



## A day in the life of... Mark Farrell, assistant manager at a London 'wet' hostel

Hopkinson House is a wet house, which means people can bring alcohol onto the premises. There are 21 single rooms downstairs, 11 single rooms on the second floor and four self-contained flats.

When we get referrals from the borough of Westminster, we meet the person to see if he or she is suitable to move in. We don't have a huge amount of criteria and we're pretty flexible.

When someone comes into Hopkinson that has an alcohol issue, we try – and don't always succeed – in helping them to try and cut down on alcohol and start using their living skills. Then we see if they could take on extra responsibility.

I come in at 9.30am and go straight into the duty office to see if there have been any disruptions in the night, or any exclusions. I pick up the major incident reports if there are any, and familiarise myself with what's gone on, especially on a Monday morning. Things do tend to kick off more on a weekend.

Sometimes we have to exclude a service user if they've created a problem, for up to 48 hrs. This means they're asked to give back their keys and leave the project. It normally happens on a weekend, as there's no management in after Friday evening. It sounds awful, but it's almost like a short sharp shock. If someone's been here eight months, gets into a big argument and is excluded for the weekend, they tend to forget what it's like back out on the street.

We also sometimes get abandonment. If people have been long term living in the street, they can't adjust. They come in and we give them every type of support we can, but if they don't want to be inside, they just leave. It can be entrenched in somebody that they've lived out on the streets so long, that they're

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streetwise and know how to get by.

We only take people who are street homeless or in very short stay night shelters and get referrals from various outreach services. We're not direct access; sometimes local police think they can pop people at our door at 11pm and we can take them in.

I'm often at referral meetings in the afternoon. Everybody has a six-weekly review, just to see how things are getting on. Then it's dealing with any referrals that have been faxed over. We have an average of four or five referrals a week, of which three or four might be suitable.

We ask our residents to pay £30 a week. That's £25 a week for food and £5 service charge. It's a lot more than some other places ask, but we provide a bigger service. Everybody has their own room with a

locked door, and two cooked meals a day.

We also run extensive leisure and recreation facilities here. They're all service user led, and include shiatsu, acupuncture, karaoke, a video night, bingo, and parties for Burns night and St Patrick's Day. They're well attended and give a real feeling of community.

Individual cases can be really inspiring. We had a guy in here last year for 18 months. He'd witnessed his brother being blown up next to him in the Falklands war, and had only been back a few months when his wife died of cancer. This was the catalyst for him starting drinking, as he just couldn't handle it. So he was sleeping rough when he came in here and we had issues with getting him to cut down.

We supported him in getting in touch with members of his family he hadn't seen for years. The upshot is that he got back with his first wife, is living in Kent and due to get remarried.

It's an inspiration if somebody cuts down on their alcohol levels. We have a service user in at the moment, who's had a history of coming in the winter and stopping a couple of months over the worst weather, then going outside again. For whatever reason he's decided to change his life around. He moved from the first floor to one of the self-contained flats a few weeks ago and everything's going really well.

As the day unfolds I take it as it comes. One of the managers, depending on what we've got on that day, tries to fit in going to the handover meeting of early to late staff, which takes place 2.30 to 3.30.

We operate an open door policy here. Any service users that are up on the second floor, or any of the staff, can just come and knock. I like the fact that we're visible. If staff are stressed out by something, they should be able to just come up and let off steam. At the end of day they're front line staff, and will know much more about the service users.

If people get drunk in wet areas, we just have to manage it as best we can. They'll still drink to the levels they always have. If somebody falls asleep in their chair, we just leave them, we don't say they need to be back in their room. We let them sleep it off.

People here are on benefit and that has an effect on drinking levels. They're quite ordered, in that they know how much they've got and know how much they can drink. Yes, they've got little arrangements between themselves – Bert will say to Joe 'I've got my money today, you don't get your money till Thursday, I'll buy you a drink till then..'. But the level of drinking isn't as high as you might think. People imagine when they think of a wet hostel that everybody's lying on the floor, frothing at the mouth with 23 cans of Tennant's Extra. It's just not like that.

I like to pop downstairs, because I enjoy the interaction. You can get the odd one that can be difficult as they often have dual diagnosis mental health problems, but it keeps it interesting.

Every day is different.

*Mark Farrell is assistant service manager at Hopkinson House, an Equinox care centre.*