

# COLD WEATHER SHELTER REPORT 2009



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# 1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

## Introduction

In February 2009 Homeless Link, funded by the London Housing Foundation (LHF), undertook a survey of eight cold weather shelters in London.

The overriding purpose of the research was to improve understanding of the following:

- Which individuals, traditionally referred to as “guests” use cold weather shelters?
- Why do they use them?
- What are the obstacles to getting these guests from shelters and into more permanent accommodation?

Additionally, it was hoped that the findings might help inform wider strategic debate about homelessness provision in London. This was considered timely with so much focus on the target of ending rough sleeping by 2012.

## Cold weather shelters in the wider homelessness sector

Cold weather shelters provide emergency accommodation during the coldest months of the year, mainly in church halls and day centre settings. They offer basic facilities; including roll mats, sleeping bags, hot meals and drinks and occasionally showers. The role of most shelters extends well beyond this lifeline provision, working closely with other homelessness agencies. Many day centres and outreach teams view night shelters as local resources for tackling rough sleeping. Indeed, they often serve as a “stepping-stone” into more permanent accommodation allowing guests an opportunity for some stability before moving into hostels or supported housing. Shelters also serve as a base from which guests can access key statutory services, such as health care and welfare benefits.

The shelters are not the only winter-specific provision in London. Various day centres and hostels operate extended services during this period. There is also a Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)<sup>1</sup> which opens up extra emergency beds in hostels and other provision when temperatures on the street fall below zero. Crisis Open Christmas also provides a particular service over the festive period when many homelessness services are closed.

## How do cold weather shelters work?

Cold weather shelters tend to run between early January and late March, although some do open earlier. Most rotate from one church to another on a seven-day cycle. Each shelter provides between 15-25 bed spaces per evening to homeless single adults in London.

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<sup>1</sup> The Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) managed by St Mungo's is triggered if the temperature is predicted to drop below zero degrees centigrade for three consecutive nights.

The locations of the shelters are somewhat arbitrary as they tend to have arisen out of a perceived local need, rather than a strategic plan. However, they do have an impressive geographical spread with almost one-third of London's boroughs being covered by the eight shelters in this research.

Nearly all shelters have a paid member of staff who acts as a Coordinator. The Coordinator oversees the basic running of the shelter, managing issues such as health and safety, admissions, volunteer rotas etc. Much of the work in the shelters is done by dedicated volunteers. Approximately 1700 volunteers are involved with the 8 shelters in this research, for example. These volunteers undertake a variety of tasks such as chairing management boards, cooking, raising funds, publicity and awareness raising in their local communities.

Above all the ethos of both staff and volunteers is about providing a safe place for homeless people to be given shelter and support.

The shelters are also strongly supported by Housing Justice<sup>2</sup> who facilitates a forum and provides ongoing training and support.

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<sup>2</sup> Housing Justice describes itself as “the national voice of Christian action to prevent homelessness and bad housing”. <http://www.housingjustice.org.uk>

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

8 winter night shelters, across 10 London boroughs, took part in the research in various capacities. Table 1 gives details of these shelters and the research they participated in.

There were four different elements to the research, namely:

**Part 1** - Quantitative data collection

**Part 2** - Qualitative interviews with guests

**Part 3** - A focus group with staff and volunteers

**Part 4** - A staff survey

**Table 1 - The shelters involved in the research and the elements they were involved in**

London Borough/s	Name of shelter or main organisation working with the shelter	Which aspects of the research they were involved in?			
		Part 1 - Quantitative data collection	Part 2 - Qualitative interviews with guests	Part 3 - Staff/volunteer focus group	Part 4 - Shelter survey of provision
Barnet	Finchley Winter Night Shelter	N	N	Y	Y
Brent	Cricklewood Homeless Concern (CHC)	Y	N	N	Y
Camden	Community of Camden Churches (C4WS)	Y	N	Y	Y
Hackney	Hackney Winter Night Shelter (HWNS)	Y	Y	Y	Y
Islington	Caris - Islington	Y	Y	Y	Y
Lambeth & Southwark	Robes Project	Y	Y	Y	Y
Lewisham	999 Club	Y	N	N	Y
Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fullham	West London Churches Homeless Concern (WLCHC)	Y	Y	Y	Y

### Quantitative data collection

In February 2009 seven organisations provided information about cold weather shelters. Data was collected on 265 guests; this data<sup>3</sup> included basic demographics, information about support needs and move-on options. The data was collected by the shelter Coordinators and, where possible, they spoke to each individual guest to obtain it. However, some information was obtained either from referral forms or by speaking to volunteers or staff with knowledge of the guests concerned. Although it varied from shelter to shelter, for some it was the first time they had gathered this type of data.

### Qualitative interviews

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted in February 2009 with 24 guests in five shelters. Homeless Link conducted the interviews in conjunction with an experienced Peer Researcher recommended by Groundswell<sup>4</sup>. The aim of the interviews was to understand the perspective of guests using the shelters. To achieve this, a questionnaire<sup>5</sup> was devised which covered a range of themes linked to the quantitative data.

Guests were asked to describe:

- How they ended up in the shelter
- Their experiences of using the shelters
- Their current situation and the support they were receiving
- The barriers they faced to finding more permanent accommodation
- Their future aspirations

Interviews were recorded when permission was granted by guests and subsequently transcribed. The interviews were then analysed in conjunction with the Peer Researcher to draw out key themes and conclusions.

### Focus group with staff and volunteers

The focus group took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> March 2009, and consisted of 6 Coordinators, one volunteer and the Peer Researcher who has personal experience of being homeless and using shelters. Homeless Link facilitated the focus group. Six themes were discussed:

- Move-on
- Referral
- SWEP and responses to the cold weather
- Guests and their support needs
- Working with external agencies
- Improvements and suggestions

The focus group was recorded and a member of staff took extensive notes. The purpose of the focus group was to gain an understanding from a staff and

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<sup>3</sup> More information available on request

<sup>4</sup> Groundswell is a client involvement and self-help organisation working in the field of homelessness. [www.groundswell.org.uk/](http://www.groundswell.org.uk/)

<sup>5</sup> The questionnaire is available on request

volunteer perspective of how the shelters operate, including whether they differed in terms of approach, service provision and outcomes.

### **Staff questionnaire**

A survey<sup>6</sup> of shelter resources and provision was completed by the shelter Coordinators. The survey covered not only current facilities and services, but also gaps in provision.

All four parts of the research helped to formulate the final report which follows.

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<sup>6</sup> A copy of the survey is available on request

### 3. WHO USES COLD WEATHER SHELTERS AND WHY?

#### Demographics

265 guests were seen in one month across seven of the shelters covering nine boroughs. The seven shelters are identified in Table 1.

#### Gender

**14%** (36 guests) were female

**86%** (229 guests) were male

The gender figures are typical of most homelessness services. It is worth noting that some shelters did not provide support for women, which may reflect the small numbers of women accessing the shelters. The gender division recorded is very similar to that in a Homeless Link 2008 report<sup>7</sup>.

#### Age

As with gender, the age breakdown reflects the wider homelessness population.

**Table 2 – age profile of guests**

Age	Number of guests
Under 18	1
18-25	41
26-33	64
34-41	42
24-49	53
50-57	37
58-65	19
65+	3
unknown	5

It is worth noting that many staff and volunteers informally claimed to have seen more women and young people than in previous years. However, neither trend is obviously reflected in the data collected

#### Immigration Status

The data in Chart 1 suggests cold weather shelters provide vital accommodation and support for a wide range of individuals with different immigration status.

These figures show that almost half of the guests are U.K or Irish nationals. This suggests that some people are still falling through local accommodation “safety-nets”. It is likely that these come from the group traditionally referred to

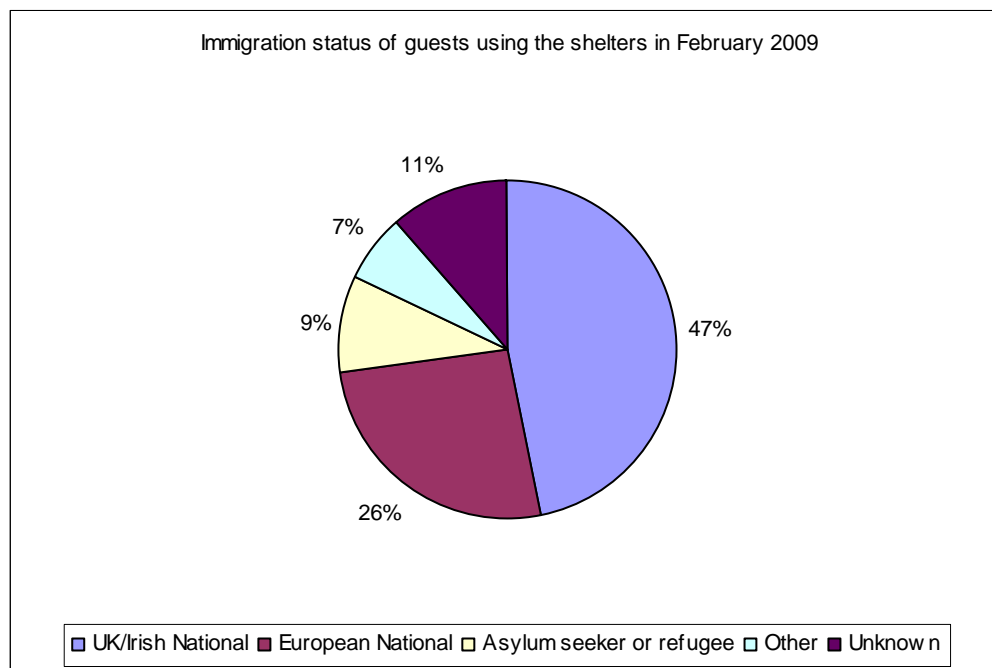
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<sup>7</sup> Cold Weather Snapshot Survey 2008 [www.homeless.org.uk/inyourarea/london/policy/cold-weather-shelters/report](http://www.homeless.org.uk/inyourarea/london/policy/cold-weather-shelters/report)

as *non-statutorily homeless* and are most likely to be individuals or couples without children and with low support needs.

Just over a quarter are European nationals reflecting the changed nature of the rough sleeping population following European Union expansion in 2004 and 2007.

**Chart 1 – Immigration status of guests using the shelters**



Almost one-in-ten are either asylum seekers or refugees. Numbers from these groups have also increased on the streets in recent years

9% (24 guests) are defined as "Other". This includes undocumented migrants, 'overstayers' and one person on a student visa.

11% (30 guests) are defined as "Unknowns". This includes people who were unwilling to identify their immigration status.

It is worth noting that the immigration status of guests is not homogenous between shelters. For example, in West London Churches Homeless Concern (WLCHC) 43% of guests are recorded as European nationals, whereas in the 999 Club in Lewisham the corresponding figure is only 1 guest. This contrast may reflect the traditional pull towards the West London area from Central and Eastern European countries as well as the 'no questions asked' policy that the WLCHC operate.

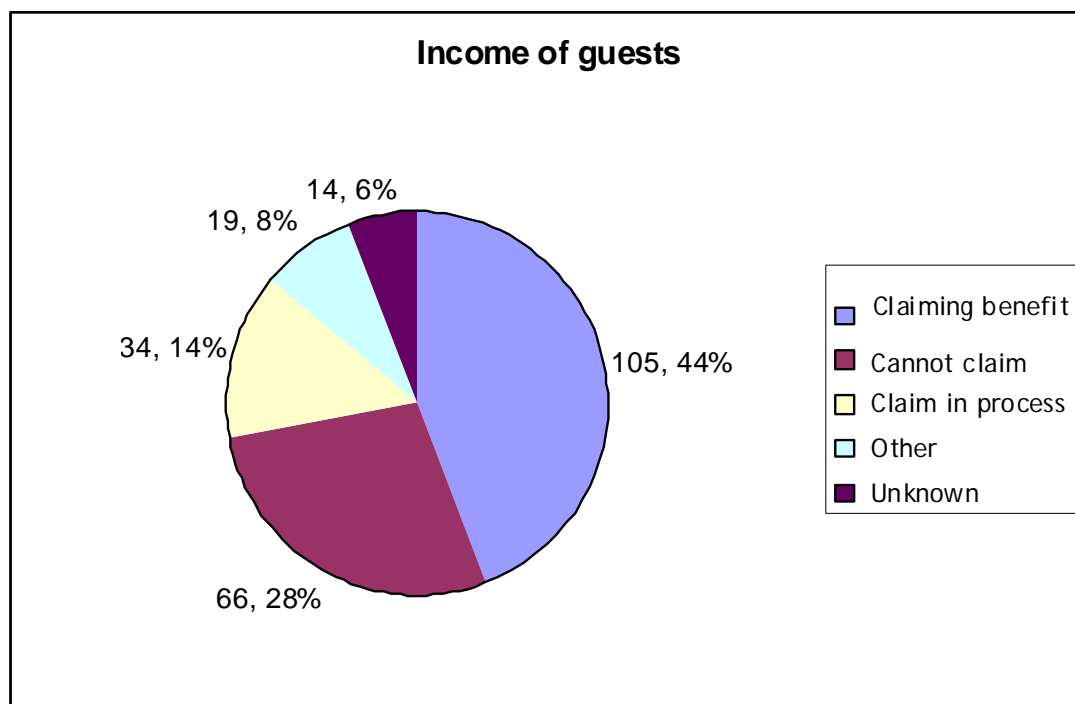
However, all Coordinators noted a rise in guests from Central and Eastern Europe and acknowledged they needed more knowledge and resources about the options available to this group. They also identified an increase in guests from East Africa, returning to London from "dispersal zones" following positive asylum decisions.

Language barriers were identified as a major difficulty in working with both these groups. There was a feeling that little could be provided by way of support, which was demoralising for all concerned.

### Financial status

Chart 2 shows that the biggest group (44%) are claiming some kind of benefit, the majority being Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants. The second largest group (28%) cannot claim as they have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) because of their immigration status. 14% of guests currently have a claim in process and are waiting for a response. The category of "Other" makes up 6% of the guests and includes those choosing not to claim and those working part-time. 8% were unknown.

Chart 2 - Income of guests<sup>8</sup>



It is interesting that very few guests are claiming Incapacity Benefit and no guests are claiming Disability Living Allowance, despite high levels of physical and mental health needs being reported. By contrast, nearly half the guests are receiving JSA which is dependent on them seeking and being available for work despite being homeless.

<sup>8</sup> Total number of guests included has been changed to 238 guests due to data quality issues (Brent CHC data not included)

**Table 3 – financial status of guests**

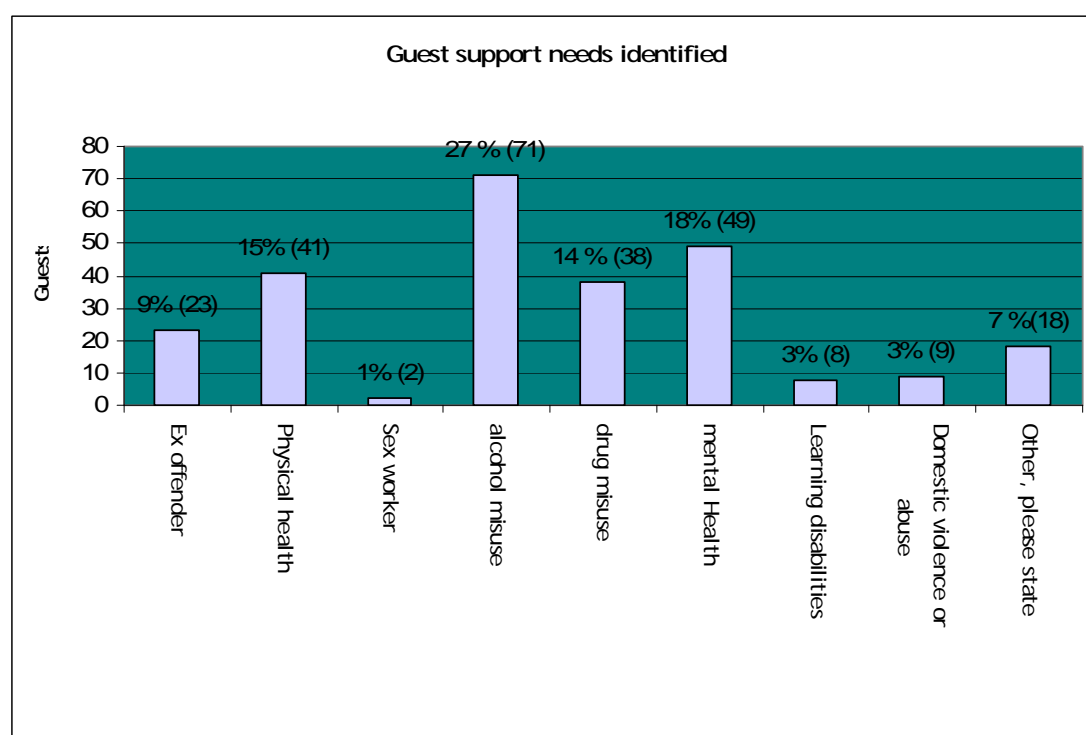
Financial Status	No. of guests
JSA	64
Can not claim (NRPF)	66
Income Support	18
Claim in process	34
Incapacity Benefit	11
DLA	0
Other	14
Unknown	19
Claiming more than one benefit	5
ESA	7

**238**

### Support needs

To fully understand the role shelters play, it is crucial to examine the support needs of guests and how the shelters are responding.

**Chart 3 - Guest support needs identified<sup>9</sup>**



Alcohol is the most frequent support need recorded amongst the guests with 27% (71) of guests recording alcohol misuse as a support need. Also prevalent are mental health, physical health and drug misuse.

<sup>9</sup> Guests were able to record more than one support need, therefore the % does not equal 100. Percentages were calculated out of 265 guests. *Other* included benefit and asylum advice, gambling and challenging behaviours amongst others.

Just over a quarter of guests are recorded as having multiple support needs. Of this group 5% (14) of guests have both drug and alcohol support needs and 4% (10) guests have drug misuse and mental health needs. Other support needs amongst the guests include gambling, challenging behaviour, language barriers, welfare benefits and asylum issues.

By contrast, 23% of guests reported no support needs at all, suggesting there is a substantial group of people solely requiring accommodation whilst they do things such as save for a deposit, or deal with a temporary crisis.

It is crucial to note that the support needs in the shelters may not be representative of the wider homelessness population. This may be because of admissions criteria or staff and volunteers not recording support needs.

In the focus group, the shelter Coordinators suggested that the support needs of guests were as varied as in previous years.

*“We see everyone, same as always really, relationship breakdown, NRPF. Drugs and alcohol, pregnant women, refugees, victims of torture, the lot... a lot more this year of people who are putting in fresh claims, people returning from dispersal zones as they won't take the accommodation up north, but it is very difficult, as well as the 'typical' majority which are British born males between the ages of 30-65 with low – medium support needs. We see just about everyone”*

It was reported by the Coordinators that some referring agencies would try to refer inappropriate guests. Some also felt that local authorities occasionally try to pass responsibility for extremely vulnerable people onto the shelters

### Groups of people using the shelters

The qualitative interviews provided further evidence of the diverse range of people using the shelters.

Of the 24 guests interviewed the following broad groups are represented:

- Long-term rough sleepers
- Individuals who had recently started sleeping rough
- People who had just become homeless, but had not yet slept rough
- Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe
- Asylum seekers who had returned to London from their dispersal zones
- Refugees awaiting papers
- People who had recently lost their jobs and accommodation due to the recession
- Ex-offenders recently released from prison
- People who had become homeless due to a recent relationship breakdown

## 4. SUPPORT IN THE SHELTERS

### Practical support

From the staff survey of shelter provision it was found that all 8 shelters provide an evening meal, hot drinks, a floor mat or air beds and bedding. 5 of the shelters are able to provide shower facilities at some of the churches. Informal emotional support is provided at all shelters by a mixture of volunteers and staff. 6 of the shelters provide games and activities for guests during the evening.

Guests rated the importance of this practical support highly and felt that without it they would be on the streets. Many stated they did not know what they would do if the shelters were not there and regarded them as a great source of safety and survival:

*'Safety issues—plenty of staff, it is not safe on the streets'*

*'Peace, quiet, warmth, housing support and food'*

*'I have nowhere else to go - I feel unsafe sleeping in the parks and on buses. Staff are very good people, it's the home of God, food and warmth'*

*'It is a very good project, it has saved my life, but I worry about what to do when it closes'*

### Professional Support

Shelters provide in-house professional support as well as utilising external agencies to support guests. From the shelters in the research, 5 of the 8 shelters have a paid-worker to support guests either when the shelter was open in the evening or throughout the day in connected day- centre provision. Many of the volunteers are extremely experienced and offer individual support to guests. 6 of the 8 shelters provide housing and substance misuse advice from a paid member of staff. 7 of the shelters provide support around employment and education.

However, lack of resources means that support is often limited with many paid staff having a large caseload. This means they cannot see everyone who needs assistance. Also, some volunteers have very little experience and are unsure how best to support guests with complex needs.

Externally, many shelters have established excellent local agency and community links. For example, one shelter has developed a relationship with the local library service to improve access for guests.

In the focus group there was a feeling that shelters often provide an opportunity for guests to stabilise themselves and prepare to move on to somewhere more permanent. A number of coordinators reported case studies where this has happened. This was also confirmed by feedback from guests:

*'It supports you to almost get back to normal life. It prevents me getting depressed and alone. It is very reassuring to know that you have a bed for the night'*

*'Space to get myself sorted e.g. GP, housing support, stability in my life, food (dinner/breakfast), showers, clothing, library card, etc'*

All the guests interviewed expressed gratitude to the staff and volunteers and felt that the shelters were good places, often offering the only alternative to the streets. A large majority of guests interviewed felt supported and cared for by staff and volunteers and recognised their kindness.

The main benefits of the shelter that guests identified were practical, such as safety, food, warmth, showers, clothing and somewhere to rest.

*'Good company, blindingly good staff, warmth, somewhere to sleep. A roof over my head and somewhere that is safe'*

*"It is warm and safe, teaches you tolerance. Very supportive and set a good example of helping other people. They try to treat every body equally and with respect."*

*'The company and the staff are absolutely brilliant. They provide lots of support. They care'*

### **Guests' perspectives on the support**

Although all the guests appreciated that the shelters are doing all they can, many felt that they provide a limited service. Practical difficulties such as the shelters moving around, restricted opening times and limited resources were highlighted as problems:

*"It would be better if there were individual rooms, good beds—some shelters still have camp beds."*

*"Having one location for the Shelter would be an improvement. Volunteers could be paid to get better services, access to medical support on site, telephone support for referrals"*

*"Being chucked out at 7.00am and not being allowed back before 8.00pm—that's 13 hours out, a long day."*

*"Carrying your bags all day long, it's a shame there isn't a trailer or a bigger van – different churches, it is painful to carry your bag around all day. Better if it was in one place – no stability, got no money so can't get a bus pass to travel from one centre to another."*

*"It would be better if there was more time to get through the door, it opens at 8 and everyone is pitted against each other, there is a massive scrum."*

Many guests recognised that shelters are not a long-term solution and experienced staying in them as an unsettling time due to the lack of stability

and having to share with strangers. The majority of respondents commented that it was a 'worrying' and 'distressing' time for them.

Whilst people were receiving more support than prior to entering the shelter, many felt their vulnerability would increase as result of not being in more suitable accommodation. Some guests reported their mental and physical health had suffered as a result of being homeless and having to use the shelters. Guests expressed their concern as follows:

*"They are very helpful, give you food, I can do my laundry, it is very good. But I just want a place of my own, but I mean what could I like about being here."*

*"I have no options right now, I am afraid of becoming an alcoholic, I can not sleep well at night with this problem"*

*"If it wasn't for the shelter I might have to enter into criminal activity for necessity, I mean who wouldn't in this situation, most people round here would"*

*"I'd like to work as I have done accounting, I am not happy sitting like this, you start to forget your skills."*

Some interviewees suggested that other guests had high support needs that the staff and volunteers were not adequately resourced to cope with. Many said they had experienced problems with other peoples' behaviour. Following their comments, guests were asked how they think the shelters could be improved:

*"Earlier entry times, while aggressive service users should be expelled"*

*"It is stressful when people kick off, toilet disputes, then it escalates from there. I am not sure if people aren't used to the culture and customs, people pretend to be friendly, but you can tell who to avoid."*

Nearly all those interviewed suggested that more funding would improve services and that they needed more support to help them get out of their current situation:

*"More funding for staff, resettlement staff to provide access to services. More staff to support service users needs"*

Clearly shelters do the best they can with the resources available. Staff and volunteers work extremely hard to provide the best possible care and support for a complex range of individuals. They offer an invaluable service to some very vulnerable people. However, in some cases the environment lacks the necessary structural support to provide appropriate responses to homeless people with high support needs and to those who have been through extremely traumatic circumstances who are finding it difficult to cope.

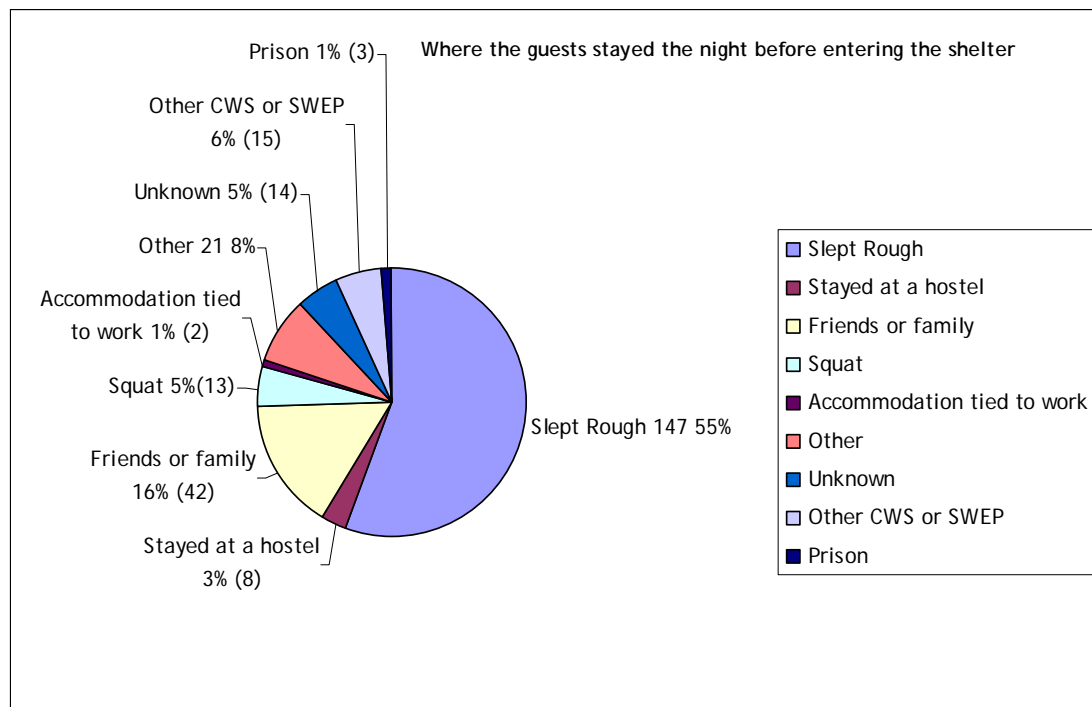
## 5. WHY ARE GUESTS USING THE COLD WEATHER SHELTERS?

As well as looking at the demographic and support needs of the guests, the research attempted to establish how people ended up staying in the shelters and whether they were actually homeless. As part of this, during the quantitative data collection, we surveyed where people had stayed prior to entering the shelter.

### Where were guests before entering the shelters?

The findings suggest that virtually all those entering the shelter had either slept rough or were living in temporary, unsuitable accommodation.

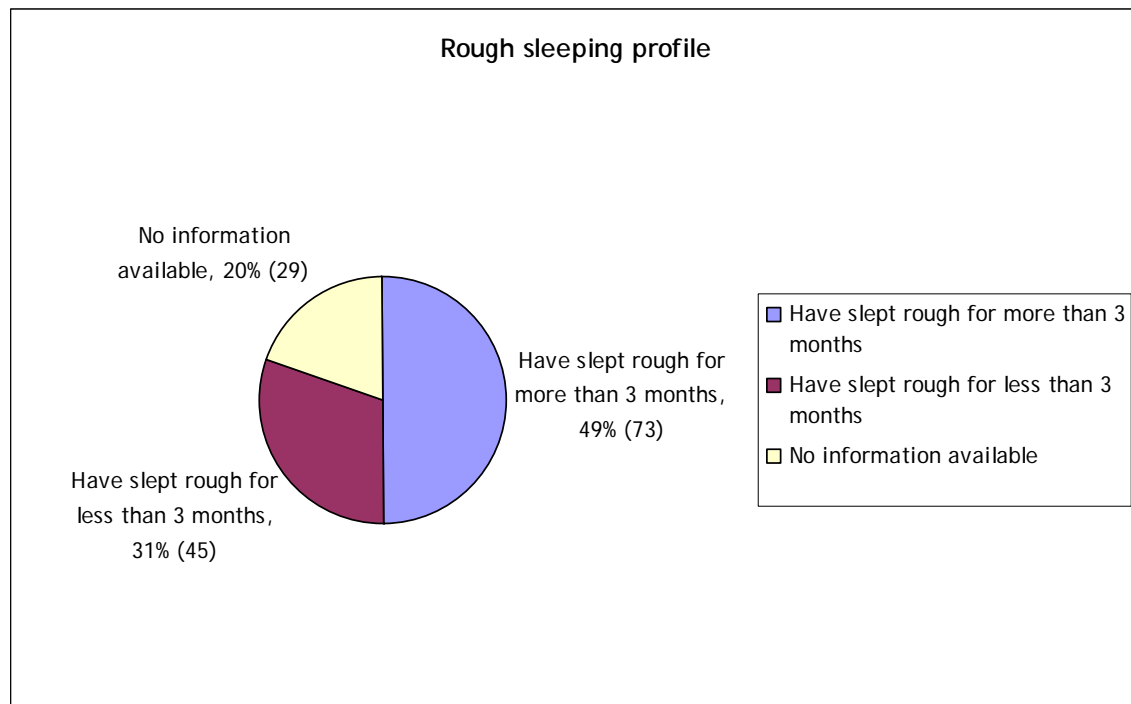
**Chart 4 – Where the guests stayed the night before entering the shelter**



A clear majority of guests had slept rough immediately before entering a shelter. The term "rough sleeping" was used in this context to include sleeping on buses, shop doorways, flat stairwells, churchyards, disused vehicles, alleyways and wheelie-bins. The category of "other" incorporated the private rented sector (PRS), rehab, hospital and just entering the country.

The research also looked at those who had slept rough for more than three months, to try to ascertain the severity of the rough sleeping problem.

## Chart 5 – Rough sleeping profile



Of those who had slept rough the night prior to entering the night shelter, 49% (73) had slept rough for more than three months. One interviewee had been homeless for more than three years.

*“I can’t do anything but wait. I sleep on the street, on the bus, but I can’t do anything, I’ve been homeless for three years and you are not free like this, you are not free in this situation”*

Another guest had also been sleeping rough for more than a year and said:

*“I was sleeping right opposite Lewisham church near Fitness First, an old closed down club, up the stairs, little balcony and there is a fitness first sign and it shelter me from the wind, I had a sleeping bag. I was there for 4 months and before that I was in a van. I have been homeless for about a year and a half to two years.”*

It is clear that some very long-term rough sleepers are accessing the night shelters:

*‘Now staff are more supportive—medical/housing support is provided, unlike say 20 years ago, where you were just given a bed and left alone to fend for yourself in the old Salvation Army hostels’*

### Are guests homeless?

All of the 24 interviewees consider themselves to be homeless and stated that the shelters offer the only alternative from the streets. It was observed that people seem to survive their homelessness through a mixture of creative and innovative solutions:

*'Friends and strangers gave me food and money. I slept in sleeping bags. I did not know of Day Centre services, as I have never been homeless before. I used to hang out in the "Bookies" to stay warm in the days'*

*'For the last 3 years no permanent accommodation. Stayed with family and friends, while using Day Centres and Drop-In centres e.g. Passage (Victoria), Lady Margaret's (Kentish Town) and Spectrum (Camden)---this helped to provide support, eg GP, helped to break up the days'*

*'I got a £90.00 Crisis Loan which I used for some food and clothing via Hounslow Job Centre, and occasionally the Police gave me a drink of coffee, while allowing me to sleep in the lobby of the station for 3 nights'*

*"I use council sauna bars in the swimming baths so I can have a shower, it is really cheap, but I can't even go there now because of what I look like"*

*"I survive by volunteering at Crisis kitchen – I learn lessons, food hygiene certificates as I have no papers as my girlfriend threw them away."*

When they described their circumstances, it became apparent that many had faced personal crises, such as relationship breakdown or family bereavement which had triggered their current status. These crises had often been exacerbated by external barriers, such as financial exclusion from the private rented sector. At present the shelters appear to offer the only accommodation option for these individuals. It is clear that guests felt they had been let down by the state and other people:

*"Mum and dad used to have pub so when I split up from my wife I went to live there, but my mum died, so I couldn't stay there. So I went from bed-sit to bed-sit, but so many wont accept DSS, so when the work dried up I couldn't find anywhere to go."*

*"I was made redundant, lost my flat because of it, I was a manager at a shop, the landlord wouldn't take HB, so they wouldn't renew the lease I lost my job and then a few weeks I lost my flat".*

*"I was a carer for my father; my family house was sold when he died, so I came back to London. I was a carer for 6 years, I worked as well. This happened 18 months ago. I initially survived on savings and then I went onto JSA. I was staying in B&B, trying to get employment. I moved around. I didn't use day centres."*

*"I feel I was caught up in the recession, so effectively I am over-qualified for anything I might want to do. There is the assumption there is something wrong with you if you are applying for mid-range job, and we also live in ageist society. It is a catch-22."*

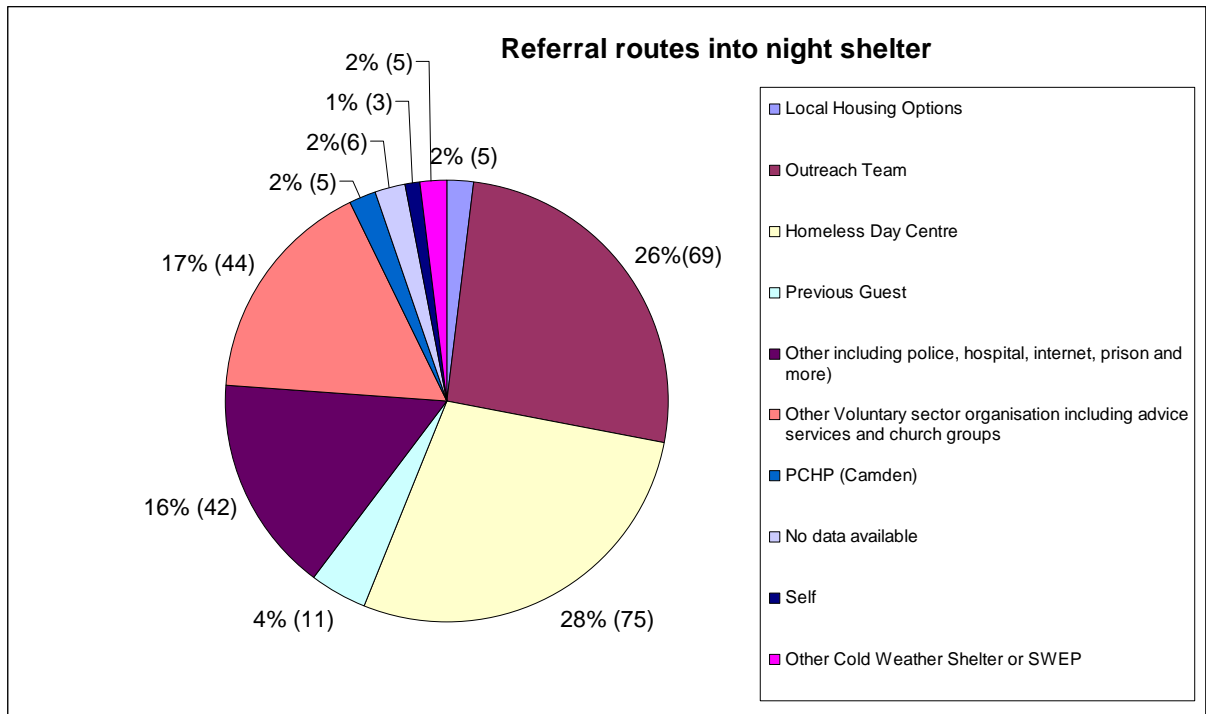
It was also apparent that, even when people had support networks such as savings, friends and family, these could only be relied upon for a limited period.

*“I survived by asking for help from friends, but it soon becomes strained, I then became a pest. And what with my bereavements mum, dad, brother, friends all dead, I’ve run out of options.”*

**Who refers into the shelters?**

Just over half of the guests are referred into the shelters by day centres or outreach teams. A significant number are referred through other voluntary sector organisations, including advice centres, drop-in services and church groups. Only 2 % of guests are referred through a statutory Housing Options service. 11 guests had stayed in shelters in previous years and had not been able to secure stable accommodation in the intervening period. One guest was reported to have been in the shelter for the third consecutive year.

**Chart 6 – referral routes into a shelter**



**Referral procedures**

All shelters who attended the focus group have some kind of referral procedure, however these vary. A couple operate strict referral procedures "gatekept" by a local day centre. Most of the others accept self-referrals, but generally encourage guests to come through agencies such as day centres and outreach teams so assessments of guests could be completed.

*“At the Manna Centre it works really well, they are qualified there and they assess who would be appropriate to come into the shelter, which I think makes the volunteers feel at ease.”*

2009 was the first year some shelters had moved away from a traditional ‘first come, first served’ model. For example Hackney Winter Night Shelter operated a telephone referral system for the first time this year, which their co-

ordinator said had 'transformed the shelter'. The coordinator was very positive commenting:

*"Hackney volunteers have noticed the changes, they've felt more relaxed, last year it was all about who had a bed, now we can focus on the positive and have build up better relationships with guests."*

Most shelters operate a strict "No alcohol, No drugs" policy as it is felt that the shelters are not appropriate environments to work with people who are intoxicated.

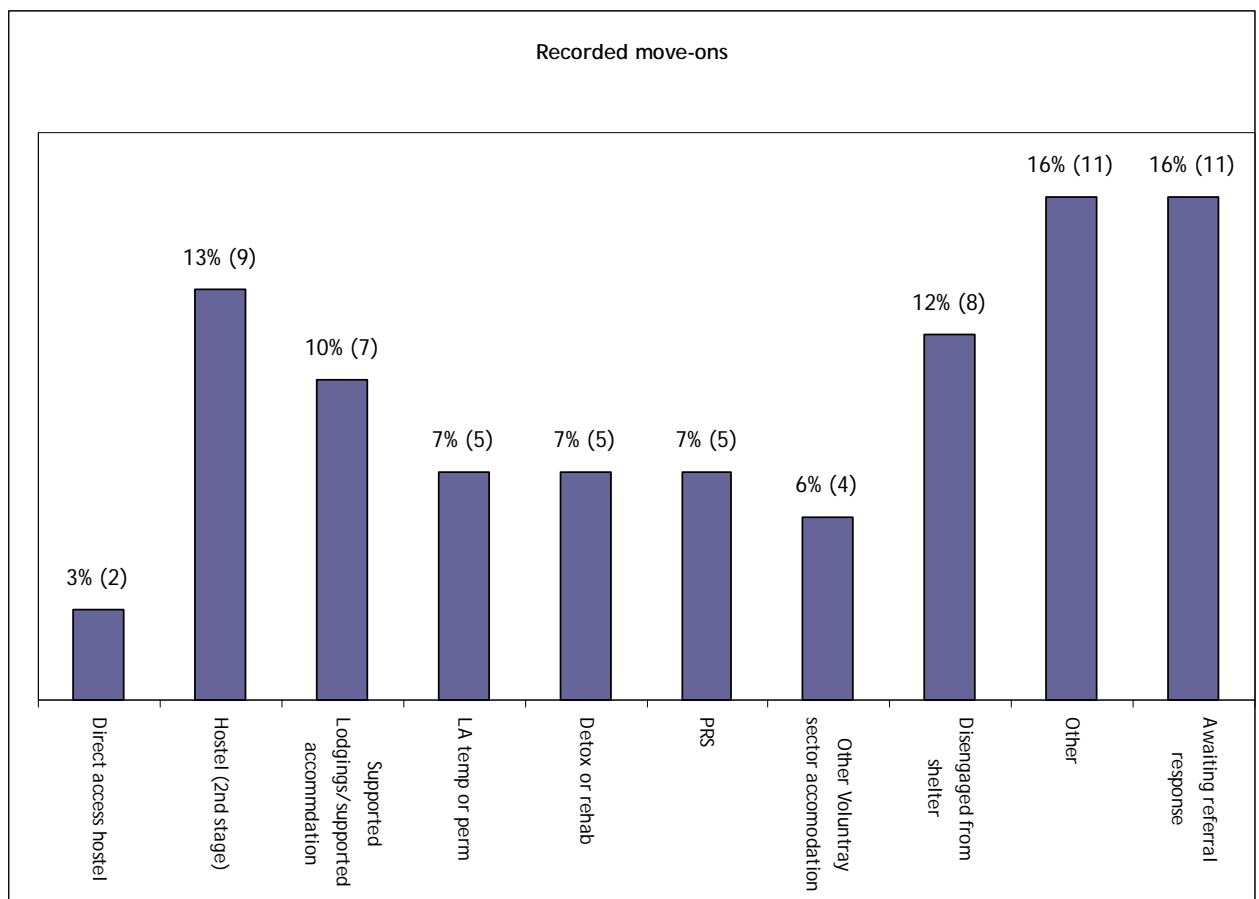
Shelters had to turn guests away on a regular basis, because of excess demand for their services. One shelter responded by providing meals to extra people who could not sleep over because of a lack of space.

## 6. ONWARD REFERRALS

### Successful move-on

Coordinators were asked to record move-on into alternative accommodation from the shelters. Of the 265 guests in the original sample only 69 had outcomes of any kind recorded (26%). This figure includes those who recorded “unknowns”, “abandonment” and “other” as an outcome. Therefore, the base number was reduced to 69 from 265 for analysis. The fact that this data was so badly recorded may be indicative of the limited move-on options available for guests in the shelter. However, when the data was collected, the shelters were still open for a further month, which may mean move-on work was taking place which is not reflected in the figures.

Chart 7 – Recorded move-ons<sup>10</sup>



Of those recorded move-on options the largest group, 13% (9 guests) were referred into 2<sup>nd</sup> stage hostels and 10% (7 guests) were referred into supported accommodation. However, the largest groups recorded were those still awaiting referral response making up 16% (11 guests) and another 16%

<sup>10</sup> Guest numbers changed to 69 as data was not recorded for the remaining participants, which may or may not be an accurate reflection of move on

(11 guests) in the category "other", which includes returning to friends and family, abandoning shelter and unknowns.

Although only a quarter of guests were recorded as having found any move on accommodation, 46% (122 guests) were receiving support around finding accommodation. This support came from a number of sources - referral agencies, external agencies, or from shelter staff and volunteers.

**Table 4 – Recorded move-ons by Borough**

London Borough/s	Name of shelter or main organisation working with the shelter	Number of guests seen in February 2009	Number of beds spaces provided in each shelter	Length of stay permitted	Ratio of move-on	Paid member of staff	Move-on's recorded
Brent	Cricklewood Homeless Concern (CHC)	27	15	No Limit	0.5	N	0
Camden	Community of Camden Churches (C4WS)	30	15	4 weeks	2	Y	27
Hackney	Hackney Winter Night Shelter (HWNS)	62	25	No Limit	2.48	Y	19
Islington	Caris - Islington	54	15	4 weeks	3.6	N	14
Lambeth & Southwark	Robes	21	13	4 weeks	1.6	Y	7
Lewisham	999 Club	20	15	No Limit	1.3	N	0
Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fullham	West London Homeless Concern (WLHC)	51	35	No Limit	1.46	Y	3

Table 4 shows a basic comparison between the number of guests seen by each shelter in one month compared to the number of bed spaces available and the length of time they were able to stay. The ratio of bed spaces to number of guests gives us a basic move-on rate for each shelter.

Because of the low levels of returns, it was considered important to undertake extensive conversations with both guests and Coordinators to understand the issues and obstacles around move-on.

### Move-on - guests' perspectives

The obstacles to finding suitable accommodation are varied and complex. They are a mixture of personal support needs and structural constraints. Guests focused on barriers such as a lack of suitable options (many did not

want to go into hostels), no local connection, little money for rent deposits and discrimination from the private landlords.

*“lack of availability of one bedroom housing”*

*“No job to get funds to pay rent”*

*“landlords will not easily access Housing Benefit. If they support me with a deposit, I could get a place”*

*“A deposit that is the problem, it can be up to 10 weeks rent, let say its £250/week you can see how much it is, you need references and previous landlord and you have to prove that you are earning, so it is impossible.”*

*“Bureaucracy. I think the system is skewed in favour of new immigrants, rather than UK residents”*

Many people stated that they didn't really understand what was happening regarding their accommodation or other support. Some guests claimed to have received conflicting information.

*“The Job centre give you no help or support whatsoever, they don't even know where the Housing Office is. It is just up the road in Westminster, but they don't know, there is nothing linked”*

*“I just go round in circles, referred to someone, then someone else”*

*“I keep getting conflicting information, apparently I am not eligible”*

Guests were asked about what kind of support they thought they needed to secure and hold down accommodation. Alongside housing advice, many people stated they needed support on employment, welfare benefits, immigration and legal and financial issues. Most guests mentioned support they were receiving either from the staff and volunteers at the shelters themselves or from other external voluntary organisations such as day centres, advice centres and other charities. Guests were complimentary about this, but many still felt it was inadequate.

*“I am doing everything by myself—no one has ever spoken to me about getting some accommodation. The only thing I get is a bus-pass, as I am seeking a job. I do not know who to speak to.”*

*“None really. They initially tried to throw me off the scheme, saying I was not doing anything to help myself. When I showed them letters from the Member Of Parliament, Housing Department, and GP, among others, they kindly gave me another 2 weeks stay” (guest was very angry).*

*‘I tried to get to a Day Centre in New Cross where there is a doctor—I needed an inhaler for my Asthma—but it was shut when I got there. I need some support, but am finding it hard to locate that at this time’*

Ironically, some guests felt they were not receiving support or being given access to accommodation because their support needs were not high enough and they were not from a vulnerable group.

*“I didn’t fit into any criteria, being a woman isn’t vulnerable enough, no mental health, physical health problems.”*

*“Support needs; I have asthma, liver disease, severe depressive, alcohol issue, but no drugs. Drinking since I was 18 and I am 53 now. Being a single man I am not vulnerable enough, I have tried every option, they keep telling me wait. I am working with SHP, Bench, Giles Trust and still nothing, they all say wait.”*

*“I will go back to the street when the shelter closes, but I would take anything. Ideally I’d like a one-bedroomed flat. I’d love my own place, once I’ve got my own benefits. I would accept shared accommodation if that was offered. Eventually I’d like to work, as I have done accounting before. I am not happy like this; I start to forget what I’ve learnt.”*

*“What do they want me to do? Start drinking a bottle of whisky or taking drugs so I can get help?”*

*“I just don’t look homeless enough, do they want me to lie down on the floor?”*

### **Move-on, coordinators’ perspectives**

The focus group described a number of positive move-on's to alternative accommodation, including resettling some extremely challenging guests. A positive relationship with the Local Authority and voluntary sector partners was identified as crucial in the process. All the Coordinators emphasised how hard they were working to try and find options for people when the shelters closed, but stated they needed more resources in this area.

They found guests with no recourse to public funds particularly difficult to move-on.

*“This year about two-thirds of our guests had no recourse to public funds and the others we feel like we’ve exhausted all options, or working with other agencies. There isn’t much support in the local boroughs... Not much accommodation, only 2 hostels. We have spent a lot of time on benefit issues, I.D issues and different issues. There is not much positive move on”.*

To address this issue some shelters help people to save for a deposit to enter the private rented sector. This is a good strategy because guests from this group are often amongst the most keen to work and often have an employment history.

A new group was also identified this year as particularly hard to move-on, namely refugees from East Africa returning from dispersal zones. It was felt there was resistance within this group to pursuing private rented accommodation as an option, as they seem fixated as a community on obtaining social rented housing

Coordinators felt that the welfare benefit system often delayed individuals who were forced to stay in the shelter whilst waiting for immigration and benefit paperwork to be sorted out.

Lack of local connection was also identified as an obstacle to accessing services. All the shelter Coordinators felt they spent a lot of time and energy ensuring that vulnerable people got help and that local authorities often fail in their duty to assist.

*“(it is) So hard for volunteers, seeing her move from shelter-to-shelter (a 7 months pregnant woman), it is harrowing story, that no one will take responsibility for her with the money that is slashed around, it is insane. This girl is getting worse the frustration is making her worse as she sees other people move- on and no- one will help her.”*

### **Guests’ aspirations**

Most guests wanted a place of their own, generally a one-bedroomed flat. Many expressed a desire for their own ‘space’. They felt that getting accommodation would allow them to make progress in other areas of their lives. Many guests expressed the need for resettlement into a ‘community’, whether this be to a familiar geographical area or to be near friends or family.

*“Anything, I am not on the grounds to say what I need/want.”*

*“I would be content to stay in a hostel to get me back on my feet. After that, a one-bedroomed flat.”*

*“A one- bed roomed flat. As long as it’s a roof over my head, it’s ok.”*

*“Any place to be honest.”*

*“One room bed-sit or flat for me and my girlfriend.”*

*“RDS is a possibility, maybe a squat – PRS, just need a bond, a month’s rent would be nice to cover the gap before Housing Benefit kicks in”*

*“I would like a studio or a shared flat with women; as long as I have my own room it would be fine. Hostel is ok if there are enough facilities. They expected me to live in a cell in an area I didn’t know. Preferable to be outside, they think you should be grateful, but it is like a prison.”*

*“I just need affordable social housing, private rented, shared housing, whatever really.”*

## 7. KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Key findings

- There have been concerns in the past as to whether individuals who use cold weather shelters are genuinely homeless. For example, the question was raised in Homeless Link's 2008 research "are people accessing cold weather shelters who would otherwise sort out their own housing situation?" However, all the evidence from this research suggests the majority of guests interviewed had some history of sleeping rough and most believed they would still be on the streets were they not staying in the shelter.
- Welfare benefits are a major issue. Compared to other residential homelessness services, guests in many of the shelters were much more likely to be from abroad meaning they usually had no recourse to public funds. Even amongst guests from the UK, a significant minority had no live benefit claim. Without access to Housing Benefit it is very difficult to access hostels or supported housing in London meaning guests had few alternatives to the shelters.
- The support needs of guests varied greatly with drugs, alcohol and mental health being amongst the most common. However, nearly one- in-four guests had no support needs other than requiring somewhere to live. Making sure that these individuals are assisted out of their homelessness before they risk developing such support needs is crucial.
- Shelters tend to differ in their admissions criteria generally reflecting their individual historical practice. Some shelters seem particularly concerned about accepting people whom they believe will be difficult to move-on. The make-up of these more 'cautious' shelters is less likely to reflect changes in the nature of homelessness over the last few years (such as the increase in Central and Eastern Europeans).
- There is a need for the professional homelessness sector and government to support the shelters to maximise their effectiveness. For example, whilst guests are extremely thankful to the people running shelters, many need more permanent, stable accommodation that is open during the day. All the shelters excel at looking after their guests, but some struggle to find ways of accessing move-on for them. Increased joined-up working and more signposting to other services is necessary to support the shelters in improving this situation. In particular there is evidence that move-on is more successful when shelters are able to work in partnership with other local agencies such as Outreach Teams.
- Cold weather shelters are a practical response by sections of local communities to the homelessness they perceive in their area. The success of this response is dependent upon a large network of volunteers and the unwavering commitment of a few individuals at the network's centre. Each shelter functions slightly differently, but all rely upon people giving up their

own time and resources to make them work. The personal sacrifices that those involved in running the shelters frequently make are inspirational.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made with a view to supporting the work of the cold weather shelters, improving links between them and other local services, ensuring their work is seen in the context of the wider strategies and, above all, maximising opportunities to end the homelessness of those who access them.

Action/Task	Key Partners	Timescale
Review the possibility of funding a worker to provide information and support to the shelters. This worker would help shelters to identify resources and improve links to other relevant homelessness services	CLG	July 09
Run a planning and good practice event to ensure strategic working is maximised.	Shelters, local authorities, CLG, Homeless Link and Housing Justice	Sept 09
Increase training and support for volunteers including awareness and knowledge training in key subjects such as dealing with aggressive behaviour, CEEs, the Clearing House and how to access specialist advice and support	Shelters, Homeless Link and Housing Justice	Oct 09
Production and dissemination of clear guidelines to external agencies on who each shelter can and cannot accommodate and the rationale behind this	Shelters	Nov 09
Shelters to have “view only” access to CHAIN records to assist in assessing guests’ housing options.	Shelters, CLG, CHAIN team	Nov 09
Day centres and outreach teams to undertake more co-ordinated work with the shelters in supporting guests, especially around move-on	Homeless Link to facilitate other homelessness agencies liaising with the shelters	Dec 09 onwards
Dedicated on-line information made available for the shelters via the internet	Homeless Link	Nov 09 onwards
Ensure cold weather services are integrated into local pathways of provision and services	Local authorities, shelters	July 09 onwards

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