

Calling all Schools- Homelessness in Norwich

For several years I organised a programme call 'Calling all Schools' that provided information about the work of an organisation called St Martins Housing Trust which provides accommodation, food and support for single homeless people in Norwich. St Martins has been in existence for over 30 years and provides the only direct access accommodation for homeless people in the Norwich area. As such it attracts people from a much wider area across Norfolk and further a field.

I have not been able to run the 'Calling all Schools' for the last 2 years but thought you would appreciate an update on the current position at St Martins. The need for its work was emphasised by 17 people found sleeping rough in Norwich over Christmas.

If you need any further information or would like a speaker on our work please contact St Martins on 01603 667706.

John Wills

St Martins – Helping the Homeless

St Martins is probably best known for running the Norwich Night Shelter. Originally based at the redundant church of St James in Barrack Street (currently the Puppet Theatre) and then in St Martins at Oak in Oak Street, the Night Shelter provided very basic accommodation for 5-600 people each year for almost 30 years until it closed in April 2002.

It closed because, a new direct access hostel for single homeless people known as Bishopbridge House was opened. It was desperately needed as the old shelter was crowded, lacked facilities and could be dangerous for residents and staff. Bishopbridge House provides decent accommodation and much improved facilities. Equally importantly it enables us to provide a level of staffing which provides support for homeless people and give them the chance to find stability and permanent accommodation. There are 30 beds(6 more than at the shelter) for single people aged from 18 upwards-mainly men but we also see a significant number of homeless young women. The average age of people who come to the hostel is about 25 and they come from all walks of life but primarily from Norwich and Norfolk.

St Martins was only able to provide the new hostel by the support and generosity of many people in Norwich and Norfolk and we continue to rely on that support to

continue our work. That work involves providing accommodation, food and support for some 250 each and every night of the year.

Despite the success of our new hostel we continue to see high numbers of homeless people coming to St Martins for help. Apart from Bishopbridge House we also operate 2 other hostels in Norwich-Carrow Hill Home and St Martins House in Westwick Street. Both take people who have been at Bishopbridge House for assessment: Carrow Hill accommodates 22 people with mental health problems, many of whom have been there for some time, whilst St Martins House accommodates up to 33 people with mental and physical health problems. Despite having room for 85 people in our 3 hostels the occupancy levels are high – averaging between 96-100% in the period from June to September 2003.

In addition to the hostels we run 8 shared houses to which homeless people can move on to from the hostels to prepare themselves for living independently. Each house accommodates 4-5 people at a time and there is much demand for places there – occupancy levels are currently above 91%. We are currently looking to find additional shared accommodation so that more of our hostel residents can take that first step on the road to a home of their own.

In addition to accommodation St Martins operates a range of complementary services:

- Tenancy Support – for 80 former residents who have moved on to their own housing we provide support to enable them to retain it.
- Outreach Team – our staff regularly go out, during the day and in the early morning, to look for people sleeping rough and offer assistance. The numbers found can vary from 2 to as many as 14.
- Temporary accommodation – we manage a small number of properties that provide temporary housing for people who have applied to the local authority for housing under the homeless legislation.

Many of the people who we help suffer from serious health problems, both physical and mental, and some also abuse drugs or alcohol. They are very challenging for our staff to deal with but we are fortunate in having very committed and experienced staff who do all they can for homeless people in Norwich.

Despite the work of St Martins and other voluntary groups to help homeless people in Norwich there is little doubt that homelessness remains a major problem in the City. Each and every night of the year St Martins alone provides accommodation, food and support for up to 250 people. Yet despite our work we still find people sleeping rough and we still have difficulty in finding sufficient adequate accommodation for single people. However, we have been providing help for the homeless for over 30 years and we will continue doing so.

The services I have briefly outlined above are expensive to operate and whilst we are always looking to maximise income from the statutory bodies we work with we could not continue without the support of people in Norwich and Norfolk. The Christmas street collection is a vital part of that support and not only brings in much needed income but also highlights the needs of the homeless at a time when people's thoughts are on other things.