWS decided it was not prudent to operate a rotating dormitory style shelter for 2021. As a result, with the help of a MHCLG grant, our guests were instead accommodated in self-contained rooms at two B&Bs in Bexleyheath. Evening meals were provided, either 'home' cooked (at a Church kitchen) or take-aways, which the guests had to eat on their own in their own room. A breakfast and midday provisions were also provided. We say a big "Thank You" to our catering co-ordinator for organising all of this.

Due to circumstances, Cornerstone's services were no longer available to us. However, with the help of the grant we were still able to engage the services of a Guest Case Worker ('GCW'). The GCW provided guest assessment, support, advocacy, facilitated move-on and is now providing after care services. We thank the GCW for all the hard work they put in and for achieving the outcomes they did.

We must also give a big shout out to several partner organisations – Housing Justice, the London Borough of Bexley and Thames Reach. These provided guidance, support and move on assistance for our guests.

Volunteer numbers were restricted to needs-based support rather than, as in previous years, face-to-face interaction at seven venues. We went from 200+ to under 20 hands on volunteers. These were our cooks and the drivers who delivered the meals to the guests. We thank all of them for what they were able to achieve under very different and trying circumstances. We also say "Thank You" to a group of people who provided help in the background. BWS beginning was from a group of people known as The Steering Committee. However, with Covid-19 the reduced level of activity required a smaller group. Nonetheless, their contribution was important to enable BWS to function and achieve the results that we did.

Some things, however, were little touched by Covid-19. As usual, the view going into the season was to provide a holistic, loving approach to our guests to enable them to be empowered and experience God's presence and love. And this was achieved. God's

presence has been strong and visible through His work this season. While there were many challenges this time, BWS has seen sustained growth and has laid strong foundations for continued growth going forward.

The Season in numbers

- The Season ran from 18th January – 30th April 2021, a month longer than previously.
- We had two B & B venues, both in Bexleyheath.
- Our maximum available capacity at any one time was 10 guests, but we could have expanded that if necessary.
- For the season we had a total of eight guests with three people who did not, for one reason or other, meet our criteria for assistance.
- The guests spent a total of 419 nights with us.
- The average guest age was 42 years
- We had seven male guests and for the first time were able to accommodate a female guest.
- Five of the guests are white and three are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic.
- We could only accept guests with low level issues. Nonetheless, there were often complex & multiple problems – for example: four guests were alcohol dependent, one drug dependant, six with mental health issues and one with an active criminal record. Some guests fell into more than one category.
- All eight guests were British and all had links with Bexley
- Two were in employment whilst the other six were unemployed at the time of and for the duration of their stay with us. One of those guests has since gained employment, aided by having a stable home which BWS helped to secure.
- We recorded zero Covid-19 cases and four guests accepted the offer of vaccination against Covid-19
- The average guest stay before move-on was 52 nights (seven weeks).
- With regards to move-on, we have five positive and stable, two positive but unstable with only one who we were unable to help into long term accommodation.
- Although our guest numbers were lower than in previous years, as a percentage our 'success' rate was higher at 88% positive move-on success.

And our activities have not stopped after April. Our GCW continues to provide services to try to ensure the positive move-ons stay positive and the individuals do not end up back on the street.

May I finish with again saying Thank You to everyone who was involved and we pray that we can rely upon the continued support of churches and the community as we move into 2022, however that may look!

Charles January
Chair of Trustees for Bexley Winter Shelter