

PETE was a long-term heroin user. Unlike many other heroin users he did not use crack and other drugs with it. When he was given a bed at a large central London hostel he moved there off the streets, glad to be in a place that was clean and warm though rather institutionalised. But Pete found his new environment far from tranquil. The majority of other residents at the hostel were using heroin and crack along with a range of other drugs. At breakfast time scores of residents who had spent the night bingeing on crack surrounded him begging for heroin to ease their jittery comedown.

Intimidated and ill at ease by so much unwanted attention he went back to the streets where he had his own spot away from the more chaotic users who revolved endlessly between hostel and street. The government paid £300 a week in housing benefit for his place in the hostel but he found that he could get more peace and quiet sleeping under a bridge. Eventually supported by a worker at the needle exchange he used regularly he clawed his way to the top of a housing association waiting list, switched from heroin to a methadone script ending his contact with dealers, moved into a peaceful one-bedroom flat in a London suburb and lived happily ever after.

Not everyone manages to move out of the hostel system so successfully though. Hostels provide a vital and valuable service for a very vulnerable section of society which has nowhere else to go. Many do valuable work helping residents to move on to more permanent accommodation and to address mental health issues and problematic patterns of drug and alcohol use. But the complex nature of the needs of those who use hostels makes it very difficult to break the destructive spiral of poverty, addiction and despair many find themselves in. And peer group pressure can simply reinforce and compound destructive patterns of behaviour.

DRUG SCENE

Paul, 34, said that the hostels he had lived in had a very relaxed attitude to drugs. "When staff found a crack pipe in my room they gave me a formal warning but they didn't create any real problems for me. Let's face it, most people who live in hostels are addicted to Class A drugs. If you want to avoid drugs you need to avoid hostels or at the very least ignore everyone who lives in them. There are so many different drugs circulating in hostels that it's hard to avoid temptation. Hostels should introduce drug-free wings like they have in prisons so that people who really do want to stop using drugs get a chance to do so."

He said that while he had found hostel staff helpful in providing advice about stabilising a drug habit or coming off drugs the chances of actually achieving this goal while living in a hostel were slim. "The government needs to know that if they fund someone to go into detox and rehab, and afterwards send them straight back to a hostel, they're wasting their money. Lots of people who have just got clean can be using



Mark Harvey

“

There are rotas in hostels for drug-taking sessions depending on who's got their giro that day

”

again within an hour of getting back to a hostel – as soon as someone knocks on their door offering them gear.”

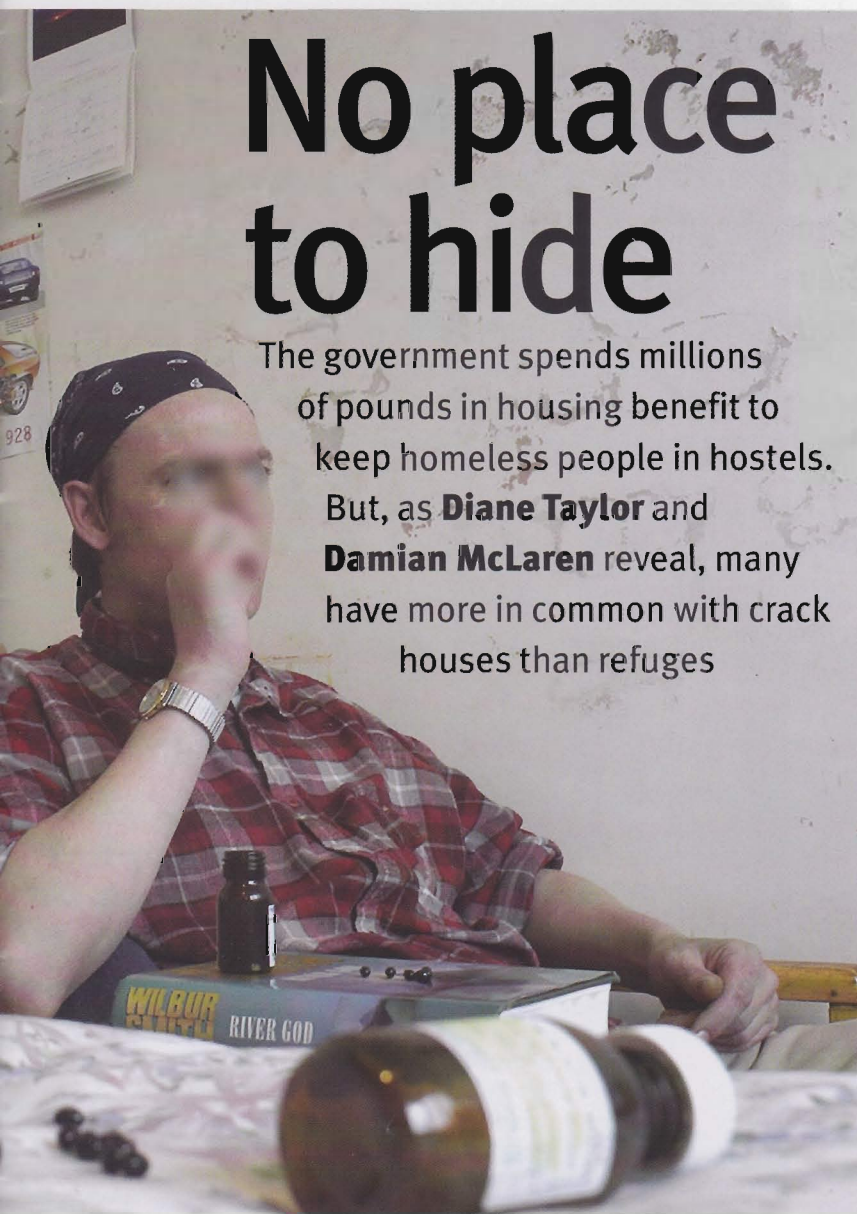
Andy, from south London, has been using heroin, cocaine, cannabis and a variety of prescription pills for more than a decade. He has had drug-free periods but has always ended up using again. He believes that a combination of factors makes it impossible for him to stop using. "The truth is I like taking gear but I just don't like all the crap which goes with it. Apart from the streets there's no other place than hostels for users like me to stay. I nearly lost my leg last year. I got septicaemia and pneumonia as a result of injecting in my groin but it didn't put me off using. The hardest thing is getting away from your circle of friends. I was born and bred in this area and everyone I know takes drugs."

ENTRENCHED

He says there are various ways by which living in a hostel can move a person's drug use up one or more notches. "I knew someone who got thrown out of a hostel for smoking cannabis. As a result of being made homeless he got in with a crowd living on the streets who were using heroin and crack. Sometimes people

No place to hide

The government spends millions of pounds in housing benefit to keep homeless people in hostels. But, as **Diane Taylor** and **Damian McLaren** reveal, many have more in common with crack houses than refuges



aren't moved on from hostels for years and years and their drug use becomes more and more entrenched."

He has found hostels and leading a drug-free life totally incompatible. "I came out of prison one time drug-free and I was determined to stay that way. I was given accommodation in a hostel and the day I moved in someone came to my room with drugs. That was it and I was back on the treadmill. There are rotas in hostels for drug taking sessions depending on who's got their giro that day. It's a bit like a cleaning rota. One night we'll all pile into one person's room for a binge and the next night we'll be in someone else's room. When you live on the streets you have to set aside some money for food but in a hostel that's provided so all the money you have can be spent on drugs. It's party time."

Gary Sutton from Release says that the issues around drug use and life in a hostel are complex. "Taking people off the street is one of the benchmarks of a civilised society. Some hostels send people out during the day. People can feel very disempowered if they're living in an environment where they have to leave by 8am every morning and not come back until evening. Some view hostels as houses for the wretched of the earth and they're not an easy environment to

Between a rock and a hard place: "I get more peace and quiet sleeping under a bridge."

stop using. Some people living in hostels will deal drugs to support their own habits. People need a whole range of interventions to get their lives on track – they need support, love, care and a good relationship with their counsellor. They need a bespoke service rather than something off the peg."

Sutton believes that more of a bridge to permanent housing is needed, more training to help people take on and maintain tenancies and speedier access to detox for those who decide they want to stop using. "But there doesn't seem to be a great deal of political will to implement these measures," he says.

WIDESPREAD

A spokeswoman for the YMCA, which has 147 hostels around the country, said: "We recognise that the use of illegal drugs is widespread amongst young people and within society, and acknowledge that this is likely to be reflected in the people who use our services. We aim to support our residents to reduce their use of illegal drugs and to ensure that we provide accommodation which is safe and secure. Each YMCA recognises its duty to do everything that is reasonable and within its power to prevent the taking of illegal drugs on its premises."

She added that prospective residents were questioned about their drug use and that while users were not automatically excluded from becoming a resident, being offered a bed was conditional upon the person accepting support to help them address their drug use.

St Mungo's, a homeless charity which is a large provider of hostels in London, has tried a range of new initiatives to help residents address their drug use.

"There needs to be quicker and easier routes into drug detox and rehab. We also need more 'move-on' housing offering various levels of support," said David Devoy, St Mungo's housing director. "In one of our central London hostels we have a dedicated 15-bed substance reduction unit where clients engage in an award-winning structured programme that provides pre-treatment, stabilisation and access to specialist staff from St Mungo's Substance Use team."

Another initiative from the charity is a Health Action Zone offering onsite prescribing of methadone. "This pilot has been very successful because it offers immediate access to treatment. We are now in the process of rolling this out to other hostels."

But while hostels may try their best to offer support to those who are unhappy about their drug use, 31-year-old Jimmy knows that even the most dedicated team of hostel staff can't wave a magic wand: "Nobody will stop using drugs unless they really want to stop using drugs. This is a negative thing to say but it's true – I love a speedball. When I'm in a hostel all my friends and I talk about is scoring and how much we like speed balling and how we're going to get our next speedball. In some hostels I go out and get my drugs then come back and sit in the front room fixing. Hostels are not helpful to stopping my drug use but neither am I." ■