

STONEWALL HOUSING ASSOCIATION

PROPOSAL FOR A SHORT STAY ACCOMMODATION PROJECT FOR YOUNG HOMELESS WOMEN AND MEN.

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SUMMARY

A proposal for the conversion of one large or two adjacent houses to provide accommodation for up to 15 people on a short stay basis (approx. 3 months)

The referrals to the houses will be from Central London and local agencies dealing with young single homelessness.

There will be 24 staff coverage and staff support for finding alternative permanent accommodation.

Particular attention will be give to providing accommodation and support to young lesbians and gay men whose homelessness is related to their sexuality.

SEPTEMBER 1982

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1. INTRODUCTION

The housing needs of some young lesbians and gay men require particular provision. Many gay people become homeless as a result of the discovery by others that they are homosexual which often results in hostility. This is especially likely to be the case if they are dependent on others for their accommodation and have no secure home of their own; eg if they are living with their parents, in flatshares or on tied accommodation. Thus this is particularly a problem for the young who are least likely to be able to afford independent accommodation in London, and also who are most at risk of being exploited by others.

A survey by the Gays and Housing Group in 1980 of 4000 callers using the Gay Switchboard accommodation service showed that 79% of the callers were not new to London, that 16% were under 21. 5% were literally homeless when they called and a further 15% were threatened with homelessness. There was strong correlation between young callers and those made homeless because of a parental or domestic dispute. Altogether 1 in every 4 said that being gay bore a direct relation to their housing crisis.

The case studies in Section 2 show the kind of situation which can result in London when there is both an inadequate supply of short stay accommodation and inadequate support for those homeless people who need a refuge from the ignorance, prejudice and hostility which many existing institutions display

Just as most homeless people need no more than a roof over their head, most lesbians and gay people need no more than ordinary accommodation. But equally just as some women need a temporary refuge from a hostile or violent man where they can be supported by other women, so some young lesbians and gay men need a temporary refuge where they know that they will be safe and will be helped in a positive way by people who have an understanding of their needs.

The proposed short stay project is intended to provide this refuge.

2.

Case Histories

The following case histories have been contributed by two agencies dealing with single homeless people in London: it is worth pointing out that they are merely intended to be representative, and for each one cited the agencies themselves could provide many others.

NB: Under the Code of Guidance to the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act local authorities are particularly asked to consider as being in priority need 'homeless young people at risk of financial and sexual exploitation' (S2. 12.c.iii). As will be clear from the following examples, this rarely happens, often because of the authority's unwillingness to undertake obligations which are not mandatory, but often because there is nowhere to send young gays where they will not be persecuted.

- A) Until the age of sixteen A was in care with a local authority in London. He was then moved to another hostel, where his homosexuality met with hostility from other inmates and he was forced to leave. Unable to find work because of his homelessness and his homosexuality, he passed through several nightshelters for the young homeless. The local authority with whom he had been in care refused help, and several hostels where he had stayed refused to have him back, usually because they operated strict rules on not readmitting inmates for a minimum period after their last term of residency. Others rejected because of his gayness; one because he was 'too camp', another because 'young homosexuals are usually involved in prostitution' (there was no evidence at this stage that he was), another because it was thought likely that other inmates might beat him up. For about eighteen months he slept in hostels when they would accept him, and otherwise slept rough or with men who were prepared to put him up. He began to take drug overdoses and poison, which meant that he found it more and more difficult to find somewhere to stay. After a spell in Borstal and later in a detoxification unit he was sent to a detoxification unit several hundred miles from London where, isolated and again harassed because of his sexuality, he escaped back to London. He was now nineteen, and had been continually homeless for three years.

The inability or unwillingness of Social Service departments or housing departments to take responsibility for homeless young gays can be seen in the following cases:

- G) G came to London at twenty two 'to be gay'. He stayed initially in a night shelter where he was threatened by other residents. Homeless, he resorted to prostitution. He approached a West End agency which refused to help him 'unless he changed his lifestyle'. Another agency got him into a voluntary hostel where he was taunted about his homosexuality by other inmates; they locked him out of his room and otherwise abused him while the staff (on day cover only) were out of the building. As a result he lost his job, and, owing rent at the hostel, was forced to leave. He was referred to another hostel, where, in spite of the fact that the referring agency had made it clear that he was gay, there was considerable friction with staff because of his homosexuality. When he got another job, working in a gay pub, he was forced to leave the hostel and, homeless, began sleeping with 'friends' in order to have somewhere to stay. When admitted to the first hostel it had been found that he had contracted syphilis, for which he had been treated, and he now caught scabies. He was eventually arrested for importuning and lost his job.

Another area where gays are likely to meet with prejudice or hostility if they are homeless is from the agencies which they approach for assistance. (These cases are also relevant to the application for a gay housing advisory service which follows.)

- H) H had been for some time involved with the West End scene, largely as a result of homelessness. Although he had some history of prostitution, he had however no involvement with other crime, no history of mental disorder or problems with drugs or alcohol; and it was in fact clear that his only real 'problem' was having nowhere to live. He approached a Social Work agency and then a Day Centre in an attempt to find somewhere to live. The Social Work Agency told him to stop using them unless he changed his way of life, and, when the Day Centre had found him a place in a hostel, provided a reference so adverse that the hostel was unwilling to take him. (The reference had described him as 'obsessively homosexual' and 'entrenched in prostitution'.) After assurances from other agencies that he was no more obsessed about sex than most heterosexuals and that he was only involved in prostitution because of his homelessness and consequent difficulties in finding work, he was eventually taken in and subsequently developed a more stable life style and gave up prostitution.
- J) J was using drugs and was sent to a rehabilitation unit where she stayed drug free for six months. Her psychiatrist decided that she was almost ready for discharge, but, on being told that she was a Lesbian, decided that she would have to stay longer to work through this 'problem'. Other staff were informed of her Lesbianism and taunted her, treating her like a man and asking very personal questions. Frustrated and angry, she left the unit and returned to the West End drug scene. She refused to contact any other agency, or to talk to anyone she did not know to be gay about her Lesbianism, fearing that her immediate experience of rejection would be repeated. She had nowhere to stay, and took a large overdose of drugs with the stated intention of being arrested, since she felt that in Holloway prison she might be accepted for what she was.
- K) K was involved in prostitution as a result of homelessness and had also been using drugs. Having been beaten up in hostels in the past was unwilling to go to another one, although homeless and in bad physical condition. Only after being reassured by an advice worker he knew to be gay was he prepared to go to a hostel.

B) B was thrown out of home by his father for being gay at the age of fifteen. He telephoned a gay counselling service which referred him to a central London advice centre. This centre sent him to his local Social Services department in the London borough from which he had become homeless. Social Services contacted his father and persuaded him to accept his son back. B was forced to leave home again after being beaten up by his father and recontacted the gay counselling service. Again he was referred to the same agency, who again referred him to Social Services, who again suggested he return home. Unable to do so because of violence he became homeless.

In other cases people are forced to come to London to seek anonymity and a refuge from the attacks which their homosexuality has provoked in their home towns: they would not normally have a claim on a London local authority.

C) C left a large industrial town in the midlands after being beaten up in the streets as a known Lesbian. She had left a child in care which she said had been taken from her by the courts because was an 'unfit' mother. Her experiences had made her very mistrustful of non-gay agencies, and she was eventually found bed and breakfast accommodation through a gay information service which in turn contacted an advisory service.

People made homeless in such circumstances are obviously particularly vulnerable to exploitation and especially prostitution, but also, eg, drug dependency as a consequence, often enough, of their homelessness.

D) Having been thrown out by his family in the North of England because of being gay, and having then been beaten up in a local hostel, again because of his gayness, D came to London. He became aware of the risk of male prostitution for people in his position and was frightened of it as a possibility. Having approached an advice agency he was referred to a nightshelter, which in turn referred him to a commercial hostel. Beaten up by members of staff because he was gay, he was forced to leave. As he now had no money and had become apprehensive of non-gay agencies he started to pick up men for bed and board.

The risk of hostility and violence in hostels, both voluntary and commercial, and both from inmates and staff, is well known among gays who have been homeless in London.

E) A transsexual, E had been living with his boyfriend in a hostel in Birmingham. After being gaoled after a fight in which he had defended E for being gay, the boyfriend settled in London and E came here to be near him. Sent to a DHSS Resettlement Unit, E left after being threatened because of his gayness. Apprehensive of hostels, he went to a cheap hotel where he was robbed, then to another where he was threatened by staff. He became hysterical and was proscribed valium by a hospital casualty department. Persuaded to return to the Resettlement Unit, he was again threatened by inmates and, on reporting the threats to a member of staff, was told that it was all that he could expect or deserve.

F) Like D, F, a twenty year old man, was referred to a nightshelter who then referred him to a commercial hostel. (He had initially been referred to the night shelter by his local Social Services.) He was thrown out after an argument with staff about his gayness and, as the manager had refused to refund his rent, he could see no alternative to male prostitution to provide himself with a bed until he was again entitled to claim Supplementary Benefit. He was eventually referred back to the nightshelter where he had originally been staying.

The following points should emerge clearly from the above cases:

- i) Homelessness among young gay people is often a direct consequence of the fact that they are gay, and is often something against which they have no defence as they are unlikely to be old enough or affluent enough to have acquired secure accommodation of their own.
- ii) In nearly all the cases cited homelessness was the only problem that people had initially: whatever else they became involved with, such as prostitution, drug or alcohol dependency or petty crime, was likely to have been a consequence of their homelessness rather than a cause, and was of course exacerbated by the difficulty of finding work or claiming supplementary benefit for the homeless.
- iii) There is a high incidence of violence and threats of violence against gay people in most emergency accommodation available to the young single homeless.
- iv) This fact is sufficiently well known among young homeless gays to discourage them from entering such accommodation, and indeed frequently to encourage them to see prostitution and sexual exploitation in general as a preferable or at least less dangerous alternative.
- v) Even where hostels or social work agencies are not hostile to gays overtly, there is a tendency to see homosexuality as a problem in itself, and to concentrate on sexuality to the exclusion of other factors in people's problems. (NB: There is also a widespread wariness among hostel workers to take on gays because of the 'problems' this creates for heterosexual inmates: the hostel which is cited above as having accepted H has a policy of taking no more than one homosexual at a time because of the 'possible disruptive effects', and such policies are not uncommon.)

The need for a short stay hostel prepared to house young gay people and to treat them with sympathy and understanding, and somewhere where they will not be at risk of violence and abuse from other inmates has long been recognised among agencies dealing with the young homeless. It is only lack of money, and not of commitment or concern, which has prevented its realisation.

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The proposed gay homelessness project

1. Legal aspects.

A counsel's opinion on the legality of setting up a gay refuge was obtained last year. The opinion acknowledged certain difficulties in the project, especially with regard to the law on the age of consent, but did not see the difficulties as insuperable, provided that certain conditions were adhered to. The most important of these conditions related to the age of the inmates, the staffing of the hostel, and its management.

- a) It was felt that it would be unwise for the hostel to take residents under the age of seventeen, and that it would be necessary to insure that all residents actually were seventeen or more before admission.
- b) It was necessary that all residents should have their own rooms, that they should sleep in them, and that this should be supervised by staff, ie that there should be a twenty four hour staff cover.
- c) That it should be administered by living in workers directly responsible to a Management Committee.

The hostel will have up to 15 people, both men and women. The premises could be in two adjoining suitably converted houses. At least one member of staff would be permanently resident in the hostel.

5. SETTING UP COSTS

Decorations and fittings	£3000
Furniture and Equipment	£5000
Office equipment	£1000
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	£8000

Three full time staff plus one CSU worker will be needed for full 24 hour coverage to provide the support necessary for the project

£7899 x3 = £23,697
plus N.I. = £ 2,606

1 CSV	at	£2,236	£ 2,236
			<hr/>
			£28,593

£32,339 .

Toatal annual staff and admin. costs £32,339

7. RUNNING COSTS

Examples of similar hostels already in operation in London indicate that all running costs (eg. repairs, services, replacement rates, cleaning and allowance for voids) can be met from rental income. Rents would be charged at the DHSS approved rent (currently about £18 per week for this type of accommodation).

8. REFERRALS

Prospective occupants of the hostel will be referred to the workers by existing Central London and Local Agencies dealing with young homeless people and gay people eg. Piccadilly Advice Centre, Homeless Action, Housing Advice Switchboard. Local authority housing departments and social services could also make referrals.

9. ONWARD HOUSING

One of the main tasks of the project, its Management Committee and its workers, will be to provide the support necessary for those in the hostel to be able to seek permanent accommodation as well as advice relating to employment, social security and relating to their sexuality. To this end strong links with local authorities, housing associations, advice agencies and lesbian and gay self help agencies will be made.

10. MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The management of the project will be carried out by a Committee representing a number of organisations concerned with young single homelessness, lesbian and gay advice agencies and funding bodies eg. London Friend
Lesbianline
Gay Switchboard
Homeless Action
Piccadilly Advice Centre
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