

St. Andrews Winter Night Shelter Report 24/11/13 – 30/03/14

St. Andrews has been running a WNS every Sunday night between 24/11/13 and 30/03/14. We had on average 20 guests staying overnight with almost the same number staying just for the meal or merely to socialize. Of those that were referred to us by HARP, typically 4-5 did not arrive, but the same number was made up by those who self referred. We had separate sleeping arrangements for men and women. Most of our guests were single men between 25 and 50, and nearly a quarter were women (who we found were harder work than the men and why a female volunteer was needed). Over a quarter of our guests were of BME origin (Eastern European or Afro-Caribbean), more than the town average of 15%. Of those who self referred, several said they thought they were on or should be on the list. We sought to encourage such guests to go through established procedures and any offer of accommodation was subject to a waiting list and spaces becoming available. Most of the self referrers were known to us and the criteria for accepting them, and any would be guest come to that, were made on mainly health and safety (for other guests and volunteers) grounds. Only on one occasion did we turn away someone who wanted to self refer and who met all this criteria, and that was because we were full. The reason for the large number of non overnight sleeper guests was partly because there were a number of rough sleepers who chose not to stay overnight or it was felt were not suitable to accommodate. Some had accommodation but had been attending our Sunday night Open House just prior to our commencing the WNS program, and in a few cases were past guests who had found accommodation but who wanted to drop by. While we had announced at the start that our Sunday evenings were only for the homeless, non-homeless folk still turned up. It became quite evident that besides the homeless, there were many impoverished, lonely, needy people in our area. But when at the end of the year the total number of guests reached 54, we made the tough decision to be more rigid in turning away those not homeless, although there were generally a few such folk who turned up thereafter.

This was the third year that St. Andrews had been involved in the WNS program and the experience of previous years did put us in good stead, although we realized we were still on a learning curve and it was important to have good communications, especially when dealing with guests we otherwise knew little about, the majority of which were new to us. Volunteer numbers were around 10-12 for the evening and around 4 for the overnight and morning sessions. I managed all the evening and morning sessions but only stayed overnight three times. We had a rota for cooks and generally that part of the operation went well. Most of the volunteers slotted into roles according to their strengths and interests and this worked well. Having a team that could and did work together, combining experience and enthusiasm, proved helpful. I particularly valued help in putting together volunteer rotas. Half of the volunteers were members of St. Andrews, although some were from other churches and the rest no church at all. While we were most evidently a church and our session was on a Sunday when services had taken place, religion was not a barrier or an issue, although we did say grace and God bless and had a prayer time for those who wanted it. As a team, we prayed before and after each session for we recognized it was God's work. Two of the volunteers that regularly stayed overnight were rough sleeper guests from last year. We felt we could have done with 1 or 2 more volunteers, especially so we could have more substantial conversations with guests and devotions for some of the volunteers and guests who cared to join us or had items for prayer. There were logistical matters like food, bedding and shower management to deal with, where we learnt as we went along. We often found ourselves giving out spare clothing to guests and this was an area that could be developed in future. In all, we coped well but as always there is room to do better.

Most of the WNS sessions could be described as peaceful but busy. On the two sessions when greater than normal tension was felt, it was largely because of alcohol fuelled anti-social behavior. Generally, altercations were dealt with fairly quickly. The geographical layout of the church created challenges in managing guests, including entry, as did the occasional overlap with services. While guests being under the influence of alcohol

were a re-occurring theme, a zero alcohol policy would not have been possible as it could have meant turning away up to half the guests. As a rule of thumb, we tended to let in those mildly intoxicated, tell those who were moderately intoxicated to go for a walk and come back in an hour when sober and turn away those who were very intoxicated. Generally this worked but sometimes conflicts did arise but these were mostly sorted with robust but sensitive handling. Besides alcohol, some guests had evident mental health issues and weren't being helped with these. The lack of tie in with statutory mental health services continues to be a matter of concern.

Those who at the start were mere names later became people we grew quite attached to and knowledgeable of (the large number of emails flying around on related matters helped). We followed with much interest their progress or, sadly, in some cases lack of progress or regression. We think we made a difference and the feedback received from guests indicated what we did was in their eyes significant, for which we are humbled and grateful. There are many stories around individuals and I will just quote a few from my blog to give a taste: *“One of the first incidents I had to deal with was with one well known to some working regularly among rough sleepers, who had an issue around alcohol addiction. He was drunk and had been barred elsewhere and we had to exclude him despite his reluctance to leave and feelings of rejection, which he expressed with some colorful language. During the next few months, he would turn up from time to time in various states of intoxication. On one of his more sober occasions, we played chess while listening with pleasure to a volunteer playing Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata on the church piano, even inviting an encore. It was quite fitting that on our very last night, the last person to turn up was he, relatively sober. He wanted to say thank you for the help we had given him and assure us that he had found accommodation and was optimistic that his issues would be dealt with... There were many more incidents to follow and, while challenging at the time, these often resulted in positive outcomes. One lady, clearly under the influence of alcohol, provided a major disruption, although two weeks later we bumped into each other when she was sober. We talked calmly and I even got a hug! One man who frequently turned up, sometimes drunk, expressed fear and inability to cope, yet desirous for a better life; we had several cultural exchanges. Another guest on one occasion had an OCD related panic attack, while we were trying to close up, and our attempts to deal with him were not particularly successful at the time. The following week we could talk about and even laugh over what happened. Another lady, who was a regular in the early days, was a compulsive hoarder, who was charming but also hard work. We continue to take an interest in our guests, including the more problematic ones. The last I heard was that our drunk lady sadly continues with her destructive alcohol related behaviour, our fearful, cultured man is hopeful but has some way to go still, and the final two are now in more permanent accommodation and doing at least ok.”*

I am glad to have been involved. We have a long way to go if the all embracing we are to meet the needs to the rough sleeper population of Southend, which given the deep seated emotional and other issues is a lot more than just providing accommodation, as important as that is. The challenge is deciding where we go next, learning the lessons, honouring and talking to each other, building the network and making a difference. One thing we plan to do is resume Sunday night open house, following having April off, and do so until WNS resumes later in the year. As for our guests, these were a mixed bag, each one having individual needs: ranging from long term problematic and/or entrenched rough sleepers, to foreigners who had unsuccessfully come to this country to find work, who had the added difficulty of no recourse to public funds and turning to drink, to some who were newly homeless, such as having recently been released from prison or through a series of events and circumstances that could easily happen to any of us. From my perspective, it has been demanding work but rewarding also, and it has been a good thing to work with such a disparate group of people in order to do something significant for our homeless guests. In all such cases it was a privilege to have been able to serve and offer Benedictine hospitality – to quote St. Benedict: *“all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed like Christ”*.
John Barber (St. Andrews WNS manager) 06/04/14 (please refer also to jrbpublications.com/blog)