

# Homeless welcomed to eat and sleep in church

THE snow started gently swirling outside the church as the first homeless man came in from the cold.

It stuck to guests' coats, hats and beards as the final few guests hurried into the warm building. On the coldest night of the year, they were grateful for food and beds in St Jude's Church, Southsea.

The men wrapped their cold hands around hot drinks as they were welcomed by enthusiastic volunteers with board games. Nearby, the choir finished their rehearsal, as camp beds were unwrapped, and pillows and duvets prepared.

This was the scene at Open Church – a project in which churches in Portsmouth opened their buildings to the homeless each night for eight weeks. Seven churches took it in turns to host vulnerable people each night from January until March.

At 8pm, the kitchen team invited their guests through for a meal of crab and sweetcorn soup, chicken satay and rice, and banana fritters. Then the tables were cleared, the camp beds brought in and the 12 men settled down for the night, sleeping alongside four volunteers.

In the morning, another team came into the church to make them breakfast before the men went on their way. They slept in another church the next night.

David Smith, who has been homeless for 22 years after



**Volunteer Andrew Malbon serves food to David Smith and other guests**

a relationship breakdown, appreciated the efforts made to make them feel welcome. He'd recently moved to Portsmouth from London to try to find accommodation.

"Without this project, I'd be on the streets," he said. "I came here because I thought there might be some accommodation, but there isn't. The most important thing is that I'm inside, and it's brilliant that they're providing this for us."

Volunteer Mark Neck, from St Jude's Church, was also involved in the pilot project last winter. He's got to know three or four homeless people, and stops to chat to them regularly.

"It's a way of giving something back," he said. "I wanted to get more involved in the church and I felt God steering me towards this. Sometimes just talking to people really helps, because so many people just walk past.

"I've also tried to help to

get people off the streets by advocating on their behalf.

"This project is a really good starting point. Of course it's just a sticking plaster on the problem, and more needs to be done to help vulnerable people in our city. Last year, one of the guys actually had a job, but wasn't able to find a place to rent and so was still coming to sleep in our churches each night."

Open Church happened with the support of the Society of St James (SSJ), a Hampshire charity that works with the homeless. All guests were referred to the project by SSJ. It ran from January 7 to March 4 this year after a four-week pilot project last year.

Each church opened on a different day of the week. The other churches involved were St Simon's, Southsea; Immanuel Baptist; King's Church, Southsea; Family Church, Buckland; Eastney Methodist; and St Swithun's RC Church, Southsea.