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# **Staff-resident relationships in Approved Premises: What a difference a door makes**

## **Abstract**

Whilst the majority of people released from prison in England and Wales return to private places of residence, a significant minority are required to live in Approved Premises as part of their post-custodial licence conditions. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, it provides an insight into life inside Approved Premises. This subject has largely been neglected in research to-date, despite Approved Premises being important sites of supervision for many people leaving prison. Second, it explores the quality and dynamics of supervisory relationships between members of hostel staff and residents. Based on fieldwork in two Approved Premises, the findings indicate that, although formally equivalent, people subject to penal sanctions may experience and view these sanctions in markedly different ways. Seemingly innocuous variation in policies and practices at a local level, such as open or closed staff office door policies in Approved Premises, can in fact play a pivotal role in the facilitation or hindrance of constructive supervisory relationships, in shaping rehabilitative regimes, and ultimately, in supporting people's successful transitions from prisons to the community.

## **Keywords**

*Approved Premises, probation, licence, supervision, relationships, desistance, rehabilitation.*

## **Introduction**

Most people released from prison in England and Wales return to private places of residence. Some, however, as part of their post-custodial licence conditions, are required to live in Approved Premises (APs; also referred to as 'hostels' throughout this paper). With a combined capacity of over 2,000 bed spaces situated over more than 100 sites across England and Wales, APs play an important role in the reintegration of thousands of people leaving prison every year (National Approved Premises Association, 2016; Stevens et al., 2011). Whilst they have a long and varied history, APs are now primarily reserved for those people leaving prison whom the National Probation Service considers to pose a high risk of serious harm to the public. Although the government's *Transforming Rehabilitation* agenda has introduced sweeping changes across the penal estate (Burke and Collett, 2016), APs remain relatively

unaffected, at least for the time being, with no noticeable change to their practical functioning or purpose within the criminal justice system (Williams, 2016).

The primary purpose of APs remains the provision of an enhanced level of supervision of people leaving custody, which aims to reduce reoffending and better protect the public (National Approved Premises Association, 2016). However, it is worth noting that professionals working in the AP estate have reported a perceived shift in residents' 'mood and motivation' in recent years, attributed in part to increasing frustration at not being able to access meaningful rehabilitation in custody; the prevalence of drug use, particularly regarding legal highs; and greater difficulties in accessing benefits upon leaving prison (Williams, personal communication).

Unlike prisons, the term for a resident's private space in APs is a 'room', not a 'cell'. During daytime hours, residents are free to enter and leave the AP as they please. Yet, unlike other people who live in their own accommodation whilst subject to a post-custodial licence, hostel residents are subject to a number of additional conditions that place further restrictions on their liberty. These include the requirement for residents to remain in the building during curfew hours, to take drug and alcohol tests on request, to allow staff to search private rooms and personal belongings, to undertake reasonable activities related to the running and upkeep of the AP, and to 'behave in a way that is not violent, threatening, disruptive, racist, sexist or in any way offensive or prejudiced' (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

With no bars on the doors and no guards to physically coerce residents into compliance, the effective functioning of APs depends primarily on the voluntary cooperation of the residents. 'Success' in its most basic sense, therefore, might constitute a licensee completing their AP residency period and moving on to a further place of residence without being recalled to custody for licence breach or having their bed withdrawn due to a breach of AP rules. Defined in these terms, successful move-on rates vary both across geographic regions and over time; in Manchester, for example, AP success rates increased from 57 percent in 2008-2009 to 76 percent in 2012-2013 (Williams, 2016).

Members of staff working in APs, however, aim to achieve much more than securing residents' formal compliance with licence conditions or hostel rules. In a broad sense, they aim to support residents' desistance by providing a wide range of help and advice around the potential needs

of residents, for example, through access to learning and vocational training, employment-related services, drug and alcohol counselling and treatment services, GP and mental health services and access to interventions to improve life and social skills (Cherry and Cheston, 2006).

To achieve success in these broader terms – to transition from ‘formal’ to ‘substantive compliance’ (see Robinson and McNeill, 2008) – members of staff working in APs must move beyond a narrow focus on surveillance, monitoring and enforcement to the facilitation of rehabilitative regimes centred on constructive relationships with hostel residents (Cherry and Cheston, 2006). Indeed, previous research has highlighted that if criminal justice workers can establish and maintain constructive relationships with those they are supervising, this can play a central role in supporting desistance (Farrall, 2002; Maruna and LeBel, 2010; King, 2013). The ability of hostel workers to establish such relationships is of course largely dependent on a sufficient and appropriate allocation of resources – something that is particularly pertinent in an era of austerity in public services (see Annison, Burke and Senior, 2014; Faulkner, 2010; Williams, 2015). It also depends, however, on hostels adopting policies and practices that facilitate rather than hinder positive interaction between staff and residents.

In its broadest sense, the fieldwork informing the current paper was conducted as part of a doctoral research project that explored the dynamics of supervisory relationships during post-custodial supervision (see Irwin-Rogers, 2015). This project developed theories of legitimacy in the context of penal sanctions delivered in the community, warning against a narrow focus on outcomes and highlighting the importance of procedure-based legitimacy in establishing and maintaining constructive supervisory relationships (Irwin-Rogers, 2017). The purpose of writing this specific paper was twofold: first, to provide readers with an insight into life inside APs primarily from the perspective of residents, as this is a neglected subject in the research to-date. Second, to explore the quality and dynamics of supervisory relationships between members of staff and hostel residents, focusing in particular on the effects of staff office door policies, which, although a seemingly trivial aspect of AP regimes, can play an important role in shaping rehabilitative regimes by facilitating or hindering constructive staff-resident relationships.

## **Previous research on Approved Premises**

Despite their importance, there has been little research that explores the experiences and views of people who work and reside in APs. Recent ethnographic research conducted by Reeves (2016, 2013, 2011, 2008) is one notable exception. This research, conducted in a single hostel, highlighted licencees' scepticism around the rehabilitative and reintegrative functions of hostels (Reeves, 2011). In large part, this was due to residents not perceiving external rehabilitative programmes as being connected to their hostel residency. In addition, hostel residents were often unaware of the more subtle and continuous reintegrative efforts on the part of hostel staff, for example, the application of pro-social modelling techniques (see Loney et al., 2000). Staff viewed supervision as complementing the purposes of rehabilitation and reintegration via the provision of help and support, whereas residents perceived supervision primarily as a control mechanism through which they were monitored and managed rather than supported.

Reeves (2013) warned against probation staff talk and behaviours that appeared to reinforce sex offender group identities. Her work also highlighted that residents' mundane daily behaviours and interactions are better understood when considered in the context of space and place (Reeves, 2016; Cowe and Reeves, 2013). For example, a sharp divide was found between the spaces occupied and claimed by residents serving sentences for sexual offences and residents serving sentences for other types of offence. It was argued that these contextual factors of space and place might be indicative of other desistance-related factors, such as attitudes towards offending and pro-criminal relationships. Reeves has called for further work exploring how the rehabilitative aims of Approved Premises might be further facilitated through a better understanding of the role of space and place – a call that this paper is intended in part to address.

Drawing on periods of observation and interviews with residents and members of staff in hostels for women, Barton (2004) found that residents generally appreciated the help and support provided by hostel workers, with some considering the hostel to be a 'home from home'. Others, however, were less positive, highlighting in particular the lack of a clear function of the hostel and of a clear purpose underpinning their residency. Based also on periods of observation and interviews with residents, a Criminal Justice Joint Inspection in 2008 examined the performance of eight Approved Premises (HMI Probation et al., 2008; see further HMI Probation, 2007; HMI Probation et al., 2011). The subsequent report, however, offered only a

cursory insight into the subjective perspectives of those residing and working in these hostels. Given some of the central findings of the current paper that will be discussed below, it is worth noting that the inspectors found that members of staff in some hostels were behaving ‘as if under siege’, seeking the company of colleagues in staff offices over engagement with residents in communal areas (HMI Probation et al., 2008: 50). Consequently, relationships between residents and members of staff in these hostels were poor, with residents complaining of boredom and perceiving hostel workers as being uninterested in offering help and support.

Looking further back, some research on hostels was conducted in the latter half of the twentieth century. Research by Wincup (1996) on mixed-gender hostels, for example, found that male residents felt aggrieved about a perceived unfair distribution of benefits and responsibilities between men and women. Women had access to televisions in their personal rooms, whereas men did not, and women were exempt from group meetings, whereas men were not. Although there were good reasons underpinning this differential treatment – for example, the potential for female residents to feel intimidated around large groups of males, particularly if they had previous experience of domestic abuse – these perceptions of distributive injustice seemed to strain staff-resident relations and damage the legitimacy of hostel workers in the eyes of male licencees.

Given its relevance to the current paper, it is also worth noting a relatively large-scale study on hostels in England and Wales that was conducted almost half a century ago by Sinclair (1971), which involved a sample of over 300 hostel residents. Sinclair's main argument was that positive outcomes, for example reductions in rates of reoffending and successful reintegration, depended primarily on a hostel's regime type and on the leadership style of hostel wardens. The most successful hostels had paternalistic regimes, which combined emotional warmth with clear expectations and boundaries around appropriate behaviour. The least successful reversed this paternalistic approach, with discipline being harsh and ineffective, and hostel wardens displaying a disinterested and unsupportive stance toward residents. It is important to note that at the time of Sinclair's study, hostel wardens enjoyed a wide degree of discretion that enabled them to shape their hostel's regime style (Burnett and Eaton, 2004). Recent legislation and national standards, however, severely restrict the autonomy of hostel managers (see, for example, Ministry of Justice, 2014; National Offender Management Service, 2014). Nevertheless, as this paper will highlight, far from hostel regimes being uniform in England

and Wales today, there is still room for variation in regime style, which has important implications for the quality of relationships between staff and residents.

## **Methodology**

To gain an insight into life inside Approved Premises, fieldwork was conducted inside three APs in England over a period of six months in 2013. Whilst I conducted four interviews in one of the three hostels after fieldwork broke down in another (discussed further below), the vast majority of the research took place in two of the hostels, which have been given the pseudonyms 'Greenville' and 'Redbanks'. This paper therefore focuses squarely on the data collected within these two hostels. Both of these APs housed male licencees only and did not discriminate on the basis of age or offence-type. By choosing two hostels which were broadly matched in terms of residents' gender, age and offence types, this mitigated the possibility of any divergent findings in relation to these hostels being attributable to any difference in these factors. Whilst Redbanks was run by a public sector probation trust (as were the vast majority of APs across the country at the time of writing), Greenville was managed independently by a voluntary management committee (see Irwin-Rogers, 2015 for more details).

In total, I conducted interviews with 21 residents (12 in Greenville, eight in Redbanks, and three in the third hostel), and ten members of hostel staff (four in Greenville, five in Redbanks and one in the third hostel). The sample ranged from young licencees in their early twenties to those in their late sixties. Whilst the majority of participants were white – a reflection of the disproportionate number of white residents in the hostels at the time of the observations – two black residents and four Asian residents also participated. Participants had been convicted of a broad range of offence types, including property offences, arson, sexual offences and violent offences. Of the members of hostel staff who took part in the study, five were female and five were male. Eight members of staff were white, one was Asian and one was black. The ages of staff ranged from early twenties to late fifties.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I conducted over 100 hours of observation which included numerous informal conversations with staff and residents. During the fieldwork, I typically took on the role of 'participant-as-observer', with all residents being informed in

advance about the research project by hostel managers (see Gold, 1958). Notes were taken during each period of observation to record a range of phenomena, including interactions between residents and staff and any key issues that were raised in informal conversations. Written consent was gained for all interview data and verbal consent for any data generated through informal conversations.

All interviews were fully transcribed and uploaded into the software programme, NVivo. To preserve anonymity, all participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Data were analysed thematically using adaptive theory principles, which offered a middle-way between the full-scale adoption of inductive and deductive approaches (Layder, 1998). I favoured this analytic approach as I considered that existing theories of legitimacy provided useful starting-points for data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, when the conceptual schemes and theoretical frameworks that had informed the research did not fit the data, they were refined or discarded, and replaced.

### **Life inside Approved Premises**

The licencees who participated in the current study used and viewed hostels in different ways. In return for a weekly rent of about £30, residents had a private room with a single bed, the use of communal bathrooms, and access to basic kitchen facilities for breakfast and lunch. The hostel managers employed chefs to provide evening meals. Not all residents took advantage of the evening meal that was included in their weekly rent: those with jobs, families, or groups of friends that lived nearby, for example, might leave the hostel early in the morning and not return until late at night. For the most part, residents would spend their time inside the hostels chatting with one another, playing computer games, playing pool or darts, or watching television. Some residents had particular hobbies, such as gardening, woodworking and chess. The hostels ran a range of constructive activities including, for example, day-trips away from the hostel and weekly singing sessions.

In terms of their restrictive capacities, the hostels imposed standard curfews on residents running from 11pm to 7am. Probation officers, however, would often attach more stringent curfew times to a resident's licence, particularly during the early weeks of someone's residency. There was a prohibition on residents entering other people's rooms, and residents were generally discouraged from having 'too close' an association with one another. There was

a ban on the possession and consumption of alcohol on the premises, and staff expected residents to be of ‘good behaviour’, which included being polite to other residents and staff and not making excessive noise. All residents were required to attend weekly hostel meetings during which staff would announce important news and provide residents with the opportunity to raise any issues with other residents or staff. Furthermore, all residents had to attend regular one-to-one meetings with a designated member of hostel staff, referred to as a ‘key worker’. Both hostels also ran internal programmes for residents that focused on issues such as alcohol abuse and managing finances.

### *An unpredictable and volatile environment*

*Lisa: A lot of people are just very volatile. Things can be fine one minute, and the next all hell is breaking loose . . . every shift is different.*

Member of staff (Redbanks)

During the morning of my first observation in Greenville, I received an insight into the volatility of hostel life. A member of staff, Sue, had said she needed to do a couple of jobs around the hostel, leaving me in the staff office with two young residents. While I was pretending to read, Ryan, a resident, asked me how long I had been working in the hostel. This gave me the opportunity to explain that I was a researcher conducting research on what people thought about life on licence and living in hostels. A phone rang and, since I was unsure whether a member of staff in the adjoining office would take the call, I decided to leave it ringing. I was scolded by Connor, the second resident: ‘You can’t just fucking leave it ringing, mate – what if it’s something important for one of us?!’ The phone stopped ringing, and Connor muttered some expletives. Shortly after, Ryan used the hostel phone to contact the benefits agency. After Ryan had spent about fifteen minutes on hold, a phone in the second staff office started ringing and Peter, a member of staff, answered it. Ryan’s line went dead, and he shouted through to the adjoining office:

*Ryan: What the fuck? Have you just cut me off?*

*Peter: Don’t talk to me like that, mate.*

*Ryan: I’m not your mate.*

*Peter: Well I’m not your mate, either.*

Ryan: *Dickhead.*

Resident and member of staff (Greenville)

I took out my notepad and started writing my first observation note: ‘potential procedural justice issues: communication problems this morning between one member of staff and a resident’. Sue returned to the office and proceeded to explain to Ryan that it must have been a fault at the other end of the line. Ryan calmed down and redialled the number for the benefits agency. He found out that he had provided them with the wrong address for the hostel, which had resulted in the benefits agency delaying his payments. He explained to Sue that he needed to visit a town some miles away that afternoon for a job interview at a ‘mate’s business’ and asked if he could borrow some money for a taxi. It was hostel policy to provide small emergency loans to residents, but Sue did not seem convinced that Ryan really had a job interview. She pointed out that he already owed the Greenville substantial amount of money in unpaid rent and previous loans. Ryan was incensed:

*But I need it! How else am I gonna get to the interview? Aren’t you supposed to be helping us to find jobs?! [Ryan turned to me]. This is a joke – are you getting all this down, mate? This ain’t fair . . . fuck this, I’ll just go and get myself recalled then! Get me a bag so I can pack my stuff. I’m leaving. They can recall me if they want, I don’t care.*

Resident (Greenville)

Ryan’s monologue lasted for several minutes, but he did not end up packing his bags. Sue informed me that he had already threatened to leave the hostel on numerous occasions. Ryan disappeared to his room. When he reappeared in the staff office about an hour later, he seemed to have calmed down and apologised to members of staff for his aggressive behaviour. Ryan, Connor and I played pool for the rest of the afternoon. Whenever possible, I directed the discussion towards their experiences of being on licence. Their opinions about the licence period were mixed and at times contradictory. Their ‘snap’ or default responses seemed to be that the licence period was ‘shit’ or ‘pointless’. However, as our conversations progressed, they would often explain how probation workers or members of hostel staff could be caring people, who were doing a good job in supporting them on a personal level or helping them with practical tasks such as securing move-on accommodation or employment. It is worth noting that this shifting between subcultural and more conventional narratives has been reported by

other researchers conducting observations in criminal justice contexts (see Dean and Whyte, 1958; Sandberg, 2009, 2010).

After an afternoon of chatting and playing pool, I felt that Connor, Ryan and I were getting on well. Although their answers to my questions were often limited, they both agreed to do an interview during my next visit. I left the hostel that day feeling as though I had made a reasonable start to the empirical research. The next week, I returned for my second observation. Shortly after arriving, I asked Sue how the two residents were getting on. There was some good news. Connor had moved out of the hostel and into his own private accommodation, a move that he had been expecting for some time. There was also some bad news. Shortly after my last visit, Ryan had stolen a television from one of the rooms in the hostel, absconded, promptly been arrested, and was now back in prison. I found this difficult to believe, since it had only been a few days since Ryan and I had been playing pool in the hostel. Sue could see it bothered me, but warned that this probably would not be the only recall to occur during my research. In any case, I was back to square one in terms of recruiting willing volunteers for interviews.

Whilst it is worth highlighting that the hostels involved in the current study shared this relative volatility in common, there were differences between the hostels, such as staff office door policies, that had significant implications for the quality of relationships between hostel staff and residents.

### **What a difference a door makes**

The hostels were formally divided into a number of public and private spaces. Residents had their own rooms, which other residents were not supposed to enter. The hostel chefs had private kitchens, although residents had access to shared dining areas, which provided basic cooking devices, including microwaves and kettles. There were several other shared areas, such as living rooms, games rooms, hallways and bathrooms. In practice, however, the shared/private distinction was more fluid. There was a tacit sub-division of some shared areas into spaces for different groups of residents. In Redbanks, for example, residents who had not been convicted of sexual offences preferred to crowd into a small television room, rather than sit in the larger room that was used by people who had. Residents entered other residents' bedrooms, but were

careful not to be caught by members of staff. The most important divide, however, was that between the staff office and the rest of the hostel.

The staff in Greenville were proud of the open-door policy that they operated; one member of staff told me that this was the only such policy in the hostel estate. This meant that residents were free to enter and leave the office during day and night, although staff locked the door on the rare occasions that they needed to have private conversations. Many residents took advantage of this policy and wandered into the office in the hope of having casual conversations with the member of staff on duty. This could make it difficult for staff to make progress on their administrative tasks, as prolonged conversations with residents could place high demands on people's time, energy and patience. Nevertheless, the staff in Greenville regarded this as time and energy well spent and seemed motivated to maintain positive and constructive relationships with residents:

*Greg: I think here compared to other hostels we are slightly more relaxed, for example, with the open door policy . . . the reason I chose this hostel is that I knew . . . on the whole, they have a good reputation for working with residents in a really positive way.*

Member of staff (Greenville)

The efforts of members of staff to make themselves available did not go unnoticed by residents, who often spoke positively about hostel staff:

*Interviewer: Yeah, I was going to say, what are the staff here like?*

*Paul: Brilliant, brilliant. Yeah, brilliant. Jane, she's a wonderful woman – she helps me out all the time . . . the staff are brilliant here, they're all here to help us.*

Resident (Greenville)

*Chris: My first impressions of the staff is that they're really good, really helpful . . . [they] just genuinely seem to want to help people, which I think realistically is half the battle.*

Resident (Greenville)

Whilst the conversations between residents and staff in Greenville were often casual and not necessarily related to any specific problems a resident was having, they provided members of

staff with regular opportunities to offer advice and support. For example, one morning shortly after I had arrived the hostel, Alex (one of the youngest residents) entered the staff room and revealed that he had a job interview later that day for some work with a local charity. Although I found that people on licence (particularly younger licencees) were loath to admit that they were worried or concerned about anything, it was clear that Alex was feeling anxious about the interview. Vicky, the assistant residential officer on duty, told Alex that this was good news and asked if he would like her to run through what the interview might involve; Alex keenly took Vicky up on the offer. They spent about half an hour in the interview room in the hostel discussing what the interview might involve, before Alex headed off for his appointment. Later that day Alex returned to the hostel, proudly announced that the manager of the charity had offered him a job and thanked Vicky for her help and advice.

The effect of Vicky's help in this particular case is not the point I would like to highlight. Alex may well have been successful in his job interview without any assistance from hostel staff. More important, however, was the positive and constructive climate that existed between staff and residents in this hostel. In part, I think this was a result of the open staffroom door policy, which provided continuous opportunities for staff and residents to interact. It also depended, however, on front-line staff having and outwardly displaying high levels of commitment and motivation to their roles. In part, these high levels of commitment and motivation were maintained because staff members were proud to operate an open-door policy and considered it an integral part of providing help and support to residents.

There was plenty of evidence from my observations and interviews that staff members in Redbanks were similarly keen to help and support residents. The opportunities for them to provide this help and support, however, were rather more limited. Unlike Greenville, Redbanks did not operate an open-door policy. Instead, staff invariably closed the door and residents were required to knock and wait until they were invited in. During one of the weekly hostel meetings, a member of staff reiterated this policy to residents. They were told this was necessary because staff might be in the process of discussing private or sensitive information, or because documents containing residents' personal information might be visible on their desks. Shortly after the meeting, I overheard residents commenting on this policy in the communal living room. Most thought the policy was more about staff wanting to exert their authority and control over them, rather than something that genuinely concerned the protection of private and sensitive information. Regardless of the validity of the residents' arguments, the effect was that

people typically only entered the staff office if they had something specific to discuss. From the time I spent in the staff office, the purpose of the majority of residents' visits seemed to be either to take prescription drugs that staff held securely in the office, or to hand in or collect the keys to their rooms (every time a resident left the hostel they were required to leave their keys in the staff office). Therefore, visits were short and purposeful, as compared to the prolonged and spontaneous interactions that occurred between staff and residents in Greenville. An extract from my interview with Stan encapsulates the climate between staff and residents in Redbanks:

*Stan: We've got all these fire alarms, but we've got no other contact with staff. . . [they] come out for residents' meetings . . . they come out to manage and facilitate things. But unless they want to speak to you personally they're not going to intrude in your life.*

*Interviewer: And is that a good thing?*

*Stan: What isn't good is this sense of discontinuation. They want to be full of friendliness, but sometimes it doesn't come across that there is . . . and it's to do with this narrow little corridor down here . . . there's no real space to gather together.*

Resident (Redbanks)

The 'narrow little corridor' that Stan referred to, separated the staff office from the residents' communal lounges and dining area. It discouraged casual association between staff and residents and seemed to serve as a boundary between space that belonged to staff and space that belonged to residents.

The closed-door policy also affected how I conducted the observations in this hostel. I spent the majority of my time in the communal living room, since this was where I had the best opportunity to socialise with residents. This contrasted to my observation periods in Greenville, which I typically spent in the staff office. After spending extended periods with residents in the communal areas of Redbanks – on the other side of 'the door' – I felt that the staff perceived me to be siding with the residents. At no point did any member of staff say or do anything explicit to make me feel this way, rather, this seemed more a consequence of the implicit signal conveyed by the office door policy itself. This is not to suggest that casual and prolonged conversations never took place between staff and residents in Redbanks; I vividly remember

one member of staff joking with me that he had just ‘escaped’ from an hour-long conversation with a resident, which had focused on nothing in particular. On the whole, however, staff seemed more content to enjoy the peace and quiet afforded by a closed office door than to expose themselves to a continuous stream of potentially demanding interactions with residents.

I would argue the closed door policy of Redbanks had some powerful effects on the way that residents in Redbanks viewed my presence, particularly when contrasted to the views of residents in Greenville. When I met people in Redbanks for the first time, it was common for them to think that I was part of a monitoring and information sharing agenda, with many suspecting that I was secretly working for the police or the probation service. Take one Redbanks resident, Aaron, for example. After playing several games of chess with Aaron over a number of visits to the hostel, we became relatively well acquainted. We had spoken at length about our backgrounds and our plans for the future and I thought a good level of trust had developed between us. Nevertheless, during one of my final visits to the hostel, Aaron had spotted an item in the back pocket of my jeans and asked what it was. When I told him it was just a writing pad that I sometimes used to jot down notes, he remained sceptical and suspected instead that it was a device for secretly recording conversations. I showed him the notepad and told him that I was surprised at his suspicion, given how much time we had spent together. He laughed, explaining to me that lots of people (i.e. criminal justice professionals) pretended to be his friend, but that this friendship was only superficial; therefore, it was ‘better to be safe than sorry’.<sup>1</sup>

While I managed to convince the majority of residents in Redbanks that I was indeed a researcher and not an undercover member of the police or probation service, one resident, Nick, became so suspicious of my presence that research in this hostel became untenable and I decided to end the fieldwork prematurely.<sup>2</sup> Nick came to believe that I was spying on residents and relaying information to members of hostel staff. One of the main reasons underpinning this suspicion was the fact that my fieldwork in this hostel was sharply divided between time spent with hostel workers in the closed staff office and time spent with residents in other areas of the hostel. This gave the impression to Nick that I was using my time with residents to collect information and then reporting back to members of staff in the privacy of their own office. In

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<sup>1</sup> See further Crewe (2011: 457-459) for a discussion of the same issue in the context of prisons.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the breakdown of fieldwork in Redbanks, see Irwin-Rogers (2017).

contrast, to reiterate a point made earlier, my time in Greenville was spent predominantly in the staff office which had an open door policy, speaking in an informal and relaxed manner to both members of staff and residents at the same time.

## **Discussion**

APs continue to play an important role in the reintegration of thousands of people leaving prison in England and Wales each year. They are unique institutions that occupy a strange position between prisons and the community – a position often described by licencees as being ‘half-way’ between the two. Given their uniqueness, it is important that policy and practice is informed by residents’ and professionals’ experiences and views of life inside APs. In large part, this paper was written to fill the gap that exists in this area.

It is worth taking some time to reflect on the breakdown of the fieldwork in Redbanks. Whilst the fieldwork experiences discussed at the end of the previous section raise some important questions around how best to conduct research in these types of environment, the main reason for including them in this paper is that they reflect, to some extent, the varying quality of relationships between staff and residents in each of the hostels. Members of staff in Redbanks made several attempts to reassure residents that I was not collecting and passing on information following informal conversations or interviews. I would argue that residents were reluctant to take staff members at their word, in large part, because of the effects of the closed staff office door policy, which, acting as a physical and symbolic barrier between staff and residents, served to create an ‘us versus them’ atmosphere that ultimately undermined levels of trust.

It seems implausible that the fieldwork could have similarly broken down in Greenville. Here, the level of suspicion and distrust that manifested in Redbanks was pre-empted by the open staff door policy, which instead encouraged spontaneous and frequent interactions between residents and staff. Residents in Greenville, therefore, were almost unanimously positive when speaking about their views of hostel staff, who were perceived to be motivated, ready and willing to provide a range of help and support. Readers may recall the incident described at the outset of the findings section of this paper in which Ryan, a resident in Greenville, became so angered that he threatened to pack his bags, leave the hostel and risk recall to custody, only to

reappear in the staff office a short time later to apologise and attempt to restore positive relations with members of hostel staff.

In contrast, it is worth reiterating the sense of ‘discontinuation’ described by Stan, a resident in Redbanks. Stan highlighted the disjuncture between the friendly interactions between staff and residents, which occurred, for example, during mealtimes when everyone sat down communally in the shared kitchen, and the gulf between residents and staff that manifested during other times of the day, when residents used the communal living rooms and members of staff closed themselves away in the staff office. I would like to highlight, however, that the data and analysis presented in this paper is not intended to imply that relationships between staff and residents in Redbanks were entirely, or even predominantly, negative – this certainly was not the case. Nevertheless, whilst the manager and members of staff in this hostel were keen to provide residents with a wide range of help and support, something as seemingly trivial as the staff office door policy acted as a barrier towards achieving these aims.

A recent study by Phillips (2014), which focused on the design of probation offices, drew similar conclusions about the importance of space and how it is organised. Phillips highlighted the distinction between the ‘protected’ zones in probation offices that included the reception area and private interview rooms, and the ‘unprotected’ zone of the waiting area, suggesting that it could contribute to the creation of an ‘us versus them’ atmosphere. The environment I encountered in Redbanks also resonated closely with some of the findings of the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection of APs in 2008 (outlined above), which found that members of staff in some hostels were behaving ‘as if under siege’, seeking the company of colleagues in staff offices over engagement with residents in communal areas (HMI Probation et al., 2008: 50).

Whilst the distinctions between APs and prisons should not be overlooked, it is worth highlighting some parallels with the findings of research on prisons. For example, researchers have found close links between positive staff-prisoner relationships and ‘information flow’ that better enable authorities to maintain order and security (Liebling and Price, 1999). The concept of ‘dynamic security’ has been described as ‘a way of working that relies on the traditional strengths of prison staff: developing relationships with prisoners, keeping them occupied, establishing trust and effective communication and therefore ‘knowing what is going on’ (Leggett and Hirons, 2007: 234; Dunbar, 1985; Parker, 2007). Prison regime styles characterised by dynamic security are associated particularly with the type of therapeutic

communities found in institutions such as HMP Grendon. The importance placed on trust and effective communication between staff and prisoners in the literature on dynamic security echoes the findings of the current paper. Order and security, as well as the effectiveness of rehabilitative regimes in APs, are enhanced by staff office open door policies that also facilitate trust and positive interactions, which consequently enable members of staff to ‘know what is going on’.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided an insight into life inside APs – a subject that has been neglected in research to-date. It has shown that whilst penal sanctions may appear formally equivalent on paper, they may nevertheless be experienced and viewed in markedly different ways depending on localised variation in policies and practices. It is worth noting that at the time of writing APs across the country are in pursuit of the Enabling Environment Award (EEA), an initiative that involves taking steps to improve the quality of support that APs provide to people on licence. Developed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2013), the achievement of EEA status depends on the creation of environments in which ‘positive relationships promote well-being for all participants’ and ‘people experience a sense of belonging’ (National Offender Management Service, 2013). Some commentators have suggested that whilst APs played an important role under the now disbanded Probation Trusts, their importance is set to increase under the National Probation Service, and that some changes to AP regimes are inevitable (Williams, 2016). Whatever these changes may be, given initiatives such as the EEA, it seems likely that rehabilitation will remain a core purpose of APs moving forwards.

Previous studies on community sanctions indicate that desistance from offending may be shaped in large part by the quality of supervisory relationships and the help, personal advice and practical support that these relationships can entail (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Raynor et al., 2014; Shapland et al., 2012; Weaver and Barry, 2014; Wood et al., 2015). With this in mind, and in the context of the ongoing drive to encourage APs to provide ‘enabling environments’ for their residents, the findings presented in this paper and its conclusions seem particularly pertinent: policies and practices in APs that may at first glance appear relatively innocuous, such as open or closed staff office door policies, can in fact play a pivotal role in influencing the quality of rehabilitative regimes, facilitating or hindering constructive

supervisory relationships, and ultimately, supporting people's successful transitions from prisons to the community.

## Notes

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