

Give Me Shelter

The role of London's Winter Shelters for the homeless 2004/05

Summary of key findings

July 2005

Foreword

On visiting church-based winter shelters in December 2004 and January 2005 I was struck by a number of realisations. First, what a warm welcome they provided to those who were using them and how greatly this was appreciated by their guests. Second, of the extraordinary commitment of those who volunteered their time to help others without accommodation during the winter. But I was also struck by the extent to which the shelters appeared to operate largely in isolation from the mainstream homelessness agencies that I deal with on a day to day basis. And with that arose a number of questions in relation to their role and how they fit with other providers and with local authorities that have the strategic responsibility for tackling homelessness.

Subsequent discussions with UNLEASH (Church Action on Homelessness) led to an agreement that it would be highly beneficial to undertake some research to find out more about who the night shelters were housing, why those people needed the shelters and what benefits they were receiving that they could not obtain from elsewhere. We worked together, to draw up a brief for Broadway to quickly undertake some research. Our initial expectations were quite low about the extent and quality of information that it would be possible to gather in the limited time available, but Becky Rice and Joanne Fearn at Broadway worked with commendable speed and ability to produce something of real content and value.

Part of the process leading to this report was a seminar at which the initial research findings were presented for discussion by representatives of both the shelters and mainstream homelessness agencies, not to mention local authorities, regional and central government. To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time that these interest groups had been brought together in this way to discuss these issues. Hopefully it won't be the last.

Inevitably, the results of this process leave almost as many questions as they provide answers. They provide neither a simple endorsement of the shelter model (for instance there are legitimate questions in relation to the ability of the shelters to undertake effective risk assessment and whether they undermine hard fought-for improvements in hostel standards for homeless people), nor do they provide an easy weapon for critics of the shelters (they clearly meet a need not being met elsewhere and provide support for a significant number of people each winter). We have definitely moved forward, however, as this report does provide some very strong information about who uses the shelters and why. Identifying this is the first step in understanding better where they fit into the overall complex of homelessness services.

I'd like to express my thanks to Alastair Murray of UNLEASH for his support and co-operation and to Becky Rice and Joanne Fearn of Broadway for the excellent work they have put into the research and writing this report.

Kevin Ireland
London Housing Foundation
July 2005

Acknowledgments

Broadway and the London Housing Foundation would like to thank everyone involved in the Winter Shelters project, especially guests and staff at Winter Shelters who were enthusiastic about, and receptive to, the research.

Thanks also to all those who attended the seminar in July to discuss the draft report. Alastair Murray at UNLEASH provided great support through his role on the steering group and in terms of facilitating access to the Winter Shelters.

Particular thanks also go to Donovan Phillips, Samson Assefa, Paul Bishop and Anne Cross for their special contributions to the project.

1. Introduction

This chapter presents key findings from research conducted by Broadway's Research Team on behalf of the London Housing Foundation in co-operation with UNLEASH- Church Action on Homelessness in London. Findings are based on the following:

- A profile of guests staying on one night provided by nine Winter Shelters¹
- Descriptive written information provided by Winter Shelters in a questionnaire
- Interviews with 58 guests staying across four Winter Shelters
- Interviews with staff representatives from six Winter Shelters.

Peer researchers (i.e. researchers who have been or are currently homeless) supported the project by piloting the questionnaire for guests, interviewing guests and reviewing initial findings from the interviews.

The research was conducted to provide a comprehensive account of the collective work of the Shelters. This report provided a basis for discussion about the achievements and role of Winter Shelters at a seminar held by the London Housing Foundation on 20th June 2005. This event considered the implications of the work of Winter Shelters for the wider homelessness and Local Authority sectors. It was attended by 44 delegates including those people from Winter Shelters (16 delegates including 3 guests), other Church based organisations (5 delegates), the wider voluntary sector (18 delegates), local government/ statutory services (5 delegates). Key points from discussions at this seminar are included below (see 1.6).

2. What are the Winter Shelters?

(a) Those included in the research

There were ten Winter Shelters across London in Winter 04/05:

- Camden & Clerkenwell Cold Weather Shelter
- Croydon Churches Floating Shelter
- Finchley Area Churches Winter Shelter
- Hackney Winter Night Shelter
- Harrow Winter Shelter
- Islington Churches Cold Weather Shelter
- Turnaround at Newham Night Shelter
- Redbridge Night Shelter
- Waltham Forest Churches Night Shelter
- West London Churches Homelessness Concern Winter Shelter

The two Open Christmas Shelters run by Crisis and Quaker Homeless Action were not included in this research.

(b) Project set up

¹ Most Shelters use the term 'guest' to describe those staying at the projects. An exception to this is Newham where the term 'service user' is used. In this report the word guest is used throughout for clarity.

Projects range from being new in Winter 04/05 to 13 years of service and from being able to accommodate from eight to 35 guests per night. Most of the Shelters work on a seven venue circuit with a location for each night of the week. There are some exceptions to this, for example Newham where the Shelter premises is only re-located after a set period of several weeks.

(c) Services offered

Shelters share the basic purpose of providing emergency food and shelter to people who would otherwise be sleeping rough. This is usually for between three and six months during the coldest part of the year although Redbridge operates throughout the year and Waltham Forest is due to extend to year round provision soon. Through these services churches have utilized the facilities and human resources at their disposal to help those most in need.

All Shelters aim to provide 'more than a bed'. In some cases this is through signposting to day services and encouraging guests to engage with other services. Other Shelters act as a branch of a day service. These day services provide a range of assistance including referral to accommodation services and to drug, alcohol and mental health services in the wider voluntary and local authority sectors, as well as support through keywork sessions. 88% of the 58 guests interviewed stated that they had attended a day centre in the week preceding the interview.

In winter 2003/04 London's Winter Shelters provided accommodation to over 1,300 individuals - it is likely that this figure was exceeded by the end on the 2004/05 season.

When all the Shelters were open in 04/05 they provided around **180 bed spaces per night**.

(d) Use of Winter Shelters

A total of 158 guests stayed at nine of the Shelters taking part in a one night count on 17th February 2005. In addition to this 35 people were turned away from three of the Shelters due to lack of space. At other Shelters referral systems mean that people are unlikely to turn up on spec to secure a place, so excess demand may be hidden.

(e) Links with local authorities

Nearly all of the Shelters have a relationship with their local council on some level. Finchley Shelter has a campaigning relationship with its London borough as it raises awareness of the need for hostel provision in the area. Croydon Shelter received funding from the council in its first year which assisted the project in buying equipment and securing office space. Camden & Clerkenwell works with the street population service for Camden. West London Churches Homeless Concern works with the Kensington and Chelsea Contact and Assessment Team and the Kensington and Chelsea Joint Homelessness Team.

(f) Different modes of development

There are different models to development at the more established Shelters. Newham Shelter has become more 'mainstreamed' (i.e. integrated) into the wider voluntary sector and is seeking opportunities to become more integrated with the Local Authority. In contrast Hackney has resisted moves towards mainstreaming, retaining a strong focus on open-door provision of basic services largely staffed by volunteers. The approach to development is influenced by the external political context, for example relationships with the local authority as well as the internal ethos of the projects.

Staff interviewees at newer projects tended to describe a cautious approach to expanding their services. Possible developments focussed on extending current services by opening for longer or providing more beds, rather than altering the structure or management of the projects.

(g) Achievements

Key achievements described by the Shelters include the sheer number of bed spaces and hot meals provided, the number of guests who have been resettled, and consistently providing an inclusive, welcoming and value for money service.

Most staff interviewees believe that there will be an ongoing role for Winter Shelters in addition to mainstream and voluntary sector services for homeless people. There were several reasons for this including the longevity of the older Shelters; the continued presence of new populations in London; the immense resources that would have to go into local authorities providing for all homeless people; the continual arrival of those who are newly homeless; and the ability of Winter Shelters to engage with some people who will not engage with mainstream services. There was one exception to this where the interviewee felt that the borough may meet the need for emergency direct access provision in the medium term.

3. Conclusions of research and seminar discussions

The research leaves no doubt about the significance of the contribution that Shelters make to homeless people across London. Shelters form an important part of the landscape of homelessness services despite operating independently from, or on the periphery of, mainstream voluntary sector and local authority services. The Shelters are more or less alone in providing free, immediate and uncomplicated access to food and accommodation.

Shelters are diverse and respond to local need and the local political climate. Some integrate with Local Authorities and some maintain an arms length campaigning relationship. Each needs to find their own 'critical distance' to retain the independence and distinctiveness valued by guests and the Church and the wider community of volunteers, while making the most of opportunities available.

The number of people accommodated per year and each night by Shelters identifies a significant number of homeless people who are not using mainstream homelessness services or have not been diverted away from homelessness by these services. It also highlights the range of locations that

those with no accommodation bed-down in and the instability often experienced by those staying temporarily with family and friends.

Information collected indicates that there is a gap in mainstream provision - namely emergency accommodation - especially for those who are newly homeless and have low support needs. It is amongst this group that Winter Shelters do some of their best work in diverting people from a street lifestyle.

We can also tentatively conclude that Winter Shelters provide for homeless people who are alienated from mainstream services. For example those who find hostels too chaotic or who avoid being around drugs and alcohol, and those who are working and cannot afford to pay rent in hostel accommodation.

The research raises the topical issue around how boroughs could, and whether boroughs should, meet the needs of those with no recourse to public funds and/or no possibility of legal work in the UK.

It is important to convey that the research does not form an evaluation of the work of the Shelters and how well they meet the needs of guests. The findings cannot be used to assess whether the Shelters are a model which should be developed and expanded or if the opposite is true. As suggested at the discussion seminar, it may be the case that Shelters are one service option of many that are required to meet the varied needs of homeless people in London.

The findings do provide a clear picture of the collective work of the Shelters and the profile of those who use them. It contributes to our overall understanding of who is in housing need in London and why. The debates around the provision of basic services by 'non-professional' agencies will continue. In these discussions it is important to be aware of the context:

- Shelters are not going to disappear in the medium term - they will continue to provide accommodation to a large number of people and constitute a step on the way out of homelessness for many people each year.
- Some mainstream organizations find that they can offer services to help Shelters maximise the quality of the work they do.
- Some Shelters have accessed funding from Local Authorities which has enabled them to develop their services
- Shelters have valuable insight to offer those making policy decisions and are generally open to working with other agencies.

4. Summary of research results

4.1 Who uses Winter Shelters?

91% of Winter Shelter guests included in the one night count on February 17th 2005 were male.

79% were aged 26 to 55 years. There was variation in the age profile across Shelters. Staff commented that there has been a decrease in the number of older rough sleepers presenting at Winter Shelters over recent years. The opposite is true of people under 26.

The nationality profile of guests was diverse - including 30 different nationalities. 61% were British, 8% were Polish and 5% were Irish.

The ethnicity profile of Shelters included just under half (48%) White British. This compares with 60% of clients included in the CHAIN² annual statistics for verified rough sleepers who are White British. The profile of Winter Shelter guests includes a greater proportion of Asian people (6%) than the profiles from CHAIN (1%) and the 2005 London's Hostels for Homeless People in the 21st Century³ research (2%).

Three in ten respondents stated that they had mental health issues and the same proportion had physical health issues. Two in ten respondents identified having an alcohol misuse issue and just three people identified having a drug misuse problem. It is likely that there is some under reporting in these figures. Some interviews with Winter Shelter Co-ordinators suggested a higher incidence of substance misuse among guests than was reported by guests who were interviewed.

4.2 How long do guests stay and where to they stay when they are not at the Shelters?

(a) How long do guests stay?

As of February 17th, approximately 77% of guests staying in eight of the Winter Shelters in 04/05 had stayed for one month or less, including 46% who stayed for one week or less.

Approximately a fifth (21%) of guests had stayed for between one and three months.

Just under a quarter of guest interviewees had stayed at Winter Shelters in previous years. It is likely that these people are long-term homeless. There were few people that had stayed for more than two consecutive years.

(b) Where else do guests stay?

² CHAIN (Combined Homelessness And Information Network) is a database containing details of individuals, assessments of their needs, contacts and interventions. It is compiled by agencies in London that work with the street population.

³ London's Hostels for Homeless People in the Twenty-First Century; T.Warnes, M.Crane and P.Foley; University of Sheffield; 2004.

When asked about the range of places that they had stayed over the last year, on average, guest interviewees selected four options. These interviews suggested that Shelters provide for people who have recently become homeless following domestic or relationship breakdown, have been experiencing 'hidden homelessness' or 'sofa-surfing', and those who have been street homeless or living a squat lifestyle.

(i) Rough sleeping

Of 158 guests staying on one night 67% reported they were rough sleeping the night before first staying at the Shelter in Winter 04/05. Staff interviewees felt that with occasional exceptions guests would be sleeping rough if they did not have accommodation at the Shelters.

Staff and guest interviews confirmed that in many cases, especially in the outer boroughs and for women, this would not be on the street but on buses, in garages etc. Several staff interviewees expressed frustration at the use of street counts as they feel this does not represent the many homeless people they work with who stay in other locations.

Only 11 guest interviewees stated that they had been in touch with staff from a Contact and Assessment Team (CAT), i.e. outreach worker, over the last year. Nine of the 158 guests included in the one night count on February 17th 2004 were found on CHAIN using a name and date of birth search. In some cases last names were not provided for guests which means that this analysis was not totally robust.

Staff interviewees often described the Winter Shelters as providing a stepping stone for those who have just become homeless including young people who have been asked to leave the family home and men who have left their home following a relationship breakdown. Many Shelters feel they make the most difference when diverting people from the streets thus preventing long-term homelessness.

(ii) Temporary accommodation

Of 158 guests staying on one night 17% reported they were staying with family or friends the night before first staying at the Shelter in Winter 04/05. 40% of guests interviewed had stayed with family within the last year.

Just under half of guest interviewees had stayed in a hostel at some point including 13 who had stayed in hostel accommodation in the last 12 months. Guests who had stayed in hostels at some point were equally divided on whether or not they feel that staying in a Winter Shelter is 'better' than staying in a hostel.

(iii) Long-term accommodation

Four in ten guests had had a long-term or permanent place to stay in the last year, a third had not had a place to stay for between three and ten years. Over a third (36%) of guests cited relationship breakdown as

a factor in leaving their last long term or permanent accommodation. Rent arrears were a factor for a fifth of guests.

4.3 What resources outside the Shelters do guests have or access?

(a) Services accessed

Interviewees were asked about the services other than the Shelter they had accessed in the week prior to their interview. Key findings are:

- Nearly nine in ten (88%) of interviewees had attended a day centre
- 45% of interviewees had attended a job centre
- 6 interviewees had undertaken voluntary work, two had attended college or university and three had used another learning resource
- 39% had seen a doctor or nurse and/ or attended hospital in the last week.

(b) Income

54% of guests staying at Winter Shelters on one night had benefits as their main source of income.

34 (22%) of guests staying at Winter Shelters on one night had no source of income. These clients were staying at West London (18), Newham (10), Redbridge (5) and Harrow (1) Shelters. 16 of the 34 guests with no source of income were from EU accession countries.

Although just 8% of guests staying at Winter Shelters on one night had work as their *main* source of income according to the one night count, 21% of interviewees stated that they got *some* income from working. There are several possible reasons for this:

- People who undertake occasional or casual work may not have this as their main source of income as benefits are a more regular and reliable source of money
- Information collated by the Shelters reflects guests' employment status when arriving at the Shelter rather than on the night of the count
- There may be a perception that when trying to secure Winter Shelter accommodation it is best to present as unemployed.

Guests described a wide range of skills, trades and professions that they had including labouring, factory work and administration. More specific responses from individuals included train driving, structural engineering, teaching history and web design.

4.4 What is the future for guests after the Shelters close?

Guest interviewees were asked to select the one or two places they were most likely to stay after the Shelter closes. The most common response was outside, sleeping rough (41%). A further 17% did not know where they would stay. 16% of respondents hoped to secure independent accommodation and the same proportion anticipated staying in a hostel.

Interviewers noted that several of those who made positive statements about securing accommodation did not have firm plans or a clear idea of how they would go about this at the time the interviews took place. Interviews were held at a time when Shelters would still be open for several weeks, so it could be that guests develop firmer plans when closure for the summer is imminent.

Staff from the Shelters acknowledge that closure for the summer is difficult for many guests. The strategies for making closure as easy as possible were similar for all projects. Encouraging people to access day services is a key method of assisting guests while the Shelters are open, but this is even more important when closure is imminent. Making the closure date absolutely clear from the outset is also considered to be best practice. Hackney Shelter provides blankets and toiletries when the project closes.

5. Seminar discussions

Discussion at the seminar was based around four key questions:

- Who uses the Winter Shelters and why?
- What is the special contribution of Winter Shelters?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Winter Shelters?
- How do Shelters fit with the spectrum of homelessness services?

Some key points about each question follow, these are taken from discussion groups and the plenary session at the seminar and from written comments sent to the London Housing Foundation in response to the draft report. The comments do not always reflect the views of the London Housing Foundation, UNLEASH or Broadway but are selected to reflect the range of opinions contributed.

(a) Who uses the Winter Shelters and why?

- Shelters provide accommodation for people with a range of different support needs including:
 - Entrenched rough sleepers who do not engage with mainstream services
 - People who are newly homeless and need immediate accommodation to avoid sleeping rough
 - Those who are not willing to/ do not know that they need to spend time sleeping on the streets in order to be verified by outreach services
 - Those who have no recourse to public funds in the UK including EU accession workers and some asylum seekers waiting for an appeal decision.
- It was felt that there was under-reporting of substance misuse by guests taking part in the research, and that guests often have a range of needs including drugs, alcohol, mental health and gambling.

'Winter Shelters seem to deal with the extreme of both sides of those with high and low support needs.'

- Some people with low support needs do not use hostels due to the actual or perceived chaotic nature of other residents. Some avoid hostels following a bad experience. Others cannot access hostel accommodation because there is a lack of bed spaces in their area- this is especially common amongst guests in outer London areas.
- Many of those staying in Shelters have previously slept on buses, in corridors or by bins in blocks of flats, in squats or at friends' homes rather than having slept on the street - especially in outer London areas. For this reason it was felt that street count figures should be understood in context, treated with caution and that their relevance varied across different localities.

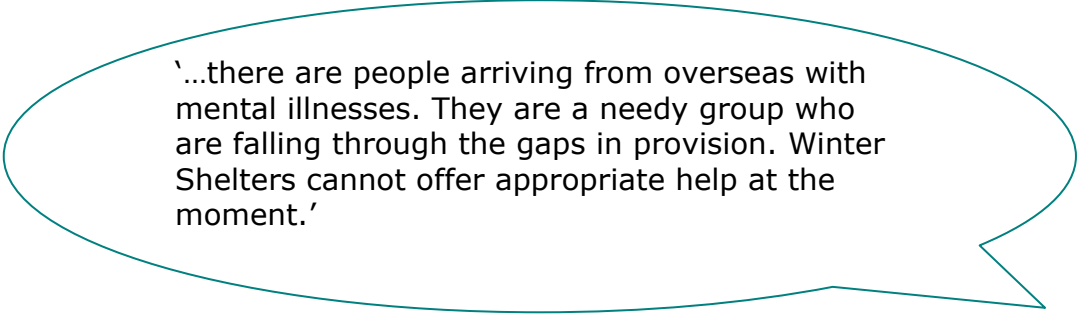
'Rough sleeping is the narrowest definition of homelessness'.

'Counts are useful to show trends but not actual numbers of people who have nowhere to stay.'

- The transient nature of those staying at the shelters is a key finding from the research- with guests typically using four types of accommodation in the previous year. It was stated that more information about this group is needed.
- It was suggested that few women use Shelters because there are fewer women than men with no other accommodation options, for example women are less likely to lose their accommodation following relationship breakdown. However the possibility that shelters may not meet the needs of women in terms of privacy and perceived safety was also raised. It was felt that more information about this vulnerable group is required. A Shelter representative mentioned that the possibility of setting up a shelter specifically for women, focussing on sex-workers, had been raised at their project but this had not come to fruition.

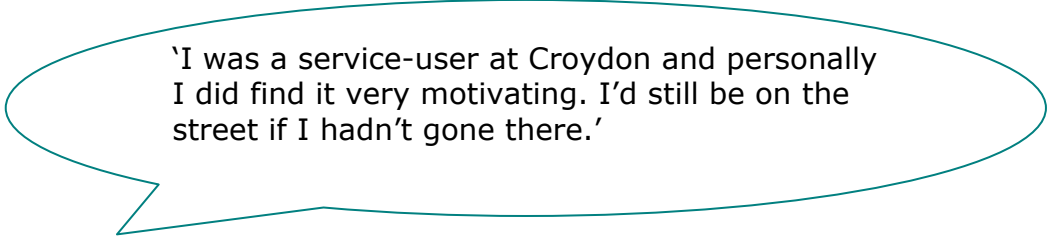
(b) What is the special contribution of Winter Shelters?

- One of the things that make Shelters unique is that they offer free, immediate and uncomplicated access to shelter and food. This level of openness is not available in accommodation offered by mainstream services.
- Some said that the nature of the support offered by Shelters differs from that in 'professional' services. Delegates reflected that the Shelter service is particularly non-coercive, non-bureaucratic and recognises the needs of the individual by working to support people rather than working in line with many specific policies and targets.
- Providing a service for people with no recourse to public funds, including those who are unable to work, is considered to be a special contribution of the Shelters. In some cases the service Shelters provide for those with no access to funds does not adequately meet their needs.



'...there are people arriving from overseas with mental illnesses. They are a needy group who are falling through the gaps in provision. Winter Shelters cannot offer appropriate help at the moment.'

- The outcomes for those who are new to homelessness, especially those with low support needs and younger people, were felt to be a notable achievement for the Shelters. Several people commented that Shelter accommodation diverts these individuals from a street lifestyle or from the difficulties and dangers of living with chaotic people and those with substance misuse issues in some hostels.
- A key issue for debate and reflection is the extent to which Shelters are successful in moving people on. All Shelters aim to provide more than a bed and many feel that their non-judgemental support inspires people to move away, or to avoid becoming attracted to a street lifestyle.



'I was a service-user at Croydon and personally I did find it very motivating. I'd still be on the street if I hadn't gone there.'

- This is in contrast to the view held by some that Shelters sustain a street lifestyle.

'Some would claim that (Shelters) maintain a street lifestyle... this only holds up if there are alternative and appropriate options available...They should not be viewed as a last resort but one of the models that can get people off the street- a variety of models are needed- this is one.'

- At a policy level the experience of Shelters can be used to inform debates on issues including migrant workers, people who have had negative asylum decisions, the problems faced by those who do not have a 'borough connection'.

(c) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Winter Shelters?

- For most of the strengths and weaknesses identified there was a 'flip-side'. For example, the intangible but important qualities of the Shelters around the warmth and 'family' atmosphere of volunteer run services was viewed as a strength but some felt the flip side of this was a lack of professionalism in areas such as risk assessment.
- Similarly the open access of the Shelters was viewed as a strength in terms of attracting people who may not accept help from mainstream services, but as a weakness in terms of identifying people who may pose a threat to the safety of others. Some Shelters have referral systems to resolve this issue. The introduction of referral mechanisms may move these Shelters further towards the characteristics of mainstream services.
- The fact that guests don't have to pay to stay at Shelters is a unique characteristic that enables people to access help immediately when they need it. The lack of bureaucracy relating to people who are staying seeking casual or longer term employment and not having to wait for eligibility for Housing Benefit to be confirmed is viewed by many as a key strength of Shelters.

'...they can sustain people who are on the periphery which stops them accessing more sustainable solutions.'

'People with drug addictions can stay for free and use their money to sustain their drug habit rather than access treatment services...However, it is too simplistic to say that if shelters didn't exist

- The work Shelters do in referring and signposting to appropriate services was viewed as a strength which is not always recognised. There can be issues with maintaining momentum of interaction with services when the Shelters close. This needs to be addressed and prevented where possible.
- The issue of the standard of accommodation offered by Winter Shelters stimulated much debate. Some felt that while the homelessness sector is fighting to improve standards of private sleeping spaces and facilities, Shelters undermine this by accommodating people in very basic accommodation with communal sleeping areas and little in the way of privacy. A particular concern was if/ where Shelters open all year round they may act as a bottom tier of hostel accommodation. Others commented that Shelter accommodation is better and safer than sleeping rough and that some newly homeless people with low support needs become attracted to drinking and drugs while in hostel accommodation.

Do Shelters let Local Authorities 'get away with it' without providing higher standard alternatives?

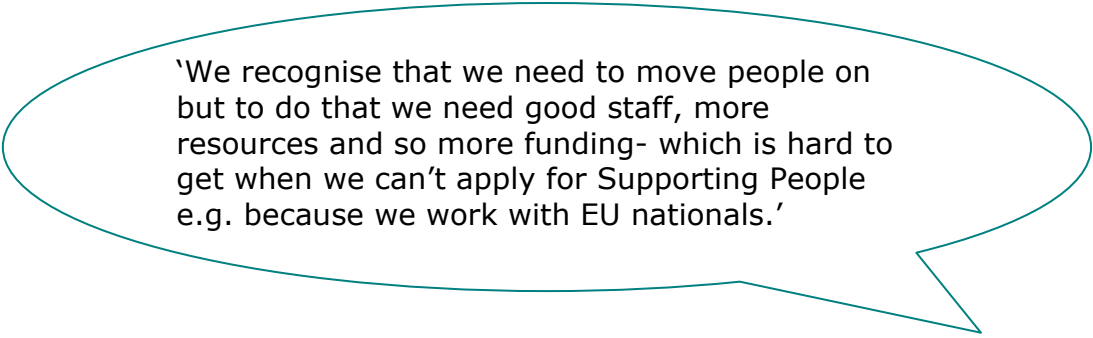
d) How do Shelters fit with the spectrum of homelessness services?

- There is some partnership working between Shelters and mainstream agencies for example St Mungos have provided training and seconded a co-ordinator for Croydon Shelter.
- The extent of relations between Shelters and local authorities varies across localities. Some influence or are part of their borough's Homelessness Strategies.
- Shelters often have a campaigning voice about the needs and issues facing guests, although communicating this through the appropriate forums and meetings is difficult for services which are largely voluntary. An example of such an issue is:

'In Redbridge the people who are easiest to move on are those with support needs. There have been people who are healthy and have no support needs have stayed 3-6 months.'

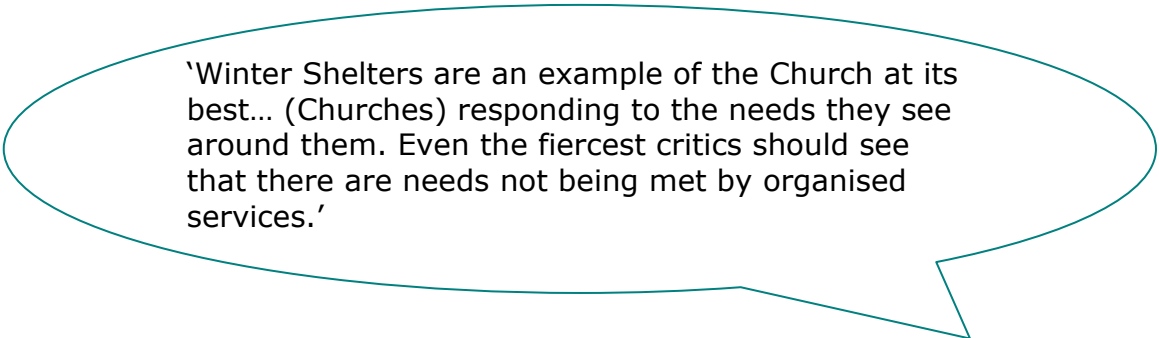
- An issue which many Shelters are grappling with is how to attract funding without compromising their independence and flexibility e.g.

without having to turn people away if they do not meet with the criteria set by funders. One delegate commented that there is a 'critical distance' that Shelters need to achieve in their relationships with Local Authorities. The challenge is to provide high quality services, accessing funding where needed, without compromising the open door approach.



'We recognise that we need to move people on but to do that we need good staff, more resources and so more funding- which is hard to get when we can't apply for Supporting People e.g. because we work with EU nationals.'

- Some felt that improving hostels inevitably means the short or medium term reduction in hostel bedspaces available and that Shelters would meet some of the resulting excess in demand.



'Winter Shelters are an example of the Church at its best... (Churches) responding to the needs they see around them. Even the fiercest critics should see that there are needs not being met by organised services.'

- Overall it was felt that forums are an excellent way of developing inter-Shelter as well as cross-sector working relationships. Some confusion was voiced about the relationship between Shelters, UNLEASH and Homeless Link. Homeless Link offers a reduced membership fee for those who are members of UNLEASH. Individual Shelters may find value in being active in both organisations rather than just attending UNLEASH - which represents all Shelters at Homeless Link.

Broadway Research team 2005