

About Hackney Winter Night Shelter

Hackney Winter Night Shelter provides a warm welcome, a hot meal and a bed for 25 homeless people each night from January to March each year. We also help our guests to escape the street and find long-term accommodation. Last winter, over 500 volunteers from around Hackney helped to run the Shelter. We are preparing to re-open in January, and we need volunteers to help set up the Shelter, welcome our guests, cook and serve supper, and some to stay overnight and provide a cooked breakfast in the morning.

Seventeen years ago, a group of local Christians, some of who had personal experience of homelessness, were thinking about how they could help the people they saw sleeping on the streets around Hackney. They had the idea that if a group of churches each took responsibility for running a shelter for one night of the week, some of those people could be helped. What started as a loose network of volunteers from local churches collaborating to address a problem on their doorsteps, has developed into Hackney Winter Night Shelter.



Setting the table for supper

Our Shelter operates during the coldest months each year, from the beginning of January to the end of March. We still operate on the same basic principles: the Shelter is at a different church hall each night of the week, and a local team of volunteers provide a welcome, a hot meal and a bed for the night for our homeless guests.

We offer hospitality to those who come to us, and we regard them as guests. We try to provide the best we can with limited resources, and to make our guests feel at home. We think it is important to take time to have a chat with our guests and get to know them. Many have commented on the warmth of the welcome they receive.

We now employ our Link Worker full-time. During the day, homeless people can phone him to find out if there is room for them at the Shelter. If there is, he explains how to get to the Shelter that evening. If not, he is often able to find callers a bed in other shelters around London.

At the Shelter venue for the evening, some of the volunteer team arrive early to set things up: they put out beds and start cooking supper. Our Link Worker arrives to check in those with reserved beds. Our guests get to the Shelter in time for its opening at 8pm (7pm on Sundays), and are welcomed by the volunteers with tea. After they have had a chance to settle in, supper is served. We provide a hot meal and a pudding each evening. Often, the volunteers will eat with the guests.

After supper, there is time for relaxation: watching TV, reading a book or newspaper, playing cards or chess, or chatting. Some of the shelter venues have showers, which our guests make good use of; we provide toiletries and towels.

This is also the time when our Support Workers can work with our guests individually, trying to find suitable longer-term accommodation for them. Our Support Workers come to us from Thames Reach, a London homelessness charity, and are full-time specialists in finding the right place for people who have been homeless. In this way we help our guests not only with a bed for the night, but to escape from the streets. Some of our guests have physical or mental health issues or addiction problems, and our Support Workers can assist them to find the help they need.



Watching the Arsenal v Barcelona match

At about 9:30pm, some of the guests will go off to another “dormitory” hall to sleep; in this way, we can accommodate more people. Last winter, we provided 25 beds each night, split between the main Shelter venue and the dormitory hall.

Also at around 9:30pm, the evening shift of volunteers leave and the smaller overnight team arrive. People start going to bed, and we usually put the lights out at about 11pm. The volunteers take turns to get some rest, but at least two will be awake at any time.

People start getting up in the morning around 6:30am. More volunteers arrive at this time to help with breakfast and clearing up. A hot cooked breakfast is ready at 7am.



Tuesday evening cooks

After breakfast, our guests start to leave, and the volunteers put away the beds and clear up; usually the halls used by the shelter are use by other groups during the day, so everything must be tidied away. We aim to finish clearing up by 8:30am.

The Shelter venues are spread around Hackney, and each has a team of local volunteers and a coordinator who arranges a rota. We aim to have enough volunteers so people don't have to be at the Shelter every week. In particular, we try to make sure people don't have to do overnight shifts more than once a month. We ensure there is always an experienced Overnight Coordinator who is in charge at the Shelter.

We organise training courses for our volunteers, in understanding homelessness, drug and alcohol problems, First Aid, and dealing with aggressive behaviour (of which there is, thankfully, little at the Shelter). We encourage our volunteers to get more involved with running the Shelter – we need people who are prepared to be coordinators, fundraisers and charity trustees.

When the Shelter closes at the end of March, our Support Workers make a huge effort to make sure all our guests have alternative accommodation. Our Link Worker continues to work with those who have found a place to stay in the area, providing day-to-day support for people who may not be used to life off the streets.

We are starting a Befriending scheme, which would enable volunteers to meet regularly with former guests, to provide ongoing social contact. This is another opportunity for volunteers to get involved.

All of these projects come under the umbrella of Hackney Doorways, our registered charity. A group of volunteer Trustees runs the charity, raises funds to support our activities, and makes sure we are meeting all the legal requirements.

COULD YOU HELP?

Each year we seek new volunteers. Below is a list of the jobs that need doing; times vary slightly between shelter venues. We have many people for the welcoming time, but are always short of people willing to stay overnight, to cook, to help clear up in the mornings and to deal with the laundry.

Jobs include:	Preparing the hall	7pm to 8pm
	Cooking supper	6pm to 9pm <i>prepare at the hall or at home</i>
	Make sandwiches	<i>can be done at home and brought in</i>
	Welcome guests	7.30pm to 10pm
	Stay overnight	9:30pm to 8am
	Make breakfast	6.30am to 8.30am
	Clear up the hall	7.00am to 8.30am
	Wash the bedding	<i>during the week before the next shelter</i>
	Deliver the bag	<i>by 7pm to the next venue</i>

To put your name forward, please email: volunteer@hwns.org.uk or fill in the volunteering form.