

WINCHESTER TOWN FORUM
HOMELESSNESS IN WINCHESTER

PUBLIC MEETING

28 October 2009

Introduction

The meeting was held at Bradbury House, Durngate and attended by approximately 75 members of the public, Councillors and local representatives.

The Chairman (Councillor Maynard) explained that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss homelessness issues which affected Winchester town and to learn more about the three main charities that worked in this area.

The Chairman therefore welcomed to the meeting Sue McKenna (representing Trinity Winchester), Michele Price (Winchester Churches Nightshelter) and Alison Thompson (Emmaus Hampshire).

A brief summary of each the three charities' presentations is set out below.

Trinity Winchester

Trinity offered a drop-in centre at Bradbury House and provided a first port of call for people whose lives were in crisis. Trinity worked in close partnership with the other charities and organisations in Winchester, sign posting clients towards the appropriate help available.

Trinity opened Monday-Friday until 4.30pm and offered more than "socks and sandwiches"

Some of the services the charity provided included:

- a free breakfast and two course lunch
- warm rooms
- bathing and laundry facilities
- clothing and toiletries
- clients were able to use Trinity's address and telephone number as a contact.
- advice and information, referring clients to outreach and learning programmes in partnership with the ACE centre. Courses were also available on cookery and wildlife studies (as Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust were also based at Bradbury House)
- Medical service (with twice weekly visits from a doctor and nurse)
- A women's service tackling the problems of domestic violence

On average, Trinity dealt with 50 clients at Bradbury House per day and, in total, had given advice to approximately 1600 people.

Trinity operated an outreach service, in partnership with the Nightshelter, to find rough sleepers during the night, provide them with hot drinks and encourage them to use the projects' services.

Trinity was a service that was open to everyone, not just the homeless, and accepted clients that were intoxicated; so long as they did not pose a threat to the safety of staff or other clients.

Trinity stressed their dependence on, and thanks to, their volunteers and supporters (for example, they were one of the Mayor's Charities and Badger Farm Sainsburys provided free food every morning).

However, Trinity needed more volunteers and funding to continue to provide these services and to promote this, the charity was holding an open day on 19 November 2009.

Winchester Churches Nightshelter

The Nightshelter provided:

- a bed at night between approximately 6pm and 8.30am for 15 clients with a breakfast and evening meal and support advice. However, as demand was much greater than the supply, the available beds were allocated to the most vulnerable and those with a local connection. Mrs Price added that the majority of those staying had a local connection to Hampshire. Those who were turned away due to a lack of bed spaces were given blankets and signposted to other local services. The Nightshelter were planning to reconfigure the internal layout of their premises to provide space for additional beds to respond to the need. In response to a question, it was explained that the Nightshelter charged clients £2 per night, which also encouraged clients to manage their finances. In answer to a question, Mrs Price explained that some people asking for money on the street in Winchester were not trying to gain money to get into the Nightshelter.
- The charity provided temporary accommodation to clients over a period ranging from 14 nights to three months and in some cases longer.
- Drug and alcohol-free zone. Clients were breathalysed and only admitted if they were beneath the drink-drive limit to ensure the safety of staff, volunteers and other vulnerable clients. The Shelter also provided support to those who had drink and drugs problems.
- The Nightshelter also provided advice and support during the day and evening, through their own staff and floating support workers from A2 (particularly helping with housing debt, training opportunities, computer skill and CVs etc).

In the future, the Nightshelter hoped to provide more help with life skills and relief from boredom – for example, expansion of their IT skills training, work placements and an allotment/gardening scheme.

The Forum noted the importance of the rent deposit schemes and the need to educate landlords to be more willing to accept homeless people as tenants.

The Forum also noted the important role played by the Nightshelter's volunteers and that it would be holding its annual Open Day on Homelessness Sunday, 31 January 2010.

Whilst underlining its thanks to the local churches, schools and supporters, Mrs Price explained that the charity always needed more volunteers, outside cooking teams to assist in providing evening meals, and donations.

Emmaus

- The Emmaus Project was a world-wide movement of independent charities, which had started in post-war France.
- The Project offered its 22 companions at Winchester a home, community and work. Emmaus was a secular movement that sought to encourage the companions to help each other to become self-sufficient. There was no limit to how long a companion could stay at the Project, although in practice those who had committed to the scheme moved onto other accommodation after a period of a few months.
- New companions were signed off their benefits and support and committed to a 40hour working week.
- The Project currently ran a shop (adjacent to the Bar End Recycling Centre) of goods recycled and refurbished by the companions at their site and a new shop at Eastleigh was about to open. With the second shop, it was hoped that the Project would be self-funding and would no longer require any external grants. Instead, the Project hoped to provide funds to other charities working with homeless issues.
- Ms Thompson invited everyone to attend the shop and learn more about the Scheme and advised that the project was able to collect donated bric-a-brack and furniture within a 20 mile radius of Winchester.

Public Questions

During questions, the following issues were raised:

- A number of service-users that spoke raised concerns about Trinity's ability to deal the demand for its services and recounted incidences of people being turned away. In response, the Forum noted that Trinity were only able to open when they had sufficient staff available and that, although they were often present and trained to help provide services to clients, Trinity's administration staff focused their work on securing future funding, without which the Centre could not open at all.

- Concerns were also raised regarding the need for a project to provide hot drinks for the homeless between 1900 and 2100 hours.
- The Forum noted new initiatives that were underway to help with alcohol dependency, as concern had been raised about clients who were unable to use the Nightshelter because of their high alcohol dependency needs. Mr Palmer (The City Council's Head of Strategic Housing) confirmed that the Council were working with the appropriate statutory agencies and the voluntary sector to provide a place of stay for this group.
- That Winchester was blessed with having three charities that worked in this area and that there was such close cooperation between them. However, there were fears that funding was becoming increasingly difficult.
- Councillor Coates (Winchester City Council's Portfolio Holder for Housing) explained that the Council provided the second highest proportion of supported housing support in Hampshire (outside of Basingstoke) and that the Council continued to increase its support to the Citizens Advice Bureau, who provided debt advice. The Council had also increased its funding to the rent deposit scheme above inflation.
- Councillor Coates also explained that a survey of rough sleepers in Winchester in November 2008 had found only four people – three of whom were known to the Council's Housing Department. However, using this figure as a reflection of the actual number of homeless people in Winchester was disputed by Mrs Price who suggested that it was simply a snapshot for comparison with previous counts to highlight trends and she questioned methodology of the count. However Mr Palmer explained that the count had been conducted in accordance with Communities and Local Government guidelines with independent observers.
- The Forum then discussed the issue of chaotic lifestyles and Mrs Price explained that, currently only one of the 15 people the Nightshelter housed would fall into this category. A member of the audience mentioned that it was as difficult to categorise homeless people as it was any other section of society.
- Councillor Pines suggested that the Council's work in this area with its strategic partners could be considered further by the Council's Social Issues Scrutiny Panel, to explore possibilities for improvement.
- That WACA was able to co-ordinate volunteers for local charities.
- That clients with children were often sign posted to other services.

At the conclusion of the meeting the Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and contribution to the debate, and the charities for their presentations. Councillor Beckett (Leader of Winchester City Council) spoke at the end of the meeting to add his thanks to the charities' volunteers.

The meeting commenced at 7.00pm and concluded at 8.40pm.

Chairman