

Local Homelessness - where have things got to?

Devizes Opendoors provides three cooked meals a week at St. John's Parish Rooms, Long Street. Between 15 – 25 people attend each session. It offers support to local people when they are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Along with the good food and company there is the opportunity of a shower, clothes, bedding and laundry vouchers. A fourth weekly session began last autumn. This is now a regular afternoon 'activity and progress' session that aims to build confidence by doing things together in a relaxed setting. In an average week in March, 37 different guests came to the four sessions; 9 were rough sleepers, 6 had been sleeping in sheds, vans and old boats, 4 were sofa surfers and 13 were those with their own homes but with issues that can make their tenancies vulnerable.

A Night Shelter is now being planned to be available for four winter months, from December 2018 to March 2019. St. Andrew's Church have agreed to alterations to its upstairs rooms that will make them suitable for this purpose. The number of guests will be limited to five. Fund raising is underway and there is much to do before any of this can become certain. A working party is producing a handbook for those who volunteer to staff the shelter. A paid co-ordinator will eventually be appointed to manage the arrangements.

This last winter, many of Opendoors guests spent those very cold nights without a decent roof over their heads. This has posed serious personal health and safety problems. Their welfare is precarious and the options open to them have been very limited. Opendoors wants to offer a few local, homeless people a significant step towards permanent accommodation. By having the security and comfort of the Night Shelter, a homeless person will know their immediate physical needs are met and they can turn their minds to planning their longer-term future. One or two people (volunteers and visitors from relevant agencies) will be on hand to talk things through and help make arrangements for the future.

A Supported Housing Project is also being planned. Together with Green Pastures (a national Christian housing provider) Opendoors is preparing to take on the responsibility of running a hostel-like project for local, homeless people. This would be the next step up from a place in the Night Shelter. The costs have to be worked out very carefully so that occupants' housing benefits cover the vast majority of the monthly bills. The property would actually belong to Green Pastures and be leased to Opendoors. If any reader is looking for a good local and social investment with a good return they need look no further than Green Pastures! A team is being formed to oversee all aspects of managing this project.

A working party that goes under the name of Trinks is also making preparations. This group (made up of people from St. James's Church, Opendoors, the probation service and Turning Point) will ensure that good quality training is available for those volunteers who become befrienders of the occupants. Trinks is shorthand for 'three-way links'. The occupant – the volunteer – and an agency case-worker will form triangles of support. These Trinks will be as important as the accommodation itself when it comes to considering the progress made by the occupants towards independent living.

The support of Devizes people, not least the members of the churches in the town, will be crucial to the success of the above two projects. Opendoors has appreciated the tremendous generosity shown in response to appeals on Facebook for clothing and bedding this last winter. It has also been grateful for the financial donations made by individuals and groups. Seeing homelessness as a community problem not just an individual and a national one, could mean that we find some effective solutions.