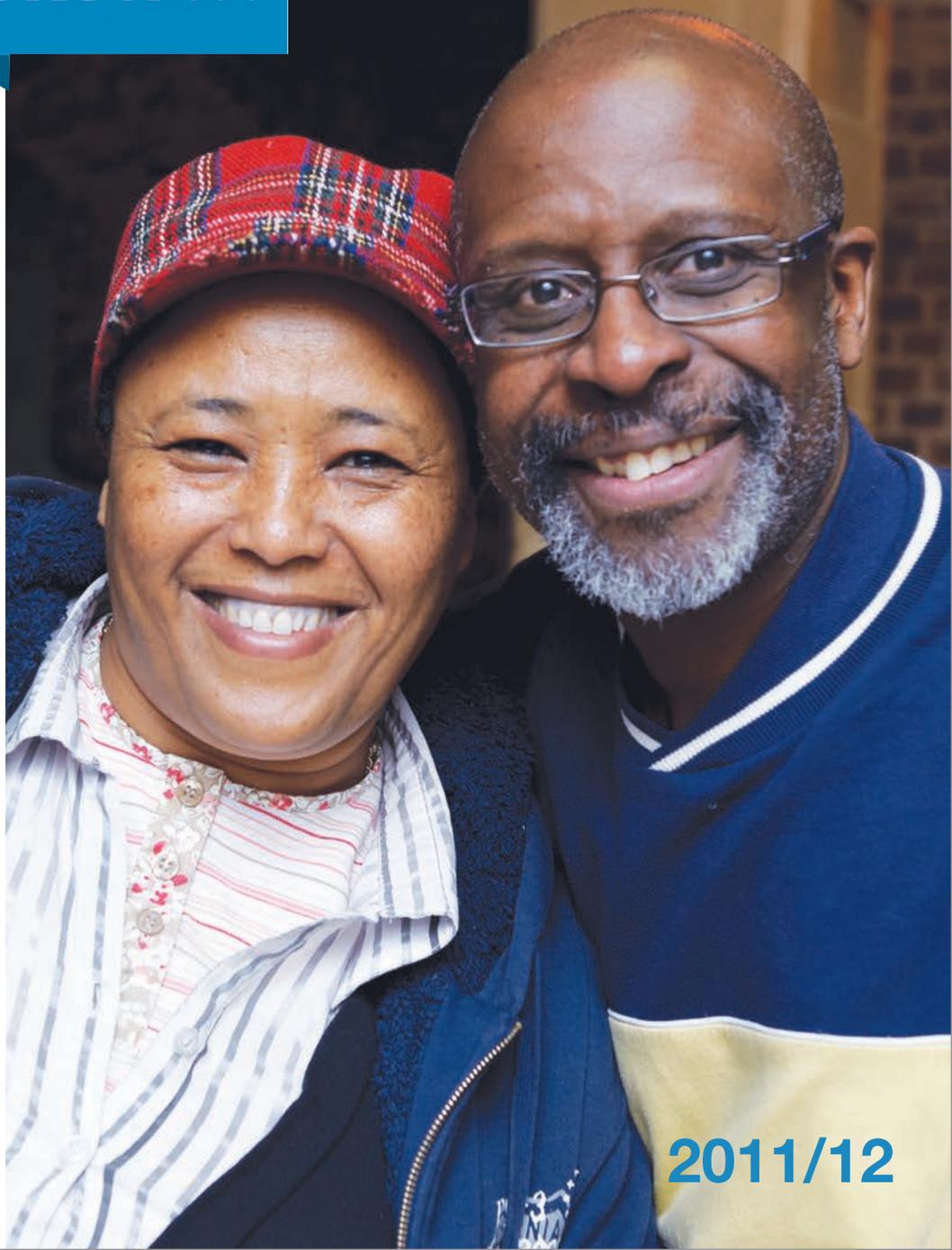
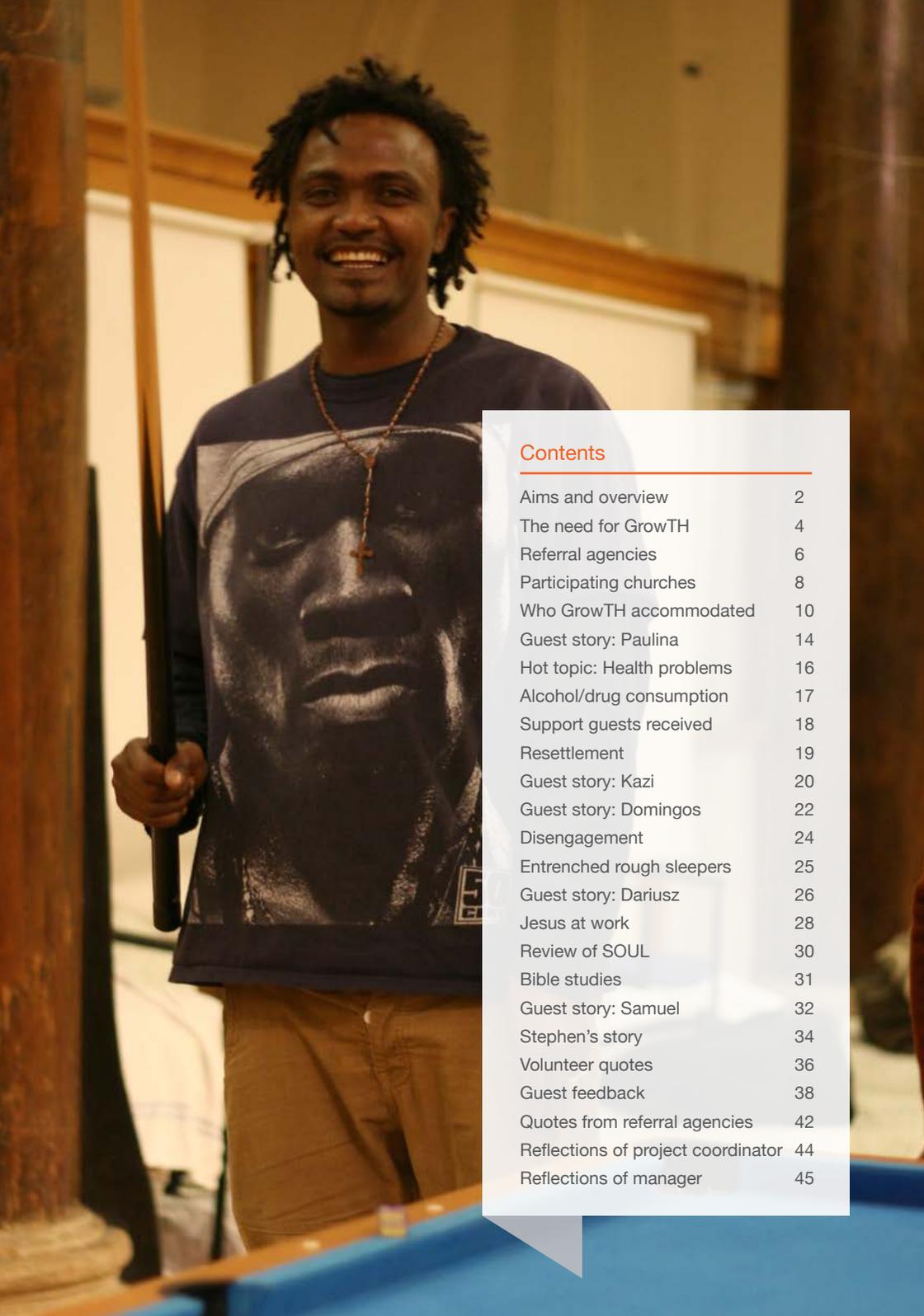


GROWTH



2011/12



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“Before GrowTH I wasn’t interested in God, but when I started praying it was like a heavy weight just lifted off me.

One evening I got in an argument with John (another guest), who turned on the tele after the volunteers said we couldn’t watch it because they had no TV licence. When I told John to turn it off, he was accusing me like, “Why do I have to? Don’t tell me what to do! Who do you think you are?” We both went mad and I went to whack him, and there were two voices in my head – one was saying, ‘just whack him!’ – but then the other voice was like, ‘no, don’t do that’. In the end I walked up to his face, said, “You don’t understand man, you need deliverance” and walked off!

In the past I would’ve whacked him and got into big trouble but now everything’s changed. The next morning John became really friendly and asked for my phone number, and now we’re like best pals.”

[Samuel, a guest at GrowTH](#)

AIMS

GrowTH is a compassion driven, evangelistic response to homelessness in Tower Hamlets. The evangelical values which underpin GrowTH shape our desire to see people understand and respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and be welcomed into the local Christian community where their faith can be nurtured and they can discover their God-given potential.

Firstly we aim to provide emergency accommodation and food to homeless people in Tower Hamlets without discrimination and favour. Secondly we try to assist our guests' long term situation, in both their physical and spiritual needs.

OVERVIEW

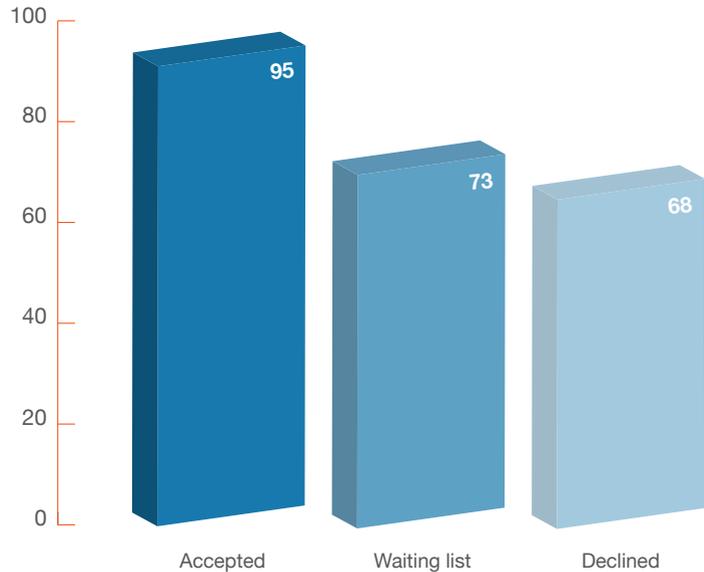
GrowTH is a church based 'rolling shelter' that provides free emergency accommodation to street homeless and those at immediate risk of rough sleeping. This winter it ran from 14th November 2011 until 15th March 2012 – one month longer than last winter.

This night shelter had a capacity of 15 beds every night and was operated by over 250 volunteers from over 10 different churches. Each night of the week a different church hosted our guests in one of 7 church venues, providing a total of 105 bed spaces (on air mattresses or camping beds) and 210 meals per week. Guests could stay for up to 28 days, during which time the GrowTH Project Coordinator worked to resettle them into more permanent accommodation.

GrowTH offered customised support and emergency accommodation, often at a time when people had exhausted all their other known avenues of assistance. GrowTH was open to all who were rough sleeping or were at immediate risk of rough sleeping.



Referrals taken



THE NEED FOR GROWTH

The Autumn 2011 counts and estimates suggested there was a 23% rise in rough sleepers, from Autumn 2010 [DCLG (2011) Rough Sleeping Statistics England – Autumn 2011: street counts and estimates of rough sleeping in England]. As the borough with the highest population in London, Tower Hamlets has reflected this nationwide trend and there is now more need for shelter than ever before – particularly for people categorised as ‘non-statutory homeless’ or ‘not in priority need’.

The local council acknowledges that a large number of individuals and families are in temporary, unsuitable or insecure housing but denies that rough sleeping is a problem in Tower Hamlets. It concludes that the only rough sleeping

hot spot is Whitechapel, which is ‘largely a result of the Whitechapel Mission attracting rough sleepers’ from outside the borough. However the evidence given is based on faulty methodology, as the street head counts use an extremely strict definition of rough sleeping which doesn’t include sleeping in abandoned vehicles, tower blocks, bin chutes, on buses or even in parks. As long as the council refuses to take responsibility for providing for these people, night shelters will be an essential service for vulnerable people with no fixed abode.

Between 14th November 2011 and 16th March 2012, GrowTH received 236 referrals from agencies and accommodated 90 homeless people –



“Being homeless on the streets of London is in and of itself, an emergency”

a 33% increase on last year. The other referrals did not receive a bed because the shelter was full, so we were only able to accommodate 38% of people referred to us. If the shelter was full, referrals would be added to the waiting list which meant that if they turned up and a guest did not come, then they could replace them. If there was no space then someone on the waiting list could still stay for a meal, but because there was no guarantee of a bed most people on the waiting list did not turn up.

Nevertheless, on many nights the shelter was not full and there were many instances when an expected guest disengaged, but no-one on the waiting

list came to replace them. Homelessness is an extremely dangerous state for anyone to be in, regardless of whether they are defined by the council as in ‘priority need’ or not. Crisis estimated the life expectancy of an average homeless person in the UK as just 47 years [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/dec/21/homeless-people-life-expectancy-47>].

This winter two homeless people who were known by guests in the shelter died on the streets, and a few guests were attacked and mugged on the streets before entering the shelter. As Christians it is vital that we protect the most vulnerable, regardless of how they got there; being homeless on the streets of London is in itself an emergency.

REFERRAL AGENCIES

Rather than advertising widely, we took referrals from agencies within Tower Hamlets which worked with specific people groups within the homeless population. The expertise of these referral agencies also proved invaluable as we set about trying to find move on accommodation for our guests.

The Whitechapel Mission

Under the leadership of Sonia Scott, The Whitechapel Mission's Life Skills team work with hundreds of rough sleepers in the Tower Hamlets area – providing them with advice on accommodation, immigration issues, job seeking and training. Whitechapel Mission provided the majority of our referrals and we had an excellent working relationship with them.

Health E1

Health E1 is the primary care centre for homeless people in the borough and thus has a very broad view of the homeless problem in the locality. We have had a mutually beneficial relationship with Health E1, not only receiving numerous referrals from them but also sending many of our guests to be registered there.

Crisis Skylight

Crisis Skylight's progression team works to provide accommodation for rough sleepers who are engaged in their many training programmes. In particular, Crisis offer an invaluable service to Eastern Europeans with two full-time Polish/Russian speaking workers.

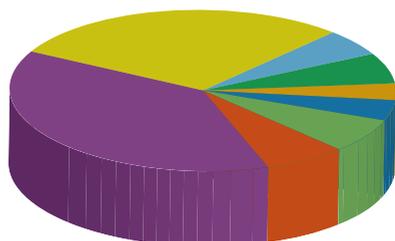
Praxis

Praxis is a charity which works particularly with vulnerable migrants, a people-group that made up around 25% of our guests. Praxis provided a wealth of support and advice to our guests who have no recourse to public funds or are asylum seekers.

Spitalfields Crypt Trust

Spitalfields Crypt Trust (SCT) is a drop-in which works with people recovering from homelessness, poverty and addiction on the border of Tower Hamlets and Hackney. We continued to build a good working relationship with SCT.

Amount of referrals from agencies



86	Whitechapel Mission	8	Praxis
66	Crisis Skylight	9	Crisis at Christmas
12	Spitalfields Crypt Trusts	16	Other shelters
14	Health E1	16	Other agencies





PARTICIPATING CHURCHES

Running GrowTH for 4 months was a combined effort of over 250 volunteers from many churches across Tower Hamlets and beyond. As the shelter progressed there was more and more integration between churches. Here's a snapshot of the churches involved.

St Paul's Shadwell

St Paul's Shadwell, an Anglican church, was popular among guests as it was the only venue with showers! Church coordinator Sarah Opie said it was a "great chance to spend time with guests from all different backgrounds and for people within the church to get to know each other better by volunteering together as well." Monday evenings at St Paul's tended to involve lots of deep discussion and prayer, and one volunteer said "It surprised me how 'normal' most of the guests were, as if it could be you tomorrow".

St Matthias Community Centre

St Matthias Community Centre hosted Tuesday nights, led by Christine Frost: "I think we were blessed with a great team of volunteers and we all felt privileged to be involved." Many volunteers said they had become more conscious of homeless peoples' needs and more confident talking to them on the streets as a result. As volunteer David said, "God's will can be demanding but never dreary."

East London Tabernacle Baptist Church

At the East London Tabernacle Baptist Church, cell groups each took a turn in running the shelter so most people in the church got involved at some point. There was also a storehouse in the church with a mountain of donated furniture and cutlery which could be donated to guests who had been re-housed. Church coordinator Henk Van Der Meer said, "it was a great opportunity to follow Jesus' commands to help the needy, heal the sick by providing shelter, food and encouragement. Volunteers found it so rewarding to serve in this way."

Tower Hamlets Community Church

Phil Warren agreed to be a coordinator for Tower Hamlets Community Church and didn't realise what he was getting into! "Before this I had never worked or even talked to many homeless people. It has helped me develop in confidence in this ministry and completely changed any preconceptions I had of homeless people. It also made me realise the reality of the situation in this country as some guests had tried so hard to get jobs and homes etc but just couldn't... Also I realised how much God does in these guys' lives! I saw people go from completely broken and worn down to completely transformed."

Epainos Ministries

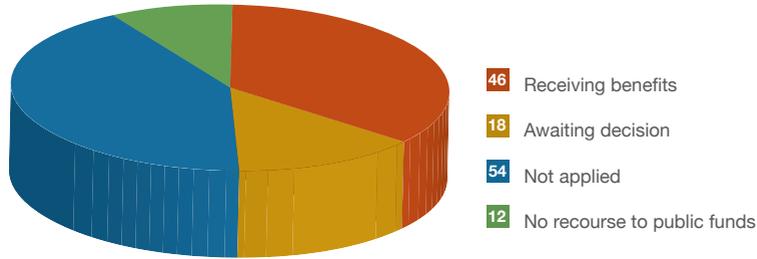
Epainos Ministries was brimming with enthusiastic volunteers who made it a great venue despite it being their first year with GrowTH. E1 Community Church joined forces with them to provide the team with experience, and the two churches have now built a deep relationship from which they plan to work together in the future on other projects. One volunteer Judith said, "I keep myself open to being touched by the experience of others, lest my heart become hardened to it. Has the experience made me more compassionate? I would like to think it has."

Other churches

Other churches who hosted GrowTH were the Good Shepherd Mission, All Saints Poplar and Christchurch Spitalfields. We are also very grateful for volunteers from Revelation Church, Christchurch London and St Luke's, as well as the Bethnal Green Mission for their generous donations.

WHO GROWTH ACCOMMODATED

Benefit status upon entering the shelter



This winter we hosted people from all walks of life – an engineer, a journalist, an actor, a chef, a sailor, students, electricians and much more. A few guests even continued working while they slept at the shelter.

The majority of our guests were not defined as in priority need by the council and only 3 people from GrowTH received accommodation from engaging with statutory services this winter. Furthermore, many guests struggled to receive any state benefits at all, either because they had no recourse to public funds or from lengthy delays in the benefits claim process. GrowTH takes guests in without discrimination or favour, and many of our guests came to us with no move-on options at all. We never refused a referral from our agencies unless the shelter was full. Unlike the popular stereotype of the homeless

people as jobless alcoholic males, our guests were very diverse in both their backgrounds and their difficulties.

This huge diversity in guest background challenges the misconception of “the homeless”.

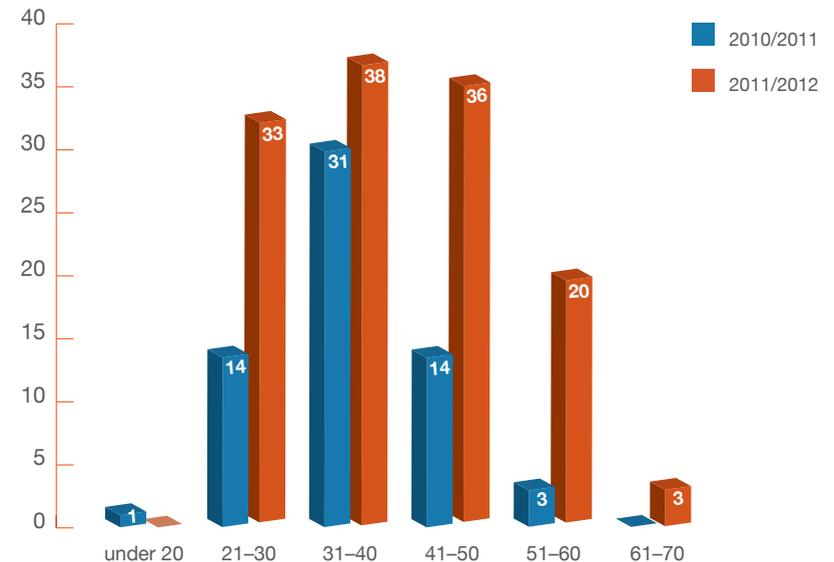
This huge diversity in guest background challenges the misconception of “the homeless”

Age range

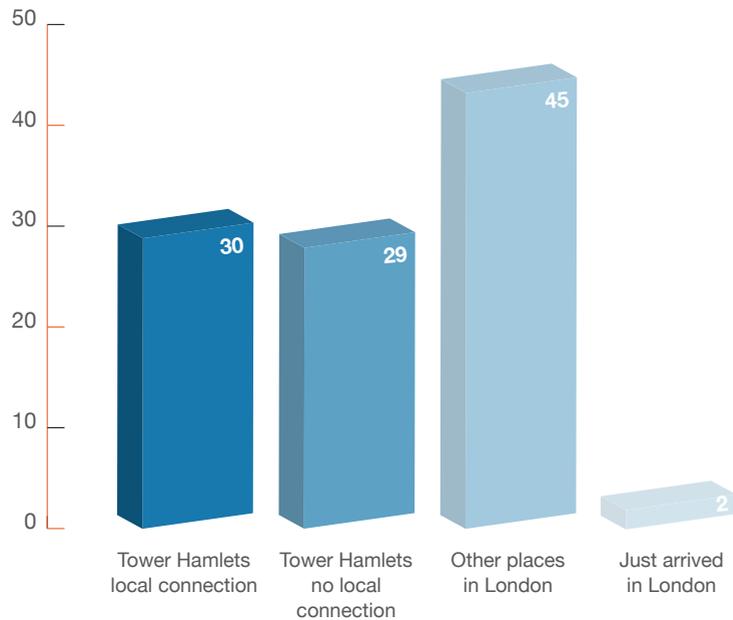
Whereas last year 31–40 was by far the most common age group, this year the age ranges have been more varied with many more older people than last year. The eldest guest in our shelter was 68 and the youngest was 20. Recent changes in housing benefit rules now mean those between 25 and 34 no longer get a one-bedroom flat on housing benefit and must seek shared accommodation. In April 2012, when

this change is fully implemented, we are likely to see large numbers of 25–34 year olds unable to keep up with rent payments and consequently evicted. The changes mean an additional 400,000 people will be looking for shared accommodation, making rooms even harder to find. We anticipate that next year, due to these changes, the average age of our guests will be much lower.

Age of referred guests



Where guests normally sleep



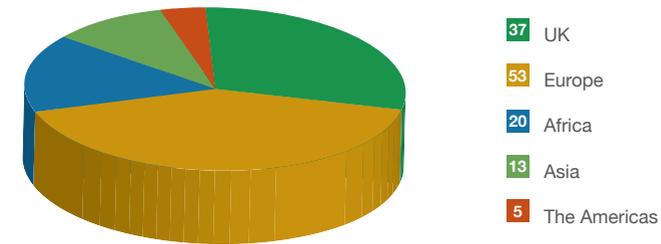
Guest backgrounds

Over 70% of referred guests said they were sleeping on the streets before coming to the shelter. While the majority of our guests normally sleep in Tower Hamlets, less than a third had a 'local connection' with the borough (a local connection is defined by London borough councils as having a tenancy agreement in the borough for 6 months in the last 12 months or 3 years in the last 5 years). Crucially, less than 10% could prove their local connection with tenancy contracts and were therefore not eligible for housing options services.

The primary reason given by guests for homelessness was lack of money, with other significant factors including relationship breakdown, upbringing and health problems (see 'Hot topic').

Many guests had lost their jobs recently and had not been able to keep up with rent payments. One guest was illegally evicted from his property. It is a vicious cycle: once people lose a permanent residence it becomes much harder for them to find work again because sleeping rough means that they don't get much sleep or access to washing facilities.

Where guests came from



International

29% of referred guests were British citizens, which may seem low but could also be considered quite high considering the advantages they have accessing statutory services.

A third of guests were Eastern Europeans looking for work in the UK. This figure shows that recent policy changes, which now allow them to claim state benefits (except Romanians and Bulgarians who still do not enjoy the same rights as other EU citizens), has not had as much impact.

In our experience it is still very difficult for Eastern Europeans to claim Jobseeker's Allowance due to language barriers. For instance, many of our guests visited the Job Centre with a friend who could help translate, but then received a phone call to advise them of their next steps. Unfortunately, it was difficult for them to understand a foreign language over the phone, especially when the phone operator had a strong accent. This meant the guests missed compulsory appointments, resulting in their jobseeker's allowance not being paid.

Even if Polish guests do everything right, it still takes at least a month for benefits claims to be processed because they're all sent to a 'specialist decision making team' at the Wick Job Centre in Scotland!

A new trend for this year has been the arrival of guests from European countries traditionally considered better off, that have been badly hit by the financial downturn like Portugal, Spain and Greece. A number of the Ethiopian and Eritrean guests seem to have come to Portugal initially, and then continued their search for work after losing their jobs.

“...it was really good for me – I liked the volunteers a lot, they were very friendly – 5 stars!”

GUEST STORY: PAULINA

Paulina, a Portuguese citizen, moved to the UK in 2010 and struggled to support herself with a badly paid cleaning job.

“Before I lived with my friend for 9 months but had to move out eventually; then my work was cut to just 10 hours a week and I couldn’t afford the rent. At first I was a little scared about going to the shelter, because I had never been homeless before, but I thought, I’ll try it one day and see. And it was really good for me – I liked the volunteers a lot, they were very friendly – 5 stars!”

Paulina came to GrowTH just before Christmas and spent a month at the shelter. We helped her apply for

Jobseeker’s Allowance, while the Crisis housing team looked for another place for her. Paulina is now back in her own studio flat and says, “Now I have my own place, it’s a quiet area and I have some nice neighbours who help me a lot. Also Seb (GrowTH project coordinator) has come to visit me, and dropped off some stuff like cutlery and a blanket. If the shelter wasn’t there it would have been really bad for me, I would have had to sleep on the streets. I want to say thank you to everybody!”



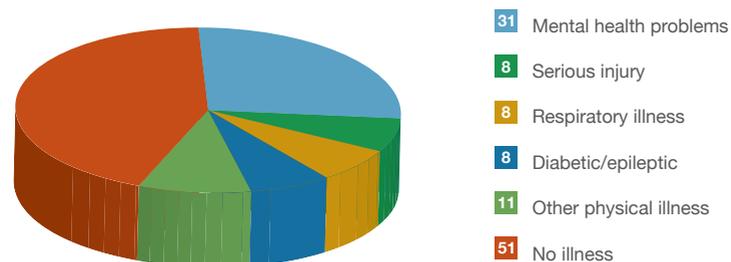
HOT TOPIC: HEALTH PROBLEMS

Rather than alcoholism, health complications were a much more prevalent issue at GrowTH. Over half of the guests had ongoing health problems when they came to us, some of which could have been fatal if guests were forced to sleep on the streets.

8 guests had serious injuries such as broken legs, often caused by accidents at work. One man had a serious head injury after being attacked while sleeping on the streets; another man came to the shelter just days after having a stroke and losing part of his memory and ability to communicate. Many more had respiratory illnesses and we worked with the London Chest Hospital to arrange for a mobile X-ray unit to come to the shelter and scan guests for TB. What's more, over a quarter of guests suffered from mental health problems – depression is a common result of rough sleeping, and many guests said they have had suicidal thoughts whilst being homeless.

Apart from the services of London Chest Hospital and Health E1, the treatment of homeless patients by statutory services in general this winter has been very worrying – many times patients are discharged from the hospital with no accommodation secured for them to go to. In fact, this winter GrowTH stopped taking referrals from the Royal London Hospital because last year they referred guests with huge medical support needs, without offering ongoing support. However, this did not stop former patients entering our shelter; instead the hospitals simply discharged them and they'd have to find another referral agency like Crisis. The result was that we still had to deal with extremely vulnerable patients, but now the hospitals had even less responsibility to provide support.

Health issues among guests



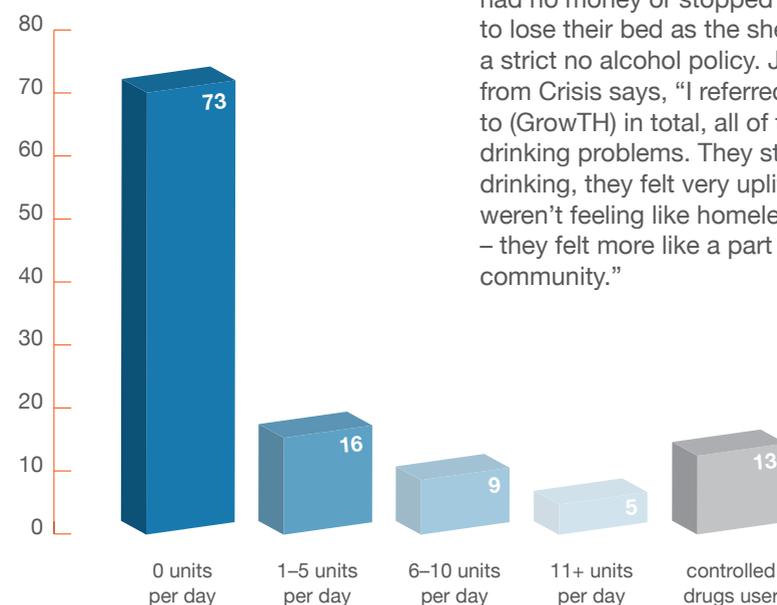
Equally disappointing is the response of local council housing options to requests for help. After one guest who suffered from anxiety and severe depression applied for housing support, he was told he'd have to wait a whole month just to come in for an assessment. Another guest who had broken both his legs after being knocked over by a car was not

considered priority need by Enfield Council (his local connection) because he was adjudged to have "made himself intentionally homeless" previously. GrowTH is contesting this decision but the process takes precious time during which the guest will be extremely vulnerable, so we have had to look to non-statutory move-on options in the mean time.

ALCOHOL/DRUGS CONSUMPTION

Contrary to the popular view of homeless people, most guests at GrowTH did not say they had alcohol or drug problems.

Alcohol/drugs consumption



One reason could be because many guests who would usually drink either had no money or stopped in order not to lose their bed as the shelter has a strict no alcohol policy. Justyna from Crisis says, "I referred five clients to (GrowTH) in total, all of them had drinking problems. They stopped drinking, they felt very uplifted, they weren't feeling like homeless people – they felt more like a part of the community."



“Many guests emphasised that the biggest support they received was the willingness of volunteers to spend time with and listen to them”

SUPPORT GUESTS RECEIVED

Our guests received an evening meal, breakfast and a packed lunch generously donated by Prêt a Manger. Nonetheless, many guests emphasised that the biggest support they received was the willingness of volunteers to spend time with and listen to them. One guest called Ashley appreciated having people to talk to and share his life story with, which he did more than once! Homelessness can feel isolating, but Ray said he enjoyed making new friends there (with both guests and volunteers) and improved his social skills. Ray is now in a hostel and on the way to rebuilding his life.

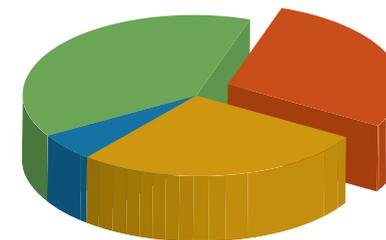
During the evening there were several activities such as table tennis, painting sessions and live music. The most popular event was “Sunday pampering night” once a month at Epainos where a team of professionals would come in to give guests a haircut, manicure and even massage! Another memorable day was when 17 guests and volunteers went down to Millwall football stadium together one Saturday afternoon to watch a live match; the result was a disappointing 0–0 but the atmosphere was great! Thanks to the Millwall Community Scheme for donating these tickets to GrowTH.



RESETTLEMENT

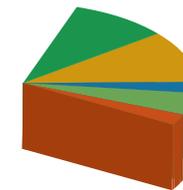
While guests were only promised shelter, food and encouragement for 28 days, we have had much success helping them find somewhere to stay after the shelter this year. 55% of guests were given a move-on option, which works out as 91% of the guests who fully engaged with the project coordinator for resettlement. Because every guest faced different challenges, the project coordinator tailored a unique resettlement plan for each guest which may explain why the results are so encouraging. Of the guests who engaged: 17 were re-housed in hostels or private rented accommodation, 4 were housed in rehabilitation centres, 2 were assisted in returning to their home countries, 24 were accommodated by other temporary shelters (typically other church night shelters) and 5 were given no option.

Move on results



- 25 Permanent resettlement
- 24 Referred to other shelters
- 5 No option
- 34 Disengaged

Permanent resettlement breakdown



- 8 Private rented accommodation
- 9 Hostel
- 2 NASS support
- 4 Rehabilitation
- 2 Left country

GUEST STORY: KAZI

“I’m 32 year old man, how I ended up homeless is a long story. It started with financial complications when my business started falling apart.”

“Then I had to move in my brother, which was okay for a while, but after a while he kicked me out and I had nothing else left.

“I’ve been in 3 night shelters: Haringey, Hackney and Tower Hamlets (GrowTH). What I liked about Tower Hamlets is the strict laws, which meant there was no alcoholics/drug addicts allowed in the shelter, it was a good bunch of people. I always felt very welcomed – all the volunteers were like brothers and sisters

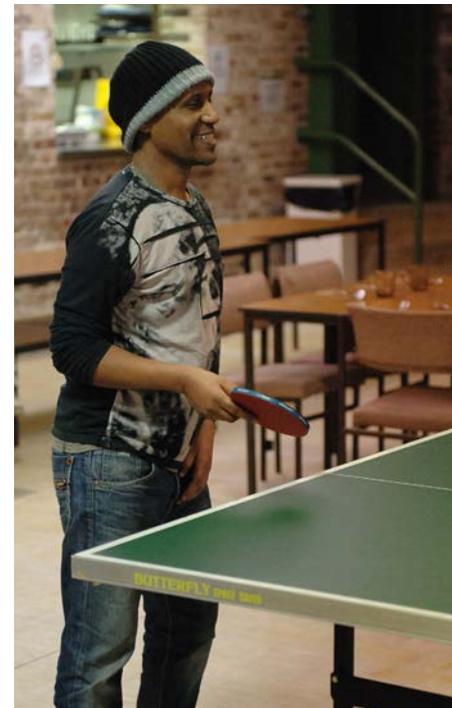
to me – we were like a band of brothers. “The other thing which was good about Tower Hamlets was the efficiency in getting me moved on. After 2 months in the other shelters nothing was happening, but after just a week in Tower Hamlets I got a phone call from an agency saying they had a place for me. Then I got a crisis loan for deposit and got into a hostel. I’m very grateful for not having to live on the streets in this time.”

(Kazi is not pictured)



GrowTH cannot take full responsibility for the resettlement of all of these guests, but in most cases we played a significant role. For example, in Kazi’s case the leading role was played by Hope Worldwide, but it was still crucial for Kazi to have somewhere to stay while this process was taking place. Whereas last year GrowTH worked in collaboration with other agencies for the majority of resettlements, this year most hostels and agencies were full up, due to the increased demand, so we had to find new ways of re-housing guests on our own.

For example, GrowTH has managed to build relationships with some estate agents that accept housing benefit and agree not to charge a deposit, in exchange for guarantees that the project coordinator will work with the guest to apply for crisis loans, housing benefits and such. As a result 4 guests who would otherwise still be on waiting lists have moved into private rented accommodation. However, this process is very time consuming and at present we do not have the capacity to play the leading role in all the guests’ resettlement. Further support was given to the guests once they’d moved into housing in the form of food (or Foodbank vouchers, thanks to Tower Hamlets Foodbank), delivering furniture or help with claiming housing benefit.



“All the volunteers were like brothers and sisters to me – we were like a band of brothers.”

“I’m in God’s hands now, and I prayed every day for Him to help me”

GUEST STORY: DOMINGOS

“I became homeless through a relationship breakdown, and ended up sleeping on the Whitechapel Road just after Christmas”

I got into the shelter in January, which helped me a lot both practically and emotionally. The best thing about the shelter was the resettlement; Seb (project coordinator) helped me find accommodation, put me in contact with an estate agents who had a property which accepts housing benefit and helped me apply for the crisis loan.

“During the shelter I made new friends and am still in contact with them; I remember thinking, “I’m in God’s hands now”, and I prayed every day for Him to help me. Now I got my own place in Hackney which is great.”

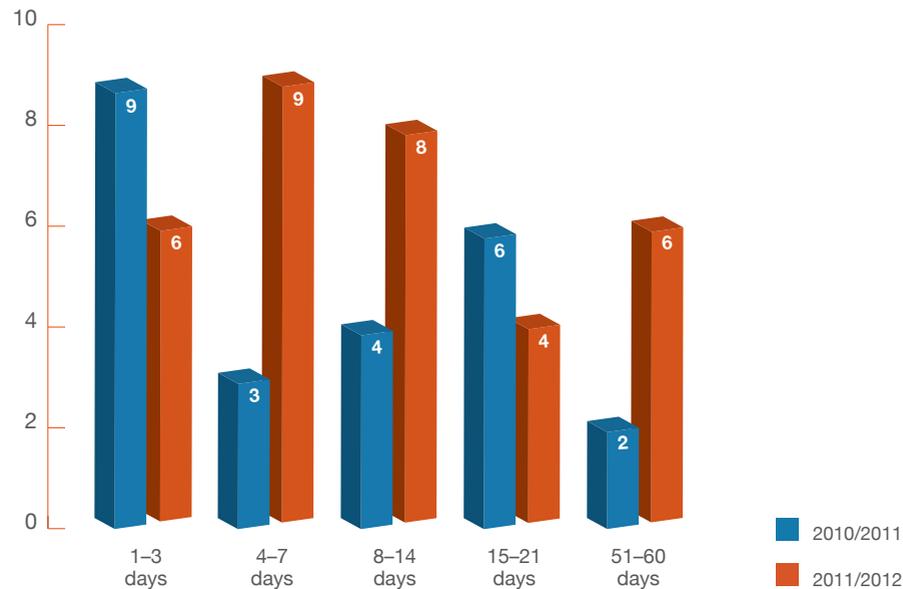


DISENGAGEMENT

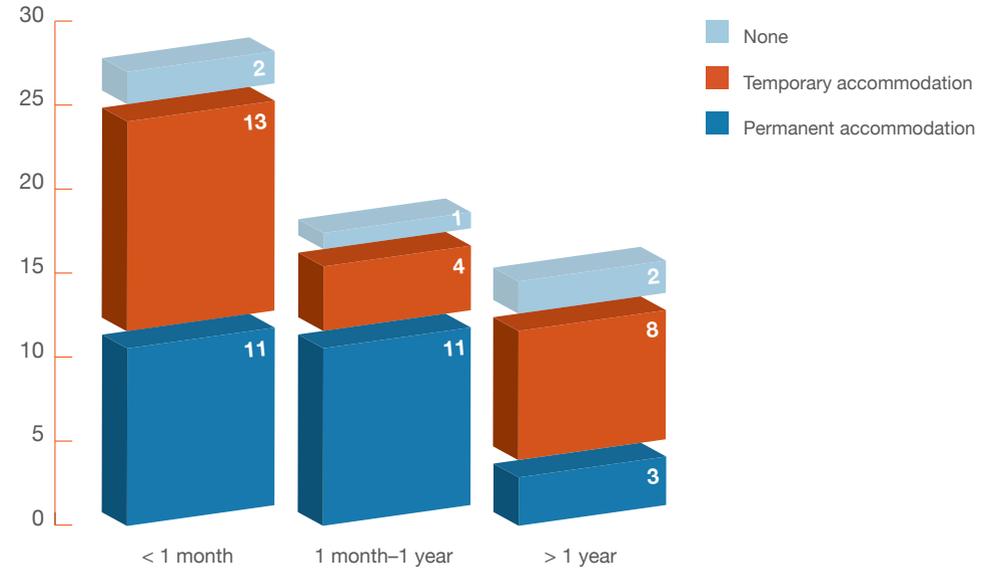
One obvious barrier to resettlement is that the disengagement rate (guests who leave the shelter before their 28 days are up) has been fairly high: 39% this year, a slight drop from 43% last year. At their first interview guests were given a hat, gloves, toiletries and a Bible to make them feel welcomed, but there is still work to be done as other winter shelters have lower drop-out rates. Unlike last year, most people who disengaged did not do so in the

first few days. During the course of the winter four people were banned from staying at the shelter – one for unacceptably aggressive behaviour and the other three for continually dropping out of the shelter and then requesting to get back in a few days later. Even after banning them, the project coordinator continued to work with them for resettlement if they were willing to engage.

Length of stay of disengaged guests



Move-on success compared with time spent on streets



ENTRENCHED ROUGH SLEEPERS

A notable trend was that guests who had recently been made homeless were more likely to be resettled than those who could be described as 'entrenched rough sleepers'. For instance among those successfully moved into private rented accommodation, only one of them had been on the streets longer than a year. One explanation of this could be that people who have a fixed abode are usually more integrated into the system and capable of accessing

statutory services for themselves. Conversely, the odds are stacked against those who are not used to paying a rent or attending regular job centre appointments and their problems may take more than 28 days to solve. In fact, simply the challenge of having to get to the shelter for 7:30pm every day proved too much for some – although for those who managed it, the consistency greatly helped give their lives structure.

GUEST STORY: DARIUSZ

“I move to the UK in 2008 and until 2010 I slowly lost all my savings while working for peanuts. On the evening of 26th September 2010 I had an accident – a very badly broken right ankle”

“This happened on North Greenwich University Campus area. Just bad luck, really. For the next month I was in Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Woolwich, which was pure horror. I was eleven times on operations tables; before hospital my weight was 102 kg (16 stones) but afterwards just 63 kg (10 stones) – so I lost 6 stone in one month. I spent 3 weeks in a wheelchair, and after that on crutches.

2 strokes in 4 months

“The ambulance delivered me “home”; that was not really home – a place occupied by terrible people from Poland and Romania. No one was happy to help. I was always hungry and the kitchen became a place of fear for me; my top dream at this time was to be able to prepare tea. But things can always be worse. On 3rd November 2010 I had my first stroke, and temporarily lost my speech and memory. For the next 3 months I tried 9 times go back to work, which was also horrible; each time the safety officer had to remove me from the work site (sometimes after 2 weeks – sometimes just after 2 hours). On 10th February 2011 I suffered a second stroke after reading a letter from Jobcentre with bad news; this one almost has killed me (I lost control of over 70% of my body).

Homeless and jobless

“When The Royal London Hospital discharged me home, my landlord changed had changed the locks of the home. He told me, “Go somewhere else man, I don’t need a dead body in my home!”. I was homeless. I reported this issue to whoever I could – the police, the council – but I only met arrogant people who didn’t want to help when they found I had no benefits.

“I know many people in UK, so at this period I found some work with a friend, but I was still on crutches. Things went up and down for a while, with some good jobs and some tough. One particular manager used me for some very heavy duty, and as a result on 1st September 2011 my leg was again broken. My physiotherapist with gave me crutches again, and I was given a little bit of compensation (£600 pounds for a broken leg!) but lost my job.

“Since then I tried to claim Employment Support Allowance, only with no results. Thames Link helped me to find work again but I had no money for bus tickets, so I had to walk between Tottenham and Farringdon Station: 3 hours walk... 11 hours work... 3 hours walk back... dinner, 7 hours sleep... and again – all on crutches – 7 days per week... This was a terrible time for me, but I had no alternative because I was getting no benefits.



“The walks damaged my leg further, and then over Christmas/New Year the job market was very quiet. In my account was less money, less and less until I reached zero pounds and eight pence (at least I was not in debt!). My new landlord kicked me out again even though I had explained my medical situation with him before. At this point I the only thing left was to ring my friends from Crisis Skylight and... well, you know what happened next...”

Coming to GrowTH

Dariusz came to GrowTH in a bad way physically and very cynical about his chances of getting any benefits. However, we made enquiries on his behalf, found out exactly what the problem was and eventually got the ESA back-paid from November. This gave Dariusz enough to pay 4 weeks rent in advance and we helped him find a private rented flat to move into, while he claimed housing benefit. Now his

leg has almost recovered and he has started getting interviews for work, and is well on his way to getting his life back on track. He says, “the shelter gave me feelings of total security and comfort, both physical and mental comfort. The group (of guests) in GrowTH was very nice, and I met some good people. This Project has given me time to re-organise everything, after just three weeks – now I have a chance of getting a good job. Thank you to everyone, you have given me hope, and possibility for future.”

In fact, now Dariusz has even offered to let one of the other guests, whose benefits still haven’t come through, sleep on his floor until his situation is sorted (GrowTH let them borrow an air mattress). It’s a bit like what Jesus said, “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (Matthew 25:40).



JESUS AT WORK

Prayer has been central to GrowTH's ethos, as well as our commitment to share the good news of Jesus. At the beginning of each evening the church coordinator gathered the volunteers to pray for the guests before they arrived, and on many nights guests asked for prayer. Bibles were offered to all the guests, including dozens of foreign language Bibles generously donated by the Bible Society.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:9



REVIEW OF SOUL

Real friendship relationships developed between the guests themselves and also between the guests and the volunteers.

In doing so the true love of Jesus Christ was shown in action. But Jesus did not just come to do good to others, He came to bring the Good News to all and He Himself is the Good News. Participating churches found various ways to share this Good News to the guests. Some of them organised a short talk from the Word of God just before or after dinner, prayed with the guests, gave them Bibles and tracts to read, or just shared the Good News of Jesus in a conversation. We also ran a DVD course, SOUL, that helps explain the Christian faith.

“SOUL is a seven part DVD series from Christianity Explored. The series challenged participants to see why Jesus died, discovered the truth of Jesus rising from the dead and explored the identity, mission and call

of Jesus. Each church was responsible to run one session on their volunteering evening.

“Many questions were asked by the guests during this course: ‘Why do we have different religions?’, ‘Why don’t we see God?’, ‘What will happen when Jesus returns?’, ‘Will I go to heaven or hell?’, ‘Do I choose my destiny, or is it chosen?’, etc. Some of these questions were answered during the week.

“Running SOUL created a great openness amongst the guests and a desire to hear the Truth. Many of them went to some Sunday services held in the Churches, some made a recommitment to Jesus, and there was also one person that realised that Jesus is Good News and accepted Jesus’ forgiveness for the first time.”

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BIBLE STUDIES

“As a Christian response to homelessness, GrowTH seeks to meet the whole needs of the people that we come into contact with. That means that we realise that people are created by God with an inherent dignity that is God given, but also with a need to be in relationship with their Creator. In line with this, one activity that we offer to our guests is a weekly Bible study. It’s been a great privilege to be involved on Friday mornings going through the Gospel of Mark with a number of guests examining the claims of Jesus. Some of these guests are Christians, some are of other faiths and some have no faith background at all. These times have been about talking, listening, discussing and giving people a chance to find out more about Jesus in a relaxed and friendly environment,

taking time out to think about the things in life that matter.

“A theme in these sessions has been discussing what Jesus meant when he asked people to follow him and what those words ‘follow me’ mean to us today. This was very useful for those faced with the reality of following Jesus in difficult circumstances. One guest who had just had all of his important belongings (inc passport etc) stolen shared very movingly of how for him following Jesus meant forgiving the person who had stolen his stuff, and then followed it up by praying that God would bless the thief! It’s safe to say that I came away from that session having learned far more than I taught.”

Tony, Chair of GrowTH

GUEST STORY: SAMUEL

“My life at the shelter lasted for three weeks, in those three weeks my life changed. It all started with me becoming homeless; I used to live with my wife but we had many problems and I left home to stay with a friend. After visiting relatives in Sierra Leone, I came back to London to discover that my friend had died and I had nowhere else to go. I was sleeping rough on the streets, night buses, in the parks, gardens – you know, anywhere to just stay overnight. The worst thing was not knowing how you’ll wake up in the morning, because there’s no security. And then you don’t know where you’ll get your food that day, or where you’ll sleep the next night.

“Someone told me about Whitechapel Mission so I went there and met Chris, who introduced me to Gavin from Hope (Worldwide). Then Hope introduced me to GrowTH night shelter, that same day they got me into the shelter, and I was off the streets. They gave me a bed for the night, a hot dinner and breakfast the next morning. All the volunteers in the night shelter treated me with respect and kindness.

“During my stay I met volunteers who inspired me about the importance of having God in my life and being a Christian. One evening at the Good Shepherd Mission, Ryan prayed for us after a Bible study and I that night I had a dream where an old friend, who was training to be a pastor, came and warned me that I needed to repent. The next morning I asked Ryan what he had prayed the night before, but he couldn’t remember! I said I wanted to

put my faith in Jesus, and ever since I took that step my life has changed for good.

“Before GrowTH I wasn’t interested in God, but when I started praying it was like a heavy weight just lifted off me. One evening I got in an argument with John (another guest), who turned on the tele after the volunteers said we couldn’t watch it because they had no TV licence. When I told John to turn it off, he was accusing me like, “Why do I have to? Don’t tell me what to do! Who do you think you are?” We both went mad and I went to whack him, and there were two voices in my head – one was saying, ‘just whack him!’ – but then the other voice was like, ‘no, don’t do that’. In the end I walked up to his face, said, “You don’t understand man, you need deliverance” and walked off! In the past I would’ve whacked him and got into big trouble but now everything’s changed. The next morning John became really friendly and asked for my phone number, and now we’re like best pals.

“I can see God’s hand really clearly in my resettlement too. I applied for a new passport and received it 5 weeks earlier than they said it would come – just in time for when I needed my ID for a crisis loan! Having a permanent place to stay makes such a difference – it lifts your spirit, gives you motivation again. A man should have responsibility, and having this flat to look after makes you feel like a man again. When you’re homeless everything drops, you can’t have a relationship – but GrowTH put me back on track, it feels good.



“Now I am taking health & safety training, and doing a managerial course to get me back into work. GrowTH has encouraged me to have a relationship with God and I want to thank everyone who got involved in making the winter night shelter come true. Being homeless changed my view of homeless people, and once I get settled I want to come back and help volunteer at the shelter next year. Stay blessed.”

STEPHEN'S STORY

"My name is Steve and this year was the first year I've volunteered for GrowTH after last year being a guest.

"I was a guest at GrowTH last year after problems with my landlord forced me to leave my home in Manchester. I had been sleeping on night buses for a few weeks when one morning while sitting at the Whitechapel mission I was asked if I needed anywhere to stay. Obviously, I was so grateful for this opportunity to have somewhere to stay. During my four weeks stay I was offered a studio flat in South London that I am still living in this day. For the first time in a long while staying at the shelter made me feel like a human again and was very enjoyable and during those 4 weeks I had such a good time.

"For the 2011/12 season I wanted to volunteer so I could give back to GrowTH and this year's guests the help I had received the previous year. I was feeling very nervous as I arrived for my first shift as a volunteer, but these fears were soon put at ease by the teamwork of all the other volunteers. I found the volunteers just as friendly as I did when I was a guest! It was such a blessing to be able to spend time with the guests and talk to them and hopefully enable them to have a comfortable stay. Being a volunteer showed how much work went into just providing one night of the shelter. As a guest I never saw all the effort that went to setting up the venue and running the venue smoothly. I thought people just turned up and the shelter just opened – how wrong I was!!!

"Each night I volunteered was different but all were enjoyable even when mopping a blocked toilet at midnight on a Friday night!! I particularly enjoyed chatting with guests offering a listening ear. This was something that I found really encouraging when I was a guest so it was such a privilege to give something back as a volunteer.

"Will I volunteer again? The answer is most definitely yes, in fact, I'm not sure what I'm going to do with my Friday and Sunday nights between now and next November!"





VOLUNTEER QUOTES

“It’s good to be part of a movement that is bringing God’s love to Tower Hamlets” **Rachel, THCC**

“Enjoyable, interesting to meet new people. Hard word but worth it. Fun, good atmosphere, respectful” **Peter, St Matthias**

“It makes me realise how lucky I am, and not to take the good times for granted” **Essie, ELT**

“This has been very rewarding and great experience. I enjoyed all aspects of it. Working with a fantastic team, and getting to know the guests and their personal life stories. But a bit tiring!” **Sanita, St Matthias**

“A really eye-opening time & fantastic opportunity to serve. It was a very humbling experience” **Kayleigh, ELT**

“It has enabled me to serve in a capacity I have longed wished to, and look forward to serving again” **Joy, Epainos**

“It was good to appreciate that guests are individuals with different backgrounds and loads” **Carys, ELT**

“It surprised me how ‘normal’ most of the guests were, as if it could be you tomorrow” **Stephen, St Paul’s Shadwell**

“It made me more aware of the needs of other people beyond practical help – talking to people and spending time listening to what they are saying can be as important to them as a hot meal. Many people are willing to talk about faith and are respectful enough to be open to the possibility” **Kerry, St. Paul’s Shadwell**

“It helped me improve my self confidence, and gave me hope for my own life and work situation” **Wuto, All Saints**

“It’s given more insight into the needs of the guests and more fuel for prayer” **Barbara, ELT**

“It would be great to explore extending the shelter to run for more months” **Stephen, St Paul’s Shadwell**

“We definitely want to be involved next winter” **Christine, St Matthias**

“I’m really passionate about following up some of the people from the night shelter, I am getting the chance to spend some time with some of the people who have begun coming to ELT” **Kayleigh, ELT**



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GUEST FEEDBACK

In two words, how would you describe your time at the shelter?

Warmth, kindness / life saver, priceless / I dunno / good time / very good / everything fine / extremely helpful / comfortable / not bad / enjoyable, pleasurable / brilliant / interestingly different / very good / good / family / good food

How would you sum up your experience at the shelter?

It was a privilege. I never expected what was to happen / the best thing to happen / very good / not bad okay / brilliant. I came to know new people from different backgrounds / I learned great social skills with volunteers and guests alike / I've been able to meet and talk with very kind and genuine people. Thank you / like a roller-coaster it has its ups and downs / nice hospitality / Overall cathartic and have met good friends / I think they saved my life, I would've still been on the streets, most probably dead / can't fault anything / wonderful experience / It was very accommodating, the churches were great as well as the volunteers, but my comfort and safety did become an issue at times, felt threatened by a few people / It was an experience / very positive / a good experience and friendship with people of different background / volunteers were kind, helpful and intelligent without imposing their beliefs on others

Were the volunteers friendly and helpful?

Yes, so kind and helpful / they were the best they could be / yes / yes very friendly and helpful / yeah that was nice / They made me feel at home / yes / none / yes, always and willing to sit and listen to your life story (sometimes more than once!) / all made me feel welcome and wanted! Great listeners with hearts of gold / the volunteers are kind make sure you have what you need, they do the best they can. I can't always sleep and they'll make me a hot drink, give me a hot water bottle and chat / very friendly and helpful / yes / friendly and helpful / yes / yes – good / in some venues more than others



At the closing service, guests were given the opportunity to share their thoughts on their time at GrowTH. 8 former guests spoke from the front; mentioning stories, thanking volunteers and in some instances praising God.



GUEST FEEDBACK CONTINUED

Were there any food dishes that were served too often?

The food was so interesting, and delicious / it was all good / chicken + rice / no / not at all, 10 out of 10 / not really / spaghetti / apple crumble. But can you have crumble too often? Probably not! / no / no / beans / no / beef / too much shepherds and mince meat, but I'm not complaining / not particularly / no, food was good on the whole / chicken / every place had different food / yes beef / chicken, sausage, meat

What do you think the scheme could do better at finding accommodation for guests?

I cannot speak for others. It is my responsibility to find accommodation for myself / good / you do very well, nothing left for you to do – you done everything for helping life and changing the world for good how God wants / from my point they're doing much better / the system already in place works perfectly. So there is no need for change / I already had a plan so didn't need help / have contact with certain hostels, have landlord list, the scheme is okay though / it was good / spend more time with the guests / no / I'd have liked my own place. I'm going to rehab, I don't really want to but I'm ill and need a permanent place. I'm thankful though / no complaints / finding appropriate accommodation & welfare benefit to guests / having more housing resources and you should have more agencies / encourage guests to view more properties and understand the process & limitations / still waiting to find accommodation myself, being moved to another night shelter / more information, clear and certain / contact housing office and landlords / I think scheme should find accommodation after shelter closing / pray every day / invite people with professional/residential capability to help directly

Is GrowTH better than statutory provision?

Yes / yes / don't know / yes they are / I've no idea as I've no experience with the other / for me, both are important / don't know / yes this is the first time for me to use this type of service / yes! / yes / yes, especially as it is the Christian organisation / I have nothing to compare with / yes, it's better

REFERRAL AGENCY QUOTES

Caroline Harte, Crisis

“GrowTH offered a very friendly, supportive and welcoming environment for members and were genuinely interested in the follow on work and accommodation of individual referrals. When contact was made with GrowTH they always told us directly what members chances were of accessing the service each evening which we all greatly appreciated. There was regular contact throughout the day when needed with regards to our members and referrals.

“I have really appreciated linking in with you guys and knowing what an excellent supportive and friendly service you have provided to all our clients who stayed there. You are an example to other agencies, you inspire by the way you operate, well done and thank you... I feel it offers an ace service and is a model service for other agencies within the Tower Hamlets area. The provision is second to none!”

Bethan Lant, Praxis

“GrowTH is able to be more flexible and helpful because it is not constrained by statutory sector funding which dictates to who and how it may offer services... Without GrowTH a large number of very vulnerable and desperate people would have no option but to sleep on the streets in the very coldest months. Our work would be a lot harder without you.”

Gavin Bristow, Hope Worldwide

“Working with GrowTH is very simple, from making referrals to excellent maps to brilliant communication – I had no problems, and all my clients gave positive feedback about the shelter. There was a great atmosphere when I visited, and everyone was very approachable.

“It’s impressive that GrowTH is not only running a shelter, but also being very proactive about housing the guests yourself – like finding new landlords and dealing with crisis loans. What’s amazing is how the volunteers have chipped in to donate and even deliver furniture – a double bed, a fridge – to resettled guests. The service has improved from last year, and we look forward to continuing to work with GrowTH in the future.”

Health E1

“We have found GrowTH to be responsive, compassionate and helpful. They provide food & shelter to people who may not otherwise be able to access it. It provides several weeks in which people can be worked with to assess their options and assist them navigate a complex system.”

Chris Dykes, Whitechapel Mission

“GrowTH’s role has been invaluable, but it is really one that shouldn’t be required. If society wants to ensure nobody sleeps rough, then the state has to play a much greater role in preventing the causes of homelessness ever arising in the first place... Without addressing structural issues and ensuring it is possible to access accommodation through statutory mechanisms, we will constantly be using these stop gap measures, trying to plaster a wound that simply won’t stop bleeding.

“Saying that, GrowTH was a lifeline during the cold months for many people, largely from Tower Hamlets... Unfortunately it remains one of the last refuges for people that are living through a nightmare. People arrive at our door in a state of desperation, often having slept out the previous night. I have people coming in saying that they tried to close their eyes, and just weren’t sure if they were going to be able to open them again... To have a resource like GrowTH means an incredible amount to people, myself included, as that conversation can quickly transform into one of great joy and relief, they will have food tonight, they will have somewhere warm to sleep, and they will be safe.”

Stephen Barnes, Crisis

“GrowTH offers a human response. It’s not just a ‘service’. The lack of cynicism in response to members is excellent. In fact, in the eleven years I have worked in homelessness probably the quickest, most efficient, most accommodating referral system I have used. And Seb (and Ollie) just about as helpful, supportive and patient as anyone could be. THANK YOU!”

REFLECTIONS OF PROJECT COORDINATOR Seb Rumsby



“It’s been an exhausting but totally worthwhile 6 months for me working at the shelter. Each day brought new and unforeseen challenges, which made my job very interesting but also stressful at times. It was uncommon for the situation to change from jubilant, after a guest had successfully applied for a crisis loan – to dismal, after finding out another guest had dropped out of rehabilitation – and back again in the space of an hour! One crucial lesson I had to learn was that I was not in control, because so many factors were out of my hand; so when the circumstances started falling apart I’d pray, ‘God, you’re in charge and I’m not – deal with it.’

“And God would indeed deal with it in miraculous ways (usually in the last minute), to keep me dependent on Him. Several times I’d fall on my knees in the office having come to the end of myself, and cry out for a guest, and the next phone call I’d make would turn into a potential move-on option. On one occasion I was about to pay the bus fare for a guest when I realised to my

horror that my wallet had gone missing, presumably stolen, and once again prayer was my only hope. When I went downstairs, I met a stranger who looked at me and asked, ‘Are you Seb? I found your wallet on the pavement and handed it in to the police station.’ The guest who accompanied me to the station agreed that it was a miracle and praised God, because it meant I could pay his bus fare!

“I have learnt so much that it almost seems a waste for me not to continue working to re-house homeless people, given the alarming growth of homelessness across the UK. The unique thing about GrowTH is that, unlike other shelters, it is explicitly evangelical and not embarrassed about it. And that’s why it has been successful; guests who have spent longer on the streets say there’s something different about GrowTH – the atmosphere, the joy, the volunteers’ enthusiasm. I believe it’s the presence of God, who loves to be where people give Him glory and share His love with others.”

REFLECTIONS OF MANAGER Ollie Kendal

In October 2011, as GrowTH started to gear up for it’s second season, I felt a renewed sense of apprehension: was this actually going to work again? There were so many boxes that need to be ticked, so many meals to be cooked, so many air-beds that need to be blown up! The need was also daunting. Official government figures suggested that rough sleeping was up a quarter on the year before and record numbers of people were newly registering homeless.

The first of my fears proved unfounded; the shelter this year has not just worked, its surpassed expectations. Over 300 volunteers from 12 different church congregations have faithfully put on a longer, better and more ambitious night shelter than last year. Evenings in the shelter featured pampering sessions, haircutting, concerts, life skills classes, prayer and worship. Guests were treated to free visits to the football (courtesy of Millwall football club), art workshops, health check ups and of course resettlement and housing advice. But the world homeless people are facing is far harsher than it was a year ago.

There has been that nagging feeling that we are at the grim, messy end of a recession. Many of our guests this year had lost their jobs soon after the crash in 2008 and had survived off savings or loans until, with their

pockets finally empty, they became homeless. Our guests have come from all sorts of different backgrounds: we’ve had lawyers; construction workers; accountants; students; journalists; all forced to sleep either on the streets, on buses or on sofas.

Psalms 82:3–4 says, “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked”. As Christians we believe that when we see poverty on the rise, no matter what our politics or emotional temperament, we the Church must respond. GrowTH this year has played a small but significant part in that response in Tower Hamlets. Working together we have provided shelter to 90 people, made over 1700 warm beds available to the needy and found permanent accommodation for 30 people who came to us homeless.

As we look to next year, I’m reminded that “Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow” (James 1:17). With His strength, our response next year will be longer and leaner, with more churches helping more people trapped in homelessness get into homes and back into communities.



Contact us

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A video of the shelter this year can be found at <http://vimeo.com/thisisgrowth/videos>

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