

Places of sanctuary for ‘the undeserving’? Homeless people’s day centres and the problem of conditionality

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of a dilemma that is central to the place of day centres in tackling single homelessness, and raises issues for social work more generally. On the one hand, day centres provide vital services to a vulnerable group in a safe, non-threatening and non-judgemental setting; on the other hand, in doing so, they are believed to impede opportunities for personal change. The paper draws on findings from a research study which compared and contrasted the priorities of single homeless people with multiple support needs with the priorities of support services, exploring the role of encounters between service users and agencies in either overcoming or reinforcing multiple exclusion homelessness.

This paper focuses on evidence about the use of day centres. It seeks to draw on theological insights to explore day centres as ‘places of sanctuary’ whose largely unconditional accessibility enables them to serve as both a last refuge for the victims of multiple rejection and a safe place to confront the past. This paper will take the debate about conditionality in welfare provision beyond the field of homelessness to address one of the oldest dilemmas of social work: how to facilitate change while respecting people’s free agency.

Key words: homelessness; sanctuary; day centre; conditionality

The contested world of homeless people's day centres

This paper uses evidence from research with single homeless people to explore a dilemma at the heart of day centre provision for this group. How can a service both appeal to service users on their terms and be a vehicle for change? After reviewing research into homeless people's day centres, the concept of 'sanctuary' will be advanced as a way of understanding how day centres seek to resolve this dilemma in practice. Conclusions will be drawn that shed light on one of the oldest issues for social work: how to effect change in people in ways that still respect their free agency.

Day centres offer a wide range of services to various groups of service users, often in response to quite different motives and historical circumstances. Smith and Harding (2005, p. 1) defined them concisely as "services that provide a range of support that is not accommodation ... on a drop-in or sessional basis", and they typically do this in a single location. Clark (2001, p. 10) expanded on the range of needs that might be met, including physical care and shelter, companionship and social stimulation, rehabilitation and life skills, positive experiences, employment, independence and social integration. They occupy an intermediate position in the spectrum of social care between full residential care and occasional home-based support. Service user groups are difficult to categorise, but typically embrace the full range of vulnerable adults, including infirm older people, people with learning difficulties or enduring mental health needs, and people who are homeless or vulnerably housed. Cooper (2001, p. 98) distinguished day centres for this latter group by their open accessibility to service users on a self-referral basis. She went on to emphasise the mix of services that

includes food, practical help, information and advice, and the commitment of their staff to providing a safe and welcoming environment to all service users.

In their survey of homeless people's services in England, Homeless Link (2012) estimate that 205 day centres are currently visited by 13,000 service users every day. Nationally, day centres rely on voluntary contributions for 42% of their funding and the services of nearly 8,000 members of staff, of whom around 70% are volunteers. Jones and Pleace (2005) pointed to their central importance to homeless people in recognising that they are homeless during the day as well as the night, with needs more extensive than simply a bed to sleep in. However, Crane et al. (2005) stressed the value of day centres for formerly homeless people whose accommodation is threatened if key support needs are not addressed.

Waters (1992, cited in Homeless Link, 2010) distinguished three models of day centre provision. Firstly, in the 'spiritual/missionary approach', day centres are places of containment and acceptance, where the aim is "to provide sanctuary ... or a tolerating community of people", with open accessibility and minimum expectations of service users. A recent survey of faith-based provision for homeless people (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2009) affirmed the prevalence of this approach, and Cloke et al. (2010, p. 117) noted that 85% of day centres were run by churches and charitable groups. Secondly, in the 'social work approach', day centres are places of rehabilitation and change, where the aim is to challenge service users to change their lives by offering professional support, often delivered through a key working system. Thirdly, in the 'community work approach', day centres aim to foster personal change, by encouraging service users to tap into their inner resources through, for instance, skill development and work-related activity. While this is a helpful categorisation of the broad character of day centres, most manifest elements of more

than one of these approaches, and the dilemma identified at the beginning of this section is obscured. How can a service maintain open accessibility while pursuing personal change agendas for which service access might need to be made conditional?

Day centres within broader homelessness strategies

The criticism that day centres support the very lifestyles they are meant to challenge has become part of the folklore of homelessness policy for at least the last 20 years (Randall and Brown, 2002), and cannot be fully addressed without exploring broader urban developments and homelessness strategies. Two issues are of particular relevance: strategies of social cleansing associated with the ‘revanchist’ city; and the process of ‘responsibilising’ disruptive and anti-social groups.

Research by Cloke et al. (2010; Johnsen et al., 2005) takes up the first issue. They draw on Smith’s (1996) narrative of developments in New York in the 1990s in which prime sites and ghettos were reclaimed in the interests of commerce, gentrification and the neo-liberal agenda, a strategy entailing the systematic criminalisation and exclusion of marginal groups such as homeless people, a process mirrored in many English cities (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2007). In their research, Cloke et al. (2010, pp. 118-9) highlight the contested purpose of day centres as being, on the one hand, part of the strategy for containing undesirable populations away from key city centre sites, while on the other hand offering a refuge from neoliberalism and revanchism. DeVerteuil (2006) also showed how the development and management of homeless people’s shelters in Los Angeles served as a counterweight that avoided the more

punitive approaches to marginalised groups through an alternative policy of concealment and containment.

Cloke et al. (2005; 2010) go on to explain this resistance to the neo-liberal agenda as an arena in the emergence of a post-secular ethical inspiration that rejects both secular humanist change agendas and traditional Christian 'caritas' in favour of what they call 'post-secular charity', making possible a rapprochement between people with different faith motivations or none, but who nonetheless share a common ethos. Cloke et al. stress that what distinguishes post-secular charity from the other two ethical rationales is a 'receptive generosity' (2010, p. 57) that both gives to and receives from the other person as they are, without any pre-conceived agenda based on behavioural outcomes that derive from the giver, which may take the form, for instance, of Christian conversion, or humanist personal responsibility. In the context of homeless people's day centres, we would therefore expect to see an emphasis on open accessibility, in contrast to making services conditional on, for example, participation in an act of worship, or a willingness to address drug or alcohol problems.

By operating in this way, day centres have also served as islands of resistance to the other closely linked agenda: if marginal groups cannot be contained, concealed or excluded, they can be taught to embrace the values of responsible citizenship associated with the neo-liberal city. Rough sleeping was an early target of New Labour's social exclusion agenda (SEU, 1998; ODPM, 1999), and as such had more to do with promoting social cohesion through responsible citizenship than social justice through tackling inequalities (Fitzpatrick and Jones, 2005). Street homelessness was therefore a problem more of anti-social behaviour than of poverty, and this was reflected in increasingly coercive policies. In this context, day centres

were initially harnessed as vehicles for containing and potentially rehabilitating homeless people. However, they quickly found themselves relegated to the margins as funding conditions that required a commitment to resettlement targets and the acceptance of a high degree of surveillance threatened their autonomy and their traditional ethos of open accessibility.

Whiteford (2010) has shown how this conflict has been played out in the tensions that arose for a day centre expected to start charging homeless people for its food. His case study illustrates the issue that is at the heart of the dilemma faced by day centres in the context of contemporary urban developments and strategies for social inclusion: an environment cannot be both welcoming and challenging simultaneously. On the one hand, people who feel accepted will see no need to change; on the other hand, people who expect to be continuously challenged may eventually be deterred altogether.

Day centres as places of sanctuary

The purpose of this paper is to show how homeless people's day centres can be reconceptualised as places of sanctuary that can help to resolve the tension between places of refuge and places of change, without reverting to conditionality. Sanctuary is an ancient Judeo-Christian tradition that has taken many forms, and has re-emerged in recent years to inspire social movements and developments in social work. In her reflection on the role of the church in deprived neighbourhoods, Hope (1995) drew on Old Testament imagery of the Sanctuary as the place where the nation encountered the holiness of God. It was a dangerous, awesome place, unapproachable by anything

impure, on pain of death (Numbers 18: 3). Yet elsewhere, God is described as a refuge to his people, to whom they can turn in times of trouble (e.g. Psalm 18). Thus Hope sums up the implicit tension in the way that sanctuary “offers asylum, refuge, unconditional love, but true sanctuary will also be the place of judgement, crisis, challenge, risk and change – the place of liberation” (Hope, 1995, p. 196). She thereby captures the paradox of the sanctuary as both a place of escape from the demands, injustices and oppression of the outside world, and a place where the damaging consequences can be confronted and challenged and liberation found.

Theologians have demonstrated continuity between the Judaic and Christian traditions through New Testament imagery of the temple ‘sanctuary’ as a ‘type’ or ‘shadow’ of the heavenly sanctuary, which is at once the dwelling place of a holy God but also accessible to all believers through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ (Mackie, 2011; Steyn, 2011). Others have shown that this basic idea could also be found in other ancient faith traditions, such as city sanctuaries in Ancient Greece in the confines of which those of citizen status were granted divine protection (Marfleet, 2011). Marfleet shows how the medieval church assumed responsibility for providing sanctuary to, for instance, victims of local feuds. He then demonstrates how the concept became secularised in the seventeenth century to produce the modern concept of ‘asylum’ in which the nation state itself provides refuge to the fugitives of persecution on condition of a willingness to submit to the civic authorities. This has paved the way for sanctuary to re-emerge as a radical theological critique of the state’s appropriation of the right to grant asylum, illustrated in the Sanctuary Movement in the US in which church congregations provided shelter to undocumented Central American refugees fleeing state repression in the 1980s (Westerman, 2002). The value of this illustration for our purposes lies in the idea of

sanctuary as a place of challenge in a different sense, a place in which those who take refuge can be sheltered and equipped to challenge the forces that oppress them.

The concept of 'sanctuary' has also been used as a way of understanding particular approaches to social work in residential settings. The Sanctuary Model was developed in the US to provide an all-encompassing framework for a therapeutic environment that focuses on trauma and centres on understanding residents as people who have been injured in body, mind and soul (Abramovitz and Bloom, 2003; Bloom et al., 2003; Madsen et al., 2003). Guided by the acronym SAGE (Safety, Affect management, Grieving, Emancipation), the model stresses emotional and physical safety, shared rules and practices through which to respond to emotional crises, a recognition of losses and the need to grieve, and freedom from bondage to past events and experiences. The model thus captures the paradox of sanctuary as a place of safety and a place of confrontation, eventual liberation being dependent on this confrontation-in-safety. It has been applied in residential settings for disturbed young people, substance users, people with mental health problems and women and children escaping domestic abuse.

In an earlier paper, one of us (Bowpitt, 2000) examined the central tension in social work of trying to effect change in the lives of people who are still to be treated as free agents, and explored how far Christian theological insights might help to resolve this tension. One option lies in social workers offering services in such a way as to convey key messages about the character of the loving God who alone can heal the damage of the past and bring about real change in people's lives. This paper proposes the concept of 'sanctuary' as a development of this idea in the context of day centre care for homeless people, exploring what day centres mean to service users and staff members to see how accurately the image of the 'sanctuary' conveys that

meaning, and how far it is possible for day centres simultaneously to be places of refuge and places of change.

The HOME study

The purpose of this paper is to draw on research evidence on the meaning of day centres to single homeless people and their staff in order to explore how far they were used as sanctuaries in the above sense, thereby resolving the tension between places of refuge and places of change. The evidence is drawn from the HOME study (HOMElessness and Multiple Exclusion) that sought to understand the support priorities of multiply excluded homeless people and their compatibility with support agency agendas (Bowpitt et al., 2011b). The study was funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the Department for Communities and Local Government, and undertaken as part of the ESRC's Multiple Exclusion Homelessness Research Programme (RES-188-25-0001). The research was undertaken during the winter of 2009-10 in Nottingham and London by academic staff at Nottingham Trent University, in co-operation with the Framework Housing Association in Nottingham and Thames Reach in London. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Nottingham Trent University, and all participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and use and gave written consent to being interviewed.

The particular focus of the HOME study was upon single homeless adults with multiple exclusion, that is to say those who combined a lack of secure accommodation with one or more other indicators of deep social exclusion, such as chronic ill-health

(mental or physical), substance dependency (drugs or alcohol) or an institutional background (prison, armed forces or time spent in local authority care as a child). With the help of our two collaborating organisations, we undertook semi-structured interviews with 108 people using homelessness services, 55 in Nottingham and 53 in London, of whom 74 were men and 34 women, and nearly all of whom had recent experience of rough sleeping. Interviews with single homeless adults were balanced by 44 interviews with key informants from support services used by homeless people, 24 in Nottingham and 20 in London, consisting of 14 managers and 30 frontline staff working for 40 different agencies in total, 12 in the public sector and 28 in the voluntary sector.

The overall purpose of the HOME study was to gain deeper insight into why some single homeless people sustain the characteristics of multiple exclusion, unable or unwilling to engage with support services that might overcome its destructive effects. The study sought to explore how far this problem arises from incompatible priorities between single homeless people and support agencies, and what works in resolving them. The interviews therefore sought to understand the background of single homeless people, their priorities and survival strategies and their experience of trying to access a range of support services, comparing their perspective on these issues with those of key informants.

In the light of the above review of policy and research on the value and purpose of day centres for single homeless people, and in order to explore how far they served as places of sanctuary, evidence will be used from the 69 homeless participants who gave evidence on day centres, and the four key informants who were day centre managers. The four day centres in the HOME study, two in Nottingham and two in London, were typical rather than representative, either nationally or locally. All four

were heavily used by respondents in our study, although some evidence from London respondents derives from other centres. Importantly, three of the four day centres described themselves as ‘faith based’, including the two from London, but they varied in the extent to which they sought to address spiritual needs as a deliberate aim. All four mainly concentrated on offering a range of practical services, including food, clothing, washing facilities, health care, and advice on housing and welfare benefits, but they differed in the degree to which they sought to address drug and alcohol issues, or employment needs. All four stressed their open accessibility towards both homeless people and people with other vulnerabilities; only one was restricted entirely to homeless people, and only one allowed drinking on the premises.

Of the 69 homeless respondents who gave evidence on the use of day centres, only six reported not using them, for reasons that will be explored later on. Of the other 63, a third were women and a third were from an ethnic group other than White British, broadly reflecting the balance of the overall sample by gender and ethnicity. In other respects, day centre users slightly over-accentuated the typical characteristics of the current multiply excluded homeless population (Broadway, 2012). Thus, around a half had drug problems, two thirds had drink problems, and a half had mental health problems. Importantly, about two thirds were victims of violence or trauma, and a half had institutional backgrounds, such as local authority care, prison or the armed forces. We were therefore studying a population many of whose members saw homelessness itself as an escape from oppressive events and experiences, both personal and structural. Insofar as anything can be concluded from such small numbers, the six who reported not using day centres showed no signs of being untypical.

Places of refuge

The evidence will be structured around the two aspects of ‘sanctuary’, asking to what extent day centres served as places of refuge and of change, and exploring how the tension between these two purposes were resolved in the minds of service users and managers. Participants valued day centres most for the physical lifeline they afforded during periods of street homelessness, including a source of readily accessible (free or affordable) food, facilities for washing and personal hygiene, clean clothes, medical care and friendship. They also saw them as places of safety and shelter, where they received understanding and real care. Some used them as a source of blankets or sleeping bags, or even as places to sleep. Moreover, they were a route to other services, such as housing, substance misuse or mental health services, and several participants valued day centres as sources of advice and advocacy. Some also derived spiritual support, especially at faith-based centres where they could participate in prayer or acts of worship. Many day centres were commended for their sheer unconditional accessibility.

Certain qualities emerged from thematic analysis of interviews with service users and staff as giving day centre work a unique place in the network of services for homeless people. They are *accessible*, located in familiar places, with an open-door policy to the neediest people with the minimum of hindrance.

Everywhere you go they say they will support you but then nothing. They say it is an unusual case ... Then I was quite shocked to see a place like this where they just take you in and you can have your drink in there. And you can have food. (N50, Nottingham male)

They are *flexible and responsive* towards people's basic survival needs, whatever they are and on their terms, as far as possible.

The key aim is to listen to what a client says and develop a set of priorities based on what they are telling you ... I can't really say I want to put them into housing or whatever because actually I can only rely on what they say. (Manager, Day centre 1, London)

They show *undemanding friendliness*, providing a listening and understanding ear to every trouble without passing judgement or insisting on particular forms of engagement.

Even going to them was a sense of belonging because you had somebody around you and ... that was the biggest thing, having somebody to talk to, you know, because the loneliness ... when I was on my own - and the suicide tendencies ... were worse when I was on my own - I couldn't contain it. (L31, London male)

They demonstrate *welcoming inclusiveness* in an environment in which everyone has a place and can find companionship.

We are working with people now that are barred from every accommodation service in the city. (Manager, Day centre 2, Nottingham)

It is because of these features that day centres were judged by service users to be among the most acceptable services on offer, and frequently the only ones which homeless people felt able to use, or from which they had not been excluded. These features were confirmed and clarified by day centre staff. There was a concern to provide a safe place, where people can at least meet their survival needs without any further expectations. It should be a place where service users feel that they are being listened to and are able to shape the agenda in terms of addressing other support needs. Moreover, this should take place in an atmosphere in which their lifestyles are

not being continually subjected to critical scrutiny. Even if most day centre staff may want service users to move on, satisfying this wish is not expressed as a condition of their attendance.

Of course, this unconditional accessibility does not come without its problems. One of the most basic is that a service that seeks to include the most excluded ironically runs the risk of becoming an exclusive service, as the most vulnerable homeless people are intimidated from using the service by other service users. This is something that had led staff at the Nottingham day centre that specialised in the needs of homeless alcoholics to restrict their facility to rough sleepers who were otherwise being deterred by accommodated drinkers who were using the centre simply as a place to drink. Most other day centres qualify their accessibility by rules about the way visitors should behave, which we will further explore later on. However, there was no sense that access to services was conditional upon a willingness to submit to programmes of personal reform or rehabilitation.

Places of change

Alongside help with accessing services, some participants mentioned a further role of day centres in motivating them, providing them with the facilities to sort out their own issues, like a phone, and getting them involved in activities. As places of change, further common themes emerged from our analysis that challenge the notion of day centres as merely sustaining an unsustainable lifestyle.

Day centres provide *supportive enablement*, giving service users the facilities to negotiate their own cases with other agencies, with day centre expertise as a fall-back.

They let you use the phones if you need to ring the Job Centre or if you need to make a quick phone call to your family ... They do the Big Issue so you can get set up on that, so you can make money that way. (N13, Nottingham female)

They offer *convivial activation*, engaging service users in accessible and inclusive activities that promote skill development in an atmosphere that fosters mutuality.

The housing office, benefits agency: like to them you are just a number. You're not a person. They don't care about you. At least at the day centres they do ... especially when they are giving you like lunch for free, free meals and staff eat same food as you, sit down and talk to you. They have activities there and they get involved in that. There are football games once a week, quite a lot of activities, a bit of bonding going on, getting to know each other at a different type of level, seeing each other as humans, instead of just like numbers. (L40, London male)

Their *challenge is patient*, encouraging people to address destructive issues in their lives, but on their own terms and in an atmosphere of acceptance;

They talk to you. They don't do it in the way of being nosy. They don't force themselves on you ... I used to come at first and go in the corner and sleep. After a while she'll come to me and say, 'I've seen you over the last couple of days'. That was nice. She made me comfortable to talk to her. I was honest and able to talk to her, build up a relationship slowly ... They gave me clothes, sleeping bag, all these things, very grateful for it. But at the same time I'm not getting too comfortable. (L50, London male)

However, ultimately, their *engagement seeks to be transforming*, offering opportunities for people to turn their lives around.

One of the challenges we have is that we don't want people just coming in and ... staying where they are. At the end of the day that's not actually helping them. (Manager, Day Centre 2, London)

It is on this last issue that day centres start to become contested places, forced to face in opposite directions. Those with an overriding commitment to move people on, for whatever reasons, may feel obliged to force the pace of change and in the process lose those who first need time to themselves to develop a sense of security.

Understandably, members of day centre staff were keen to stress how much further their services extend beyond the freely accessible means of survival. Staff members were sensitive to the frequently heard criticism that, by providing the means of subsistence free of charge, day centres sustain the very street lifestyles they seek to challenge. They were also aware of being part of the problem in another sense, of providing a congenial environment for those who, having accessed basic accommodation, wish to avoid addressing other support needs, thereby putting their housing at risk.

Staff interviewees responded by re-iterating the underlying purpose of their services. No matter how patient they were, their ultimate goal was to get people to engage with a process of life improvement; the challenge was how to bring this about. In some cases, the solution was spiritual, for instance offering service users the opportunity to come to faith in Jesus Christ. In most cases, the answer had to be found in the skilled guidance of service users towards effective support.

Two factors were often critical in success stories. The first was the environment of unassuming acceptance from which they emerged. It was because of being able to meet basic needs in a friendly atmosphere that service users were able to explore new possibilities, knowing that there was nothing to lose if they failed. The second was the potential for sustainability in the wake of resettlement. This was particularly valued in services that retained access for service users even after they had found accommodation. The services of day centres are still valuable, not only for providing

a referral route into other support services, but also for the supportive network that alleviates the loneliness that often accompanies resettlement (Lemos, 2000). As we shall see, this network need not be as supportive as this suggests, but the point is that day centres can sustain a resettled lifestyle at least as much as a homeless one.

Staff members at day centres were also keen to stress how much further their aims go than resettlement: nothing less than total re-integration into mainstream society is what they had in mind. This is why, alongside basic survival, advice and support services, day centres offer education, training and skills development, employment advice and volunteering and other work related experience. This is not just about keeping people occupied who might otherwise be engaged in supporting an alcohol or drug dependency; it is concerned with promoting self-confidence and self-esteem. It revolves around encouraging people to recover a basic self-belief in the wake of homelessness experiences frequently characterised by rejection, exclusion, abuse and degradation.

I think the bigger thing we try to instil is confidence and self-esteem, try and engage people in other things. We try and engage them in music or ... sport or allotment or cookery, just for two hours. For two hours they are not using, they are not drinking. They are enjoying something. It gives them a bit of confidence and self-esteem. Maybe I can do this. (Manager, Day centre 2, Nottingham)

These achievements are hard to measure. They may or may not accompany tangible resettlement goals, but they are essential to their long-term sustainability. Staff had little to say about the qualities and attributes of colleagues that might promote the self-esteem of service users, but homeless people had no doubt that it had a lot to do with the way they were treated and the extent to which it left them feeling valued, in sharp contrast to their experience of many statutory services.

Contested places

Of the 69 homeless respondents who gave evidence on day centres, six said that they would not or could not use them. The first reason was a feeling that they were unsafe places, or in some way threatening because of some feature of other service users, typically the likelihood of their being drunk or prone to pick fights. The other reason was an inability to meet conditions, thereby impeding access. These included having to pay for your food, having to maintain sobriety or having to be homeless.

I didn't really like going to those two (day centres) because there were like too many what I call idiots that caused fights and bullying and that because with my medical conditions ... I am scared of getting into fights ... because if I get hit too hard in the wrong place around my head it could kill me and because a lot of the wrong type of people out there on the streets with addictions knew about this I did used to get bullied quite a lot ... They just come at me and threaten me ... and them kind of people more often than not it would be the (two day centres) that they would use. (N35, Nottingham male)

Some of the people you see going into hostels and the day centres I don't want to be with them ... I don't want to be in a room with an alcoholic ... I consciously make an effort to keep out of their way, so why would I want to be stuck in a room with them? (L41, London male)

What these quotations illustrate is the dilemma of accessibility, on which we have already touched. Maintaining accessibility to people with drink and drug problems or other extreme complex needs runs the risk of excluding two sorts of equally vulnerable people: those who are seeking to deal with their complex needs and fear being 'dragged down' by associating with those who do not share this commitment;

and those who feel intimidated by the threatening behaviour often associated with some forms of substance use. Yet tackling this problem by limiting access threatens to jeopardise the benefits of openness.

Before examining day centre responses to this dilemma, we should re-iterate that we found no evidence that this deterrence was experienced in a discriminatory way, though further research needs to test this question more conclusively among especially vulnerable groups. We have noted, for instance, that there was no disproportionate avoidance of day centres by women, members of black and minority ethnic groups, or people with particular kinds of complex needs. We did, however, note that three women were glad of day centres that were restricted to their gender. Nevertheless, a fuller analysis elsewhere of our findings by gender (Bowpitt et al., 2011a) concluded that men are as likely to be intimidated from using homelessness services as women. The complexities of homeless people's engagement with day centres transcend the broad divisions of race and gender, being driven by the deeper vulnerabilities that they all share, and which service providers struggle to accommodate.

The fact that 90% of our study respondents did not appear to be deterred by the dilemma of accessibility reminds us not to get it out of proportion. Nevertheless, have day centres found a way to resolve it? One way is for them not to see themselves in isolation, but to collaborate with similar facilities that operate different policies. Another way is to design and manage the regime and its associated sanctions in a way that maximises openness and flexibility. In none of the four day centres was the consumption of illegal drugs permitted, and three did not permit the consumption of alcohol either. However, there was some variation in the sanctions that were applied to infringements, and the degree of formality with which they were applied. In all

cases, physical violence towards staff, volunteers and other service users attracted permanent exclusion, as also did the sale of illegal drugs. Where consumption of drugs or alcohol was the issue, or where people clearly arrived under the influence, responses varied from the relative informality of a request to come back when sober, to the contrasting formality of an Acceptable Behaviour Contract. This latter procedure was adopted in the one day centre where drinking was allowed on the premises. All service users had to sign an ABC, which was then lodged with the police who were informed if the contract was breached.

Day centre staff members were anxious to minimise the number of people they barred, aware that there was often nowhere else for them to go. However, their reasons were subtly different from those that service users considered acceptable. For instance, only one of our staff interviewees expressed a concern that openness to drinkers, for instance, deterred the most vulnerable rough sleepers, but the response in that case was to exclude the accommodated, not the drinkers, and there was evidence that some of our respondents were still put off from using that facility. Staff members were more likely to emphasise mutual safety and respect, and to avoid risks to the long-term survival of the centre that might be posed by any breach of local by-laws on street drinking or the more serious threat of prosecution under the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. However, they were keen to stress two further points that mitigate any threat to accessibility. The first is that signed behaviour contracts have the effect of turning an otherwise impersonal regulatory code into a personal commitment, so that individuals who breach can be seen as having let themselves down. The second is that day centres usually offer avenues of redemption even to the permanently excluded if they can show that they have moved on from the person who broke faith.

Conclusion

This paper has used evidence from a study of homeless people's experience of day centres to illuminate a dilemma in the provision of unconditional services for groups perceived as both vulnerable and disruptive. How can freely accessible services also be vehicles for change? We argue that this question goes to the heart of social work's claim to both respect people's free agency and effect changes in their lives.

Elsewhere, research has shown how attempts have been made by Government to harness day centres to a social inclusion agenda that uses conditionality as part of a drive towards promoting responsible citizenship among marginal and anti-social groups. We have also noted research by Cloke and others that has explored day centres as part of a resistance to this and other strategies of social cleansing. This paper has sought to explore in greater depth the dilemmas that arise from occupying this ambiguous position in the landscape of welfare, and how elements in the faith-based character of most day centres might provide a way forward. We explored how the concept of 'sanctuary', derived mainly but not exclusively from the Judeo-Christian tradition, has been revived in recent years, notably in residential social work, and might provide a framework for understanding how day centres might simultaneously provide unconditional refuge and a vehicle for change.

Day centres physically sustain some of the most vulnerable people in our society through life experiences that for many would otherwise be life-threatening. Their success in this aim stems from the accessible, acceptable and largely unconditional nature of the services offered, which contrasts sharply with most other services that homeless people encounter. In doing so, day centres stand charged with helping to

sustain unsustainable lifestyles, as if homelessness were a mere lifestyle choice. However, as we found in our study (Bowpitt et al., 2011b), for many of our respondents, homelessness and other features of multiple exclusion were triggered by traumatic events and experiences associated with domestic abuse, eviction and imprisonment, from which the streets were an escape, if not a sanctuary. The street lifestyle was a way of coping with the damaging effects of multiple exclusion. Far from confirming service users in an unsustainable lifestyle, day centres make a challenge to that lifestyle possible by creating an atmosphere of welcome, friendliness and trust, in which the underlying damage of multiple exclusion can start to be addressed.

In this sense, day centres provide a ‘sanctuary’ to a highly marginalised group. They are a last refuge for multiply excluded single homeless people, many of whom have been rejected by all other helping services. They offer a safe place for those unable to meet the conditions that operate elsewhere, because they operate from a different set of values that stress unconditional acceptance in an atmosphere where, in a sense, everyone is ‘undeserving’. Thus, they draw on the Christian traditions that inspire them by conveying a message about a gracious God who especially longs to be a refuge to failures and outcasts. But those very traditions also make day centres places of change in which service users are encouraged to submit themselves to a restorative process. The point is that this process cannot be engineered through the application of externally imposed conditions, an approach that tends to be associated with secular neoliberal ‘responsibilisation’. Instead, to be places of sanctuary, day centres have to rely largely on trust mediated through the kind of resourceful, open-ended friendship that was found among staff and volunteers who respect the freedom

and capacity of even the most damaged people to rebuild their lives in their own way and their own time (Bowpitt et al., 2011b, pp. 64-66).

Earlier we saw how the concept of ‘sanctuary’ has grounded a particular approach to residential social work that espouses what has been called the Sanctuary Model. Whilst it is unclear how far this model is theologically informed, it manifests all the main applications of the concept. It begins by recognising residents – abused women, disturbed youth, substance abusers, people with mental illnesses – as damaged, injured or traumatised by past events and experiences, something we found to be the case with two thirds of our sample of multiply excluded homeless people. It conceives of the residential setting as a refuge for those fleeing abusive situations or memories, and commits them to guaranteeing physical and emotional safety, recognising the need for a strategy that manages behavioural threats to that safety without resorting to exclusion. Lastly, it commits to the goal of emancipation through first enabling residents to confront the damage done by the past. Sanctuary thus becomes emancipatory in both personal and structural senses, by offering healing for the damage and empowerment to challenge its causes. In this illustration, the model has been applied in the controlled environment of a residential setting, so its wider applicability to social work remains unclear. But the general principle of offering a refuge as a pre-condition for facilitating change is one worthy of wider application.

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