

Peer research into Camden's hostels pathway

“IF I DON'T MOVE ON QUICKLY, I CAN SEE MYSELF BECOMING INSTITUTIONALISED, LIKE SOME OF THE OTHERS”



The experiences of people in Camden's hostels pathway

In Spring 2015 a group of local service users designed and carried out research to find out from 81 people what it is like to be in Camden's hostels pathway at the moment. This report is a summary of the research, and has recommendations for how the hostels pathway can be improved.

Camden’s hostels pathway (Camden Council, 2015¹)

“CAMDEN’S HOSTELS PATHWAY AIMS TO ENSURE THAT VULNERABLE AND HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE ACTIVELY SUPPORTED TO CHANGE BEHAVIOUR, RAISE THEIR ASPIRATIONS, GAIN MEANINGFUL OCCUPATION AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, MOVE FROM A STATE OF HOMELESSNESS AND DEPENDENCE TO INDEPENDENT LIVING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The value of service users conducting research with their peers is well established; service users engender comprehensive and valid opinions, as participants feel they can be honest and understood (National Institute for Health Research, 2014¹). Consequently, commissioners of Camden’s hostels pathway have asked service users to assist them in finding out how satisfied Camden’s hostel residents are with the service they receive.

Methodology

In March 2014, researchers spoke to nearly 50 service users in focus groups and 1:1 interviews about their experiences through the hostels pathway, and how it could be improved. Hostel staff supported their clients to complete questionnaires as well; in total the experiences of 81 hostel residents were heard.

Findings

- Many participants expressed little hope they would ever have a permanent residence. There was a sense that they had become institutionalised into a system there was no escape from
- When talking about the range of support available, many residents said the help was there, but that they didn’t access it. Residents blamed themselves, it didn’t seem to occur to them that they could be better supported to access opportunities to move their lives forward
- Many residents talked about the behaviour of other residents, and the impact this has on them feeling safe and secure, often talking of substance use, crime and mental illness
- The hostel staff were generally spoken of positively, but residents expressed that wider national and local policies had reduced the options for moving their life forward.

Recommendations

- Work to ensure that wherever possible that people with similar levels of support needs are housed together, and that residents are given specific training and support to keep themselves safe and manage challenging relationships.
- Many participants demonstrated a sense of scepticism that their experiences and opinions would be heard and valued; it is recommended that hostel residents are made aware of responses to this report.
- Work better to support and encourage residents to access the existing range of services/initiatives that could improve their wellbeing.
- Work with residents to address hopelessness – this is often linked to move on opportunities and fears that future living arrangements will not be sustainable.
- Wherever possible support residents to stay in the same building if their support needs change, so they do not need to experience a complete upheaval (it could be that residents move to different parts of a hostel).

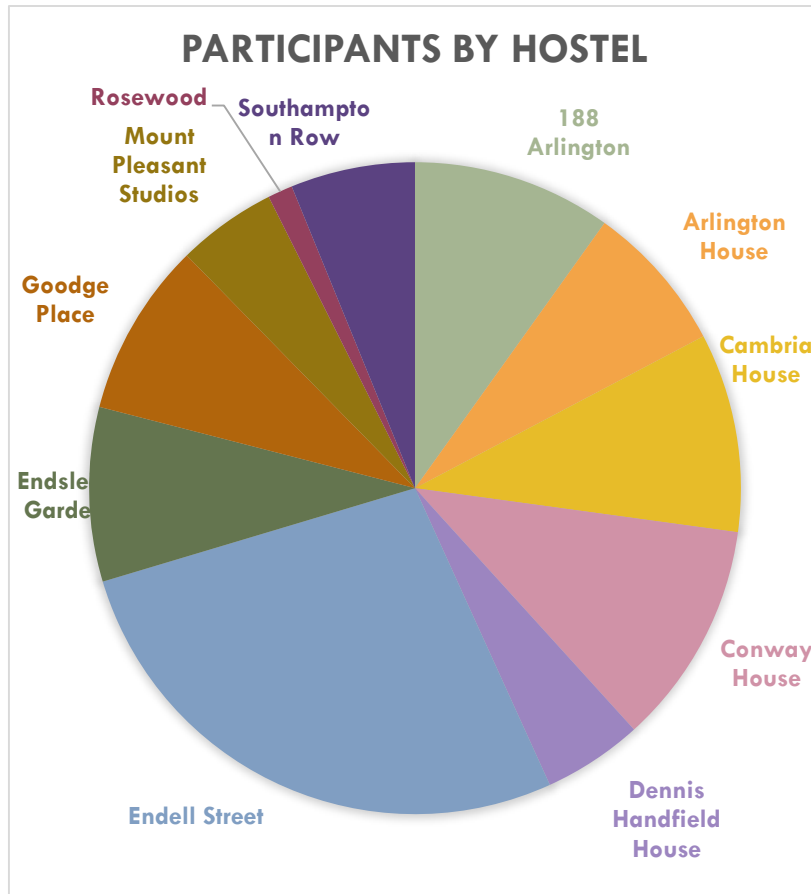
¹ Camden Council, 2015. Hostel pathways, taken from <http://tinyurl.com/nvoejcr>

² National Institute for Health Research, 2014. Good practice guidance for the recruitment and involvement of service user and carer researchers, available online at <http://tinyurl.com/q989dkh>

INTRODUCTION

Following recruitment and training, a team of 10 service user researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with 46 peers in 8 hostels to elicit their experience of Camden’s hostels pathway. In addition, questionnaires were handed out, and an online survey disseminated. Hostel managers were also approached to ask for their support in gaining access to service users; 5 of Camden’s hostels supported this, in total 81 people participated.

Participants



Gender

84% of participants who disclosed their gender were male.

Age

There was quite a wide spread of ages of participants in this research; the average age of participants was 43.

Ethnicity

Of those who disclosed their ethnicity, 53% of participants identified as white British. A significant minority of participants identified as Irish.

Disability

Approximately half of residents asked said they had a disability. Of these, half again said they had some form of mental health problem.

It is acknowledged that these are not the experiences of all those in Camden’s hostels pathway; in particular, it is not known how residents view the support they receive in

- Camden Housing First
- Birkenhead Street
- the hospital discharge service
- flexible designation service
- Irish Centre Housing’s recovery service
- Camden Road
- Chester Road.

Further, more systematic, work could be done to hear from everyone in Camden’s hostels; 11 out of 19 hostels participated.

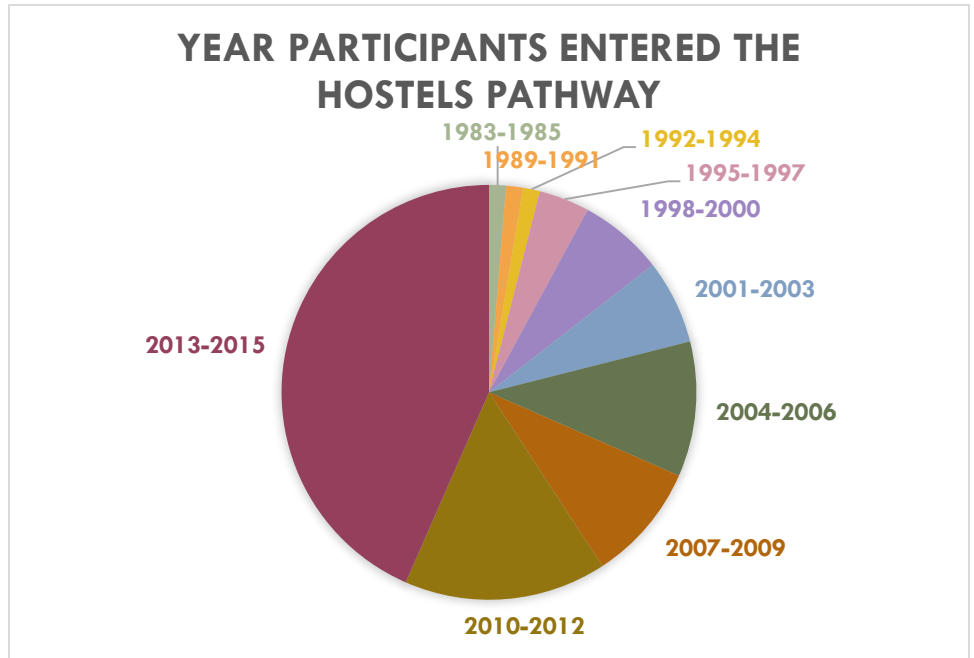
Service user experiences

Participants were asked to tell researchers about their hostel pathway; what year they entered the hostels pathway, and how many hostels they had lived in.

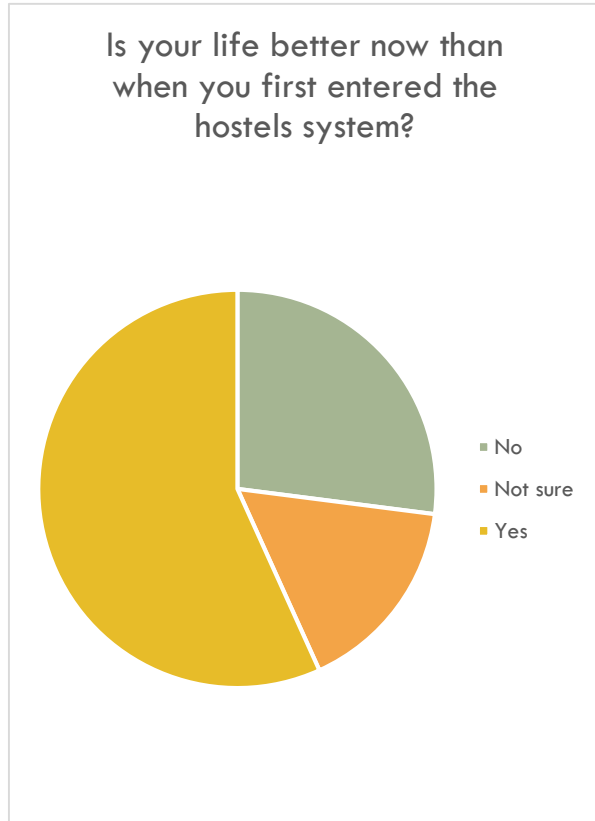
More than half of participants said they had been in the hostels pathway longer than 6 – 24 months (this is the length of time hostels pathway guidance suggests someone can expect to stay in a hostel; Camden Council, 2012³).

The average length of time people had been in the hostels pathway was 7 years; in that time, they had stayed in a few different hostels (the average number of hostels participants had lived in was 4).

The majority of participants said all the hostels they had lived in, had been in Camden.



Participants were asked to reflect on their hostel journey; just over half of those who responded said their life was better now, compared to when they first entered the hostels system.



“Before I became homeless, things weren’t too bad. Then things happened – a loss of friends, home, relationships...”

“I came here from prison... Things were a bit difficult. I’ve settled in here alright – the support is there if you need it”

“I was on the streets homeless and in a state of despair, but being fortunate enough to get into Conway House has totally transformed my fortunes and my outlook and prospects for the future”

“[in hostels] I have been assaulted over 15 times, seen one murder, started taking class A drugs, been given substandard and prejudiced medical treatment. Also I have attempted suicide 4 times.”

“Now, life is much better – I was abused at home. Now I’m warm and safe, and have all the support I need.”

³ Camden Council, 2012. *The Hostels Pathway: Your Guide*. Available online at <http://tinyurl.com/pwb42yb>

RESULTS

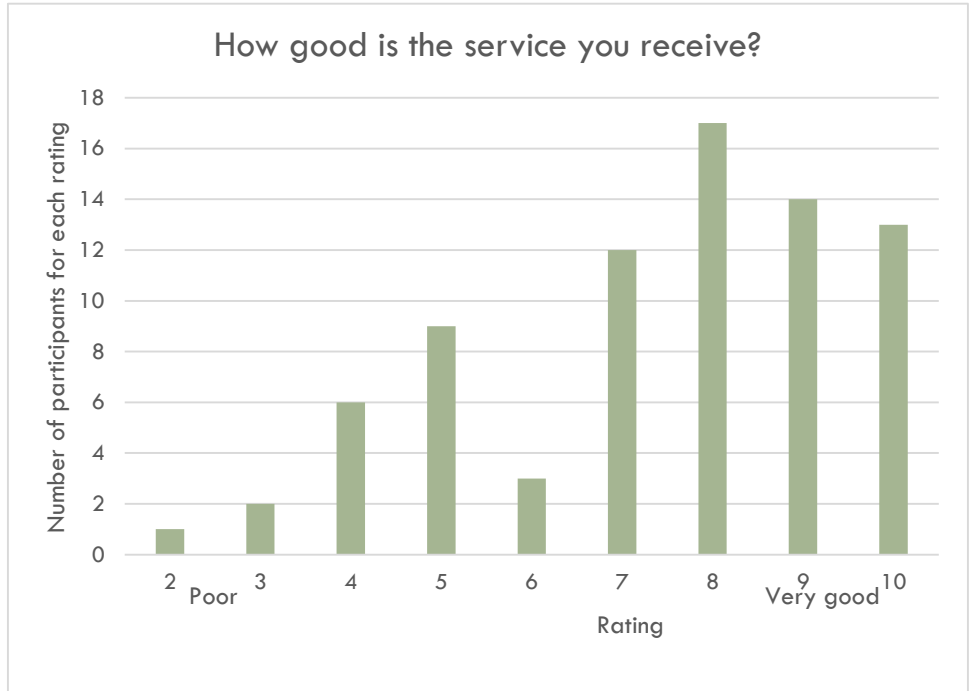
Experience of service quality

In order to get a general picture of service quality, participants were asked to rate the quality of service they received from Camden’s hostel pathway. People rated their experiences on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being very good, and 1 being very poor.

It seems that generally speaking, more participants had positive experiences of their services – on average, people rated their service as 7 out of 10.

“I receive all the support I need, if I have a problem the staff are very helpful and they encourage me to better myself”

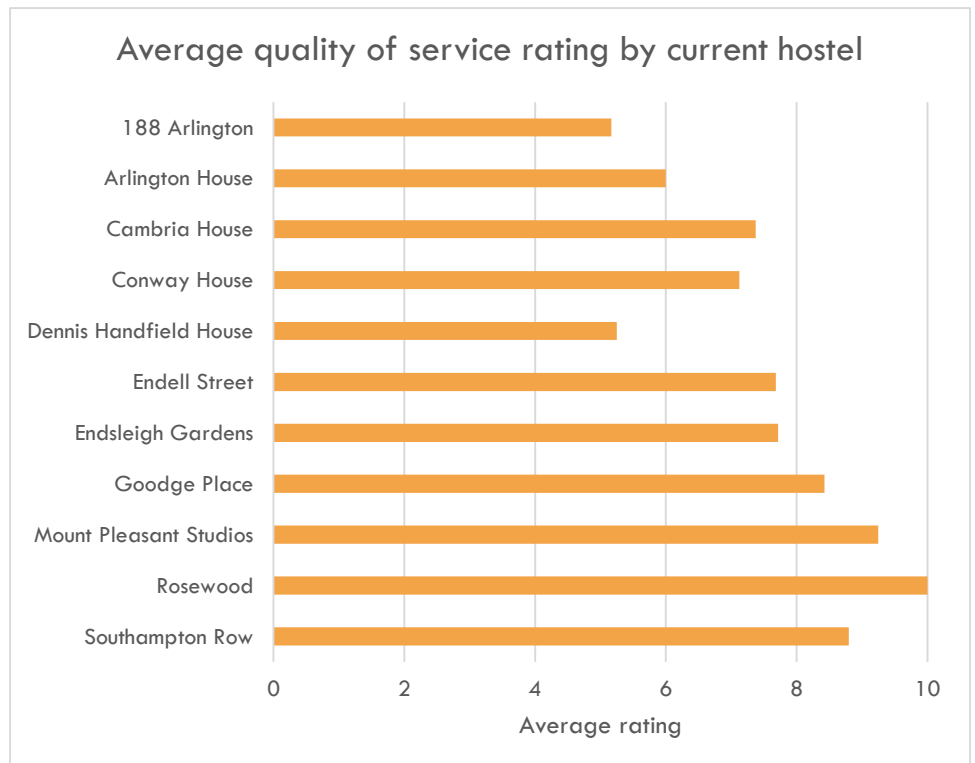
“There is no support at all with my drinking. Now I’m being moved to a hostel where I’m allowed to drink, when in fact I want to stop drinking”



In terms of average rating per hostel, the differences between hostels were small.

Many of the hostels that scored higher had staff supporting residents to complete questionnaires. Where the engagements were peer to peer, a slight tendency for lower scoring can be seen; this may reflect the trust and honesty generated by the peer to peer engagement.

It is important to note that these ratings are not weighted in terms of the numbers of responses received for each hostel.



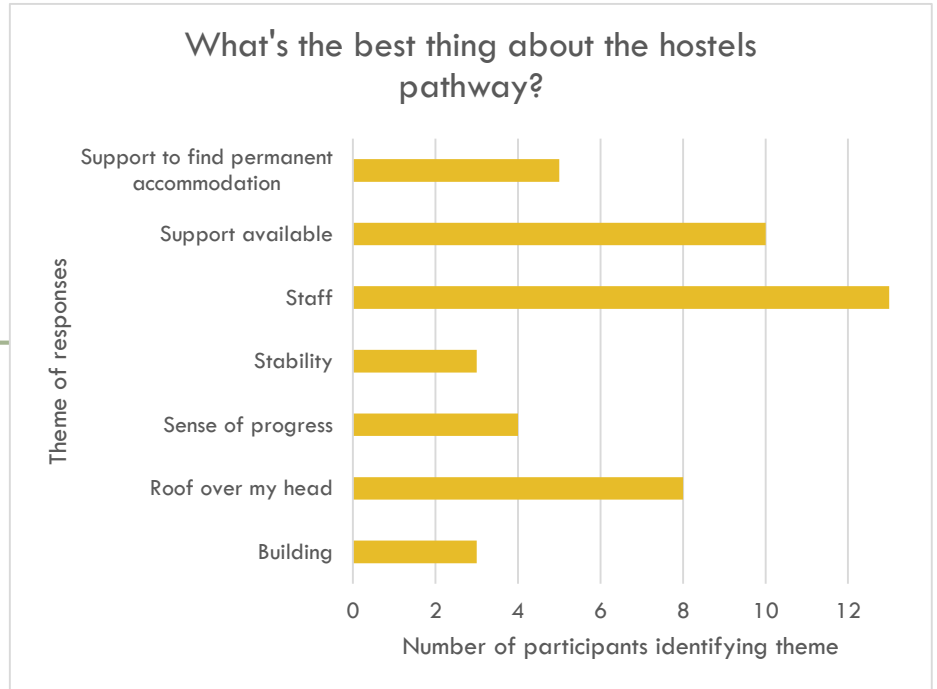
Positive experiences of Camden’s hostels pathway

Participants were asked to identify the best thing about Camden’s hostels pathway. A few key themes arose, in particular:

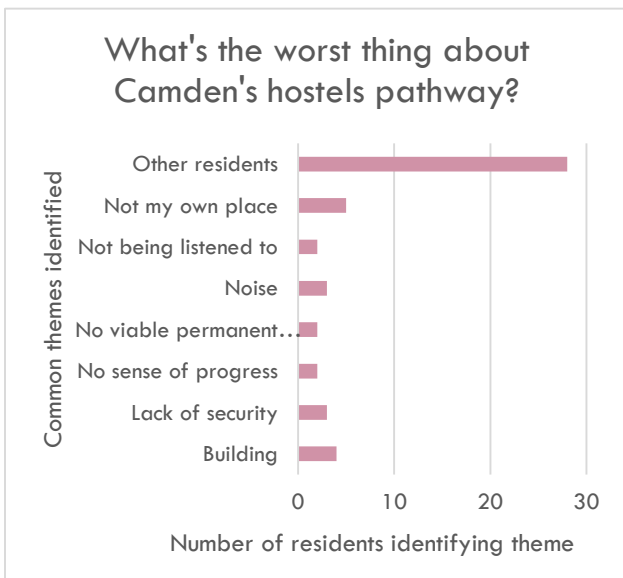
- access to a range of support and activities
- a roof over their head
- supportive and helpful staff.

“They always let me know they are here to help and are always keen to help me even if it is a non housing issue.”

“There are activities and access to courses”



Negative experiences in Camden’s hostels pathway



Participants were also asked to identify the worst thing about Camden’s hostels pathway. Key themes emerging from a number of residents were:

- Sharing with other residents who may be at different stages in their recovery journey
- The fact that accommodation does not belong to residents
- A sense that there are few viable options for a more permanent place to live.

“It doesn’t feel like a pathway – I’ve just been moved sideways from hostel to hostel for years”

“I don’t have security and I can’t make long term plans. I’ve got to ask permission to paint my walls”

Feeling safe

Current participants were asked to rate how safe they felt. On average, participants rated their sense of personal safety as 7 out of 10.

“Of course many people end up in hostels – some hardcore drug addicts, some ex convicts, some with diseases like TB, and other with severe mental illnesses, so of course living like this is not safe”

“Good security throughout the building with key fobs and night staff. None of the residents are aggressive”

"If I don't move on quickly, I can see myself becoming institutionalised, like some of the others"

CONCLUSIONS

Many participants expressed little hope they would ever have a permanent residence

There was a sense that they had become institutionalised into a system there was no escape from:

"To be honest after all this time living in hostels I have given up hope of a normal life and just try to make the best of a bad situation"

"It's a prison to me, they are sorting out their homelessness problem not mine"

"We're treated like a deck of cards – shuffled from one place to the other"

When talking about the range of support available, many residents said the help was there, but that they didn't access it

Many residents spontaneously spoke of their sense of personal responsibility for their recovery and future tenancy security; while this is to be welcomed, in some cases it appeared that residents felt they were to blame for the fact that they did not have a permanent place to call home.

"There isn't really anything bad about the hostels in my opinion, it's just whether you choose to take the help and support"

"In an ideal world, I would like more help with housing, and communication with the relevant parties... but that would be in an ideal world and I do understand that there are many more people in the same position that I am in, that other needs are greater than my own"

"The support offered ... does what it says on the tin. No complaints, the buck stops with me"

Many residents talked about the behaviour of other residents, and the impact this has on them feeling safe and secure, often talking of substance use, crime and mental illness

"It can sometimes be a bad environment in terms of drugs, thievery and violence. Sometimes I feel too confined and trapped!"

I live and have lived with alcoholics, drug addicts, fornicators, ex-cons and people who are depressed. This energy put together = Hiroshima blast"

"Everyone in here has been through turmoil... people can't stay here long term"

The hostel staff were generally spoken of positively, but residents expressed that wider national and local policies had reduced the options for moving their life forward

"Housing stock is finite. We have to wait our turn. Lots of services keeping you in the loop for as short a time as possible."

"The whole situation makes life more difficult to progress, as not having somewhere to call home prevents you from taking the steps required for a better life"

"The whole system is about containment; I've got somewhere to sleep, but I feel like I'm in a prison"

RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers asked participants “If you could change 1 thing about the support you were given in Camden’s hostels pathway, what would it be?”; some people gave similar responses:

- To have a secure place to call home
- More support from staff, particularly about moving on
- To be able to stay within Camden if they wanted to.

Based on this research, the following is recommended:

- Work to ensure that wherever possible that people with similar levels of support needs are housed together, and that residents are given specific training and support to keep themselves safe and manage challenging relationships. This should be balanced with a recommendation to ensure that people don’t have to move hostels, unless absolutely necessary and welcomed by the resident.
- Demonstrate to residents how the recommendations of this report will be actioned; many participants demonstrated a sense of scepticism that their experiences and opinions would be heard and valued.
- Work better to support and encourage residents to access the existing range of services/initiatives that could improve their wellbeing.
- Work with residents to address hopelessness for the longer term, often linked to move on opportunities and fears that future living arrangements will not be sustainable.
- Wherever possible support residents to stay in the same building if their support needs change, so they do not need to experience a complete upheaval. It is acknowledged that this needs to be balanced with the first recommendation; perhaps hostels could be developed so more people can move within the same hostel to balance their housing stability needs, with the recovery of others.

Researcher reflections

“IT’S THE MIXTURE OF PEOPLE WHO ARE USING DRUGS, DRINKING, OR WHO HAVE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS. AND THE ONES WHO HAVE LOST EVERYTHING”

“THINGS HAVE CHANGED SINCE I WAS IN A HOSTEL. I WAS BORN IN CAMDEN, MOVED OUT OF THE BOROUGH, CAME BACK AND WAS GIVEN A FLAT. THE SYSTEM WAS A LOT EASIER”

“I SAW NO FORM OF STRUCTURE WITHIN THE SYSTEM THAT WOULD GIVE HOPE THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING AT THE END OF THE ROAD”

“POLITICAL DISINTEREST”

“IT’S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE A PRISON – PEOPLE SHOULD BE BEING HELPED TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY, BUT THEY’RE NOT EVEN ALLOWED PEOPLE SLEEPING OVER”

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