



Nightwatch
1976 - 2026

THE NIGHTWATCH STORY

By Nana Acquah

This is the story of Nightwatch volunteers who are out every night of the year in the centre of Croydon giving food and other help to homeless and other vulnerable people. We can be found at 9.30pm by the corner of Fell Road and Katharine Street.

Our core activity is providing direct support for homeless people and others in need. We help people at every level of homelessness, from the street homeless to those in hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation and vulnerable former homeless people who need continuing support keep their housing.

We currently have over 150 volunteers. Volunteers are involved in different tasks. Some volunteers do not work directly with the homeless, but contribute by making food, buying goods for us, administrative work or fundraising. There are no paid staff, and no office premises which helps to keep our overheads to a minimum.



1976 - 1986: In the Beginning

Nightwatch began with a tragedy that shook the Croydon community. In February 1976, a man named Jamie Keating died after freezing to death on a park bench in Thornton Heath. His death raised a painful and unsettling question: how could someone die of cold and neglect in such an affluent area?

Local people came together, determined to understand how this could have happened and what could be done to prevent it from happening again. A meeting was convened to discuss homelessness and possible solutions, but the local council refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. That refusal became a turning point. Rather than stepping back, members of the community stepped forward.

A small group of local residents began walking the streets of Croydon late at night, talking directly to people sleeping rough. What they discovered was stark. Around seventy people were living on the streets - many without access to benefits, in poor physical and mental health, and with no realistic way to change their circumstances. These findings were shared with others, galvanising a growing movement.

By August 1976, Nightwatch was born. Its aims were clear: to mobilise volunteers, to run a soup service three nights a week providing hot food, clothing and blankets, and to work towards establishing an emergency shelter and, ultimately, a staffed hostel.

The Reverend Martin Wharton of Croydon Parish Church became the charity's first chair, he later became the Bishop of Newcastle. Nightwatch was based at the Parish Church Hall for the next sixteen years. On 12 September 1976, the first

soup run took place. Volunteers carried soup and sandwiches to car parks, derelict buildings, and other places where homeless people were known to shelter in and around Croydon town centre.

Leadership evolved as the charity grew. From 1977 to 1980, Nightwatch was chaired by Dave Randall, a journalist with the Croydon Advertiser. In 1980, John Taylor took on the role of Chair. Through his work with Nightwatch, John saw the particular vulnerability of young homeless people. Volunteers had been seeing more young people sleeping rough, many of whom had grown up in local authority care and, upon reaching sixteen (or eighteen if still in education), were released into independence with little or no ongoing support. With no family safety net and limited council provision, the streets became their only option. In response John Taylor helped to found the Croydon Association for Young Single Homeless (CAYSH) in 1981, it quickly grew into a thriving organisation.

Nightwatch continued to expand its support. In November 1980, it took responsibility for managing a house on Thornhill Road with six bedsits. By March 1981, a thirteen bed staffed hostel had opened, followed by another property on Northcote Road in April 1985. As accommodation and support increased, street homelessness in Croydon steadily declined.

By the mid 1980s, there was even talk of winding down Nightwatch, a belief that the job had largely been done. Homelessness did not disappear—it changed, persisted, and required continued community action. Nightwatch remained, shaped by its origins and committed to standing alongside those who had nowhere else to turn.



1987 - 1996: Focus on the Street Homeless

By the early 1990s, Nightwatch was running three hostels, yet homelessness in Croydon was once again on the rise. Wider government policies and social change were reshaping the landscape. More people were finding themselves homeless, while at the same time the supply of available housing was shrinking. New pressures were emerging faster than existing services could absorb them.

In 1992, Jad Adams became Chairman of Nightwatch at a time of significant transition. That April, all Nightwatch accommodation was transferred to Croydon Churches Housing Association. This was a pragmatic decision; the hostel operation had grown considerably, and changes in housing legislation meant it was appropriate for a professional housing association to take responsibility for managing accommodation rather than a small charity.

Volunteers were witnessing a sharp and troubling increase in rough sleeping. On Sunday nights alone, the number of people encountered rose from just three to around thirty. There was no single cause. The closure of Cane Hill mental institution in the early 1990s, as part of the move towards 'care in the community' left many people without adequate support. Redundancies due to the economic recession pushed others into crisis. Rising numbers of relationship breakdowns disproportionately affected men and teenage children, often leaving them without stable housing. At the same time, Right to Buy legislation meant fewer homes were available, this was particularly challenging for single people or those without children, for whom the council had little statutory responsibility.

Jad Adams now took Nightwatch in the direction of expanding its street-level operation for which it needed larger premises, more volunteers and more funding. The charity moved out of the Parish Church Hall into another hall in central Croydon, recruited new volunteers, secured additional grant funding, and increased its street work from three nights a week to seven. In 1994, Nightwatch stopped relying on donations and began

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 1992

YOUR LOCAL GUARDIAN

Nightwatch aims to double homeless help

A charity which feeds the homeless in Croydon intends to double its work within the year.

The new chairman of Nightwatch, Jad Adams, was speaking after being elected head of the committee which runs the recently reformed group.

"We have been providing soup, sandwiches, clothing and blankets to the homeless in Croydon on three nights a week for 16 years now," said Mr Adams, a 36-year-old writer who has worked with the charity since 1979.

"By the end of the year we are hoping to double

the service to cover at least six nights. We frequently see people who say they have not eaten for days.

"In a nation as wealthy as ours, in a place like Croydon with so many people willing to help, that is simply an intolerable situation. The very least we can do for the homeless is feed them."

Nightwatch has been running for three nights a week since 1976 when a group of local people, alarmed at the extent of homelessness in Croydon and the deaths of two homeless people, called a meeting to discuss what they could do.

At first they decided to feed people with soup and sandwiches. Later they opened a hall where homeless people could sleep and then progressed to providing hostel accommodation for 13.

By 1992 Nightwatch one short stay for three other premises in Croydon.

This month it is to hand over all the other assets with them to Churches Housing Association.

The Nightwatch has now been continue and exp

level provision for homeless people.

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Homeless to receive more care on streets

NIGHTWATCH charity for the homeless is to boost its presence on the streets after handing over its short stay hostels to a housing association.

The charity has been operating for three nights a week since its inception in 1976 but now volunteers aim to be out six nights a week distributing soup, sandwiches and blankets to the homeless of Croydon.

Enormous

Jad Adams, the newly appointed charity chairman, said: "Most management attention was centred on the enormous task of running the hostels.

"Now the street level work is our only concern, we intend to improve it.

"Of course, the only real solution to homelessness is to provide more homes.

"But we are making a valu

purchasing essential items for clients like underwear and socks, and even suits to help people attend job interviews with dignity and confidence.

By 1996, the volunteer base had grown to around seventy people. A grant from Comic Relief enabled Nightwatch to invest in training, strengthening the skills of those working on the front line. That same year, Nightwatch launched a pilot scheme known as Settling in, designed to address a persistent problem: the cycle of repeat homelessness.

Too often, people who had finally secured accommodation after months or years on the streets found themselves stepping into empty rooms with bare floorboards, no bed, no cooker, sometimes not even light bulbs. These stark conditions led to despair and, in some cases, a return to homelessness. Through Settling in, volunteers visited people in their new homes, assessed what was needed, and helped them begin again. They supported utility connections, sourced cookers and fridges, and worked with recycling charities to furnish homes with essential items.

The scheme, later renamed Resettlement, proved to be a powerful intervention. By helping people not just move off the streets but truly settle into a new lifestyle, Nightwatch began closing the revolving door that had brought so many back to homelessness time and again. The project became one of the charity's most enduring and successful initiatives, rooted in the belief that a home is more than four walls, it is the foundation for rebuilding a life.

1997 -2006: Evolving Needs

By the turn of the millennium, Nightwatch had grown into a large and committed community, supported by just over one hundred volunteers. In 2001, the charity reached its twenty fifth anniversary, a milestone marked by a reception for volunteers hosted by the Civic Mayor.

Yet celebration sat alongside growing need. By 2002, Sunday evenings regularly saw between thirty five and forty people gathered in the garden. They were not only those sleeping rough, but also people living in hostels, bed and breakfast accommodation, squats, and other forms of insecure or poor housing. Homelessness was becoming more complex, and the boundaries between street homelessness and hidden homelessness were increasingly blurred.

In response, Tony Sewell, a volunteer at the time, established an advocacy service to support people sleeping rough. The service helped individuals navigate the bureaucracy of welfare benefits and housing systems, barriers that often stood between them and stability. Around the same time, volunteers noticed a growing number of refugees and asylum seekers seeking help, arriving from countries including Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iran. Croydon's role as the location of the Home Office immigration headquarters meant many asylum seekers were incorrectly directed to Nightwatch, when they in fact needed to attend the Home Office itself. This period placed new pressures on volunteers. Numbers increased, language barriers made communication difficult, and the emotional demands of the work intensified. To respond more effectively, Nightwatch produced information leaflets in Arabic to better support refugees from North Africa and improve understanding during first contact.

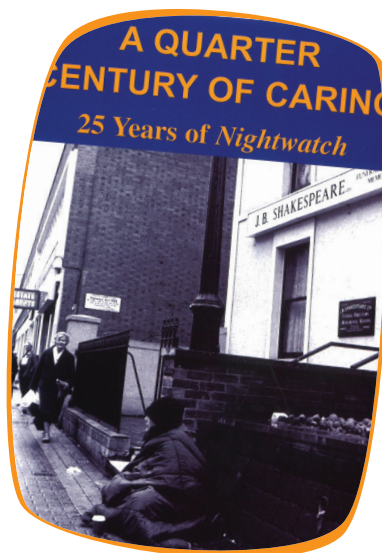
In 2004, the dangers faced by people experiencing homelessness were brought into stark focus. Two homeless individuals were attacked in Croydon on the same night. One lost their life, and the other was left permanently injured. It later emerged that the perpetrator had carried out five other attacks on homeless people that year. For Nightwatch, it was a sobering reminder of the vulnerability of those it served and the risks they faced simply by living on the streets.

That same year, Nightwatch faced another difficult first: the banning of a client following an assault on a volunteer and an attempt to extort money from another. It was a challenging reminder that safeguarding

volunteers and clients alike was essential. 2004, also saw the first year of Croydon Churches' floating shelter, a winter project with which Nightwatch worked closely. Many Nightwatch volunteers supported the shelter during the colder months, strengthening collaboration across the local homelessness sector.

In 2005, Nightwatch faced an unexpected challenge of its own, it became, briefly, a homeless charity without a home! The landlord of its premises planned to redevelop the site for housing, forcing Nightwatch to find an alternative base. Following a successful fundraising campaign, the charity renovated a derelict church building in central Croydon, transforming it into a kitchen and storage space. That same year, Nightwatch stepped into the digital age with the launch of its first website.

By 2006, Sunday night numbers had risen again, with around forty people attending regularly. There were fewer asylum seekers, but more Eastern European nationals, many of whom were highly motivated to find work. The majority of those attending, however, were long term homeless or formerly homeless individuals who continued to rely on Nightwatch for support and connection.



2007 to 2016: Increasing Needs

As Nightwatch moved beyond the mid 2000s, the profile of homelessness in Croydon continued to change. Volunteers began to see increasing numbers of Eastern Europeans, including non EU nationals such as Russians and Albanians. Sunday

evenings grew steadily busier, with around sixty people attending, and for the first time there was a noticeable rise in the number of women seeking support.

In 2011, Croydon was deeply affected by the riots. In their aftermath, Nightwatch worked closely the council to support people whose homes had been destroyed and who were suddenly left destitute. It was another reminder that homelessness is often the result of sudden crisis, not long term planning

Later that year Nightwatch's long serving Chair, Jad Adams, received the London Peace Award from Mayor Boris Johnson in recognition of his work after the riots. The award reflected not only individual leadership, but the collective commitment of volunteers who continued to respond to growing needs in the borough of Croydon.

As London prepared for the 2012 Olympics, Nightwatch found itself having to defend its work. As part of the Soup Run Forum, the charity campaigned against decisions by local authorities in Walthamstow and Westminster to shut down soup runs, alongside a more local police led campaign against Nightwatch in Croydon. During this period, a London School of Economics report described Nightwatch as "a good model of providing local solutions to local homelessness problems," affirming the value of its community based approach.

In 2012, that recognition was echoed closer to home when Nightwatch was named Volunteer Group of the Year at the Croydon Community Civic Awards. It was a proud moment, celebrating the dedication of volunteers and the impact of their work across the borough.

Change continued, in 2013, Nightwatch was warned that it would once again need to move from its building. As it had done before, the charity adapted, equipping another hall, storeroom, and kitchen in central Croydon to continue its



operations with minimal disruption to services for clients.

The pressures on Nightwatch intensified in 2014. In August, more than one hundred people attended on a Sunday evening, the highest number ever seen in the garden at that time. This surge may have been linked to the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which came into effect in October 2013. The introduction of a total benefits cap, combined with London's high cost of living, left many families struggling to afford food, let alone maintain accommodation.

The charity strengthened its partnership with the Croydon Food Network, which coordinated food supplies across the borough. An agreement was put in place so that surplus or unsuitable food could be shared between organisations, ensuring nothing went to waste. Nightwatch also received repeated donations from Sutton Food Bank, helping to sustain its service during periods of high demand.

Over time, numbers in the garden stabilised, reducing to an average of eighty to ninety people on a Sunday evening. While the scale of need remained high, Nightwatch continued to adapt, guided by experience, grounded in community support, and committed to responding compassionately to homelessness in all its changing forms.



2017 to present: Changing operations

As the charity moved through 2017 and into 2018, the pressures driving homelessness in Croydon became increasingly visible. Rising property prices pushed affordable housing further out of reach, particularly for young working adults and those on low incomes. Landlords increasingly looked to let to higher earning tenants, while delays and sanctions linked to Universal Credit left many people without money for food or rent. Croydon Council's own Public Health Report recorded a 22 per cent rise in homelessness between 2014 and 2017, yet more than a third of single homeless people failed to meet statutory thresholds for support. For many, Nightwatch became the only place to turn.

Sunday grocery distributions regularly supported up to one hundred people, many of whom had accommodation but could not afford food. Attendance fluctuated, falling from an average of eighty to seventy one in 2017, though spikes of over eighty five were not uncommon. Nightwatch welcomed the Homelessness Reduction Act, but concerns remained about whether councils had the resources to deliver meaningful housing plans. During this period, the charity received the Croydon Heart of the Community Award, reflecting renewed local recognition. Support flowed from churches, individuals, and faith communities including Sikh and Muslim groups, whose generosity became a vital lifeline.

Nightwatch commemorated its 40th anniversary in 2017 with a conference in Croydon titled '*Help Meet the Challenge of Homelessness*' which was addressed by Marcus Jones MP, the local government minister with special responsibility for homelessness and by Lord Lieutenant of the County Kenneth Olisa.



Doug Randall, Bishop Martin Wharton and John Taylor, three pioneers of 1976 who got together at the 40th anniversary conference.



The conference was part of a series of moves to raise Nightwatch's profile and widen its funding base at a time when traditional funding sources were drying up. Nightwatch to increase involvement with the business community by engaging with the Croydon Business Excellence Awards, winning the award for 'best charity or social enterprise' in 2016. Local businesses or local branches of national companies such as Zurich and Access Insurance gave welcome support.



Nightwatch introduced a hardship Fund in 2019 to help clients with a one-off payment to overcome a financial hurdle. Since then, the fund has distributed £140,000. Awards range from fuel vouchers for payment meters during the energy crisis, to those faced with Notice to Quit because of rent or service charge arrears.

Covid-19

The greatest challenge



When the COVID 19 pandemic struck in March 2020, Nightwatch faced one of the greatest challenges in its history. Panic buying and rationing left supermarkets bare, threatening the charity's ability to source food. An urgent appeal brought a surge of new volunteers, many younger people temporarily freed from work or study. As older volunteers stepped back to shield, these new recruits filled the gap, ensuring Nightwatch remained on the streets every night. Volunteers also assembled food parcels for rough sleepers isolating in emergency accommodation, while local residents, such as those of Temple Road, ran weekly "One Tin" collections to keep supplies flowing.

The problem of food supplies was solved by contacting companies like Simply Lunch, a long-time supporter of Nightwatch, and others who had been supplying office workers who were no longer at work and cafes which were no longer open due to the covid lockdown.

Nightwatch volunteers are proud of maintaining an unbroken service when so many other charities closed down. It is sobering to remember that the people who went out to serve clients during Covid were working at a time when 1000 people were dying per day nationally and there was no certainty the numbers would go down and not rise exponentially. In the early months there was no vaccine and the effectiveness of masks was uncertain. Our new young volunteers were showing real courage in going out during covid to maintain an unbroken line of Nightwatch service.

As vaccination programmes began, Nightwatch worked alongside the NHS to ensure clients could access jabs, including those not registered with a GP. Client contacts rose from around 14,000 in 2019 to nearly 21,000 in 2020, the highest demand in its forty five year history. This mirrored national trends, with rising homelessness driven by domestic violence, loss of temporary accommodation, and pandemic-related poverty.



By 2022, Nightwatch reached a historic milestone, receiving The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service during the Platinum Jubilee weekend, the highest honour for volunteer groups in the UK. Yet operational uncertainty persisted. The redevelopment of Queen's Gardens left the charity without a settled serving point, and despite council reluctance to offer permanent space, Nightwatch maintained continuity by relocating nearby. That year, demand again surged, with an estimated



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22,000 client contacts and an average of seventy seven people attending on peak nights. Women now made up over one fifth of those seeking support.

Resettlement work continued despite a constrained housing market. Volunteers helped people furnish empty flats, replace essential appliances, and access work through practical support. The Hardship Fund distributed tens of thousands of pounds to prevent crises spiralling into homelessness, particularly as energy costs rose.

By 2024 and into 2025, Nightwatch was supporting nearly 25,000 contacts annually. Attendance regularly exceeded ninety on Sundays, with weekday averages near sixty. Despite disputes over its serving location, the charity retained strong civic backing, including support from cross party councillors and the Civic Mayor, who chose Nightwatch as his charity for the year and regularly came to serve as a volunteer.

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In conclusion

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Our volunteers come from many different cultures, reflecting the rich diversity of the community we serve. We are deeply grateful to the people of Croydon who give so generously in so many ways:

- their **time**, by preparing food, serving meals, or advocating on behalf of Nightwatch,
- their **energy**, through fundraising activities such as sponsored walks and other initiatives and
- their **financial support**, which enables us to continue our vital work.

We could not do what we do without this collective generosity, commitment, and compassion from our local community. In its fiftieth year, Nightwatch remains rooted in local generosity, sustained by volunteers, and committed, night after night, to standing alongside Croydon's most vulnerable people.



What others say about us

Sarah Jones, MP for Croydon West said:



"Nightwatch has consistently been an incredible service to people in Croydon and everyone should be so proud of meeting this half a century milestone. Staff at Nightwatch provide a lifeline in our community, offering not just practical support but dignity and compassion. I am so grateful to have them in Croydon doing such vital work."

Natasha Irons, MP for Croydon East said:



"Warmest congratulations to Nightwatch on 50 years of remarkable service. For half a century, Nightwatch has shown what compassion and community spirit can achieve, offering not just food and practical support, but dignity, care and hope to those facing homelessness. This anniversary celebrates the thousands of lives changed by the hard work of Nightwatch's volunteers, trustees and supporters. It's a powerful reminder of what local volunteers can achieve when they refuse to ignore those facing hardship. Thank you to all who have made Nightwatch what it is today."

Chris Philp, MP for Croydon South said:



"In 2026, Croydon Nightwatch marks 50 years of extraordinary service. Since 1976, volunteers have gone out every single night to support homeless and vulnerable people in our borough. Entirely voluntary and receiving no state funding, Nightwatch represents the very best of Croydon's compassion and community spirit. In 2022, it was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest honour for volunteer groups in the United Kingdom. I thank every volunteer, past and present, for the difference they have made to so many lives."

Steve Reed, MP for Streatham and Croydon North said



"Nightwatch have been helping highly vulnerable people in Croydon for half a century now, and all of us who live here thank them for that. It's a tragedy that homelessness was allowed to increase so much, and it's only right this Government is focused on making sure everyone has a secure roof over their head. But for all of those 50 years Nightwatch has been there to offer help, advice and a friendly word to people who desperately need it. Thank you Nightwatch."

Client comments ...

"Nightwatch makes me happy, get fed, get treated nice and polite. They are very helpful and charming people and I'm happy to come again, all the time!" LC

"I've been a client and received help and assistance from Nightwatch constantly over a period of a year, everything from assistance with debts and loans as well as the ability to come down if the pantry is low to be topped up and the service has been incredible. The people really care and bearing in mind that they are doing it on their own time and giving their time freely, incredible people and a great experience."

CG

"Nightwatch has helped me to get extra food when I needed that at times, and I like all the food, I come on different nights, sometimes I get hot food."

AA

"Nightwatch has done a lot, helping me eating, getting some new stuff for my apartment because I came from the street and I really appreciate them for the help they gave me" DG



"Nightwatch has been very helpful, for a lot of us around that are homeless. Nightwatch prepares food for us every night from Monday to Sunday-which is very helpful and goes a long way to alleviate our problems. They provide food, clothing and advice as well, some appliances as well and it goes a long way to alleviate the problems of the homeless on the streets. Nightwatch has been around a long time, and they are doing a great job, and we are very grateful for their support. I pray that they keep doing that, and I pray that the government or any other organisation that wants to help support them does, to continue their good work." SD

"Nightwatch, no matter how I have been feeling, no matter how hungry I have been feeling, they have always put a smile on my face; they have fed me and made me giggle and smile and they always make sure that everyone gets something to eat. No matter how cold people are, they give sleeping bags, jumpers, socks, t-shirts, everything. The thing that some people that come to Nightwatch don't realise, is that Nightwatch are volunteers and are doing it all out of the goodness of their hearts. I am a lucky man that I have been able to speak to the men and ladies at Nightwatch." TO



50 Nightwatch

1976 - 2026

www.croydonnightwatch.org.uk



Nightwatch - Homeless Charity



@WeAreNightwatch

Financial donations can be sent via

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The Queen's Award
for Voluntary Service