



FAITH IN ACTION: MERTON WINTER NIGHT SHELTER: 2023/24 FINAL REPORT

Introduction:

Each year, Merton Council carry out an annual count of homeless people in the Borough. This is done during only one night, and only visible people sleeping on the streets that night are counted towards the yearly homeless figure. This year the total amount of homeless people rough sleeping in Merton was recorded as being only 13 people. This is sadly a huge underestimation of the service users we are seeing weekly at the Faith in Action Drop In sessions, topping 73 service users in 2023 and also a vast contrast to the initial 35 people who signed up to be assessed for the 12 places that the Winter Night Shelter could accommodate. We had a total of 38 assessments during the course of the shelter.

Rough sleepers experience the worse side of humanity and are often met with judgement, brick walls when seeking assistance and cold and dangerous environments. Homeless people are much more likely to die young with an average age of death of 47 years which is a staggering 30 years younger than the average age of 77 years for the general population. Sadly, at Faith in Action we are seeing this first hand, with one of our own past Night Shelter guests passing away this Winter at the young age of 41 years old and several other Faith in Action service users losing their lives this past year.

This means there is a greater need than ever for the Winter Night Shelter which provides a safe, warm and welcoming environment for up to 12 guests at a time during the cold and harsh Winter months. We provide the most essential of services for some of the most vulnerable in our society; a delicious evening meal and breakfast each morning, shower and laundry facilities where available and a chance to try and improve their current situations.

Again, Covid 19 was still in the back of our minds when planning for the Night Shelter to ensure the safety of both guests and volunteers. This year, we were able to relax the testing that we carried out each year, with guests only being tested on initial entry and over the Christmas week when guests and volunteers may be socialising more than usual. Thankfully, this year none of our guests tested positive to Covid 19 throughout the whole period.

The communal night shelter opened on Monday 4th December 2023 at the Salvation Army hall hosted by the wonderful volunteers from the Wimbledon and District Synagogue. The need for a warm place for our guests became even more apparent with temperatures in the first week dropping to minus 2C and in the middle of January temperatures went as low as minus 8C in London.



The Night Shelter:

Our night shelter comprises of:

3 Volunteer organisers: responsible for the overall running of and fundraising for the shelter.

1 Full time Project Co-ordinator: responsible for communication with all venues, supervision of day-to-day operations and individual casework for our guests.

1 Part-time Project Assistant: responsible for venue support twice weekly and continued casework for our guests.

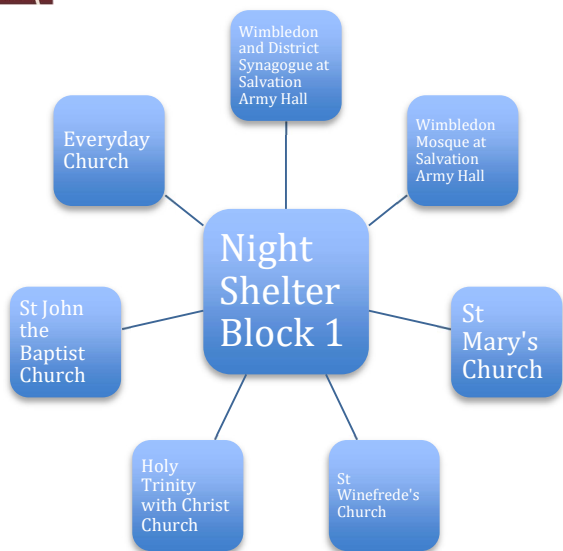
12 Venues: who with their venue co-ordinators, organise both the available space and volunteers for the night shelter. Double sessions from St John the Baptist volunteers for a second year running and Wimbledon Mosque who both covered one night in each block. Also, the Salvation Army, Wimbledon who provided a venue for two nights in each block.

A community of over 400 volunteers.

Support and advice from Faith in Action's Trustees, Drop In Manager and Treasurer.

The project operated in **2** consecutive blocks of **7** venues, opening their doors for the same night each week for **7** weeks, offering up to **12** bed spaces each night.





OUR HOSTING VENUES AND COMMUNITIES

Our teams were also kindly supported by; Wimbledon, Korean, Morden, Sutton and Mitcham Salvation Army and volunteer teams from the Quaker community, the Shree Ganapathy Hindu Temple, Christ the King, Worcester Park Baptist Church and St Ann's Catholic Church in Banstead.





TRAINING

Prior to the Winter Night Shelter opening our doors, we offered an in-person volunteer training session, hosted at Trinity United Reformed Church. We ask that all potential new volunteers attend training prior to their first shift at the Night Shelter and also all veteran volunteers refresh their skills and attend a training session every 3 years.

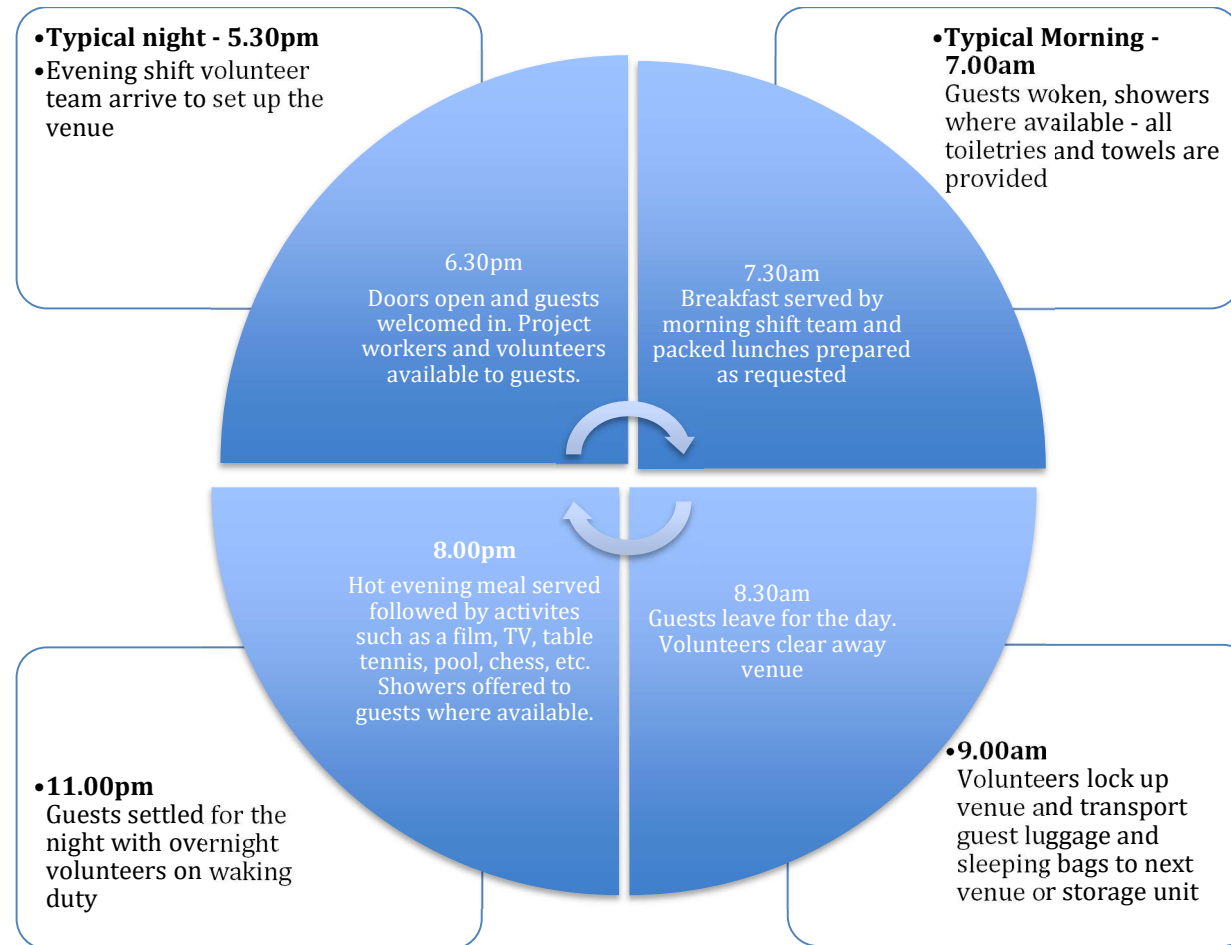
We were delighted to see so many familiar faces along with some new volunteers. The training was run by three Faith in Action trustees, Jane Bush, Talat Malik and Robin Goodchild and the Night Shelter project coordinator, Ashling Flannery. A copy of the training slides along with a live voice recording was offered to those who were unable to attend the in-person session. Volunteers were also offered an additional training session in January prior to the start of the 2nd Block.

We also offered all volunteers an additional Rough Sleeper Mental Health online training course which was sponsored by the Mayor of London's Rough Sleeping Innovation Fund and a Suicide First Aid online training course which was sponsored by Merton Public Health.





A TYPICAL NIGHT AT THE SHELTER





We had a total of 19 different faith communities involved in the Shelter this year with the help of over 400 volunteers. Our wonderful volunteers assist us in so many ways including preparing and serving delicious meals, which are so thoroughly enjoyed by our guests, transporting the ever growing mountain of luggage from venue to venue which in itself is a mammoth task, staying overnight to ensure the safety of all of our guests and turning up week after week to chat with our guests who they truly begin to bond with and form friendships with, playing games with them and generally take excellent care of them, making them feel welcome and part of our Night Shelter family.





This year we had several young people donate their time and volunteer with the Night Shelter as part of their Duke of Edinburgh award. Our guests were treated to beautiful homemade cakes and delicious dinners, which were fully planned, paid for, prepared and delivered by the wonderful young people completing their Duke of Edinburgh awards.

We are so grateful for them choosing to donate their time to the Winter Night Shelter and we wish them all the best in completing their Duke of Edinburgh awards and for their future.





GUESTS

Guest referrals mainly come via the Faith in Action Merton Homelessness Project where the Project Co-ordinator is based twice a week to meet with and assess potential new guests in need of the Night Shelter. Great care is taken in choosing guests because not every rough sleeper can cope with the rules necessary for safe communal living.

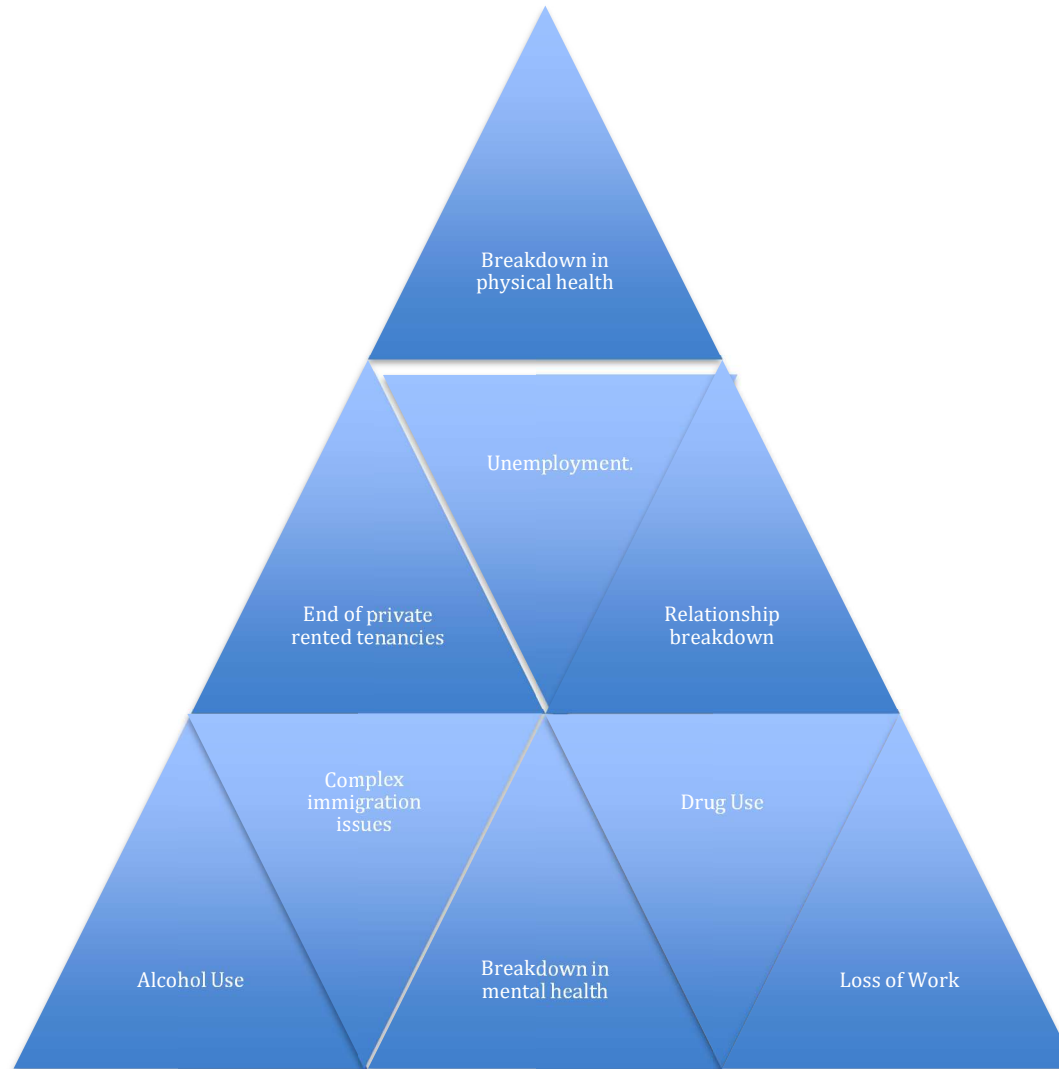
Every decision we make is central to the guest's welfare and general outlook during their stay in the shelter. The moment a guest becomes part of the shelter, we immediately start working with them to find out what support they require and work with them to achieve their goals.

We have undertaken 38 guest assessments and 23 guests have taken up offers of a space at the shelter. There was a waiting list running throughout the season for places. Once a guest is given a place in the shelter they can stay as long as they need, provided they respect the shelter rules.

Our guests come from a wide range of working backgrounds and professions including; builders, carpenters, plumbers, teachers, nurses, HGV drivers and those working in hospitality.



There are many reasons for becoming homeless:





CHRISTMAS AT MWNS

As per last year, unfortunately, Crisis at Christmas no longer provide a service that allows all London night shelters to decant their guests over the Christmas period. That meant for us that we would again have to rally up our volunteers and organize our own arrangements for the Christmas period. Without doing this, the Night Shelter would not have been able to open our doors over the Christmas week and our guests would have had to return to the streets for this difficult period.

Everyday Church, together with Wimbledon Mosque put on an amazing spread of traditional Polish Christmas food, together with a pizza takeaway treat for our guests to enjoy on Christmas Eve. Guests then moved to Salvation Army Hall, Wimbledon where the Wimbledon and District Synagogue, together with the Wimbledon Mosque smoothly organized a huge team of volunteers to provide constant cover and meals at Salvation Army Hall until the morning of 27th December, where Faith in Action took over for the usual twice weekly Drop In session.

Guests were treated to beautiful homecooked food, board games, friendly conversations with our volunteers and lovely Christmas gifts over this period. However, most importantly, they were able to stay in one place for 48 hours, meaning they could lie in for as late as they wished, stay in a dry and warm environment instead of wandering the streets and feel safe and part of something over Christmas which can be a very lonely and sad time for many of our guests.

A huge thank you to every single volunteer who was involved in the Christmas period.





A guest's journey with the Night Shelter

Simon had been known to Faith in Action for a number of years. He had been a guest at the Night Shelter about 5/6 years previously. However, since then he found himself homeless again after a relationship breakdown and completing his journey with an alcohol recovery house. He sadly could not find any work as a painter and decorator, which was made even harder as he had been waiting months for an important surgery on his foot so was not physically fit to work.

He worked extremely hard to achieve his sobriety and Simon is currently celebrating being sober for 2 years and 9 months. We are very proud of him and he continues his battle against alcohol. It was therefore so important to both the Night Shelter and Simon himself that he did not end up back on the streets after the Night Shelter which could have led to him relapsing.

Simon was so proactive in trying to find permanent accommodation, but despite numerous property viewings that we set up for him, he could not find anything suitable. With Simon being over 6ft tall, and landlords charging in excess of £1,200 per month for a small box room with shared facilities with up to 7 other people, it was proving very challenging to find a decent match for him.

We referred Simon to the newly refurbished YMCA in Wimbledon where he passed the assessment and was accepted to be put on the waiting list for a room. This was quite a lengthy process, but fortunately, he had to time to wait as he was still a guest at the Winter Night Shelter. He thankfully was offered a room in the YMCA and has moved in. He has his own room with bed and storage and an ensuite bathroom and spacious, bright shared kitchen facilities. Simon also has access to their gym facilities, counselling services, communal lounge areas with pool table and their general support for their caseworkers.

Simon is unfortunately still waiting for a date for his foot surgery, but he is hoping this will be in the near future and he can then concentrate on getting back to paid full time work and enjoying the next chapter in his life.

Quote from Simon: 'I am grateful for the opportunities the Night Shelter gave me and the good and nice attitude of the people who work and volunteer there and who have helped us, especially Ashling and Nicki. I would also like to thank the people who worked hard to prepare food for us, the service was life changing.'

Names have been changed for privacy reasons





SOME OF THE WAYS IN WHICH WE HAVE HELPED

Housing:

- Three of our guests were referred to the newly refurbished YMCA, Wimbledon and were given rooms. We also have two further guests who have successfully completed the assessment and are currently waiting for a room, which we hope to be available in the near future.
- One guest viewed a property through Housing Justice's Letting Network and was successful in his application. He is now enjoying his independent life in his own flat and looking for work. He had been homeless for approximately 18 months prior to securing accommodation.
- A number of guests reconciled relationships with family and friends, meaning they could move into accommodation with their loved ones.
- We have supported guests to gain pre settled and settled status. This in turn allows an application for Universal Credit and the prospect of finding more stable housing with our trusted private landlords.

Health:

- Unfortunately, one of our guests had an episode of psychosis whilst in our care and we supported them to get the appropriate medical assistance, including specialist treatment at Springfield Hospital.
- Two guests began an alcohol detox programme through VIA, Merton which is an alcohol, substances and drug misuse programme.
- A number of guests were registered to a GP and received initial consultations, correct medication for various health issues and ongoing follow up support.

Employment, Training and Benefits:

- We successfully opened UK bank accounts for three of our guests, with their no fixed abode bank account scheme.
- We supported three of our guests to successfully apply for Universal Credits to enable them to access funds.
- Six of our guests regularly attended a weekly English language class at the Faith in Action Drop In to improve their language and communication skills.



- A number of guests continued sporadic work in the building industry, earning and saving wages as they stayed with the Night Shelter.
- One guest gained employment at a local restaurant as a bartender.

Immigration:

- One of our guests is working with Praxis and South London Refugee Association to apply for asylum and we are also working with St Mungos to complete a Care Act referral to hopefully secure accommodation whilst they are going through this process.
- One of our guests applied for his foreign pension through Department for Work and Pensions and he is currently applying for settled status. We are waiting to hear the outcome of both of these avenues.
- One guest applied for and gained settled status which means he now has the right to live in the UK permanently and has access to public funding. Two further guests also applied for settled status and we are optimistically waiting to hear the outcome of these applications.
- One guest applied for Voluntary Return to his home country through the Home Office and they are waiting to hear the outcome of this application and another guest returned to Poland on a Voluntary Basis, with the support of the Probation service.

Together with.....

Liaising with social services
Housing referrals
60+ Oyster Card application
Grant applications
Covering the cost of travel to appointments

Mobile phone top ups
Food Vouchers
Luggage Transportation and storage
Showers
Laundry facilities

And countless emails, calls and meetings with councils, housing associations, benefit offices, private landlords and embassies.



SPRING TRANSITION FUND 2024:

In January this year, we made an application through Housing Justice to the Mayor of London's Spring Transition Fund (STF). This Fund is designed to stop those in Night Shelters like MWNS returning to the streets when the shelter closes. The Fund provides grants for budget accommodation for those guests for whom there is a coherent plan for Move-On.

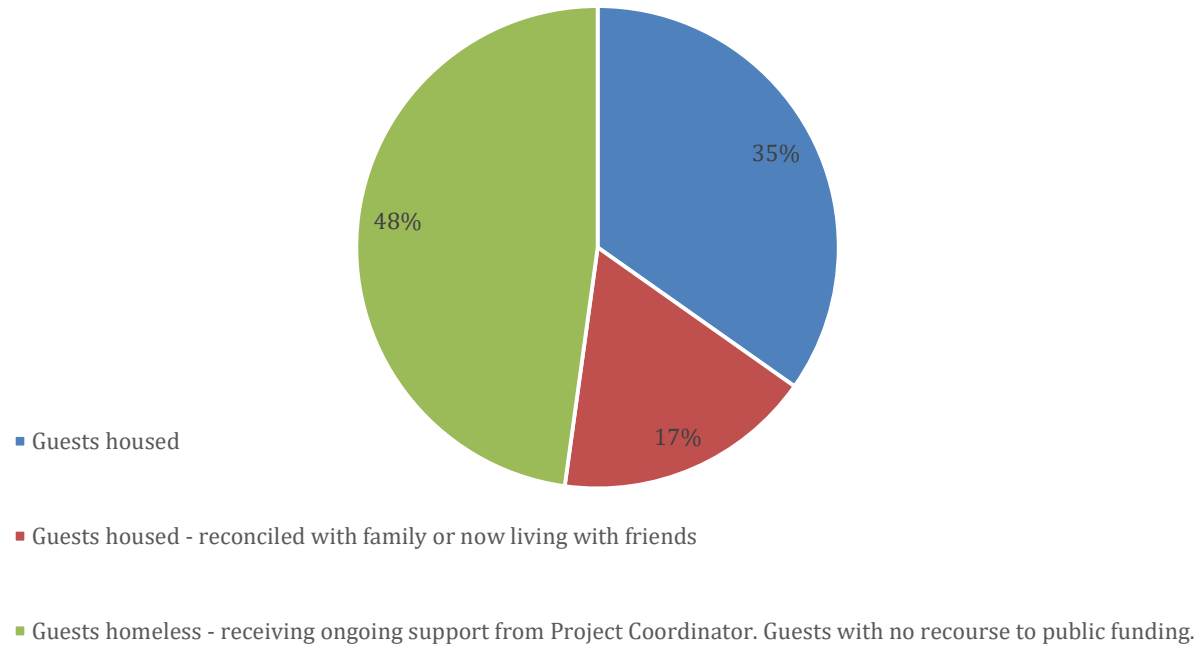
Last year, we were successful in securing a grant from the STF and this enabled us to extend our shelter for 8 weeks. Initially, 9 guests were accommodated in single budget hotel rooms. This year, we were awarded £20,000, only 57% of the 2023 grant, but were still able to extend our shelter for 5 weeks for 11 guests. This was achieved through having guests share rooms. This worked well and weekly casework meetings were held to see how guests were generally getting on. Moreover, the Project Co-ordinator worked with our guests during this period, supporting them into new accommodation, as it became available. We were delighted that we had the additional time to put into effect a positive outcome for 4 of our guests.

Our Project Co-ordinator continues to work with the remaining shelter guests to support and facilitate their move on requirements through her work at the Faith in Action Drop In Centre. Also, our Project Co-ordinator keeps in contact with those who are newly housed in the event that additional support is needed during their settling in period.





Guest Outcomes





MWNS 2023-24 Accounts:

INCOME to 31st March 2024

Faith Groups	£4,201
Trusts and Foundations	£25,000
One off grants	£26,867
Companies and Charities	£3,750
Individuals	£1,195
Bank interest	£15

£61,078

EXPENDITURE to 31st March 2024

Salaries, training, computer software and audit	£46,915
Housing Justice membership	£395
Safestore – central/luggage storage	£1,351
Covid Christmas isolation accommodation	£465
Mobile phones/rucksacks/sleeping bags	£1,053
Phone top-ups/clothing/storage boxes/travel passes/oyster card top ups	£485
Extended Night Shelter: Food vouchers/supplement/hot meals	£2,476
Bank charges	£53

£53,192

WMNS 2023/24 MAIN BALANCE **£7,886**

Spring Transformation Fund

Grant Income **£20,000**

BALANCE **-£150**

MWNS 2023/24 OVERALL BALANCE **£7,736**

MWNS RESERVE: Brought forward from 2022/2023 **£27,979**

OVERALL BALANCE TO CARRY FORWARD INTO 2024/25 **£35,715**



LOOKING FORWARD

Our Project Coordinator will continue to support our Night Shelter guests at the twice weekly Drop In Sessions run by Faith in Action, and this will continue all year round.

We are very much focused on partnership working for the 2024/25 Night Shelter season, and we will prioritise working to establish and grow connections with 3rd parties such as The Nehemiah Project which is a residential rehabilitation house for people with drug and drink addictions. We will continue to explore how best to help those guests who come into the night shelter and explore further training opportunities for our volunteers.

We are working hard to secure additional venues in Block 2 on a Tuesday and Friday so that no venues have to run shifts in both blocks and also recruit additional volunteers to help on those days. We would also like to have more Polish and Tamil translators available to our guests as frequently as possible. If you know anyone who may be interested in volunteering with us next season, please do contact the project co-ordinator at ashling@mertonfaithinaction.org.

COLLECTIONS AND DONATIONS

There are some items that instantly help to make our guests feel welcome and other items that are incredibly useful. If you are able to start collecting for next winter, it really does make a difference to our guests.

- **Oyster Cards:** for guests to travel to and from medical appointments, work, support group attendance, etc.
- **Slippers:** The guests have really appreciated being able to slip out of shoes and into slippers. One guest advised us how looking after your feet is essential if you are homeless as there can be so much walking.
- **Mobile Phones and Chargers:** It is critical for us and third parties to be able to easily contact our guests.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANK YOU'S

We are very fortunate to have such amazing support from so many brilliant volunteers, faith group communities, services, partners and funders in our community who all helped towards the success of this year's Winter Night Shelter. We are extremely grateful to the Faith in Action staff team for assisting with advice and ongoing casework, translation and follow up support during the season. We would also like to thank Karen Hayhurst (Housing and Support manager) and her team, together with the Reception team from the Wimbledon YMCA, St Pauls Group for their support and practical help throughout the season.

FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

Our hosting Faith Group Communities
The Wimbledon Foundation
The Rowlett Trust
Wimbledon Offices Ltd.
Abundance Wimbledon
Acorn Environmental
Barre Wimbledon
The Salvation Army South Wimbledon

D & S Tailoring, Wimbledon Park
Eddison White Estate Agent
Housing Justice
London Borough of Merton
Wimbledon YMCA St Paul's Group
The Wimbledon Guild
The Galaxy Cafe
CDARS

AND all the hundreds of individuals who have so generously donated their time and money to the Winter Night Shelter, along with the other faith groups, community groups, schools and colleges who contributed in so many different ways. Your support is invaluable and greatly appreciated. Without your generous donations and assistance, the Winter Night Shelter quite simply could not operate and for this, we are so grateful.

With many, many thanks,

Ashling Flannery (Night Shelter Project Co-ordinator)
Nicki Zisman (Night Shelter Assistant Project Co-ordinator)
Jane Bush, Robin Goodchild, Talat Malik, (Trustees Faith in Action)