

Glass Door and the Pandemic

By Elspeth Fearn

Glass Door is a London based charity whose objective is 'A route out of homelessness'. To help achieve this, Glass Door coordinates the largest network of open access services for people affected by having no home and sleeping rough. Working in partnership with churches in several London boroughs, night shelters on church premises are open during the difficult winter months of November to March, giving guests a bed, a hot evening meal and breakfast and the support of Glass Door case workers.

Glass Door first opened in Richmond in December 2018 with several churches participating, including from RTM St John the Divine and St Matthias. These churches took it in turns to accommodate guests and cook hot food for their evening meal. As St Mary Magdalene was at that time still in the middle of its rebuilding project, volunteers from St Mary's helped out at the Team's other two churches.

Then, in early 2020 the pandemic struck and night shelters had to be closed because of the social distancing risks and infection. The existing challenges of London and other big cities for the homeless in normal times were made far worse by the lockdown. Libraries, stations and parks where they often gathered, were shut and there was no access to food, water, showers, electricity and healthcare. The Government however introduced the 'Everyone In' initiative in March 2020 asking local authorities across England to get the homeless into shelter. So hotels and hostels opened up to admit and protect these people and by April 2020 over 90% of rough sleepers had been accommodated in this way. Time has however moved on, the Everyone In scheme has ended and the level of funding from government has been reduced.



Meeting at St John the Divine with Sarah Olney MP

Nancy Baldwin

Glass Door for its part had to look at very different ways of doing

things to cope with the immense challenges the pandemic threw up. To replace night shelters, new services were launched to ensure that guests could stay in individual rooms and had access to food and support. Glass Door therefore opened two hostels in Paddington and Victoria providing some 88 self contained rooms with food. Obviously not everyone could be accommodated in the hostels, because of sheer numbers. So Glass Door launched the Community Dinner Service (CDS), again in churches, so that at least guests could have a hot evening meal and also access to caseworkers. To avoid the risk of infection from rotating venues the CDS was confined to one or two venues in each existing borough participating in Glass Door. In the case of Richmond the CDS operated at the Vineyard Community at the Vineyard Life Church on 7 nights a week. Within the rota RTM volunteers cooked there twice a week with other churches operating on the other nights. In addition others were baking bread and cakes at home to supplement the meal.

Local businesses were asked for help and many were keen to contribute and were very generous. Particular thanks go to Waitrose who provided RTM with a considerable amount of food including two turkeys at Christmas. The donation of two freezers also helped maximise the use of the food resources and if there was anything left over it was given to ETNA (the East Twickenham Neighbourhood Association Community Centre) who through their Real Junk Food Project redistribute it to local charities and families.

By mid 2021 night shelters could still not reopen because of Government social distancing rules. On 25 June a meeting was arranged at St John the Divine with Richmond's MP Sarah Olney and some of the Glass Door volunteers to discuss the vital need to reopen night shelters and Sarah wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities

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and Local Government pressing for this change. Others in the charity sector also argued for the easing of the social distancing rules on night shelters. After further consideration, the Government on 16 August issued revised guidance for night shelters. This allowed rotating church shelters to take place, and removed limits on the number of guests, as shelters would now not be legally required to implement the concept of households. Social distancing was no longer required but everyone needed to remain vigilant. Glass Door welcomed the new guidance whose implications it is



Volunteers at the tea party at St Mary Magdalene

Elsbeth Fearn

considering in depth but feels confident that it should be able to run nights shelter this coming winter.

The work of the volunteers is crucial to Glass Door and not just relating to the cooking of food. Many volunteers especially some older ones would talk regularly to the guests as they ate their evening meal. Because of social distancing this was not possible so they are looking forward to being able to resume this important role. In RTM our thanks go to Isabelle Swann, Pat Johnston and Sarah Percival for all their work in planning cooking rotas and collecting and maintaining food supplies and also thanks to all the volunteers who made a great

difference in what was a very difficult winter. Volunteers were given a thank you tea party with cakes at St Mary Magdalene on Sunday 25 July.

Glass Door has stayed open the whole summer so caseworkers can still meet and support the homeless. The Glass Door Annual Report for 2020-2021 shows that despite the disruption of the pandemic, the charity still managed to move 317 guests (more than in previous years) into more permanent housing with the immeasurable benefits that meant for personal safety and well being, the rebuilding of lives, access to work and to a positive future. RTM is proud to be able to play its part in this.

Every year Glass Door holds a fundraising appeal the Sleep Out in which supporters are sponsored to sleep out in the open at Duke of York Square in Chelsea for a night to raise money for the upcoming winter season in the night shelters. This year's Sleep Out will be taking place on 1 October from 9.00pm until 2 October at 7.00am and people can join in virtually from around the world For more information visit <https://www.glassdoor.org.uk/Event/sleep-out-savedate>

A Wreath

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,
Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,
I give to thee, who knowest all my ways
My crooked winding ways, wherein I live,
Wherein I die, not live; for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
To thee, who art more farre above deceit,
Then deceit seems above simplicitie,
Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
So live and like; that I may know thy ways.
Know them and practice them: then shall I give
For this poore wreath, give thee a crown of praise.

George Herbert (1593-1633) Metaphysical poet and priest in the Church of England

This poem is based on St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 9:25
'Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown'

