

18.11.21

To: Glass Door staff, volunteers, member churches, supporter churches and organisations and our many friends

From The Revd Prebendary Dr Brian Leathard, Chair of Glass Door

Dear Glass Door Community

I know you are anticipating that two of our winter night shelters will open next week on Monday 22 November (in RBKC and Wandsworth) with a January 2022 opening in Hammersmith & Fulham and Richmond upon Thames. The Trustees have, after searching reflection, decided that this will not take place as planned.

You will be aware that we informed these local authorities in a timely fashion so that our shelters could provide emergency accommodation to help cover the shortfall in local authority provision and help those who are not entitled to such provision. We have furnished the local authorities with detailed information of the stringent Covid safety measures that our staff have put in place to keep everyone as safe as possible in the shelters. In particular, our caseworkers have been working with guests to ensure that everyone who enters a shelter is double-vaccinated (guests, staff, volunteers). This full vaccination requirement, we believe, makes our shelters a safer venue than other indoor public spaces such as bars, restaurants or cinemas, where vaccinated and unvaccinated people mingle. We have worked in conjunction with an expert epidemiologist and former Chair of Public Health England, who believes that sleeping in our shelters this winter, among only fully vaccinated people and with stringent safety measures would certainly be safer than sleeping on the street. The truly shocking fact is that the average age of death for a male rough sleeper is 45 and for a female 43- and these were figures prior to Covid.

Despite this, the local authorities do not support our plans to open the nightshelters. Their view is that only own-room accommodation is safe enough and that there will be no need for any accommodation beyond what they intend to provide. We respect the fact that local authority responsibility extends only to those for whom they have a statutory responsibility, whereas we at Glass Door seek to accommodate those who do not have this safety net. We agree that own-room accommodation is preferable to communal space, if it is available. However, we are not convinced that the own-room accommodation they intend to provide will be sufficient to meet the needs of **ALL** who may find themselves sleeping rough this winter in London. In addition there are some for whom the isolation of an own-room is not good. We believe that communal nightshelter space is safer and better than sleeping on the streets, given the requirement for full vaccination, which of course, wasn't available last year when our nightshelters had to close. In light of our stringent safety measures, including full vaccination, we struggle to see the rationale of keeping any homeless person sleeping on the street, rather than allowing our nightshelters to function.

While we are saddened by the local authorities' decision not to support us, we have, over many years, sought to build productive partnerships with them. We have listened to their concerns and refined our proposals in response. We have replied in detail to their questions and incorporated into our processes their suggestions to improve Covid safety processes. We have reduced risk to the lowest possible level- lower, we believe, than in the case of many normal public settings and our plans are in line with central government guidelines permitting nightshelters. Of course, if government guidelines were to change we would adapt accordingly.

The crucial difference between last winter and this is that **double vaccination** is now available and we will require evidence of it for everyone entering our nightshelters- guests, staff, volunteers. Because double vaccination has eased restrictions across society, we believe people experiencing homelessness should not be subject to more onerous restrictions than others. We

accept that the risk of transmission in a communal nightshelter cannot be completely eradicated, but it can be minimised and managed. By contrast sleeping on the street presents a profound risk to both physical and mental health. In 2019, 112 roughsleepers took their own lives in England and Wales- a suicide rate 35 times higher than in the general population.

We very much hope that our local authority partners will change their position, and, even if they cannot support our nightshelters, agree that they will not oppose them. The local authorities insist that they have enough own-room accommodation available for everyone. If we have data to suggest there is need that is not met by local authorities, we still intend to open our shelters in the hope that local authorities would rather see fully vaccinated homeless people, whom they are not in a position to accommodate, being accommodated instead in a local church hall with all possible safety measures in place, rather than exposed to the risks of rough sleeping on the streets of their boroughs. In that eventuality we will write to you again but I felt that word of this postponement, at the eleventh hour, when so many preparations have been made, should come from me personally as Chair.

I am truly sorry for the uncertainty this presents in whatever part of the Glass Door community you participate. We have to live with uncertainty and the Trustees and staff of Glass Door are totally committed to navigating this uncertainty as best we can for our guests and for the charity.

Please know our casework and single-room accommodation services remain open to those in need, regardless of their ability to demonstrate a local connection or their ability to access public funds.

Thank you for your understanding and for your enduring commitment to the work of Glass Door.

Brian

The Revd Prebendary Dr Brian Leathard
Chair of Trustees