



COLCHESTER EMERGENCY NIGHT SHELTER

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Trustees' Pack

History of Colchester Night Shelter

Capacity and location:

The Colchester Night Shelter first opened in October 1984. It was the result of collaboration between the Colchester churches and the Probation Service as these organisations were most keenly aware of the need for a direct access facility.

The Shelter was first situated in a three bed council house which had been made available by Colchester Borough Council for a peppercorn rent. We had six beds and because of the arrangement of the bedrooms and because men predominated the street homeless population they were reserved for men only.

For the first four years the Shelter was run on a purely voluntary basis and as a consequence had several shorter periods of closure due to a lack of people who were able to run it on an unpaid basis.

Then in 1988 a funding opportunity arose with Joint Finance which enabled us to appoint a full time Co-ordinator. This role encompassed running the Shelter and ensuring that a properly trained volunteer rota and support system was established. From this point on we could provide a service not just simply make a provision as and when good natured individuals were available to do the work.

It soon became clear, however, that the need for the Shelter far outstripped the capacity and so we began to look for bigger premises.

In 1990 Colchester Borough Council was in the process of relocating the Women's Refuge and so their previous residence became vacant. Next door, and attached to that building, a business with living above the shop also came up for sale and the CBC offered to buy it for the Night Shelter.

In 1991 following CBC's refurbishment of the premises we moved into a facility which could take both men and women, offered 21 beds in single and twin bedded rooms. It is this building in Alexandra Road the Night Shelter still occupies today.

The premises are now owned by the Night Shelter courtesy of a grant from the National Lottery Fund in 1995.

Service development:

At the little Shelter we offered a cooked breakfast but no other meals except for high days and holidays such as Christmas and Easter. The desire for an evening meal came top of the residents' wish list. We started by giving out just sandwiches but now provide a cooked meal each evening including a Sunday roast.

It also emerged that Sunday was especially difficult for residents to get through because there was nowhere to go to get warm and rest up. Following a successful community wide "Sleep-out" in Castle Park organised by Colchester Housing Forum, the Shelter was granted £3,000 to pay someone to keep the Shelter open from 12.30pm until 7.15pm when normal opening hours begin.

As the housing crisis deepened during the 1990's it became hard for people to get access to more permanent facilities and we established a resettlement programme to help our residents to find suitable accommodation. Staff see the residents weekly and discuss their housing plans, any special needs and their general welfare.

This programme was expanded to include dedicated resettlement work with The April Centre as partner accommodation provider and advocate for residents when they have appointments or need to challenge decisions. The resettlement worker also does follow-up on information and compile all the relevant notes for potential housing providers.

The Night Shelter continues to work closely with the April Centre and many go into their private rented housing facilities even though the resettlement worker is now employed by the Shelter.

The new enlarged resettlement role has enabled the Night Shelter to help very difficult-to-house clients with complex problems and often challenging housing histories. We can confidently keep these residents for longer to ensure that they receive the support they need in their future homes. This work is sustained by funding from Supporting People.

From the middle of the 1990's we also began to support people with drug and alcohol problems on a systematic basis which actively supports people in their participation on substance misuse programmes as well as trying to motivate those who are finding the thought of reducing or stopping extremely difficult. This project is supported by funding from the Essex County Council Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT).

At the beginning of the millennium a number of projects working with homeless people joined together with Essex Libraries and applied for money from the Learning and Skills Council to help the homeless become more familiar with IT and introduce them to IT learning facilities. We were successful in this.

At the Night Shelter residents can use the computer from 9pm till 10.30pm as well as Sunday afternoon. When the Shelter is not open the residents can access IT facilities through other members of the consortium such as the Library, Matrix, The April Centre, and a number of others.

Also during 2000 the Night Shelter expanded its healthy living programme to include fruit and no smoking on Wednesdays and we gave out vouchers for the local swimming pool. Whilst we still keep up the fruit deliveries we have not been able to fund the swimming for a few years. Smoking has of course been disallowed nationally but the Night Shelter became a no smoking house in April 2007 – three months before it became a legal requirement. A small shelter has been built in the yard by our Assistant Co-ordinator.

Most of these developments have been spearheaded by residents, who have regular access to the staff meetings and also to the Committee Meetings.

We held a major consultation in 2006 which comprised current residents, ex-residents and banned residents. We were looking at the vexed questions of the rules and services but there was surprisingly solid support for the system we use here although a number of minor alterations were implemented following the consultation. We are planning a further event in the near future.

Staff development:

From our very humble and shaky start when we relied exclusively on unpaid volunteers, the expansion to 21 beds demanded that we began to pay our overnight workers – at first a sessional payment, followed up by a regular salary and annual contracts.

Obviously we have kept up with the sickness and holiday regulations as they have been rolled out.

An Assistant Co-ordinator dealing with the staff rota and provisions was first appointed in the late eighties and this role includes deputising for the Co-ordinator when that person is sick or on leave.

The training of staff is focussed on operational issues as are the monthly staff meetings but increasingly we are offering other skills as well. Now the core programme includes stress awareness and management, assertiveness, conflict management and resolution as well as first aid and fire training. An important part of the training in recent years has been protecting vulnerable adults from abuse.

In addition to this individuals can go on specific training courses which they will then share with the rest of the staff group at staff meeting.

Volunteers receive the basic operational training (which includes food safety and clinical waste management) as well as the conflict management and the vulnerable adults' protection courses.

"Helpful visitors" who come in just to help out with the cooking need little because they are not involved with the residents but they must sign for the basis food hygiene training.

Funding:

This has always been a challenge with statutory funding and trust funding often being time limited or for specific or new projects.

However, most of our core funding whilst often lagging behind cost increases, is secured by DAAT, Supporting People and rent income from Housing Benefit as well as the charge we levy of residents for their food and service (covering about half of what it costs to provide these services.)

As for capital projects we have had Lottery funding to buy the building as mentioned before and we have had generous private trust fund monies for specific things (such as washing machines, PVC windows computers, etc.).

We have recently embarked on a major refurbishment project involving the entire property and have had substantial funding from the Lauren Evans family, The Rotary Club, The Lions Club, Fowler, Smith and Jones as well as the Homeless Trust. Local churches and schools such as United Reformed Church, St Leonard's and St. Philomena's School have made major contributions to this project as well.

We have so far managed to refurbish our main kitchen, two bedrooms and, thanks to Colchester Borough Homes' contractors, we were able to refurbish the residents' kitchen as well.

This spring we are going to do up two more twin bedded rooms as well as the laundry room. We hope we can persuade other organisations and individuals to take part and perhaps opt for an adoption of this project for a certain length of time.

We feel that the local community is very supportive and we are always happy to welcome any interested parties actual or potential supporters to come and visit to see for themselves what has been achieved.

Management:

In the early days the management structure was fairly informal though never slack. But the moment we were in receipt of serious public monies increasingly formal structures had to be set up.

Thus in 1990 we became a limited company as well as a charity and we are fortunate to have both width and depth to our committee members' skills and expertise not to mention unfailing commitment. The Committee meet 4-5 times a year to discuss major issues, the report from the Co-ordinator and oversee financial matters.

The development of human resource legislation and health and safety regulations have required us to buy in expert help in the form of the Peninsula agency which now looks after these two very complex and difficult areas of management work.

Once we started using regular contracted staff a more formal procedure was necessary to ensure good operational governance and consistent working between teams. We now run a 5 weekly staff meeting which discussed all areas of operational policy as well as all individual residents. Whilst most issues can and do get decided in this forum, some decisions, be it that they are controversial or financially demanding, will be further discussed and decided upon at the Committee Meeting.

Each staff member also sees the Co-ordinator for a one-to-one consultation between each meeting which gives everyone an opportunity to reflect on their own performance as well as that of management.

Residents are invited to take part in these meetings or make their views known in writing. Often new developments or existing failings are channelled through to become better practice via the residents' intervention.

In it's nearly 25 years (anniversary in October this year) of existence the Colchester Night Shelter has proved to be remarkably resilient in the face of countless challenges both from the client group and from the gap between increasing service demand and increasing cost on the one hand and diminishing returns or trailing funding increments on the other.

With its past track record of delivering the best possible service no matter what the difficulties, we are confident that the Night Shelter will face the future issues with dedication and commitment from staff, management and residents.

***Pernille Petersen,
Co-ordinator
6th February 2009***