

The Dover Outreach Centre and Winter Night Shelter

Peter Sherred

The United Kingdom is often promoted as the world's fifth largest or richest economy, so it is both surprising and a disgrace that alongside such an image of power and success there are worrying aspects of the nature of our national society that appear to be increasing, such as homelessness, witnessed by the number of so called rough sleepers present in our towns and cities, as well as an apparently growing class of people who are severely economically disadvantaged and who have fallen between stools of self-sufficiency and state dependency. As a result, we have witnessed the growth of food banks, refuges, winter shelters and other voluntary help agencies to give support and encouragement to those unfortunate enough to have been trapped in pockets of despair and loneliness. As ever Dover, through its people, has risen to the occasion and has set a wonderful example of care and compassion towards the disadvantaged by the provision of an Outreach Centre, Winter Night Shelter, a Food Bank, Street Pastoring Scheme and a Money Course, among other facilities. How has this all come about and who has been behind these voluntary projects and the driving force of the success of them?

The vision for the Dover Outreach Centre originated in the organisation known as Christians Together in Dover (CTID) and was first mentioned in 2010, along with several other outward facing Christian initiatives. At the time the CTID Chairman was Arthur Salisbury who, until his retirement, was proprietor of the Allan Hughes quality clothes shop in Cannon Street, Dover. Arthur was succeeded as Chairman of CTID by Revd. Andy Bawtree of River, currently Anglican Area Dean of Dover, then Noel Beamish, first as Vice Chairman and subsequently

Chairman. A group was set up to explore avenues of Christian service in the community, thereby taking church witness beyond the walls of church buildings. After much discussion and reflection, a bullet-point list of projects was produced which included the provision of a Food Bank, an Outreach Centre, a Winter Night Shelter and a Money Course, among other ideas.

In 2014, CTID considered the possibility of establishing a winter night shelter provision in Dover having already discussed, in late 2011, the resources required with The Rainbow Centre, who were undertaking a comparable project in Folkestone. Advised that such a project would require £60,000 - £70,000 each year to run and with no financial resources available, it was concluded that focus should be placed on the establishment of a Food Bank and to ensure such a facility was secure and up and running before larger projects were embarked upon. This opened in October 2014 with a store at Whitfield and another in the Eastern Docks. Noel Beamish led this project for three years



The Outreach Centre, Victory House Snargate Street

before passing leadership on to a successor while maintaining involvement in an ancillary way. The Food Bank has operated successfully and expanded its operations since it started.

In addition to overseeing the start of the Dover Food Bank, Noel Beamish was instrumental in setting up Dover Street Pastors, heading the scheme for some five years and actively supported by the Revd. Bill Kirk of The Baptist Church in Maison Dieu Road with his wife Marie. Establishment of an Outreach Centre and the operation of a Winter Night Shelter Scheme took time to come to fruition, primarily because of the scale of what might be needed in terms of resources, finance and the likely number of volunteers needed to make a success of the project.

In 2015/16, on each weekend between December and March, two men began operating a winter shelter in St Martin's Church Hall. This provided a catalyst for a group to move the project forward, initially focussed on running a winter shelter for as many nights as possible in the winter of 2016/17. The group then needed a base so that rough sleepers could attend and register in time for the first night on 1st December 2016.

In May 2016, after a successful search, with the active support of the Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Jeff Cridland, a suitable base was found in part of a redundant social club attached to St Paul's Catholic Church, in Maison Dieu Road. The premises were in a state of significant disrepair having remained unused for several years. While its refurbishment, plus the necessary fundraising and seeking out volunteers to run the centre, was a challenge, the commitment and drive of all involved ensured the Day Centre, which opens on weekdays between 09.00 and 11.00, was just about in a fit state to

allow doors to be opened for the first time on 26th September 2016. One of the Trustees, Vee Bentley from Deal, took on the day-to-day management of the Centre. In July 2016 the Outreach Centre was established as a registered charity.

On opening day three people attended the Centre, since when numbers steadily grew to an average of 12 people a day by the end of 2017. Since its opening, over 500 people, all homeless, have been seen. To ensure the success of the project a leadership team was established, which had as its Chairman of Trustees and Chief Executive Officer Noel Beamish, with five other trustees currently being Judith Shilling (Temple Ewell), Janet Jowett (River), Revd. Sean Sheffield (St Andrew's Buckland), Vee Bentley (Pentecostal) and Peter Wallace (a Dover District Council Planning Officer). All were supported and encouraged in a good relationship with Fr. Jeff Cridland.

The Dover Outreach Centre Trustees, Manager and volunteers make it clear that they do not support people to be homeless, but the aim is to support people out of homelessness as well as helping people in risk of homelessness. The Centre provides a daily drop-in service. Those attending the Centre complete registration forms and then have access to a simple breakfast, showers, laundry facilities, free telephone, lockers, benefits advice, housing advice, job-seeking advice, Food Bank vouchers, medical advice, spare and replacement clothing and much more. The most important thing is that people receive a listening ear, kindness and compassion, delivered in a way that seeks to help them out of homelessness, rather than supporting them to remain homeless. Significantly, the Centre provides a postal address, vitally necessary for important communications from family and important agencies. In September 2017, a funding bid to the Kent Police and Crime Commissioner was

successful in enabling the provision of a mental health service.

The base at the rear of St Paul's Church was very much a short-term expedient and those involved kept their eyes open for a more permanent place. In March 2018 premises in Snargate Street became a possibility. The intention was to rent the ground floor only of the building, but the owners preferred the Centre to take over the whole of the premises. After negotiation, the lease started on 2nd April 2019 when possession of the building was taken. In addition to the large ground floor area, the building has 17 rooms upstairs and a three bedroomed flat. Many of the rooms are being occupied by East Europeans on tenancies, but as rooms become available the intention is to change the dynamic of the building and make it available for homeless people. Much work has been required to be done to the building to make it fit for purpose and much more needs to be done, but an interdenominational commissioning service was held on the 11th July on the ground floor and the Centre was opened for business on the 22nd July.

Running alongside The Dover Outreach Centre (and run by it) is the Winter Night Shelter for the benefit of Dover's rough sleepers. This facility is operational during the coldest three months of the year and extended during extremes. It is supported by seven churches in the Dover area, with a night shelter at a different church location each night of the week, currently as follows: Sunday at Mary the Virgin Church, Cannon Street; Monday at The Ark Apostolic Church, Noah's Ark Road; Tuesday at The Beacon (Methodist/United Reform) Church, London Road; Wednesday at Dover Baptist Church, Maison Dieu Road; Thursday at St Paul's Catholic Church, Maison Dieu Road; Friday at St Peter and Paul (Charlton) Church, St Alphege Road; and Saturday at St Martin's Church, Church Road.

The Winter Night Shelter is run by volunteers who cover one shift per week. This facility provides a relaxed space and hot evening food as well as either a camp bed or a floor mat (whichever is preferred by the guests). The intention is to provide an atmosphere that aims to be as homely and as welcoming to guests as possible to promote a sense of wellbeing and relaxation. Many who do attend have little or no experience of 'home', but the outcome of the approach in the Shelter is that something like half the guests manage to move on into accommodation and work at the end of the Winter Night Shelter period. Three shifts per day are covered by volunteers: 6pm – 10pm, 10pm – 6am (each volunteer will sleep for one half of the shift) and 6am – 8am. On average the Winter Night Shelter provides for 40 people. During its first period starting on 1st December 2016, over the three-month period that it ran 35 people stayed one or more nights and at the end of the period 22 had moved into some form of accommodation and 15 into work. None of this would be possible without the band of volunteers who devote their time to the project, plus generous financial assistance from several sources.

A spin off from the establishment of the Dover Outreach Centre has been a social enterprise feature which Noel Beamish says really came about by accident or "by God's design". Fr. Jeff Cridland was so impressed with work originally undertaken to refurbish the old social club at St Paul's, that he inquired if it was possible for the volunteers to refurbish the church hall and other rooms adjoining the church building. This request coincided with three homeless men at the Centre becoming ready to rebuild their lives and try to return into work. They started as volunteers and soon it became apparent that employing them to do similar work was a good idea. The social enterprise was officially formed as Dover Outreach Enterprise Ltd in July 2017 and has since taken on many

different projects at churches, houses and farm buildings, all completed to a high standard and for satisfied customers.

Since the Outreach Centre Charity has been operating, funding has come from several sources. 70% of donations have been provided by individuals, churches, businesses and schools, with the remainder being provided by grant funding from Dover Town and Dover District Councils, the Police and Crime Commissioner, and the Port of Dover Community Fund. Such funds enabled the Charity to grow and be in good health at the end of 2017. It must be a matter of great pride for Dover as a town to have within its community these hugely important social projects operating so successfully to help ameliorate the predicaments many of the attendees are confronted by. Great credit goes to all the volunteers and CTID for the vision and passion with which these projects have been conceived and brought to a successful place. While no doubt wishing to give credit to others, one man's vision, drive and commitment, can be seen behind these developments and that is of the somewhat modest and self-effacing Noel Beamish, who continues to be active in many aspects of the projects' activities and as Chairman of the Outreach Centre trustees.

Noel and his wife Jayne live at Ewell Minnis, and Noel credits his wife as being hugely important to his calling and commitment. He credits her also with enabling them to live simply to facilitate his ministry to the homeless. They were married at The Apostolic Church in Lydden 31 years ago and are the proud parents of three adult daughters, all of whom are working after having attended University. Noel, who had been a member of the Living Well Church (an Apostolic Church at Whitfield where he was been an Elder for over 10 years), is currently associated with the Renewal Church – New Frontiers based at the Village Hall, Whitfield. He has his origins in

Eire, having been born in Cork on 14th December 1965 (a possible clue as to his Christian name?). He has four siblings, two brothers and two sisters. The family originally moved to Carmarthen in Wales where Noel's schooling took place, but after 12 years the family moved to the Dover area, engaging in farming at Chilton Farm in the Alkham Valley. It was a mixed farming enterprise, embracing arable and livestock, but it proved to be uneconomic, so Noel attended South Kent College to attain a National Diploma in Building & Construction, and then a further Higher National Certificate. He then joined the Brett Group as Assistant Estates Manager before becoming Estates & Security Manager. He had all the benefits of life with a good job, a good income, a company car and a contented family experience, but he felt a strong calling to commit himself full time to the projects with which he had become involved through his association with CTID and which he fully believed in. So, having given a year's notice from December 2016, he left the Brett Group in the autumn of 2017 and became full time committed to the Dover Outreach Centre at St Paul's until July 2019, all the time fully supported by his family.

What of the future for the Centre and for Noel? Noel says it requires a discernment of God's plan and that all he does in helping others is for God's glory and not his. In the immediate future this means continuing to meet the needs of the homeless and training up the next generation of volunteers to take the reins for the future. Currently the focus is on the need to carry out much work in the new base for the Outreach Centre in Snargate Street which was formerly the base for the British and International Sailor's Society and commonly known as the Seafarers' Centre or Seaman's Mission. The Charity has now renamed this building Victory House.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).