

NOTES OF MEETING WITH JANE SPENCER, MANAGER, SOCIETY OF ST JAMES', ALL SAINTS HOSTEL, 23 MARCH 2015

**Present:** Cllr Darren Sanders (Chair, Housing/Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel), Cllr Phil Smith (Member, HASC Panel), Jane Spencer

**Background:**

The meeting aimed to gain evidence from Ms Spencer about isolation among 16-25-year-olds, many of whom reside at the hostel.

All Saints is a supported housing facility for residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with high support needs that lies between those at the Foyer and those at Victoria Road South.

**Questions and discussion**

1. How do people arrive at the hostel?

There was direct access - people in the target group could turn up and ask to be admitted. However, this is now conducted through a housing panel that allocates provision based on need. There are procedures in place to deal with those who present outside of normal office hours. These are led by PCC's housing options department.

2. What are the entrance criteria?

Aside from the details above, First Wessex, which owns the Foyer, All Saints and Victoria Road South, asks that entrants are able to pay two weeks' rent - £10.74 - upfront as part of its tenancy arrangements. As per First Wessex policy, anyone residing in any of the three centres who is in arrears - even if it is less than £100 - cannot be transferred to any of the other centres regardless of need.

3. Why do people arrive at the hostel?

The Southwark judgement a few years ago - which allowed teenagers who had been evicted from their parents' home the right to approach the local authority for a home and to be given it if they were deemed to need Looking After - has increased the number of 16 and 17-year-olds at the centre. Previously, it was usual to see two or three 16 or 17 year olds n a year: now there are times when almost all 22 residents are 16 or 17 years of age. That is one reason.

There is also what I call the 'disposable child theory'. I have had many parents say to me 'They are old enough. I do not have to look after them. You do it instead.' Sometimes, they want us to teach the life skills they did not. In other cases, there has been abuse or neglect by the parents, leading many of the children we see to be lacking boundaries in what can and cannot be done in life. Part of our job is to teach them those.

4. How is the hostel set up?

There is a communal room on the ground floor and three floors of bedrooms - 22 in all. Each floor has a kitchen and showers for those living there. The ground floor can be used for people with some physical disabilities.

Each room has a small sink for shaving and similar things, a work desk, bed, room to hang stuff and draws. First Wessex provide bedding and a starter pack with plates and cups to get the young people started. All kitchens should contain pots and pans for cooking.

Staff are on duty to support young people 24/7. We make regular checks of the building to maintain safety but go to a lot of trouble not to be seen as security guards constantly invading their space.

Residents can come and go as they please, within limits. Alcohol and tobacco are allowed, but other drugs - including legal highs - are not.

5. Given that there are locked rooms, what can be done to reduce isolation among residents?

Sometimes, people with mental health conditions will self-isolate so they need extra services, which we provide. Especially in the early stages, we are in regular contact with residents - often multiple times a day - and we always work on a plan to get them back into some form of mainstream life.

Bear in mind that we are dealing with people who have often been let down by the ones they love and thought they trusted. This makes many of them angry, especially when they see complete strangers offering to help. We must be sensitive to that. So we put together plans with them early on. However, we know we discover key aspects as we go along.

There are two things that would enable us to pick up people feeling isolated while they are here. The first is to access the CCTV in the building. Data protection means only the landlord can access CCTV footage. We cannot. That means we are less able to spot trouble, especially on the floor where we do not have our office.

The second is to have full disclosure of information at the start. That has not always happened and we have been left to discover things that affect how we handle individuals after they have been sent here. That is frustrating, especially as the design and intention of the systems we have in this city is good.

6. How would you reduce isolation further if money were no object?

Firstly, I would make sure all cases remain open to social care for the first couple of weeks after people arrive here to provide consistent support and respond to issues

as they arise. This will help us and PCC assess properly what help is needed and whether the work we provide is right for them.

The second is to have a financial system that helps people with the sort of chaotic lifestyles many people who come here have. We are already starting that. The Society of St James' has set up a fund to pay the upfront rent First Wessex wants. This means people who need our help cannot be turned away by the landlord because they cannot pay the rent in advance at the point they become homeless because they have no income in place. Instead the Society of St James will pay the rent in advance to the landlord to enable them to access homeless accommodation quicker and reduce the level of stress associated with being young and homeless.

The second is to have a 'grace period' of up to six weeks, whereby the young people who come here can receive the sort of benefits they would if they were at college while we agree a plan with them. Too often, they cannot go out because they have no money when they arrive here and are being told to get training and a job the second after they have often been kicked out of their parents' home, a really traumatic experience. That makes them sink into themselves.

If they have that grace period - even if it's a taper or paid back in instalments once they get a job - then they will be able to find their feet without this extra stress. The fact we go through a housing panel, rather than have direct access, minimises the possibility of fraud, but the principle could help people a lot.