

# Crisis management

## **Service delivery, complex needs winner: Leeds Survivor-Led Crisis Service**

Andrew Cole reports on a centre where people with mental health problems are respected and supported, not judged

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Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday evening, the Leeds Survivor-Led Crisis Service opens its doors to people in acute mental distress. And every night it is forced to turn many others away. The reason is that there is nowhere else like it in Leeds, or many other parts of the country for that matter.

The service's centre provides a sanctuary for people who are at the end of their tether. Many are suicidal. Others will be the victims of abuse or sexual violence. Most will have already been excluded from other mental health services because of their "challenging" behaviour.

What they find at the centre is very different from what they will have been used to. Dial House, an 18th-century listed building on the outskirts of the city, offers a homely environment where staff are welcoming, empathetic and studiously non-judgmental.

When clients arrive they are offered one-to-one support from a support worker, but if they prefer, they can simply have a bath, or make a meal in the adjoining kitchen. The centre's underlying philosophy, says project manager Fiona Venner, is that "people do the best they can in the circumstances they're in. Our job is to support them to find their own solutions."

The client-centred approach encourages people to talk through their suicidal thoughts and allows them to self-harm if they feel the need.

"If somebody is given the support to talk about absolutely their worst and most frightening feelings, that will reduce the risk of it actually happening," Venner says. There has been only one violent incident in the centre's eight-year history.

Similarly, giving people permission to self-injure, in private, actually means it rarely happens. "We're so respectful of self-injury as a coping mechanism and so open and comfortable about talking about it with people that they don't feel the need to do it very often."

There are, of course, limits. If someone is judged to be at real and immediate risk of suicide, the team will intervene, as they will if they learn about adult or child abuse.

The service was set up in 1999 and offers a telephone helpline as well as personal support. It became an independent charity in 2001. In the last two

years it has seen the number of clients increase from about 250 to 1,000 a year.

Clients are encouraged to comment on the service and this has enabled the centre to draw up a list of the key elements of effective support: listening, not judging or assessing, providing a calm environment, peer support and, treating people with warmth, kindness and respect. Staff learn that sanctuary and social contact are as valuable for most clients as formal counselling.

In fact, the main criteria for selecting staff are personal experience of mental health problems and a background of working with people in crisis . "A lot of the team have experienced periods of being suicidal as well as self-injury," says Venner.

Although Venner is convinced of the service's value, it is difficult to measure its exact impact. "Often we don't know the next chapter of someone's history," she admits. "If we don't see someone for a while, we never know whether that's good news or bad news."

But the feedback from clients provides persuasive evidence of its unique value. One person even said: "You have saved my life and given me the will to live."

Venner has no doubt that many of her clients would be dead or self-harming if the centre didn't exist. "The truth is there's nowhere else they could go if not here. That's why we're so overwhelmed."