



LONDON'S OUTCASTS

Research report from a study
on 999 Club Day Centre

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Acknowledgements

This study is a result of a partnership between the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Roehampton and the Club 999 charity. Under the supervision of Dr. Michal P. Garapich, twelve students from the Department carried out a needs assessment at the Club's premises in Autumn 2013. We would firstly like to thank two people, without whom this study would not have been possible: Dr. Stephen Driver, the Head of Department of Social Sciences at University of Roehampton, and Dr. Peter Wood, the Chief Executive of the 999 Club. Their decision to go ahead with what was quite a challenging educational experiment paved the way for our research involvement. We also owe a big thank you to the 999 Club staff who helped us along the way during the three months in which the study was conducted, in particular to Sue French, Tracy Bridge and Debbie Kingshott. But most importantly we would like to thank all those at the 999 Club who took the time and patience to talk to us about their lives, problems, experiences and hopes. We would like to dedicate this report to our respondents wishing them all the best in their difficult situations.

Contents:

1. Introduction	2
2. Aims of the study	3
3. Methods	4
4. Data and findings	6
4.1. Not all homeless	6
4.2. Needs and hierarchy of access to assistance	7
4.3. Routes to 999 Club	8
4.4. Club's life as way to 'normality'	10
4.5. Expectations	12
4.6. Diversity and unity	14
5. Conclusion – what and for whom is the 999 Club for?	15
6. Case studies	17
7. Recommendations	23
Appendix	25

1. Introduction

The authors of a recent overview of research and policies on homelessness in the United Kingdom stress: “homelessness is one of the most distressing and visible of social problems, and the treatment of homeless people is often viewed as emblematic of a society’s commitment to social justice”.¹ In a similar tone, Jürgen Von Mahs suggests that homelessness is, “as an extreme form of social exclusion and poverty—a particularly good test case for the ways in which societies respond to a complex social problem involving the provision of multiple services including welfare assistance, housing, work, and health care”.² From this perspective, homelessness is a reflection of ourselves; a way in which we inspect our own moral compasses and attitudes to fundamental problems faced by contemporary society. In the years of austerity and economic unpredictability, especially in a global city like London, these questions come to the forefront. Not just the dilemma with who deserves to be helped, from the shrinking collective pool provided by the welfare state, but crucially, where it goes wrong with the modern social contract if – as recent data on homelessness in London indicates³ – a large number of people are becoming ‘economically marginal’, in highly precarious circumstances and at risk of becoming destitute. Is it a question of the number of night shelters and assistance programmes, or a more fundamental problem of the hierarchical nature of social justice, structural exclusion (for example in the consequences of modern migration restriction regimes) or degrading effects of low pay employment? Homelessness is not thus a marginal problem that happens to marginal people.

This report takes a bottom-up view on homelessness and deals with more mundane and day-to-day issues faced by a small fraction of London’s homeless and marginalised community. Nonetheless, while reading the report, these fundamental questions posed above should be kept in mind. This study shows a snapshot of a group of people in a particular place, at a particular time. We often pass next to them on the streets or on public transport and we may not even realise that they are homeless. But as they transgress our social, as well as moral comfort zones, they do this for a reason. This report is thus a modest invitation to stop, take a mirror and look.

¹ Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Deborah Quilgars and Nicholas Pleace, 2009. *Homelessness in the UK: Problems and Solutions*. Chartered Institute of Housing; p. 9

² Jürgen von Mahs, 2011. *Introduction—An Americanization of Homelessness in Post-Industrial Countries*; Urban Geography Vol. 32, Issue. 7, p.923

³ BBC News: “*Rough Sleeping in London increases by 13%*”, 20 June 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-22980135>

2. Aims of the study

The aim of this piece of research was twofold – one, to gather a wide range of views and opinions from the 999 Club clients regarding immediate assistance that could be delivered; two, to offer a broader understanding of the profile of people using the club’s facilities and the role the Club plays in their daily lives. As a day centre with an open door policy, the 999 Club does not keep a record of who comes in and who comes out. This presents the management of the club with a challenge in terms of an awareness of who is using club’s facilities and, most importantly, for what purpose. In more detail, this study aimed thus at answering the following research questions: 1) What type of people frequent the 999 Club? 2) Why do they go there? 3) What type of assistance do they seek? 4) What is their perception of the place and what role it plays in their lives?

As with all research, not everything can be anticipated and this study sometimes strays beyond these questions. As a meeting place and a centre of social encounters, the 999 Club is composed of people and their social interactions. This study is thus also a study of the unique social space created by the 999 Club and what it means for the people who spend their days there. In this social space, clients, staff and researchers alike are part of a more general social and urban London setting. As the British sociologist and geographer Doreen Massey underlines, social space is the product of interrelations as it is constituted “through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny”, it is also a sphere of multiplicity and coexisting heterogeneity and is “always in the process of being made, it is never finished, never closed”.⁴ In that sense, this study is also an insight into the social space clients, staff and researchers create at the 999 Club. This social space emphasises one of London’s main features – its complex contradictions borne out of physical proximity and social distance between the wealthy and the poor in an urban setting, as well as ethnic and cultural diversity within. Although located in Deptford, South-East London, social space created by the club’s visitors stretches far beyond borders of this city and the UK. As will be further explored, this space is an important location of social capital used by the diverse mix of clients. We use the term social capital in a general sense, describing the value of social networks for accessing various resources based on common notions of trust and reciprocity. This research is thus an insight into the connectedness between the global and the local, and how people with very little resources manage to get by and make sense of their plight in a global city, within a social space provided by one of numerous day centres in London.

⁴ Doreen Massey, 2005. *For Space*. Sage Publications, London p. 9

This research does not exhaust the complexity of issues faced by the group of people we have investigated and we are aware that some dimensions of the challenges faced by the 999 Club may require further research.

3. Methods

This study is an ethnographic exploration of a particular social space and its users; it aims to gather data on individual circumstances in a given social context. Answering the research questions required reliance on the 999 Club clients' perceptions, opinions and narratives thus seeking 'soft' data that is not easily quantifiable or objectively available. The reasons behind a person's homeless status or how they sometimes use the club's assistance may be very diverse, multiple and difficult to measure. In approaching this subject, a simple survey would just skim the surface of the complex social reality. It may tell us *what* takes place, but would seldom be able to answer *why*. Qualitative methods of research, where not just facts but their meanings to participants are sought, were thus an obvious choice for research at the site.

By ethnographic exploration we mean a prolonged period of on-site research at the Club 999's premises, observing, 'hanging around', befriending and talking to people whilst trying to observe the social space through the eyes of its users. Between September and December 2013, twelve students with their tutor (Dr Michał P. Garapich) spent around 30 hours each at the 999 Club and each interviewed four or five of its clients. The interviews were deliberately unstructured, with their topics loosely focusing on the main research questions. At times, these interviews stretched throughout several sessions during the three months of the study giving students an insight into the development of an individual's situation. At other times, interviews were interrupted to be taken up again at a different time. Other interviewees only appeared once during the course of the study not to be seen again. As it will become clear, the pool of 999 Club users is extremely diverse in terms of their experience, as well as sociological factors such as race, ethnicity, migration status, education history, employment and homeless experience. The different ways unstructured interviews were conducted reflect that diversity. In total 62 individuals were interviewed, 10 women and 52 men from a diversity of backgrounds and age groups, ranging from early 20s to late 60s.

The research process developed over four months. The team visited the site for the first time in May 2013. A session on methods and research tools was conducted in September 2013 and then two introductory sessions took place at the club's premises to familiarise the research team with the setting, in order the club's users became accustomed to our presence. By the time interviewing

began, both the staff and users were familiar with almost all the research team thus creating a sense of trust between both parties. Throughout the three months of our weekly visits we became almost part of the 999 Club social atmosphere, which allowed us to approach, talk to and discuss various issues with our respondents with relative ease, confidence and acknowledgement of each other's roles.

We went to great lengths to keep the interviews as informal as possible. The interviews were not recorded; notes were only taken after gaining the interviewee's consent and all respondents were assured of full confidentiality. Normally data gathered during the interview included the life history of the respondent, his/her experience with homelessness, the assistance sought and needs that the 999 Club ought to know about. As with all ethnographic research, in some cases the data was extremely rich and encompassed various aspects of the person's life story, perceptions, experiences and needs. In other cases, the respondent would be much more modest with information, but even in these cases a prolonged relationship that developed between the interviewee and researcher generated valuable insights and overcame this. An important part of the interview included reflections on the 999 Club itself, what works, why the place attracts people, and what could be improved. Assured of anonymity, we are confident that the respondents were able to offer us honest accounts and reflections. Each researcher produced four or five interview transcripts which was an account of his/her conversations with the interviewee, along with ethnographic observations and comments made on site. These fieldwork notes are often quoted throughout this report. Researchers were also asked to keep a field diary in order to reflect on personal impressions and issues that occurred in the process of embedding themselves within the social life of the Club. All ethnographic research has a self-reflexive dimension and the diaries were intended to enable the research students to question their own findings and perceptions of the on-goings as the research progressed.

The full table describing the details of the samples – their gender, age, housing situation, long term and short needs and how long they have been frequenting the Club – can be found in Appendix 1.

4. Data and Findings

4.1. Not all homeless

Although the 999 Club as a day centre would be described by authorities and general public as a place for the 'homeless', it in fact is not, in that it is not solely used by the homeless. To be precise, people who are 'rough sleepers', according to accepted definition of that social condition (ETHOS⁵), constitute only a minority of the club's clients. This misunderstanding stems partially from the ambiguity, fuzziness and contested nature of the very term 'homeless'. Scholars usually break down the term into several different social circumstances which is better understood as a process of dealing with the lack of adequate, secure and safe housing. UK scholars define homelessness very broadly, to include not only rough sleepers but also "to include those living in temporary or highly insecure forms of accommodation, such as hostels, women's refuges, bed and breakfast hotels (B&B), or staying temporarily with friends and relatives because they have no home of their own".⁶ Our sample perfectly reflected that broad range and heterogeneity in various proportions: rough sleepers (roofless), people with secure but temporary hostel accommodation, people living in squats, council housing tenants and also a number of 'hidden homeless' who sleep on a temporary basis with friends or family or who drift between cities or even countries. It is hard to quantify the proportions in our sample, as some individual circumstances changed during the course of our three month weekly sessions at the 999 Club – an interviewee could switch from one category to another several times. Insight into individual circumstances of the respondents showed that people who slept rough, i.e. those spending the night on the streets, parks, underpasses or bridges, constituted around a third of our sample. The number grew with the start of the winter shelter the club initiates every year between December and March.

Although it is not just homeless people that use the premises, the association of the place as catering to the 'homeless' is nevertheless socially and culturally important, as it is after all treated by the dominant society as a form of stigma and reminder of their 'out of place' status. As our conversations circled around the club's position on the area's social map, our respondents frequently attempted to contest that stigma stressing the fact that "normal people come here" and that the association of the club with rough sleeping is just part of the true nature of the club. Negotiating and contesting the social stigma of homelessness and poverty in general is something

⁵ See: ETHOS Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, *European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless*. <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article120>

⁶ Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Deborah Quilgars and Nicholas Pleace, 2009. *Homelessness in the UK: Problems and Solutions*. Chartered Institute of Housing, p.2

that is crucial for many of the 999 Club's clients and we shall return to this subject in following subchapters.

It is worth noting however, that the majority of respondents have had, at some point in their lives, an episode of rough sleeping, some more recently than others. This could have ranged from a short episode to a 'homeless career' spanning over decades. In defining homelessness as a social process, it is useful to differentiate between chronic, episodic and transitional homelessness⁷ which illustrates various experiences people go through with regards to housing problems. It is crucial to underline that in our relatively small sample, all possible scenarios were present and there was a continuum of possible forms homelessness can take. For the respondents themselves, however, being 'homeless' meant rough sleeping, hence an often met resistance to being labelled as 'homeless'. As one of our respondents stressed "*I don't see myself as homeless when I am staying at friends' house*". This distinction is an important reminder of the hegemonic power of some categories society constructs for control and surveillance purposes. 'Homelessness' is precisely such a term, stigmatising and in turn being contested by the people it is often applied to.

4.2. Needs and hierarchy of access to assistance

The wide experiences of destitution and significant social problems of people frequenting the club, such as unemployment, domestic abuse, addiction and access to housing – and the way people cope with them – are partially determined by their diverse demographic backgrounds. In terms of thinking about these social problems, and the assistance the club might offer, the main criteria diversifying the sample in our research lies in the unequal access to welfare due to the residency status of the respondent. The first category is British citizens, who are entitled to the entire range of social benefits and assistance in terms of housing, unemployment, training and health. The second category is formed of EU citizens who, in order to access the entitlements available to British citizens, need to present the authorities with additional paperwork documenting 12 months of continuous employment in the UK and who need to fulfil the habitual residency test. The third category consists of people with an immigration case pending, mainly people seeking asylum. The available state assistance is much more limited in their case, although there are specialised charities that the centre tries to signpost. Finally, in the fourth category we find people with no recourse to

⁷ Typologies of Homelessness, 2013: Moving Beyond a Homogeneous Perspective *In Focus: A Quarterly Research Review of the National HCH Council* Jan. 2013 http://www.nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/InFocus_Jan-2013_FINAL_1.16.13.pdf

public funds. Mostly undocumented migrants, they rely entirely on the charity sector, the black economy and the informal networks among people in similar situations.

It is important to stress that despite this diversity, the immediate and long-term needs of our sample were fairly uniform focusing on following major issues: housing, employment, personal counselling related to addictions or mental health and problems related to learning disabilities and inadequate education. The fact that some people have greater access to resources than others means that the 999 Club has a strong group of people who have a very limited range of options but they remain there due to a sense of security and familiarity. These people, mainly undocumented migrants or EU citizens unable to meet the requirements of the habitual residency test, are often stuck at the club for months, even years. It is inevitable, perhaps, that the proportion of these individuals attending the club will rise rather than fall as people in the first two categories, British citizens or EU citizens who meet the habitual residency test, are most likely to move on. This results in the accumulation of cases much harder to resolve. Having said this, the club is not only an advice centre but is strongly involved in the creation of a safe, familiar social space where people can stay, relax and socialise. This means that even people without acute housing problems and with relatively secure financial situations will remain frequent visitors at the Club.

Many of the social problems facing clients at the 999 Club are related to their psychological wellbeing. Mental health problems related to past traumas during childhood, addiction, depression and psychosis were not uncommon conditions amongst people we interviewed during this research. The club has, understandably, limited resources to tackle these problems; its main task is to refer clients on to specialised organisations. There is a concern, not least from the staff of the club, that this is an area the centre needs to address.

4.3. Routes to 999 Club

The various housing situations faced by the clients of the 999 Club reflect the wide variety of routes into the 999 Club and ways of becoming a regular service user. Most of our respondents described some problems related to their accommodation arrangements and desire to alter or change it: access to social council housing, domestic violence, eviction release from prison, inadequate accommodation, or its lack, in the case of rough sleepers. There was, however, also a minority of people who did not seem to have any particular housing problem.

Majority of the respondents have heard of the club either through formal recommendations (for example, via the parole services or other homeless agencies) or informal information shared among

their personal networks. The 999 Club has been in the area for three decades and it is important to emphasise that locally it stands for a significant legacy of tradition of care and civil society in Deptford. For clients who have been raised in close proximity to the Club, this is the place that has always been there and always kept its doors open to those in need: homeless, in distress or down on their luck. Family and friendship connections between members of staff and 999 Club clients are a crucial embodiment of that tradition and it is clearly maintained through public displays of conviviality between some members of staff and clients. These displays are fundamental, since they give newcomers to the club a sense of a safe and friendly environment. For residents who have been in the area for decades, the centre is an important fixture in their daily routines. Here they meet, chat and plan.

Though, despite this, for most clients the most immediate reason for coming to the club was a problem related to housing or to seek information or advice on social benefits. The difficulties in dealing with these issues vary, for example:

1) Jane is seeking to flee her violent partner, but suffers from heroin addiction herself. She came to the 999 Club in search of advice on her options for finding alternative council accommodation;

2) Michal, a Polish national entitled to social benefits, came to the 999 Club seeking help in finding temporary accommodation in a night shelter;

3) Thaddeus is a Romanian national with no access to social benefits. He came to find information about temporary housing;

4) Victor is an undocumented migrant from West Africa who has been sleeping rough for two years – in parks, under bridges and in parking lots. He uses the emergency winter shelter provided by the 999 Club, but has little chance of securing more stable accommodation. His use of the club during the day gives him a sense of protection from British immigration enforcements; he uses the place for social reasons but is rather reluctant to socialise too much. As field notes observe: *He comes to the centre to 'socialise with people he knows' but likes to 'sit alone and be peaceful' most of the time. He also told me that he comes to the club because he is 'anxious of getting put in prison' due to his irregular immigration status*

For people in dire housing circumstances, free food and a shower acts as an additional incentive to come to the club for the first time. The route into the 999 Club may be mundane, even accidental. Some 999 Club clients admit to dropping in simply because the place looked like an inviting social space to make new friends. For example, Terry, who had lived locally for almost a decade, has never been homeless, but uses a local food bank and, as our field notes describe: *he walked past the club*

one day and had a look in, decided to go into the place and check it out; since then he has been going to the Club every day for a chat and a gossip as he says it is nice to meet different people [...] he is now a regular member. In a similar manner, a person may come with a concrete goal and then find the Club appealing to return for different, more social reasons, as these field notes indicate: *When Darren became homeless, the 999 Club helped him get re-housed within a couple of months, he eventually found a place to live and is now happy. So he comes to the Centre now to socialise, eat, drink he has made friends from coming to the centre.*

4.4. Club's life as way to 'normality'

It is crucial to distinguish between the reasons why people enter the 999 Club in the first place and factors behind their continuous attachment to its social life; these may not be the same. For many people, their problems are not resolved immediately and there is a need to remain associated with the club for long periods of time, for others their problems are unlikely to be solved. This, however, does not prevent them from remaining regular users of the Day Centre. Why is this?

The main answer emerging from our data is that the 999 Club should be regarded as a community centre in its own right. With a range of incentives enticing people to come and remain frequent visitors, mainly related to its role as a social space of interaction and support, the 999 Club has multiple functions appealing to the multiple and diverse needs of its users, precisely what a typical community centre does. A vast majority of our respondents, in addition to practical issues such as food and a shower, stressed that this is the place where they can meet friends, acquaintances, hang around and observe others, play chess, learn about new casual job prospects or temporal housing arrangements (such as squats, emergency winter shelters or friends to stay with) or simply stay with others. This social element of the club came up with noticeable regularity. For example: *Ashley was very sure that she was not homeless and tried very hard to convince me that not only did she have a home but a very nice one at that... she said she used the club so that she could 'meet up with friends as it is a place to socialise'. During the interview many people were coming up to Ashley to say hello and I got the impression she was the matriarch of the club as she has been coming there for a very long time.* In this case, Ashley treats the club as a place to meet her friends, as a local community centre. Similarly, *Charlie said that recently he has 'found himself at a loose end' without work, so uses the centre as a 'safety net'. Asked what it means he said it is a 'great place to come to socialise and meet friends when things aren't working out'.* In a different case: *Even when he finds*

permanent accommodation and gets back into employment he reckons he will visit now and then as he thinks it is a decent place to come and socialize as well as get help, as it is “not just for homeless”.

This view of the club, as “not just for homeless”, emerged as a recurring theme – respondents stressed that it was a ‘normal’ place, a community centre, a centre for interaction, not predominantly for the homeless, as one respondent said: *The club ‘brings the community together’.* Considering the social stigma homelessness has in the dominant societal normative framework, it is vital to recognise the meaning of that perception in respondents’ world view. By reinforcing that the place is not ‘just for homeless’ but for ‘normal people’ like ‘us’, a connection between the ‘normal’ life of work, family and stable financial situations and the chaotic, unstructured and destitute lives laden with addiction and mental health issues (which is a shared experience of many club’s clients) is made. Most of our respondents objectively can be described as suffering from various forms of both structurally and individually determined forms of exclusion.⁸ Often finding themselves at the bottom of the social stratification ladder of London society, these people would understandably feel and experience exclusion, rejection and stigma on a regular basis, given that their statuses were of those who are unemployed, homeless, receiving benefits, suffering from mental health and/or addiction issues, immigrants, squatters, ex-prisoners or people with a disability. One powerful way to offset that is to underline the ‘normality’ of the club and the ordinary, social practices they engage in once they are there, such as having a cup of tea or a game of chess together and simply ‘being with others’.

Thus the openness of the club, in terms of its open door policy, appeals directly to the sense of exclusion these people experience in their daily lives. For example, during our fieldwork we often witnessed people coming through the club’s doors for the first time. This gave us an opportunity to witness first-hand how this process works and what drives people to use the club’s services. A good example is Aisha, a Muslim woman from a Bangladeshi background, divorced from her partner and now living alone with her children (which led to exclusion from her own family). Aisha said: *I feel a lot more comfortable here, I don’t feel like people are judging me here and the people here seem very nice and easy to talk to. The people at the job centre are not very helpful to be honest, and it is very hard for me to get a job because of my depression.*

These inclusivity-communicating practices create a sense of belonging and being rooted in one special place, where everyone shares similar past experiences, where they are not looked down on

⁸ On forms of exclusion and its determinants in case of homelessness, please see: Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Sarah Johnsen and Michael White. Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in the UK: Key Patterns and Intersections. *Social Policy and Society* / Volume 10 / Issue 04 / October 2011, pp 501 - 512

and can maintain some degree of social autonomy and personal dignity. This strategy of 'rooting' oneself at the Club has thus both social as well as emotional benefits. It responds to the sometimes conflicting needs of our respondents, both to feel a 'normal' member of society and at the same time feel a sense of belonging and attachment to a marginalised social space and stigmatised group of people. The resulting ambiguity is often felt and articulated by our respondents through acknowledging the 'community' spirit of the place but at the same time it's very transient nature. In other instances, it was also clear that the strong bonds between clients can have a destructive dimension, as with clients whose addictions are fuelled by constant drinking companionship-seeking at the centre. This is also the case with visible groups of homeless male migrants – mainly Polish – who strengthen their bonds through drinking and collective economic activity, like scrap collecting or begging, and then use the club as a place to rest and sober up.⁹ Another example of the negative effects that bonds sustained through the club can have is the case of females at risk from domestic abuse. For example, Katie who uses the club regularly realises that in order to flee her abusive partner she would need to leave the social environment created by the club. Our fieldwork notes leave no doubt about this dilemma: *Katie is scared of leaving her partner; she states: 'if I leave him I can't come back down here and this is all I have' – referring to her mum, the friendly places, the club and the area more generally.*

Some clients realise this 'darker' side of the social space created by the club, acknowledging that this place cannot become 'too comfortable' for its clients, and that in essence people need to help themselves to move on, rather than become accustomed to the *status quo*. This issue directly leads us to discussing the various expectations people may have of the club.

4.5. Expectations

Since the majority of our respondents have spent considerable time at the 999 Club, their needs tend to diverge between short term, immediate issues and longer term ones. The latter mainly relate to their wellbeing and survival – food, clothes, washing and the company of others. The former most often remain those that were the main drivers behind their decision to come to the centre – issues related to problems with housing and/or finances. Several things were, however, highlighted which showed rising expectations from the clients with regards to the management of the club, which came about after clients spent more time at its premises. They focused mainly on the opening hours of the club, in particular, the need to open early on Mondays and the need to

⁹ On that particular issue, see: Michal P. Garapich. Homo sovieticus revisited - anti-institutionalism, alcohol and resistance among Polish homeless men in London'. *International Migration*. 2013

improve the quality of the meals, in particular, offering hot soups in winter. Chronic rough sleepers expressed the hope of an extension of the winter shelter programme to other months of the year. At least four respondents stressed that the place should somehow facilitate provisions to search for employment, for example, by installing a PC with an internet connection for people to look for job opportunities.

Most interestingly, a lot of these rising expectations and comments about the life at the club focused on its status as a community centre; respondents commented on the significance of 'family' and the 'community' spirit of the place giving them a sense of belonging and not being on their own. In that sense, the centre fulfils their needs and most of respondents stressed that they are happy with the services provided – as this note demonstrates: *He said that the only benefit he got from this place was having a place to socialise and have tea and read the newspaper.*

The majority of people were aware of limitations the centre has in terms of resources and advice but stressed that this was acceptable. As this field note observes: *Although they offer housing advice, Mia does not feel like the club can help with getting a permanent place to live. She explains to me that "the club can only do so much" and that the things they provide (shelter, food, friendly face) are about as much as she can expect.* Or, as this quote from a respondent demonstrates, some people acknowledge that it is down to people themselves to find a solution to their plight: *"... they are doing a good job by feeding, clothing, giving medical assistance and accommodating sometimes... but they cannot lead my entire life for me".*

A policy of encouraging some clients of the club to volunteer and help the staff is an important part of building a sense of community. Respondents who have volunteered were very positive about its impact and their sense of dignity. For example, *George says he owes his life to the 999 club and volunteering in the club can't make up for what the club did for him, motivating him during his detox phase and providing after care.* His placement has additionally reinforced a sense of community of the place, as *he sees the members [of the club] as his crazy family and the staff members are his helpers but are also his colleagues and family as well.* Volunteering has, in particular, been very useful for the club when it comes to bi-lingual migrants, who were able to act as intermediaries between the staff and the non-English speaking clients. This opportunity not only builds confidence and a sense of purpose for the individual but is clearly part of the club's ethos of community spirit. It seems that for both sides it has brought clear benefits. Although, many clients we spoke to were not aware of this opportunity.

4.6. Diversity and unity

As our data demonstrates, clients of the 999 Club are an extremely diverse group of people. They encompass all possible forms of homelessness; they cover all possible immigration statuses and diverse routes to poverty and destitution. Approximately half of the British citizens interviewed at the club have a Caribbean background. The club also has a significant number of Polish, Romanian and African migrants. There are young people and people in their 60s, and people with and without formal education and skills. A significant number have a history of incarceration in prisons. This heterogeneity is part of the appeal of a club where everyone has a feeling of being welcomed and treated equally. It is also a testimony to London's multicultural population. But it, however, provides a strong reminder of the uneasy relationship between diversity and inequality. Structural factors play a powerful role in this relationship and it is not a surprise that the clients of the club represent a part of London's population that suffer most from various forms of cultural and structural discrimination. It could be a snapshot of London's unprivileged population – one that certainly does not feature in any tourist brochures.

However, despite this tremendous diversity, the data gathered during this project indicates that people frequenting the club share a lot in common. All are part of a broadly defined population that are economically and socially marginalised, as most struggle with unemployment and the lack of secure, long term housing tenure, as well as various other forms of exclusion. A significant proportion also suffer from some form of mental health issues linked to past traumas, addictions or previous episodes of homelessness, itself a strong cause of mental illness. Despite all the differences, part of the sense of community the club is able to engender stems from an implicit, and sometimes explicit, realisation its clients form a group of structurally excluded people. The perception of the social and emotional ownership of the club by most clients is thus further reinforced by their perception of the authorities, and the wider society, as hostile, alien and part of broad, generalised authority which is 'against them'. In their world view, the club is thus a refuge from the gaze of authority; a 'safety net' where all complex circumstances an excluded individual may encounter can find a non-judgemental, sympathetic hearing.

This is not to portray a rosy picture of a happy place of non-confrontational social encounters. Rows, disputes, conflicts and rule-breaking are not uncommon within the club's occurrences. This is simply to restate the fact that the clients of the 999 Club form part of a community, not just through their own search for an emotionally safe social space, but due to structural exclusionary conditions forcing people in poverty to form groups and congregate in social settings such as the 999 Club. In that sense, the club is a culturally vital element of that process of group-making.

5. Conclusion - what and for whom is the 999 Club for?

Throughout our time spent at the 999 Club, and the conversations with its visitors and staff, it became increasingly clear that the club plays a very significant role in the lives of a great many people who visit it on a regular basis. In light of our interviews and observations, it appears that the main pull factor of the club lies in its multi-functional character. It is able to cater both to the immediate and practical desires, such as food and washing, and to the more subtle, psychological needs of people as they search for a sense of belonging; a place where one feels among kin, sharing a similar social position. Our research suggests that this is the main reason behind the club's popularity and the genuine articulation of sympathy towards its role and staff. In fact, for many people who attend the club, its sole function is social – to provide a semi-public, semi-private social space of safe interaction and connection with other human beings.

Thus as a community centre, and as part of the local social landscape, the club fulfils an important function. Although some users complained about certain features of club-life (such as the food and the occasional rowdy behaviour of people consuming alcohol outside the premises), in perspective, the place is seen as having its own distinctive character which the respondents recognised. In this context, comparisons with other day centres for the homeless highlighted the 999 Club's openness and sense of familiarity as its main advantage. The expectations of our respondents were not very high, as many realised that they had very complex issues which went beyond the resources available to the club. In that sense, many clients stressed that things are as good as they are and that as long as the primary function of the club, as a space of interaction, a spontaneous community centre made by people like them, is maintained then they would continue to frequent it.

This does not mean that the need for advice and legal support among clients at the club is unimportant. On the contrary, the 999 Club does a lot in that area with expert advice, friendly hand and help given to everyone. In fact this dimension is integral to what makes the Club such a special place – that it blends advice centre with a social space of interaction. It is quite clear that the social space of the centre, in the eyes of respondents, is not limited to only other clients but that the staff, advice workers and volunteers are an integral part of it. In that sense, what makes the 999 Club a 'normal' place 'not just for homeless' is the fact that the boundaries between the staff, advice workers, volunteers and clients are porous, flexible and easily bridged. The open door policy is thus extended to the overall view of the interaction between staff and clients, with the division between 'us' and 'them' to a significant extent blurred. Of course, some division exists and is part of the social fabric of the place, but we would argue that it is less obvious and less visible than in other homeless day centres.

An important and valuable asset of the club is, then, its social capital; an ability to produce a sense of commitment to its role as a social space. The club is governed by certain set of written and unwritten rules of behaviour and the sense of community it is able to generate. The crucial issue is that the social capital is a product of the commitment of everyone at – and to – the club, staff, volunteers and clients alike. An answer to the question: *what is the club for?* lies therefore in that complex balance the club manages to maintain; as a place where people feel secure and familiar, and a place where help – even the most mundane – can be sought. In this way, the 999 Club is not just for the homeless, the rough sleeper or someone just released from prison, but is also for the lonely pensioner in search of companionship, the former rough-sleeper who wants to remind him or herself a little of the life they once led, the undocumented immigrant in fear of the authorities, or even a local neighbour who may just come in for the tea.

6. Case studies

In order to gain a more in-depth insight into individual complexity of people we interviewed, below is a selection of case studies based on our respondents' stories. The case studies are based on our field notes. Some details of the case studies were changed in order to protect the identities of interviewees.

Case Study 1: Mary

Mary is a 35 year old Polish national with a long history of migration across Western Europe. She is not employed and does not seem to be seeking employment and is not entitled to receive any state benefits. Her English is basic, but she is able to communicate her needs. She is part of a group of Polish men who either squat or live in other temporal accommodation. One of these men is her boyfriend and she stays with him in their friends' flat nearby. She has clear health issues: eating disorders and a history of mental health problems. The 999 Club is her main social interactional place where she looks for friends. Predominantly she uses the club as a source of food and companionship, but she rarely approaches the staff for help or advice. In particular she is not aware of the nurse at hand, although her health issues are a cause of concern. On the other hand she seems to be excluded and mistreated by her male colleagues who sometimes mock her conditions and seem to not want to seek help for her. Her mood varies and she is in clear need of psychological counselling.

Case Study 2: Ben

Ben is a 50 year old male, from Newcastle. Ben's parents are both from Jamaica. His current profession is in construction but currently is unemployed. He receives benefits, £75 a week. All of Ben's family is back in Newcastle. "I had a stable life back in Newcastle but all my mates were telling me that London is a city with gold pavement" so he decided to come to London. At the moment, Ben is a rough sleeper, currently he sleeps at the S. centre, if not there then he sleeps at subways or wherever he can. In his own words, it was the relocation that triggered his situation: "Not a drinker, drug addict or having any mental instability...like I said before, not knowing anyone here made it harder for me to find a place". He comes to the club every day to seek advice about available housing, "I don't consider myself a help case because I can look after myself, I just need a helping hand to get accommodation". He enjoys the club and thinks that the staff members are committed to the clients. Ben also frequents other centres, one in Whitechapel because it opens at 6am so he gets breakfast there. At the Club he gets his eyes and feet checked by the nurse, in addition to some tea, toast and a shower. Ben's short term needs are to get a roof over his head and to get his life back on track, so he can look for work in construction. When he gets a place, he will still come to the club to show his gratitude, if the club manages to get him accommodation he will volunteer there to say thank you to them but "If I don't get a house by January or February, I will not go back home because for me that is failure". Ben does not think it will be hard to get a job because of the CSCS card and experience he has in construction. He uses the phone in the club, but in the other centres he visits there are computers so he goes on the internet and looks around; he thinks the club has not got many things to do, so he thinks that is one thing the club should change "but I am happy with the fact the club has advisers".

Case Study 3: Jo

Jo is a 50 year old female of African origin born in London. Jo has no qualifications but did work in the local fruit factory. She did admit to using drugs. She did not want to talk about the reasons she had found herself homeless but did open up with her daughters help later on. Whilst talking to her daughter, she joined the conversation when the daughters boyfriend's violence was mentioned, she said to her daughter "He is the reason we are homeless now". Jo is now unemployed and stays with friends. Jo expressed her fears and worries regarding the fact the daughter stays with the same violent man they blame for losing their home. She receives benefits but, on the day of the interview discussion, had a problem with the benefit payment and was receiving help from the club; they found the relevant numbers for her to call and allowed her to use their phone to call them. Jo was evicted from her home ten years ago; she has been coming to the club in Deptford for over five years and also uses another local club Deptford. She explains that "they serve dinners at Deptford but they charge over there". She explains that she comes to the club most days to get food, she says "I know most the other members and think they are a friendly bunch, all with some sort of mental or financial problem". She comes there to socialise as much as she does to get help with benefit claims and housing advice. Although they offer housing advice, Jo does not feel like the club can help with getting a permanent place to live. She explains that "the club can only do so much" and that the things they do provide (shelter, food, friendly face) are about as much as she can expect. She points out the other facilities provided by the club, shower room and towels, as well as clean clothes, and states that they have doctor's there sometimes too. Jo sees the club as a social place where she can keep sheltered in the day, meet friendly, familiar faces and get help and advice when needed with her benefit claim. She also appreciates the breakfast and lunches, but would be completely satisfied if they provided dinner too. She also uses the clubs phone to contact any official numbers she may have to call and informs me the club is helpful with that.

Case Study 4: George

George is a white British male in his mid 20s. He grew up in care until the age of 18. He mentioned that he ran away with his brother when he was 11 because he was “horribly abused” whilst in various types of care. He does not know exactly where his brother is now. He says he received good GCSE grades and 1st level degree in History. He graduated in 2011 and funded his studying with a student grant. He has had “a million and one jobs of all different kinds” including working at a butcher, parcel force, education department and doing manual labour, such as plumbing. He lost his last job because he got into a drunken fight with a taxi driver which led to police involvement. Therefore, he is unable to get another job until it has been cleared. George describes himself as “on the run, most of the time” and the incident with the taxi driver is why he cannot apply for a job or apply for any benefits. He also has other criminal offences, such as theft, which prevents him from getting employed. This, in his words, has led to becoming homeless as he has “no source of income whatsoever, except money from begging”. He currently sleeps rough: “I sleep anywhere and everywhere”. He said he gets “very depressed” being on the streets and has previously felt suicidal and is homeless due to his alcohol dependency and gambling problems. Any money which he gets from begging is spent on either of those things. He comes to Club 999 because he was found by a street rescue team who told him about the place and he started coming because he was “desperate for support” and “fed up of the same thing every day”. He comes to the centre “almost every day...if we can make it down.” He said that he likes to sleep as soon as he gets into the centre as it is “better than sleeping on the streets” and he normally struggles to get a decent amount of sleep. He says that even when he gets housed in a shelter or stays at someone’s house he “cannot get to sleep on a bed” as he is “too used to sleeping on the floor”. He has been attending the centre for almost 4 months on and off stating that there is “nothing better to do”. He said that the tea and food offered by the club is a great help to him as he rarely gets to eat on the street. He also said that the staff “do a wonderful job” and provide him with support. Furthermore, being able to socialise and keeping warm inside are both positives of the centre. His most immediate need at the moment is getting his issues with the police sorted. Staff at the centre are helping him by allowing him to make phone calls and speaking to the police themselves. Asked about the future he said: “I literally have no idea what to do now...Ideally I’d like to get back into work and possibly go back to university to do a Masters degree. None of this is possible at the moment though and my alcohol problems also hold me back.” Asked what could be done to improve the centre and he responded “coming here is pretty mundane, always the same thing... there could be some more social activities, like a quiz night each week could be fun”.

Case Study 5: Nic

Nic is around 25 and British of Jamaican background. He was studying at Lewisham College. He is unemployed and homeless, sleeping rough locally. At the time of interview, he has been coming to the club for a couple of days only. He became homeless due to a relationship breakdown. He says that since he found the club, he has been coming as it's warm to stay in and he can drink tea, coffee, have some toast and a shower. He comes across as a young man who is willing to get out of his situation. He comes to the club, sits at the table and starts reading a book or writing in his diary. Nic applied for benefits four weeks prior to the interview and was still awaiting a decision. Once he has secured his jobseekers allowance and gets his own place, he plans to return to college. As a newcomer, he feels that the club meets his needs, providing help in terms of food, shower and benefits claims.

Case Study 6: Edward

Edward is a 26 year old white male who was born and raised in south London; he is unemployed since he left prison approximately three years ago. He now lives with his girlfriend and their child in a council house. Edward went to jail when he was 20 years old. In his own words, Edward is at the club because he is unemployed but does not want to just stay home and do nothing; he would love to volunteer at the 999 Club and help the other members. "The old staff here are great, like Sue and them I love but not the new ones, they don't understand". Edward went on to say that while the new staff were trying their best they are "foreign and don't know what it's like for us". However, Edward also expressed that he was glad to have the foreign staff as some of the older English ones "only want to help their own. Like they would give everyone food but they only want to give advice and support to the English ones". He was first told about the club on his release from prison; he was technically homeless and living with his sister and her young family. While Edward did not consider himself homeless he contacted a charity. Edward's most pressing need is of a job and he has expressed several times that he would like to be in full time work or at the very least in college so he can gain more skills to help him find a job. He expects the club to help him with this as much as possible but understands that it may not happen very quickly. Asked what it was that he would like to do at the club, he mentioned that the night shelter ought to be extended beyond the winter months. Edward also said that people should not be allowed outside as they scare people when they are drinking, "it's not nice for the college students, just out to get lunch and people are begging for food".

Case Study 7: Curtis

Curtis is a 50 year old man from Sierra Leone. He gained asylum and stayed in the UK where he worked for approximately six years in mechanics. After this time, his claim for asylum ran out and he was no longer legally allowed to work in the UK nor was he permitted to claim benefits. As a result, Curtis could not pay his rent and was unable to afford somewhere else to live. "I stay with friends when I can but if I cannot I stay outside and sleep under a tree". Curtis' younger brother also lives in the UK with his wife and children, "they live outside of London, I stayed with them for a while but I feel bad". Curtis explained that he did not feel like a man when he had to stay with his younger brother, he did not think it was right that he was imposing on his family life. Curtis uses the club for company as well as to get something to eat if he cannot afford to buy food himself. The club is a very useful place for Curtis as they are helping him sort out his immigration status and have arranged a lawyer to help him understand what he is entitled to. Curtis has bullet wounds in his leg from the time of the conflict in Sierra Leone. "I have to see a doctor; it's been like this for a long time". What Curtis most wants from the club is continued help with his immigration status so that he can get into employment again. He also expressed a desire for the club to serve hot food on a daily basis or at the very least one hot meal every other day, "I think that the club should do hot food, for when people are sleeping outside". Curtis explained that he enjoys visiting the club, that he likes meeting the people and that the club means he always has something to eat.

7. Recommendations

The recommendations stemming from our study can be divided into general ones and more specific ones. They will attempt to convey some of our respondents' suggestions but also include some of our own impressions on how the 999 Club might change and what it could do to improve its current operations:

- Starting from general recommendations, it is crucial that the club continues in its role as a community centre for everyone, regardless of their particular circumstances. The open door policy is much more than just a management rule: it has a symbolic meaning for its users, giving them a sense of equal treatment, fairness and ownership of this social space. An important extension of this policy is the practice of staff members to come out and talk directly to clients often in a convivial and friendly manner (for example, while having a cigarette outside, greeting someone new, etc.). This practice, although mundane and spontaneous, should be strongly encouraged among staff, and their efforts in this practice rewarded.
- As a community centre, the 999 Club gives its users a sense of 'normality' that their real lives often lack. It is thus very crucial to underline the fact that the place is not for a specific type of person labelled "poor", "homeless" or "excluded". These terms need to be avoided if possible, as they tend to unnecessarily stigmatise people who are already stigmatised by the dominant norms of society. The popularity of the place stems partially from its ability to remove the stigma attached to these social categories.
- The advice services provided by the club are important and there is a need to strengthen this area of the club's services. In particular, complex cases related to mental health and immigration law prove to be a challenge the club needs to tackle. Liaising with the foreign embassies of citizens who are present at the club in a large number (i.e. Polish and Romanian) need to be strengthened, despite the often reluctant embassy staff to engage in this.
- There is a constant need for psychological counselling for a number of the club users. Using links with relevant charities or universities that may provide volunteers that could assist centre staff in this area would be strongly encouraged.
- A space with internet access should be established for the use of those clients in search of employment.

- An important part of bonding practice in place is made through playing chess and backgammon. The centre should encourage more people to get involved in these games by providing additional sets and helping clients to become volunteers. Occasional competitions should be organized with the active involvement of the club staff and volunteers.
- The 999 Club should consider opening earlier on Monday mornings and opening during weekends. This was a frequent suggestion made by respondents, in particular, those rough sleeping for whom – during the winter shelter programme – weekends tend to be difficult periods, with having to find alternative accommodation.

Appendix 1: Respondents profiles and needs

Gender	Age (aprox)	Citizenship status	Housing situation	Short term, immediate need	Long term need	reasons for coming	Self-reported Substance misuse issue; other	Comes to the Club since
M	50	British	Council tenant	work	Secure employment	social		
F	29	British	Council tenant	Dealing with domestic violence/abuse	Accommodation, rehab	Food, advice on housing	Class A drugs	2
M	40	British	secure			social		2
M	50	British	secure	Employment	Employment	social		5
M	35	British	Insecure – rent arrears	housing	Housing, employment	food	Mental health	6 months
F	50	British	Insecure, evicted, stays with family, friends	housing	housing	Food, social, advice on benefits	Drugs	5
M	45	British	Insecure, stays with friends, shelters	Housing, employment	housing	Social, friends		
F	55	British	Insecure, stays with friends, shelters			Social, friends		2
M	55	British	Secure, episodic homelessness	housing	Housing, rehab	Social, friends	Drugs, mental health	
M	50	British	Rough sleeper	housing	Housing, employment	Health care, employment advice		6 months
F	55	British	insecure	housing	housing	Advice, social		8
M	40	Sierra Leone	secure	housing		Food, social		
M	53	British	Rough sleeper	housing	Housing, rehab, legal	Food, advice on benefits		6 months
M	35	British	secure	employment	Education, employment	Food, social		4 years
M	54	Italian	Insecure, sleeps in his car	Employment, housing	employment	Food, advice		3 weeks

M	45	British	secure		Housing, rehab	social	alcohol	5
M	70	British	Secure, chronic homeless	none	none	social		
M	40	Polish	Rough sleeper	New ID, food, shelter	Employment, housing	Food, shelter, shower		5 months
F	30	British	Council tenant	employment	employment	advice		1 st day
M	45	Nigerian	secure	employment	employment	Advice on jobs		2
M	24	Romanian	secure	employment	employment	Social, friends		2
F	45	Polish	Insecure, episodic homelessness	Shelter, food	Housing, employment	Shelter, social	alcohol	2 months
F	35	Romanian	secure		employment	social		3 months
M	45	British/Nigerian	Rough sleeping	Shelter, food	Legal, employment, housing	Food, advice	alcohol	3
M	40	British	Rough sleeping	Shelter, housing	Housing, employment	Advice on housing		2
M	20	French	secure	none	none	Volunteering at the club		3 months
M	30	British/Burundi	Insecure/hidden	Food, employment	Benefits, employment	Food, transport money		
M	25	British	Rough sleeping	Food shower	Benefits, housing	Food, advice		2 days
M	68	Nigerian	insecure	Food, employment	Immigration status, health	Advice, social		1
M	40	Non-British African	Insecure/chronic homelessness	Food, clothing	Mental health, housing, rehab	Food, social	alcohol	
M	50	British	Rough sleeping	Shelter, employment	Housing, employment	Advice, social	alcohol	1
M	40	British	Rough sleeping	Shelter, food, health	Housing, employment	Advice, social		
M	22	Jamaican	Rough sleeping	Shelter, food, job	Immigration status	Advice, social		1
M	32	Jamaican	Secure/temporary	Housing,	Housing, employment	advice		2 weeks
M	26	Romanian	secure	employment	employment	social		2
M	52	Denmark	secure			volunteering		6
M	40	British/DRC	secure	Employment, housing	employment	social		2
M	60	British/French	secure			Food, social		
F	60	British	temporary	housing	housing	advice		

M	35	Polish	secure	Mental health help	Housing, mental health	Relax from stress	alcohol	
M	37	Polish	Insecure/squatting	Housing, employment	employment	Social, food		
M	54	British	Insecure/stays with friends	Housing, employment	Housing, employment	Social, advice		1
M	55	British	Temporary/hostel	Housing, employment	Housing, legal	Food, social	alcohol	4
F	50	British	secure					20
M	50	Sierra Leone	Rough sleeping	Shelter, housing	Immigration status	Food, social		
M	26	British	Council tenant	Employment	employment	Social, advice		3
F	45	British	secure			social		15
M	25	British	Secure/hostel	Housing, employment	housing	advice		1 st day
M	67	Jamaican	Rough sleeping	shelter	Housing, employment	Shelter, food		6 weeks
M	22	British	Rough sleeping	Shelter, legal issues	Housing, employment	Social, food, rest	alcohol	
M	45	British	Secure	Employment,	Employment			
M	40	Africa	Rough sleeping	Shelter, food, job	Immigration status	Social, food		
M	35	Polish	secure	Housing, benefits	housing	social	alcohol	2
M	40	Polish	squatting	Housing, employment	Housing, employment	social		1
M	60	Polish	Rough sleeping	Shelter, food, papers	Housing, legal	Food, shelter	alcohol	2 weeks
M	30	Polish	Rough sleeping	Shelter, food, papers	housing	Food, shelter		2 weeks
M	40	Polish	secure	Employment, health	Health, housing, employment	Social, food		3 months
M	40	Polish	squatting	Housing, employment	Housing, employment	Social, food		3
F	35	Romanian	With friends	Housing, mental health	Housing, mental health	social		3 months
M	60	British	With friends	Employment, housing	Employment, benefits		alcohol	
M	40	Romanian	squat	Employment, papers	Housing, employment	Social, advice		
M	50	British	Rough sleeping	Housing, benefits	Housing, mental health	Social, advice		