



## Cold weather is yet to start at St James's Winter Shelter

Having wanted for some time to work with a homeless charity I was introduced to the [West London Day Centre](#) / [St James's Winter Shelter](#) through a friend belonging to the Muslim charity, [The City Circle](#). Whilst this shelter is homed in a church the organisation reaches out to Muslim and Jewish communities as well therefore people from all walks of life are united by a simple desire to help provide shelter for those in need.

This was my and my friend's first time volunteering and arriving didn't know what to expect. There's quite a lot to take in, ...where things are stored, which switches to turn the lights off, and which switches to never turn off (such as the church clock!)...but to also start to understand what it means to be homeless. It led to me thinking about how to socially approach guests; routine conversation openers have to be considered in a different light. The guests are referred to the Night Shelter by the West London Day Centre so it's not a drop-in service. The WLDC co-ordinates several venues including Tuesday night at St James's Night Shelter which hosts fifteen guests.



The volunteering is broken into four teams: kitchen, evening, overnight, breakfast. You're asked to commit to at least six shifts between December and May. Since I was fortunate enough to be in a position to do all I volunteered for everything.

My first shift: kitchen duty. Having started life in hospitality and events, this was something I was looking forward to. St James's had previously raised funds for a fully commercial kitchen to be installed. So, under the instruction of a more seasoned volunteer we got stuck into the evening's repast: soup on arrival, sausages & mash for main course, bread and butter pudding for dessert. The St James's Winter Shelter makes sure to cater for all dietary requirements even including separate gravies for vegetarians. Nerves were getting to me having never cooked bread & butter pudding before (to my shame!). We were fortunate enough once the food had been cooked to sit down with the guests for dinner which was quite a treat owing to the menu being well received.



One of the best aspects of the shelter, strangely enough, is the lack of conspicuous gratitude. It feels more like a group of people who have come together to share a meal and some company, similar to having guests in your house. It creates an atmosphere of camaraderie rather than charity, making everyone more relaxed.

I start into 2016 mindful of the fact that the festive season, synonymous with charity, is now behind us but the cold weather has really yet to start. If you wish to help through donations, charitable giving or volunteering please check out their website <http://www.wlm.org.uk/how-you-can-help/donations> or their Just Giving page <https://www.justgiving.com/warmbedsnotcoldstreets/>.

For me? I guess our motivations are all different. I wanted to do something that wasn't about "me". I have to admit though this experience has been tremendously rewarding and something I aim to continue being involved in.



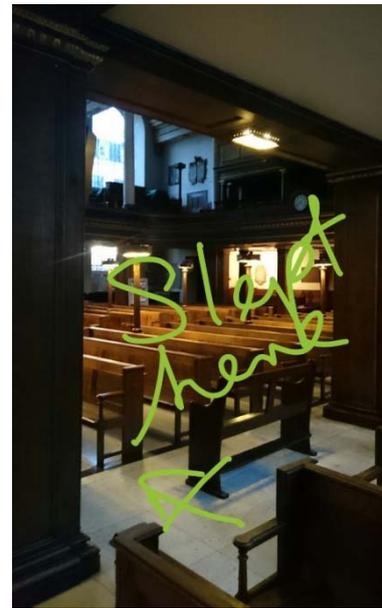


## No one needs go hungry in London

Two weeks later, I returned to St James's Winter Shelter for my second shift: the overnight team. Two volunteers, along with the guests, are required to stay overnight in the body of the church. The Winter Shelter provides named and labelled bedding for each guest at the start of the season so they have the same bedding each stay. Once dinner and the evening's entertainment had finished (although I'm not sure my hacked-about version of Claire de Lune on the piano would count as "entertainment") the guests made their way upstairs to the church where there is enough room to spread out. It's organised so there is a women only area and separate toilets as well. Lights out at 11pm and despite the unbelievable snoring (sounded like a trumpet!) before I knew it, it was 6.15am and time to get up.

So, back to the familiar territory of the kitchen to prepare breakfast; cereals, fruit and yoghurt. By 8am breakfast is due to be over and all the bedding neatly packed away. On this occasion we were a little behind schedule – understandably no-one is in a hurry to leave.

A highlight of the night was helping a guest get ready for the first day in his new job! Felt good. Great tips from another guest on getting top spin when playing table tennis. Also, pleasantly surprised to be remembered and welcomed by another guest, "hey, you're the chef, sausages were banging!"



Courtesy of the Pret a Manger [Foundation Trust](#) we collect food from our nearest branch (as do all the shelters) to give to guests as they leave, for their lunch that day. Undoubtedly the walk from St James to Green Park, past the shops of Piccadilly, the Ritz and bright lifts of Mayfair makes seeing someone homeless even more poignant.

The work that organisations such as the [West London Day Centre](#) carry out, makes a massive difference to people's lives. Without being laid back about it, perhaps the most extraordinary comment I heard from one of the group was how food is not a problem in London, no-one needs to go hungry. Good to know, but all the same, it's hard seeing the look on a guest's face the next morning, preparing to venture out onto the streets again. So very sad.