



REPORT TO THE SCRUTINY COMMISSION ON WINTER NIGHT SHELTER PROVISION IN HACKNEY

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1. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the winter night shelter provision in Hackney and Hackney Doorways/Hackney Winter Night Shelter's response to Covid-19.

2. Background information

Hackney Winter Night Shelter has been operating in the borough for 25 years. Originally set up by a small group of people in response to the rough sleeping issue they saw locally, several churches decided to each host one night a week to offer food and shelter to homeless people.

The charity Hackney Doorways was established in 2010. Until very recently, the night shelter continued to run from churches (and latterly two primary schools) in Hackney and operated as a "roving night shelter" which means that the venue changed each night of the week. For November and December, 15 bed spaces were offered, which increased to 25 for January through to March. For the latter months, there were 14 venues (a main shelter and a dormitory, accommodating 15 and 10 respectively).

The charity's recent 3-year strategy set out its aim to move to a permanent building, and offer a year-round shelter facility.

The charity is governed by a Board of Trustees and has a small staff team (a director, two advocate workers and a shelter manager), although some additional staff have been recruited for the next six months. The charity works with over 700 volunteers from the local community.

3. The Night Shelter Offer

3.1 Women's shelter

In July 2019, the Charity set up a year round women's shelter, part-funded by the GLA Rough Sleeper Innovation Fund. Originally run as a 12 month pilot, this will continue for at least one more year. The women's shelter is run from a 4-bedroomed house in Clapton, leased from the United Reform Church at a below-market rent, and can accommodate up to 9 women, in shared rooms, who can each stay for a period of up to 90 days. During this time, the Women's Advocate Worker, supports each woman to secure more stable move-on accommodation, and to access any other help that they may need to overcome any barriers to their moving-on. This can include accessing welfare benefits, getting legal or immigration advice, securing employment, access to health services, etc. The project has proved very successful in achieving good outcomes for women.

The women's shelter remained open during the whole of the first lockdown period, albeit with a smaller number of women as the GLA insisted that each woman had to have their own room, and so a living room was repurposed as a bedroom. There were five women from March through to September.

Over 90% of the 29 homeless women in year one were found move-on placements and none of the women returned to the streets.

Until the New Year our intention is to keep the number of women low (with a maximum of six) in order to comply with government covid guidelines, and to keep one bedroom free should it be required for any woman to self-isolate.

3.2 Winter night shelter

We have secured a temporary (yet "fixed" or "static") venue which opened on 1 November. The capacity for this new shelter is 13, although at least until Christmas with the constantly changing covid restrictions and lockdowns, we will restrict this to a maximum of 10. The building which was previously council offices (owned by Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association) is available to us until the end of February.

We are now seeking premises in Hackney that can be used as a permanent shelter beyond that date.

4. Funding

The Charity relies in the main on grants from charitable trusts and foundations, donations and events. It enjoys enormous support from the local community, including faith groups, local businesses and community groups. As far as the author is aware, it has never applied for nor received grants from the Council.

5. Effect of covid-19 on service provision

Although Hackney Doorways had planned to move to a “static” shelter venue, we had to accelerate our plans to ensure that we could open this winter. The number of volunteers has been significantly reduced in order to limit the number of people who can be in the shelter to reduce the risk of disease transmission. As a result, it has been necessary to increase staffing levels.

The temporary building in Stoke Newington was furnished and some minor refurbishment works carried out, with the help of volunteers. The service was mobilised within a short space of time.

We are proud that we have been able to set up a comfortable, welcoming and safe space for those who seek our help.

For the coming winter, we are not able to accommodate as many rough sleepers as in prior years.

Recent lockdown

The 4-week lockdown period meant that we have had to keep guests in all day to abide by the law, which has proved challenging as we have had to increase staff cover to ensure that two staff are on the premises at all times. Although our guests have been fairly accepting of these “rules” it is difficult as the evidence on the local streets is that many do not appear to be following them.

Government guidance on winter night shelters is strict and comprehensive risk assessments have been conducted, with procedures and protocols implemented to ensure compliance. Broadly, this includes:

- the provision of single or small shared rooms with covid-safe screens
- limitations on the number of people who can be in dining room or lounge at one time
- reduction in the number of volunteers so that they can work in small groups
- following all covid safety precautions (covid sanitiser stations, PPE, wearing of masks in communal spaces, etc.)
- procedures in place for guests with coronavirus symptoms (which includes a route to refer to the council to access covid-safe hotel provision if necessary)

Meals are cooked off site and delivered to the shelter by churches and community groups.

6. Working with the Council

The winter night shelter and the women’s shelter receive some referrals from the Greenhouse, where clients meet the shelter’s criteria for working with those with low

needs. Most referrals are from other charities and organisations (such as Hackney Migrant Centre, Crisis, Thames Reach, homeless day centres, etc.).

Over recent years, the charity has worked more closely with the Housing Department at Hackney Council and has an excellent working relationship with the Head of Housing and the Rough Sleeping team manager.

The Council supported the application to the GLA and also lent their support to our successful application to the Covid Homelessness Relief Fund. They were instrumental in helping us to find and secure the premises in Stoke Newington.