

Taking comfort from

It's two weeks to Christmas and national homeless charity Crisis is gearing up to the next level. Chief executive Shaks Ghosh is making final checks before she announces the location of their main centre

The charity has been opening its doors for 33 years to give homeless people a Christmas, so although it's hectic, there's 'a kind of formula', says Ghosh. Recruitment of 3,000 volunteers, to work with the year-round team of four, begins in September. An appeal for empty buildings goes out in October, asking for warehouses as close to the centre of London as possible, and with good public transport links.

Then there's the supplies to feed 1,200 people; food donated by the supermarkets, warehouses full of baked beans, potatoes, turkeys from a farmer in Norfolk, Christmas puddings from chef Anton Mosimann.

About half of the volunteers will be new. The other half will be the regular returning team of 'inspirational, fantastic leaders' that Ghosh says she would trust with her life. These 'green badges' take charge during the three shifts in each of the hostels, briefing volunteers, making sure of security as people are admitted, checking that everything's distributed to plan – and, most importantly, making sure that the guests are comfortable and happy.

'Their job is really the welfare of the guests and they're constantly looking out,' says Ghosh. 'They say to people if there's anything you're worried about, if there's anything that doesn't feel normal, talk to us.'

Getting to know the guests is important, so Crisis can identify any special needs, such as drug or alcohol addiction, and make sure that everyone is placed in the right environment. Crisis doesn't need to know any of the guests' identity, but they are searched – gently patted down to make sure they are not carrying any weapons, needles or bottles – as they enter the hostel. At this point, the trained eyes of the green badges pick up if anyone is particularly vulnerable. There are smaller, specialist centres, one for the many 'really really damaged women, who don't want to be in an environment with lots of rowdy men' and two quiet centres 'for people who live very isolated lives and can't cope with being jostled and the queues'. Another of the smaller centres caters for drinkers and has substance misuse specialists on hand.

Guests are not allowed to take drugs on site, but there is a needle exchange and they are allowed to drink, when it has been decanted into plastic bottles. 'We don't provide drink, but people can provide their own and that's fine,' says Ghosh. 'It's for people who can't get through the Christmas period without a drink... I think that counts for many of us as well!'

'Open Christmas' does not mean open to those who might exploit the opportunity to access hundreds of addicts in one place – 'a dealer's market', as Ghosh points out. Green badges will clamp down on dealers as soon as they are spotted, often with the help of guests, who are likely to tip off a member of staff. The police have provided wonderful support in the past, says Ghosh, rigging up cameras within hours, when one of the centres 'was getting hit by so many dealers', a couple of years ago.

Apart from all the 'obvious stuff to do with food and clothing and shelter' that's on offer, many guests return to Crisis for the closest experience to a family Christmas. There's a man who's returned each year for 32 Christmases, recounts Ghosh. There are others who have a few years off, then come back because 'they remember it as somewhere where they get a lot of love and affection and they're not bothered by anybody'.

Of the 1,200 people expected, about 500 will sleep over. Some will stay for the whole eight days, but many will have drifted back to where they came from by 30th December. About a third will be rough sleepers, a third will live in the hostel system, emergency shelters and B and Bs, and a third will have some sort of permanent accommodation. These people come back to Crisis because they feel part of the homeless community, says Ghosh.

They also come back because they can be sure of a festive welcome from the volunteers who have given up their own Christmas. That's what makes it special, according to Ghosh.

'For every homeless person there are three volunteers. They're doing it for love, and people know that,' she says. There's 'all the Christmassy stuff' – presents for everybody, Father Christmas, turkey and trimmings.



Part of Crisis's approach has been 'the traditional charity way of doing things', providing solutions to immediate problems and fixing people up with medical services. But there is a different flavour to this year's event, as the charity wants to invite its guests to 'think about their future, their lives and where they're going'.

'We're moving towards a model of trying to help people to help themselves, so this year's a bit of an experiment,' explains Ghosh.

'Homeless people can't just put their lives on hold until they've got all their problems sorted out. They need to gain the skills to find their own route of homelessness,' she says. 'As a charity we have to find far more enabling and empowering ways of delivering services.'

The result of these thoughts is a 'be inspired' learning and skills area, in the main centre. There will be computers and careers advice, help with

Crisis



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numeracy and literacy, a book club, and an 'activity and engagement area' with yoga, drama and debate.

'It's all about getting people to wake up,' says Ghosh. 'We're trialling something which is again very, very preliminary – the passport system. We're saying to people "you're only here for eight days, but here's your passport". It's a symbolic and psychological thing. They'll be handed something that says "this'll enable you to get somewhere, all year round".' An activity centre at Crisis' London headquarters in Commercial Street aims to encourage people to follow up their Christmas visit by coming to see them regularly, to explore new options.

Leading people away from substance misuse is an obvious ambition for a charity that sees 80 or 90 per cent of guests addicted to alcohol or drugs, and Ghosh is extremely keen to provide better links to drug and alcohol services.

'We connect very badly with other services... we always need more drug and alcohol advisers.' The problem, she says, is that if you want services run by other charities to give up their Christmas, you have to pay for them.

Alongside the essential counselling, needle exchange and harm reduction services, Ghosh is always on the look out for anyone doing anything new and different.

'I'm always intrigued by things like virtual healing. You can try out so many different and wonderful things, and something might help somebody.'

Novelty aside, 'a dream come true' would be helping guests to sign up for detox services, while they're with Crisis for the festive period.

'Christmas is a time of year when you reflect on your life,' she says. 'It's not far from New Year and people think well, maybe my life is going to be different next year.' Ghosh is painfully aware of the likelihood of short-term solutions, and recalls a moment of 'lost faith' a couple of years ago, from watching people go through the painful process of detox, then going back on the street.

'I thought, "What is the point of running these services?" People put themselves through hell when they're detoxing, it's painful to watch. And what do we do with them? Put them back in a hostel with everyone else who's a drug user.'

She wants 'proper policy' from the Home Office, support with finding accommodation and getting back on track, to make the passport system 'really meaningful'.

Meanwhile, Crisis will be preparing the centres, looking forward to the 'total organic experience' that makes the Crisis open Christmas so different from anything written in their manual for volunteers.

