

Entering the main hall of St. Mary Abbott's Church on Friday afternoon, the atmosphere is one of excitement, of anticipation. People frantically rush back and forth as Christmas music fills the air, setting up the room in preparation for the week-end ahead. For one charity, today marks the beginning of the end of four months of relentless hard work, appeals and collections. In one corner of the room is an enormous pile of bin bags, ten deep and 20 to 30 wide. Each bag contains a collection of coats from across the capital, donated by members of the public to help someone in need keep warm this winter.

"I'm a terrible seller, and if I was on The Apprentice I'd fail in week one. But I have no hesitation in talking about what I do because I'm not asking for money. And people respond very well to that," says Frances Manthos, founder of Calling London, one of the most unique charities in the country. "I know you've got that bright green fur at the back of your closet that you hate. But we would love it and that's the idea."

Calling London is a charity with a distinctive selling point. They don't want your money, your time or your signature. All they want is to take that coat that you no longer use and, through the network of charities they supply, redistribute it to people who desperately need it.

"Basically a friend was a teacher and had pupils coming to school, a primary school, without a coat because they couldn't afford it," Frances explains. "That was a particularly cold period, and discussing that seemed absolutely shocking to us that this could be happening in London. So, inspired by a group in New York, we decided to get all our friends together and do a winter coat collection."

And that is exactly what Frances has been doing, along with a host of other volunteers, every winter for the past five years. Calling London begins its collection drive in September, getting donation boxes into as many local businesses, schools and offices as it possibly can. People can drop off coats at their convenience, with the real work for the volunteers starting in the first week of December.

“It’s a win-win scenario really” explains Charlotte Iselin as she scrubs down one of the dirtier of the donations. Charlotte, is in her second year as a volunteer with Calling London. “It gives people who want to do something for those less fortunate an easy access point, and of course you can’t put a value on how much it means to those who receive the coats”.

It is a service that has become increasingly important since the charity’s inception in 2011. Last year 7,580 people were recorded as sleeping rough in London, a number which has increased every year since 2007 and is now more than double the number it was in 2004 to 2005. In addition to this, alarming figures from the Office of National Statistics earlier this year showed that excess winter deaths (the number of people whose deaths were registered between December and March compared with previous months) were up 23% from the previous five years.

Consequently, Calling London has found itself expanding further afield every year. It boasts collection boxes all over London, and even in the town halls of some London boroughs, starting in Kensington and Chelsea before branching out to Westminster and Hammersmith and Fulham. Hammersmith and Fulham council received 851 approaches for support with homelessness last year, of which only 250 were given assistance by the council, by finding them temporary accommodation and helping them get back on their feet again. However 600 people did not receive this service, and with unemployment in one of the boroughs poorer wards, Wormholt and White City, at 44%, the need for community support has never been more evident.

“There are always homeless groups involved,” Frances says. “There might be groups for drug rehabilitation, for detention centres. The food banks are an obvious one. We also have worked in the past with groups like Refuge for Women, the elderly, even to schools directly.”

As the charity has expanded to help an ever growing range of people, so its community of volunteers and supporters has grown with it. Chestertons, an estate agents which is working with Calling London again this year following a suc-

successful partnership last year, is placing collection boxes in every one of its 32 offices across London.

“We just agreed it would be a fantastic way to give back and do something meaningful for those most in need in winter,” says Robert Sturges, manager of the Fulham branch of the company. “The ability to be able to contribute in this direct manner is what is spurring people of all ages, of all apparent backgrounds to drop their clothing in to us.”

Indeed, Frances feels that projects such as hers really help to highlight the generosity of people in the capital: “People really want to help other people. They don’t always know how to go about doing that, but there are so many good people out there who I’d never have met if I hadn’t done this. It’s just about finding them.”

And Calling London appears to be finding them in their droves. In their first year they collected just over 1,200 coats and last year broke the 2,000 barrier despite only operating in a select few boroughs. This year, with the help of their vast network of volunteers, they’re hoping to move past 3,000.

Another important part of Calling London’s success has doubtless been the strong relationships they have formed with the charities they supply. They do not discriminate about who they distribute to, with the sole requirement for receiving a donation being that they go to someone in need. This is a fact that does not go unappreciated by the charities who are recipients, such as the Hammersmith and Fulham food banks.

“They’re great,” says Daphne Aikens, Chief Executive of Hammersmith and Fulham food banks, “and it’s such an obvious thing to do. There was a very wonderful story last year of this woman who was a domestic violence victim, and we had one small coat left and no one was taking it. Anyway, she came in shivering from head to toe and it absolutely fitted her perfectly. So you know it’s just wonderful for the people coming in to be able to do that.”

It is stories like this one that make all the work Frances and her team do worthwhile. Anyone who deals with Calling London, from the volunteers to the charity heads, have nothing but glowing reviews of the work they do and the good it does. And with demand growing every year, the only question that remains is what's next for this unique little charity.

“Every year I get more and more requests for coats from outside of London” explains Frances. “Either I'd like to get a sponsor for a van that can deliver outside of London, or I'd love to find like-minded people to help us create sibling 'Calling' charities. How about a Calling Birmingham? Calling Brighton? Calling Glasgow? The idea is so simple.”