
Towards a desistance focused practice with Sex offenders in Approved Premises/Hostels

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This article is informed by research and theory developed by the author and others. For wider details the reader is encouraged to look at: Cowe (2008), Cherry and Cowe (2010), Brayford, Cowe and Deering (eds) (2010) and Cowe and Reeves (2012) forthcoming. The aim of the article is to summarise some of the findings related to the skills staff need to work with sex offenders in approved premises or hostels¹, and the implications for hostel regimes and their relationship to a wider public policy arena.

The research findings suggests that working directly with sex offenders on their offending behaviour must not be viewed in isolation from wider issues of resettlement, i.e. the development of skills for living by themselves, and longer term functioning in society. Policy and practice encourage an over-generalised and simplistic or punitive approach when ignoring the diversity and range of sexual offending and the multi-layered responses that may be required. Practitioners and policy makers who want to develop practice in this area ought therefore to be mindful of the multiple meanings of the concepts of desistance and of sexual offending. In addition, the meaning of ‘Approved Premises or Hostel Staff’

must be made clear, and it must be remembered that a hostel or approved premises is not an island of practice.

Desistance-focused practice in hostels or approved premises needs to be seen as an active process that requires the engagement of the social agency of the individual – both **resident and staff** - as much as the contribution of external input, programmes or sanctions. No ‘Damascus moment’ is postulated as critical to such change however. The relationship with staff, the hostel ethos and the day to day messages about what is possible for offenders are critical to the narratives they develop about themselves and to the honesty with which they may disclose their real intentions, hopes and fears. It may also shape whether residents come back to the hostel or seek statutory support when they experience problems post-residence and may encourage self-report in the future. A desistance-focused emphasis can make staff feel less engaged in ‘moral dirt’ (Ferguson 2007)². The regime ethos shapes how staff feel about themselves and their work and how they view and relate to their family and the wider world.

Current approaches with sex-offenders variously focus on factors like containment, monitoring, risk, resettlement, rehabilitation and desistance. Research in the UK reveals a tendency for practice to be driven by attention to the first three of these at the expense of the others, ignoring that all six are interlinked in the short as well as the longer term. Discourse, policy and practice can juxtapose public protection and rehabilitation to varying degrees. Current sentencing and practice frameworks can play down the possibility of change, thus justifying disengagement from offenders and harsh practices.

Approved premises can make an important contribution to public protection and to resettlement of high risk and high need offenders (HMIP 1998). However, Cowe and Reeves (2012) found that a constructive and supportive approach was now at risk of being seen as an optional extra or a bolt-on to practices focused on risk, containment and monitoring. Changes and shifts in resident populations since 1998 do appear to have changed staff and offender attitudes and experiences of hostels (Cowe 2008). It remains to be seen whether 'grouping' sex-offenders in this way is helpful to their long term risk reduction and resettlement. Grouping all 'sex-offender' populations in hostels may lead to normalisation of deviant attitudes and norms between sex offenders and the 'pathologising' of residents by staff with a danger of work with such offenders be seen as engaging in 'moral dirt'.

As a result of fear, whether real or imagined, containment-driven practices can reduce opportunities for engaging offenders in pro-social and charitable work. Developing a regime for sex-offenders that has a strong focus on social efficacy and community relations may not sit easily with some policy jurisdictions. A message to staff and managers that is overly orientated towards risk and public protection can both lead to a reduction of change-focused practice and to corrupting or watering down of what may be perceived as 'softer rehabilitative practices'. Hostels could lose emphasis on a relational practice (Deering, 2010), which may actually contribute as much to robust practices focused on risk and public protection as on those focused on containment and surveillance.

Punitive climates can push managers and staff to shape their practice into a 'safer' and more palatable public protection - and containment-focused straightjacket at the expense of longer term aims of resettlement and potential rehabilitation. Research and policy around what works with sex-offenders and what works in a more general context has tended to focus on 'qualified staff' or staff involved in running formal programmes or interventions. Cowe and Reeves both found that:

- all hostel staff shape and influence the ethos and efficacy of the regime;
- all hostel staff have the potential to influence offender attitudes and behaviour;
- contracting out doesn't mean these staff have no impact, and
- all staff can contribute to risk assessment (housekeeper factor³)

A risk driven practice can lead to staff-resident relations that result in prisonisation, exclusion, control or containment and a negative facing, as opposed to pro-active and pro-social relations with residents and outside agencies. It would be naive to assume that displays of external conformity by residents to visible outward controls put in place by staff within a hostel are indicative of or likely to lead to internalised change and long-term desistance patterns.

Containment - and surveillance-driven regimes may encourage sex-offenders to close down and not talk about what they really think or feel, risking a neutralisation of staff efficacy with an ethos based on 'them versus us'. Residents can start to see the hostel as just a sentence to get through, whilst at the same time building networks with other sex-offenders. Their efficacy may be short-term only. To remain effective at resettlement and rehabilitation, hostel staff need core skills in a number of areas. These include listening, self-awareness, empathy (but not collusion), scepticism (but not nihilism), and the ability to understand and practice a range of pro-social skills. Furthermore, they need to be good mentors with an awareness of blocks to reintegration. Basic skills are also needed in risk assessment and in knowledge of the range of specific sexual offences and motivations, and in using the mundane to promote change and monitor risk.

Managing and understanding one's own emotions is another central skill factor. Finally, they must be able to work in a team and collaborate with multiple agencies.

Hostel managers are a key factor in influencing and shaping the ethos and efficacy of a regime (Cowe 2008, Fisher and Wilson 1982, Sinclair 1971). They need to value the whole team and consider the wider set of staff-skills and their contribution to the regime. Ignoring the agency and impact of all staff means to risk losing the valuable potential that more mundane parts of hostel life have to offer residents. It may encourage staff to be seen in relation to functional as opposed to pro-social roles and as agents of change. Mundane practices were found to offer sites of engagement and opportunities to better understand offenders' potential risks and needs. The mundane offers opportunities for monitoring as well as for pro-social modelling, and it allows the development of a relational practice whilst engaged in skills development by the residents. Such skills may include cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores, gardening, outdoor activities and sharing meals.

Staff need to retain a commitment to developing residents' independent living skills, including paying rent and budgeting, and in getting alongside offenders in the minutiae of their daily lives. The research suggests that this may better prepare residents for resettlement and assist them to see relationships with official organisations as something that is not solely experienced as surveillance and monitoring. The sense of having the possibility to return and providing a safe haven can promote offender engagement. The research found that hostels can provide an environment within which there is potential for constructive engagement with sex-offenders' risks and needs - although informed by a healthy scepticism - and a long-term focus on resettlement which supports residents' potential creation of a changed life script. In those hostels whose regime was being shaped by a risk driven focus at the expense of, rather than alongside a rehabilitative focus, Reeves and Cowe (2012) found there was evidence of a marked reduction in appropriate external connections being developed for residents and less promotion of in-reach events and external engagement.

The author has begun to question whether the location of the majority of 'services' for sex offenders in the UK within criminal justice settings is helpful to reducing risk, encouraging self-reporting and securing longer-term engagement. One hostel member of staff seemed to summarise well the very real tensions between staff, resident and public concerns as to what the hostels role should be:

'What we need is an unswerving commitment to their potential to change and lead useful lives alongside a realistic engagement and awareness of the real harms they have caused and might again cause'.

NOTES

- ¹ Hostels or Approved premises are akin to halfway houses.
- ² The concept of moral dirt in social work practice was first used by Ferguson in relation to work with abused children but transfers equally well to the work of staff with sexual abusers.
- ³ Housekeepers and cleaners were often in regular contact with residents, having access to their rooms and able to see on a daily basis the scope of residents basic living skills and self care. They could also be the first to notice changes in clothing, behaviour or mood that might otherwise go unnoticed. They might also notice attempts to conceal items or the presence of new items in room such as children's toys or books which could be used in grooming activities.

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