

Helping the homeless helps De Beauvoir

It may have been a challenging 2013, but De Beauvoir's nightshelter is back bigger and better this year – helping transform lives and bringing the community closer together.

Now in its 18th year, St Peter's has always been a key member of the Cold Weather Shelter Project, organised by the charity CARIS Islington (Christian Action & Response Society). Held between January and March - the coldest three months of the year – it is one of seven churches, of all denominations, which opens its doors on a rotating basis each week, offering food, hospitality and a bed to homeless men and women.

Some things have changed since last year. Most notably, the crypt space. "2013 was our most challenging nightshelter yet," remembers Judith Hale, who helps organise St Peter's offering on a Monday night/Tuesday morning, and got involved in the early 2000s as an occasional cook.

"The crypt development was underway," she continues, "and we had just one room for sleeping and eating, which meant we could only accommodate men as there was nowhere separate for women to stay. We also had no storage rooms, nowhere or nothing to cook on, and one toilet for 19 guests and volunteers. We thought that was bad – then we had a flood!"

Today, guests enjoy a meal and hot breakfast in the crypt's transformed café space – described by one as 'like eating in a restaurant'. Alongside this, there are two large rooms which accommodates up to 20 men and six women, two state-of-the-art bathrooms, a brand new kitchen, and a Monday afternoon café serving up soup to guests before the nightshelter opens.

But, for all the newness, many things about St Peter's nightshelter have remained the same.

There continues to be a thriving bunch of over 100 volunteers, aged 17 to 80, who work a number of shifts ranging from setting up beds to serving breakfast.

What's also unchanged is the breadth of guests availing of the nightshelter service. "They're young and old, men and women, from all sections of society and from right across the world," says Judith.

"We have had pianists, singers, artists, teachers; people with intelligence and a wide breadth of knowledge," she continues. "Hearing their stories still shocks us. Time and again, we're amazed at how the security of a family, a home and a job can be just a quick slip away from homelessness, destitution, and often prison."

Much work is being done to prevent this at a local and national level, says CARIS Islington's nightshelter coordinator Mark Brennan, who works with government agencies and homeless charities throughout the year.

One local charity making a difference is Pilion Trust. Embedding themselves in the community, they get to know the local homeless and their individual issues, and refer almost 50 per cent of Islington's nightshelter guests each year. Other referrals come from 30 different agencies across London.

In fact, work done with Islington's homeless is often leading edge. Currently the 14th most deprived local authority within the country's 354, and 5th most deprived borough in London's 32, government agencies and charities work together to reduce the number of homeless.

'No second night out' is one successful government programme piloted in Islington and recently rolled out to boroughs across south and west London, Manchester, Bradford, Oxford and Birmingham.

"Early intervention is crucial when it comes to someone new sleeping rough," explains Mark. "'No second night out' is about getting all the resources and contacts together for these people, and working very intensely with them to help them stay off the street."

But 'new rough sleepers' is just one of three homeless categories identified – there are also 'people that live on the street' who, for a variety of reasons, prefer life this way. And 'returners'; people who find themselves in and out of prison or accommodation, and who cannot sustain a tenancy for many reasons, one of which is having an addiction.

The biggest barrier to helping these, according to Mark, is people giving them money. "Give money to a homeless charity rather than those begging on the street," he advises. "The majority have homes but can make up to £200 a day there, which is then used on drugs, perpetuating the cycle and their chaotic lives."

But, for all the good done by charities and agencies, nightshelters now operate in 25 of London boroughs, and will always have a place in society because what they offer is unique. Compared to the more clinical approach often taken to solving homelessness, Mark explains: "Nightshelters welcome people into an environment of hospitality as guests. These guests may want food and a bed, but often what they need is help believing and trusting in people again. When they see what we do for them each night, and meet the people involved, it's a huge support to them."

It's not just the homeless that benefit from nightshelters though – the community does too. "We're embracing the marginalised, the ostracised, the abused, all those people struggling within society. We're helping them renegotiate their lives and see the best of humanity.

"What we're actually practising here is offering a network of support and community," sums up Mark. And the impact of that goes far beyond any nightshelter.

www.carisislington.org; www.homelessuk.org

Barbara Walshe, volunteer at the shelter, wrote this article in 2014