

# Bullying and harassment in hostels and supported housing

## Research and recommendations

**BROADWAY**  
STREET TO HOME



## The issue

There is little research about bullying and harassment amongst residents in hostels and supported housing for homeless people. However, it is generally acknowledged by both professionals and residents to be a significant issue. In Shelter's Reaching Out<sup>1</sup> report, for example, over half of rough sleepers interviewed described having had problems with other residents in hostels, such as violence, theft, bullying, noise and arguments.

## Broadway's view

Broadway believes that it is not acceptable or inevitable that clients experience bullying and harassment within their accommodation. We are committed to ensuring a culture of anti-bullying across all our services. Our staff work hard to ensure that clients are safe and happy in accommodation and that bullying and harassment are not tolerated.

*"I thought it's got to stop. I put in a complaint ... I overcame [my fear of reporting the bullying] when I met my new keyworker. Something must have happened cos they [the bullies] have not been near me... [If it happened again], I'd go to staff." – hostel client*

We are committed to developing this work further. In response to this internal research project we have set up a Bullying and Harassment Working Group with membership from across each of our residential services as well as floating support and outreach. Work with staff and clients will create a stronger anti-bullying culture at Broadway and we will monitor our success through our client survey, levels of reporting and outcomes achieved for clients.

## About the research

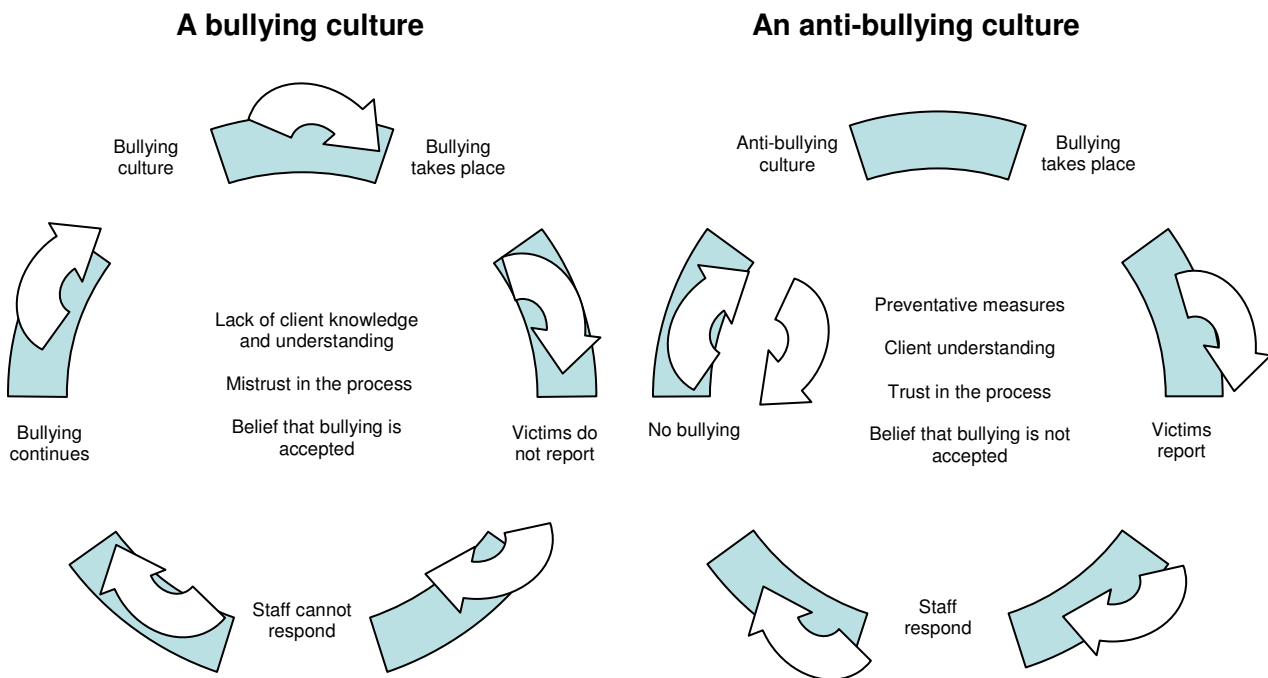
In 2008, Broadway's client survey, the Pulse, showed that clients think that bullying and harassment is a problem in residential services. This research was conducted in response to these findings, with the objective of finding out more about why bullying and harassment was a problem for our clients, and how we could reduce the problem.

In 2009, Broadway's research team interviewed 11 hostel residents, 3 supported housing clients, and 2 former clients, about their experiences of and views about bullying and harassment. Three focus groups were also conducted with hostel and supported housing staff. Clients and staff discussed their experiences of bullying and harassment, and gave their ideas for how it could be tackled. These are presented here in three sections, which look in turn at the issues and recommendations around (i) prevention, (ii) reporting and identification, and (iii) response.

## Key findings

- Bullying and harassment can take many forms, including 'borrowing' money, cigarettes, phones or other possessions and not returning them; banging on doors and using people's rooms to take drugs; physical violence; and sexual exploitation.
- Good practice in dealing with bullying and harassment included prominently displaying information, staff dealing with bullying both proactively (without waiting for clients to report it) and discreetly, and staff who are seen to take bullying and harassment seriously.
- There are several barriers to dealing with bullying and harassment, in particular clients rarely reporting it (often because of stigma or fear of retaliation); and staff not always having the tools or power to deal with it (for example by swiftly evicting serious perpetrators).
- Successful ways of **preventing bullying** include: client information, advice, training and support; staff presence in the building; and intercoms.
- Successful ways of **identifying bullying** and encouraging reporting include: ensuring confidentiality; trusted staff discussing the issue in key work; providing a range of forums for discussion; and tackling stigma.
- Successful ways of **responding to bullying** include: formal chats and warnings about eviction; mediation; and moving people's rooms.

Interviews with clients and staff highlighted the key elements of 'bullying' and 'anti-bullying' cultures and suggested how these cultures could be created and maintained. These are presented in the diagrams below:



## Types of bullying and harassment

The types of bullying and harassment which clients reported having experienced currently or in the recent past were:

- Financial exploitation, including 'borrowing' money, cigarettes, phones or other possessions and not returning them.
- Knocking on doors / walls in the night or coercion to let people in through windows.
- Using people's rooms to take drugs.
- Verbal harassment.
- Physical violence.
- Sexual exploitation.
- Intimidation by visitors.
- Coercion to do housework.
- Making it hard for people to use communal areas.

Bullying and harassment can take very subtle forms: examples given included 'jokey' comments, talking loudly while people used the telephone, or repeatedly moving someone's possessions in the communal area.

Services appear to be vulnerable to the effects of just one or two clients – one 'bully' entering the service can affect a large number of clients. This suggests that bullying should be kept high on the agenda even where little is currently taking place.

## Prevention: why bullying and harassment takes place

### Bullying and drug use

Most clients and staff agreed that many clients who bullied for possessions or money did so to fund drug use. Other drug-related bullying includes using people's telephones to phone dealers or their rooms to take drugs. Bullying can also take place between people who use drugs or alcohol, for example not sharing drugs which had been bought together. This is generally not reported to staff.

### Bullying by 'friends'

Some bullying is carried out by people the victims consider to be friends. Clients may choose to be in friendships which staff see as exploitative. Loneliness can make someone vulnerable to bullying, and rejection and isolation can be consequences of standing up to bullying:

*"Sometimes I've said no [to lending money] and they shun you for a few days ... It can feel really bad cos there's no one to talk to ... One woman feels she has to borrow out ['lend' money which won't be repaid] ... I think she thinks she'll have more friends. They do it to the weaker ones they know they can" – hostel client*

### Bullying for 'survival', status or self-esteem

Clients and staff described how dominant or aggressive behaviours which may have been necessary 'to survive' on the street or in prison could be seen as bullying and harassment in accommodation:

*"It's prison mentality – there's a cross over as it's still an institution here. The strongest survive" – hostel client*

Clients also thought that people could be driven to bullying by the desire to control, increase status, increase low self-esteem or seek attention, or in response to being bullied themselves.

### Vulnerability to bullying

Most clients said that some people were more vulnerable to being bullied than others: they described people with mental health problems, drug or alcohol problems, physical weaknesses, low self-

esteem, a history of being bullied or being in abusive relationships, and people without support networks. Many clients said that potential 'victims' could often be easily identified by bullies, by the way they present themselves and respond to initial attempts at bullying. A lack of self-confidence, fear of the bully, and self-identification as a victim were all given as reasons why someone may not 'stand up to' a bully.

### **A lack of understanding of bullying**

Clients did not always know when they were being bullied or harassed, either because the form bullying took was very subtle, or because it was viewed as an inevitable part of hostel life. Several clients interviewed said that there was no bullying or harassment in their hostel, but when questioned further described being asked for money or cigarettes, people banging on their doors, or sarcastic remarks.

Similarly, clients did not always know that when they behaved in a certain way they were bullying others:

*"To me, bullying was putting your hands on someone and goading them all the time ... I borrowed and didn't pay back, and didn't realise that comes under bullying" – hostel client*

## **Prevention: recommendations**

Clients and staff suggested a number of measures that would help prevent bullying and harassment.

### **Client information, advice and support**

It is important that all clients know what bullying and harassment is and how their service will respond to it. To help make this happen:

- Ensure that bullying and harassment is discussed at the time of booking in, including the serious consequences of bullying or harassing others; advice on dealing with attempts at bullying or harassment; and an outline of the support available.
- Display information. Clients said that information such as posters showed that staff took the issue seriously. One client described the powerful effects of a pictorial abuse policy (which had resulted in her realising she was experiencing some forms of abuse depicted).
- Support clients around confidence, assertiveness, healthy friendships, and dealing with bullying and harassment. This can include client training or workshops (these would need to be carefully managed to ensure that clients were not put off attending by fear of repercussions from bullies) and also be addressed in key work sessions. Potential perpetrators should also explore self-esteem issues with staff so they are supported to find alternative ways to build status or self-esteem.
- Train staff to feel confident in providing support around bullying and sensitive issues around self-esteem.

### **A statement of rights**

One former perpetrator interviewed said that a 'statement of rights' displayed at her hostel had 'opened her eyes' to the fact that her behaviour was bullying. The rights on this statement included: 'I have the right to be treated with respect as an intelligent, capable and equal human being', and 'I have the right to say 'yes' or 'no' for myself'. As part of its anti-bullying guide, St Mungo's<sup>2</sup> has developed a client-led rights charter in many of its hostels, and has found this to be successful in achieving change<sup>3</sup>, for example by cutting through stigma and serving as a reference point for future discussions about acceptable behaviour. Clients and staff suggested that a statement of rights could be included in sign-up packs and discussed at sign up.

## Staff presence

Staff presence (throughout the building and including at night) was highlighted by both staff and clients as a deterrent to bullies:

*“[You should have] an hourly or two-hourly building check ... One night staff does this – you can hear doors quietly open all the way up the stairwell. There’s a definite difference when this person is working, the building is a lot quieter. You know he’s no nonsense, and he’s fair.”*  
– hostel client

Clients also talked about the importance of intercoms for making them feel safe; for example, they could make arrangements that if they hit their buzzer, staff would come to their room or listen in.

## Financial protection

Ways of protecting clients thought to be vulnerable to financial abuse include holding bank cards, letting people use the safe to store large amounts of money, and accompanying vulnerable clients to withdraw money from the bank. Financial information (for example appointments with the Welfare Rights team) should also be kept confidential.

## Building positive communities

Staff highlighted that, although shared living can present problems, it can also present a positive opportunity for clients to develop social networks. Preparation and guidance for clients on shared living (for example before moving on to supported housing) could be beneficial. Likewise, efforts to improve communal spaces and to build a sense of community could create a more positive culture of shared living. Client involvement activities and positive relationships between residents and staff are also integral parts of this.

# Identification and reporting: why clients don't report bullying

## Low levels of reporting

Broadway has clear policies and procedures around reporting and responding to bullying and harassment, which it advertises to clients. However, we are concerned that not all clients who experience bullying or harassment report the problem to staff. Where they do report it, it is not unusual for clients to decide not to take it further. Working to ensure people report bullying and harassment is key to ensuring a strong anti-bullying culture.

There are complex reasons for clients not reporting bullying or harassment (of self or of others) including:

**Stigma:** There is a stigma related to both experiencing bullying and reporting it. Many clients expressed the view that, unless people are particularly vulnerable (for example, older or physically weak) they should be able to deal with bullying themselves. It could be embarrassing to admit to being a 'victim' and to needing help:

*“We’re all grown men, if we go running down to staff it’s like little babies ... We don’t need women in skirts running around sorting our problems out. We should deal with it ourselves”.*

## Not wanting to 'grass':

*“I’m not a grass – I’d rather fix a problem myself. At school you never grassed. It’s morally wrong.”*

**Fear of reprisal or repercussions:** Clients could be afraid that reporting bullying or harassment would make the bullying worse if the perpetrator found out:

*"[I didn't tell staff that my friend was bullied]. He doesn't want to cause waves, we all have to live together. Otherwise it will cause more troubles, banging on the door saying 'you accused me of this and that'. Sometimes it's best to keep quiet".*

### **Lack of confidence that staff will be able to help**

*"Staff can't do a lot, there's not a lot in their power unless they witness it, otherwise it's just hearsay."*

**Only one means of reporting:** One client said that they would not report bullying to the particular complaints advisor at their service, highlighting the importance of having a range of different people to talk to.

Other barriers to reporting (discussed in more detail in 'prevention' above) include a 'friendship' between the person experiencing bullying and the perpetrator; a lack of awareness that what is taking place is bullying; and substance-related bullying which clients do not want staff to know about.

### **Identification**

Even where clients do report bullying or harassment, it can be hard for staff to understand who is the victim and who the perpetrator; for example, perpetrators can claim to be bullied themselves to deflect attention. It can also be hard to judge when a relationship has become exploitative, or to judge, for example, when 'jokey' comments may signify harassment.

## **Identification and reporting: recommendations**

### **Tackling stigma and breaking down the 'grassing' culture**

Open discussions about bullying and harassment are essential to tackle the stigma associated with both experiencing and reporting bullying. A focus on 'rights', 'respect' and acceptable behaviour rather than 'bullying' and 'victims' can give a more positive and empowering language to discussions about these issues. Inviting 'peers' (clients from other services) to facilitate discussions about bullying, and share experiences could also break down stigma. St Mungo's found that the development of a client-led local 'rights charter' was effective in tackling the perception that 'grassing' is wrong. Examples from Broadway show that, when one client comes forward to report bullying, others are more likely to follow.

### **Talking about bullying and harassment**

There should be a range of accessible forums for discussing and reporting bullying. Suggestions included:

**Bullying as a standing item in keywork and residents meetings:** This could be raised under a different name; some people suggested 'well-being'. Specific issues can be raised sensitively, for example by asking clients 'are you ok with this friendship?' Key work is a place where bullying and harassment can be identified, methods of dealing with it discussed, and reporting encouraged.

**People outside the service:** Clients said that having someone outside the service to talk to about bullying and harassment would be helpful. One suggestion was having cross-service bullying and harassment advisors or mediators, to support clients.

**Peers:** A buddy system could be piloted, so that clients can speak to peers.

*"[It would help to talk to] people that have been there before, that have experienced the same type of bullying. Like AA meetings" – supported housing client who had experienced bullying in the past*

**Informal reporting:** Staff said that residents and staff spending time together (for example in joint activities) can encourage trust and enable clients to raise issues informally.

### **Anonymity and ensuring that reporting has a positive outcome**

Clients need to trust staff and the reporting process so they are willing to give staff permission to intervene. In many cases ensuring the anonymity of clients who report bullying is essential, and perpetrators must not find out that victims have reported them. People who report bullying should receive feedback that the issue has been investigated and that appropriate action has been taken.

*“I know staff take it seriously, that’s a good thing. Signs are all up in the building – saying if you notice someone being bullied or abused. If people think it’s not taken seriously, they lose confidence to come forward” – hostel client who had previously reported bullying*

### **Proactive identification of bullying by staff**

Clients stressed the importance of staff vigilance, and staff guidance or training in identifying bullying could be considered:

*“Staff at reception, they’re clocking the times people are coming in, going out, looking for patterns” – hostel client*

*“We’ve got staff that have eyes in their backside. They can see things coming” - hostel client*

Staff outlined a number of characteristics that someone who is being bullied may display. These include: becoming friends with someone unexpected; falling into rent arrears; acting out / behaving abusively or aggressively (often to staff); and becoming more withdrawn.

Making bullying and harassment a standing item in team meetings would ensure that it remains high on the agenda, and would give staff the opportunity to discuss potential and current problems.

## **Response: problems in responding to bullying**

### **The difficulty of responding to bullying**

Responding to bullying and harassment is difficult. Broadway’s working group on Bullying and Harassment will explore the support and training that staff need to tackle this issue effectively. Staff emphasised the level of skill and experience needed to respond effectively, in particular to safeguard the victim whilst tackling the bullying. They also described the challenge of understanding a situation when they are presented with unclear information or conflicting stories.

Some clients perceive that bullying and harassment can only be stopped by the victim ‘saying no’ or standing up for themselves rather than through staff intervening:

*“Unless they [the victims] say no, you’re not going to stop it” – hostel client*

### **Obstacles to eviction**

When asked how perpetrators should be dealt with, clients’ immediate response was often that they should be evicted. Both hostel and supported housing clients who had been bullied were often frustrated that the perpetrators were not evicted:

*“He should have been evicted straight away. The contract lists all the things you can get kicked out for. But the only thing anyone gets kicked out for is rent arrears” – former supported housing client*

### **Acceptance of low level bullying**

Clients can sometimes accept low level bullying and harassment (such as subtle verbal harassment, banging on doors or walls, and asking for cigarettes) as an inevitable part of hostel or supported housing life. Tackling this low level bullying and harassment is key to preventing escalation and creating an anti-bullying culture.

## Response: recommendations

Clients and staff gave several examples of, and ideas for, an effective response to bullying.

### Support for victims and perpetrators

Victims should be protected from any further bullying, including repercussions of reporting bullying, and supported (for example in keywork). Perpetrators should be supported to change their behaviour.

### Warnings and the threat of eviction

Warnings (or a 'formal pre-warning chat') and the threat of eviction were seen by clients as being effective. Clients stressed that staff would not reveal that bullying had been reported, but would say that they had noticed it themselves:

*"He [the bully] didn't know I'd been to staff. When they talk to people, staff put it across as they picked up on it [ie. no one told them]. Staff have a good method. They pull people to one side and say they've noticed some hassle. They'll remind them that they're in breach of their licence, in risk of losing their residency. It happens and it works. Bullies will change their mind if they're at risk of losing their place" – hostel client*

### Reviewing tenancy agreements so that serious, persistent perpetrators can be evicted

Further investigation is needed into eviction as a response to serious, persistent bullying. Staff suggested negotiating fixed term short hold rather than periodic tenancies.

### Mediation

Joint meetings with the victim and perpetrator had been held with some success, but staff said that the effectiveness of this approach could be limited if clients were not willing to engage or gave conflicting versions of events.

### Transfers and moving people's rooms

Transfers, and moves to different parts of the hostel or to smaller rooms where there is less space for people to use their rooms, had been successful.

### Consistently challenging low level bullying

Discussing, and possibly recording low level bullying and harassment prevents escalation and keeps the issue on the agenda.

### Tools, training and support for staff and clients

Staff guidance and / or training may be necessary, on: supporting victims; challenging and working with perpetrators to change their behaviour; determining how to respond to bullying and harassment; and mediation. It is also important that staff are well supported in dealing with bullying and harassment (for example in supervisions).

## Acknowledgements and contacts

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### References

<sup>1</sup> Rice, B., Hough, J., Smith, J., Francis, M. (2007) *Reaching Out*, Shelter

<sup>2</sup> St Mungo's (2009) *Anti-bullying Guide for Projects*

<sup>3</sup> Bilton, H (2008) *Piloting St Mungo's Bullying in Hostel's toolkit: an evaluation of the pilot*, St Mungo's