

PUNITIVE CQC SIGNALS THE END FOR WELL RESPECTED REHAB SERVICE.

David Finney (Independent Social Care Consultant, Substance Misuse Services) recently highlighted some major concerns about CQC inspections following a toughening up approach after recent negative publicity, including the fallout from the Winterbourne View abuse scandal. (DDN February 2012).

Walsingham House has experienced this tough touch with devastating and unnecessary consequences.

St James Priory Bristol is a registered charity based in the centre of Bristol providing support and treatment for people with addictions. It has been providing quality services since 1996 - Walsingham House (Tier 4 rehab) and St James House (3rd stage supported accommodation). Walsingham House opened as a residential rehab service in June 1996. It was forced to close in January 2012. 15 ½ years of dedicated, valuable and successful work providing compassion, acceptance, respect and empathy for people struggling with a substance dependency was summarily ended as a direct consequence of an intransigent and adversarial approach by CQC.

Walsingham House opened as a pioneering drug and alcohol rehab provision for homeless people (Addiction Today Sep/Oct 1996 edition). At the time Deidre Boyd visited the centre and *'found a bubbling mix of dedication, determination and optimism.'* These attributes continued throughout the years until the very end. Having opened as a hostel accommodation the project evolved into a mainstream residential rehab provision funded via Housing Benefit and Supporting People for the housing element and Pooled Budget/Community Care funding for treatment. The project achieved block contracts / preferred provider status via tendering with a number of DATs including Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Camden, Wiltshire, Bexley, East Midlands Providers Organisation and North Somerset. It also provided an integrated Dual Diagnosis service from 2006.

In October 2010, having commissioned David Finney to help in the application, Walsingham House achieved registration with CQC as 15 bed 'accommodation for persons who require treatment for substance misuse'. At the time this was viewed as a major validation of the project and an asset in developing a wider network of referrals. We were flying then and this coincided with our best year for referrals from April 2010 – March 2011.

However, 2011 became our 'annus horribilis'. A catalogue of staffing difficulties included:

- Longterm sickness of an experienced counsellor – totalling 8 months;
- Retirement of Senior Counsellor who was the bedrock of the team;
- Disciplinary action and suspension of another staff member;
- Temporary staff appointments;
- Consequent disintegration of a very stable and experienced counselling team.

This came to a head in September and on October 6th CQC inspectors arrived to complete their annual inspection. They discovered, not unsurprisingly in these circumstances, that there were standards with which Walsingham House had become non compliant. We owned this immediately and emphasised that we wished to resolve all issues as soon as possible. We even re-contracted David Finney to ensure that this happened. Our belief was that the clients were safe and systems were in place but that the evidence had not been recorded appropriately, partially at least as a consequence of our major staffing problems.

There had been no complaints about the service from any quarter – clients, carers, commissioners, social workers, probation officers. We had developed very positive partnership relationships with a wide range of referral agencies and commissioners. Clients self reported their gratitude for the services provided. We were aware that an inspection is regulatory but had assumed, erroneously, that the review would be a mutual process and our staff would all be involved in the inspection. This was not the case as from the start the inspectors style was attritional. Staff who were seen described their attitude as challenging and adversarial from the start creating an atmosphere of apprehension - not the approach we had anticipated. The feeling from the beginning was that the approach from CQC was punishing and judgemental not collaborative or supportive.

Communication was poor – emails went astray and reports did not arrive on time – the main report had to be collected from the local CQC office. Time frames for commenting on inaccuracies in draft reports were skewed. Even when inaccuracies were highlighted they were not in all cases accepted. Warning notices (which were not required in our opinion) were issued based on a report which we had been unable to challenge for factual inaccuracies. Whilst we were expected to operate in a non-judgemental manner CQC's reports were very judgemental – even stating on many occasions “.. our judgement is....”.

It was asserted that clients were not safe and yet all five clients in residence at the time were allowed to stay for the duration of their placement (8 weeks). We had positive feedback from all of them for the care and support they received during their stay. CQC did not ask them for any feedback. As a consequence of the warning notices our numbers were restricted and when the five clients completed their stay and were moved on successfully we were prevented from admitting new residents due to concerns about client safety! This seemed to be paradoxical and was extremely punitive for us as we ran an 8 week programme. If we had run a 12 week, 24 week or a 36 week programme presumably clients would have remained for that term and we would still be operational. There was a lack of understanding displayed concerning how we operated.

Due to the Warning Notices, the local Safeguarding Team's excessive involvement and delays in re-assessment by CQC we then had no clients referred to our service from October. For just about three months we had no residents at all – the first time this had ever happened. CQC had been informed at the beginning of November that we would only be financially viable in these circumstances until the end of December. Our financial tipping point was reached in early January.

Whilst we readily accepted that there were areas of non compliance with CQC standards at the time of the inspection and willingly co-operated with all CQC requirements there was no recognition by CQC of the positive past or the current context which framed the inspection. What the inspectors discovered was clearly not the norm. A snapshot view does not provide a balanced assessment. Clients who have only recently been admitted to a first stage rehab will never have the balanced view and gratitude about care, safety and support that residents experience during their treatment episodes.

CQC literature states “ The CQC can be flexible about how and when to use enforcement powers.” and “Any enforcement action we take will be proportionate to the risks posed to people who use services and the seriousness of any breach of the law.” We do not think that this occurred. All the current clients were allowed to remain in our care which shows that the inspectors felt they were safe. The Warning Notice procedure which was implemented and its consequences for the operation of our service do not appear to be proportionate in these circumstances.

As a consequence of CQC's inflexibility and overbearing approach a valuable, established and respected service was forced to close with 18 redundancies. More importantly a resource that was generally held in very high regard by clients as a caring and effective resource for vulnerable people with a substance dependency has now ceased to operate.

Achievements:

- Member of EATA since 1997. Board member from 1998 – 1999.
- NDTMS data provider since 1998.
- Affiliated FDAP member since 2002.
- IIP Recognition since 2003.
- Awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Award for Voluntary work 2003.
- Honoured with a Royal visit from Duchess of Gloucester 2005.
- Accredited Supporting People Provider since 2008.
- National recognition for Dual Diagnosis work. (Turning Point Dual Diagnosis Good Practice Handbook 2007. DDN Articles- September 2006, January 2011, October 2011. National Drug Treatment Conference 2008 – Matrix Model.)
- CQC Registration 2010.
- Presentation by Walsingham House at the NTA residential rehab conference in Bristol in 2011.

Comments from Residents that CQC did not speak with ...

- *“After being a lost street junkie I am now a recovered, responsible and productive member of society.” DN - 2011*
- *“Walsingham House and St James House have been full of dramatic ups and downs but with care and love I was supported through the first stage of recovery.” JM - 2011*
- *“When I got to Walsingham House I couldn't talk. I was traumatised and very damaged and did not trust anyone. I was cared for and given so much help and support in that place and most of all I got hope that I could live without alcohol. The treatment I received was priceless for me and saved my life.”CQ - 2012*
- *“Just wanted to reiterate my thanks for helping to save my life.” MS - 2012*
- *“I am devastated about the closure of Walsingham House”. SI - 2012*