

**Rishi Spolia is the Head of Locality for Accord and the Chair of CIH West Midlands Regional Board. In December 2018 Rishi and five other colleagues signed up to take part in St Basils Big Birmingham Sleepout 18. Read Rishi's blog below.**

### A Night Out!

My wife sent me an email promoting the St Basils Big Birmingham Sleepout 18. The challenge was to spend a November night in the grounds of Birmingham Cathedral! I sent the email out to colleagues and six of us volunteered to raise money for St Basils, to help and support young people faced by homelessness. In preparation I checked the weather for the night and it was going to be dry until 3am and then a heavy thunderstorm was forecast...we were going to be given a cardboard box and plastic sheet for cover! As the night got closer I personally began to look at homelessness more closely and through different lenses. What did a homeless person wear? How did they stay dry? What was that person everyone was walking past sleeping on?

I was told to wear layers, layers and more layers to keep warm and dry! However I reminded myself I was lucky. I was only sleeping out for one night and I would have eaten a hot meal before I went. I would be home in the morning for a shower and a warm bed to jump into. I would not experience the night after night merry go round of trying to find a safe, warm and dry place to sleep. The threat of being arrested, someone beating me up, urinating on me or being mugged would not be a concern for me. This was what I could do to raise awareness of homelessness amongst family and friends who may have never thought that one of their family members would be sleeping rough. We all help in our own way building homes, providing support, giving money or donating food - how we choose to help is personal choice.

On the night I walked up to the cathedral holding a rucksack and carrying a sleeping bag. I had my coat tied around my waist as I was too hot, due to the layers of clothes I was wearing. I was wearing a short sleeve vest, long sleeve vest, t-shirt, a sweatshirt, walking trousers, woolly hat, thermal socks and walking boots. I was walking in Birmingham City Centre on a Friday night in between people going out. To say I was getting some strange looks is an understatement. Did I look stereotypically homeless? Is this the stigma a person coping with homelessness experiences every night? If you are feeling low and in need of some support being looked upon as a second class citizen is not going to help you in any way and make you feel further marginalised from society. I walked past an opening between two offices and a man was sitting on his sleeping bag probably making sure his spot was his for the night, hoping it was safe! It feels as if every door way is a bed for the night. Is this really 21<sup>st</sup> century Birmingham?!? As I approached our cordoned off area, manned with security there was no chance of us not feeling safe, for which I was grateful for. The only thing we had to contend with was the weather. I was given my wristband, a cardboard box and plastic sheet and we chose our camp for the night. We decided to pool our cardboard boxes and plastic sheets and build one big shelter to keep warm.

After building our shelter Midland Langar Seva were providing tea and snacks for all the volunteers. These guys do this every night in Birmingham and across 14 other locations providing a hot evening meal to the street homeless – fantastic effort and thanks for the hot cup of tea! We walked around the grounds and looked at the shelters that people had built. We talked to others who were sleeping

out, exchanged stories and began thinking about how we were going to build our shelter next year! We attended a service (sang a few Christmas carols) in the cathedral (first time I have been inside) and listened to a few words from St Basils CEO thanking every one of the 600 people for all the money raised and taking part. It was then time to bed down!

We crawled under the plastic sheets and got snug! We all checked for the gaps in the plastic to prepare for the 3am rain and where it was most likely to come through. Regardless of the rain, the spirits in the camp were excellent and very upbeat. We all knew what we were here for and what we were raising money for. Two group members fancied a 1am snack and began to dig into their reserves they had packed. It did feel strange sleeping in the city centre that I had walked through hundreds of times. As we tried to sleep I heard voices walking by and the smashing of a glass bottle, however I had no fear that I would be troubled as we were in our cordoned area, but for the many that do this night after night their coping strategy have to be robust and fearless.

The night got colder, the wind picked up but the rain held off which must have been a blessing from above. Surprisingly I managed to get some sleep, which may have been down to the fact that I had been up since 6am. I woke and it was still dark through the plastic sheeting but the area was beginning to clear to allow for the Christmas German market to set up. Once we woke up we began to take the shelter apart and take it to the recycling point.

We had done it. We had completed a night out! Thank you to everyone that sponsored us and helped us reach £3,000 to help St Basils continue their great work. Thanks to Alan, Helima, Giddy, Justin and Tina for volunteering and spending the night out under the stars with me x