

## **Report on the Zero Nights Coldweather Shelter 2018-9**

**Alison Murdoch and Sioux How, May 2019**

The Zero Nights scheme was set up by Fair Housing for Frome over the winter of 2018-19 with three main aims:

- Avoid preventable death and illness, reaching out with kindness and compassion
- Connect rough sleepers with agencies that can help them get access to housing and other services.
- Raise awareness of homelessness in Frome, helping local people to become better informed and motivated to help find solutions to the housing crisis. To be achieved by holding public meetings, putting articles in the press, and training volunteers to support the shelter.

It was hosted in two venues: Frome Town Hall (evening drop-in) and the Wesley Methodist Church (overnight) and funded by a grant of £1872 from Frome Town Council and a £3000 crowdfunding appeal plus £300 provided for volunteers expenses from Elim Connect Centre.

Planning started in the summer of 2018 via networking with existing agencies, particularly Elim Connect Centre, who are the agency contracted to work with single adult rough sleepers in Mendip. Elim had failed to find a venue for a coldweather shelter in Frome the previous winter, and instead had provided four-wheel drive vehicles to bring four homeless people from Frome to their coldweather shelter in Wells. Stephen Fowler and Suzanne Addicott from Elim immediately offered their support and expertise to a Frome scheme, including volunteer training and expenses. It was subsequently agreed that an Elim worker would be in attendance every evening that the scheme was open and provide the only 'gateway' into the shelter ie that no rough sleeper would be allowed to stay overnight unless they had been interviewed and vetted by that worker. Elim also played a very helpful role in liaising with the overnight venue.

On 20<sup>th</sup> September FHfF organised a consultation meeting at Frome Town Hall attended by representatives of Mendip District Council, Frome Town Council, Fair Frome, Mendip YMCA, the Bridge Café and the Community Police team. Suzanne Addicott from Elim provided an overview. Following a thoughtful discussion about challenges and concerns, the idea of developing the scheme was generally endorsed, as part of the government's national SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) provision. This meant that the scheme would only open when a temperature of minus zero was predicted for three nights in a row. Elim also proposed that the shelter be limited to 3-5 guests per night, because it was a pilot and based on their experience of need. A public meeting was subsequently held upstairs at the Cheese and Grain, attended by approximately 20 people.

Zero Nights was staffed by a part-time co-ordinator – Sioux How - plus 38 volunteers, who each attended a general training and a training evening about safeguarding. In addition, Alison, one of the FHfF development workers initiated the scheme, applied for funding, identified the venues, led on insurance and publicity, recruited and line managed the co-ordinator, and offered general support (including a couple of morning shifts). Elim Connect Centre provided invaluable professional support including outreach workers, volunteer training and guiding documents.

Elim strongly recommended that catering should be minimal, so that the scheme didn't become 'attractional'. At the evening drop-in there was generally tea and coffee, biscuits and cake, soup and fruit. The soup was kindly supplied by Sue Crisfield at Routes Café. Evening snacks were supplied at the Wesley Church with a breakfast of baked beans and toast. It was important to feed both the volunteers and guests, although none of the guests seemed particularly hungry.

Zero Nights operated for a total of 9 nights and saw a total of 9 different guests attend the drop in and 4 sleep overnight in the church. Alongside Elim we ensured that 22 Mendip rough sleepers slept in the warm and were off the streets. As of 18th Feb 2019 only 1 of these is still sleeping rough. All the guests who decided not to stay overnight were linked in with services that can offer ongoing support.

Zero Nights was enthusiastically supported by the local community, with many offers of help and supplies that couldn't be taken up, and intense scrutiny and discussion on social media. As an example: when Fair Frome shared the Zero Nights poster on facebook on 3 January, it reached 37,115 people via 658 shares. FHfF facebook posts also reached an unprecedented audience, and there were various articles in the local press.

Fair Housing for Frome is very grateful to everyone who made Zero Nights possible, in particular the two venues - Wesley Church and Frome Town Hall – and their staff and boards, who had the courage and generosity to make this initiative possible. We hope that it is not the last.