Could a radical revamp of one hostel spark a new wave of safer, more empowering homelessness services?

Caroline Thorpe reports

As soon as the staff member’s gone, my new roommate goes and pulls out a crack pipe, puts a bloody great stone on it and starts smoking it in front of me. And I’m just sitting there on the bed opposite thinking: “Well, I stand a chance then, don’t I?”

Welcome to your first night at St Mungo’s homeless hostel in London’s Cromwell Road. Or at least welcome to the hostel as it was. The scene, as related by former hostel resident Kronus Taylor, is hopefully not one that’s likely to be played out at Cromwell Road today.

The building reopened last October after a £3 million revamp, courtesy of the government’s £30 million capital improvement programme. This aims to improve 150 hostels and day centres by March next year. Double rooms were one of the first casualties of a structural overhaul, going clients coming off the streets and — like Mr Taylor — hoping to get clean, a fighting chance.

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weekly slot to drop in on the manager.

Outside In runs a peer-mentoring service, where residents buddy up with newcomers to help them settle in. Mr Williams has also decided to extend formal hostel induction (a tedious deluge of form-filling) over a couple of weeks to prevent people feeling overwhelmed.

Daily life is more pleasant for staff and clients alike. And it’s also cut down on the scourge of hostels: bullying.

‘Traditionally in a hostel environment there’d be bullying,’ explains Mr Williams. ‘The residents all knew bullying is going on, but no one would tell the staff so the staff had no way of dealing with it.’

End to isolation

Mr Taylor knows this. In the Cromwell Road of old, he says, bullying was rife. His tales range from clients taking advantage of the old layout’s dark corners to lay claim to less assertive residents’ benefit payouts, to allegations of rape.

Current resident Mr Hilliard is shocked by the latter revelation. ‘I don’t see it and I’m fairly observant.’

Mr Taylor takes the opportunity to float the idea of support groups – client involvement in action. ‘The way to stop bullying is to make sure people aren’t isolated. They’re only being bullied if they’re isolated and have nowhere to turn to,’ he says.

While the Cromwell Road experiment has much to recommend it, there’s still ironing out to do.

Mr Williams admits it is a ‘work in progress’. Though the general hostel atmosphere is good, getting more residents to buy into the idea of involvement isn’t easy. Current attendance at some focus groups is meagre.

Mr Taylor has ideas for improvement. ‘One thing I was really sore to see when I came into this hostel and I was really kind of thrown back by because it was the one thing I didn’t expect to see missing in this project and that was the pool table. Because some of my best key worker sessions surrounded playing pool because I was so relaxed.’

He has similar feelings about a ping pong table, which might encourage a greater sense of community.

‘There’s no-smoking issues as well,’ chips in Mr Hilliard, unimpressed with a rule banning smoking in bedrooms if its occupant has visitors.

While staff hope, given time, the mechanisms in place will enable such views to be addressed (regulations permitting) at Cromwell Road, other St Mungo’s hostels will also benefit. The money in St Mungo’s hostels’ capital improvement pot will stretch to doing up eight more hostels and seven housing projects.

At one of them, the Birkenhead Street hostel in King’s Cross, resident involvement in the revamp is already more advanced than that across town at Cromwell Road. ‘We’ve got the clients interviewing the architects and deciding which ones to use. So the architects will literally be pitching their ideas to the clients,’ says Mr Williams.

He’s determined not to squander his shot at radically changing the culture throughout St Mungo’s. ‘Cromwell Road is a chance to prove that a different approach to client involvement can work, and it’s a lot easier for me to roll it out to other projects saying, “this is how you can do it”’.

Ultimately Mr Williams’ message is simple. ‘Change the whole atmosphere, change the whole environment. It will give you a better chance of moving on.’

New and improved: the reception and exterior of St Mungo’s Cromwell Road hostel

Interview panels included two managers and two clients. When it came to hiring, one clincher would be: ‘Would I want this person to be my key worker?’ If either client said no, the candidate was out.