

# STAFF STORY

01/21



## Kate's blog: Homelessness during Covid-19

July 2021

At Sanctuary Supported Living, we provide a range of specialist supported housing for young people and adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Our skilled and experienced teams work to prevent street homelessness, break the cycle of rough sleeping and sofa-surfing, and provide people with the personalised support they need. This tailored approach helps people to gain the essential life skills, self-confidence and resilience that will help them to get back on their feet and eventually move on and live independently in their own homes.

Here, Kate Molope, Local Service Manager for Sanctuary Supported Living's specialist Sudbury Young People Supported Housing and Haverhill Homeless Supported Housing in Suffolk, shares her experience of how Covid-19 has affected both homeless people and the front-line teams who support them.

“There are many words to describe how things have been since Coronavirus changed all our lives, but the word I am going to choose is: amazing! This may surprise you, as I am sure most people would more commonly choose a negative word.

Why has it been amazing? It has been

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amazing because, despite the difficulties and the challenges for us all, Covid-19 has also brought a lot of positives to our communities.

It has been an amazing year for homeless people and the services which support them for many reasons – Covid-19 saw all rough sleepers supported to leave the streets and move into accommodation. It took the focus away from everything else and made safety the absolute number one priority.

All the other little bits we do in our jobs had to take a back seat. Keeping our clients and staff safe was all that mattered. We tried to give our clients as much time as they needed to just talk; are they ok? How are they feeling? Talking therapy was the best that we could offer at times – but it shouldn't be underestimated.

It's a testament to the safety and infection control measures we introduced, that out of over 400 Sanctuary Supported Living residents across parts of Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, as of July 2021, we have only had three positive cases.

Staff resilience has also been amazing. We took the decision not to move to skeleton staff at any point and we have seen staff commitment and passion for their roles at

an all-time high.

It was particularly rewarding to see our teams recognised as key workers and thanked for their hard work and their dedication to supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. We have dealt with the pandemic in our personal lives and were still coming into work every day to support our clients.

We saw a huge rise in the number of people we supported who have moved on to live independently, as accommodation was being made available more quickly than before the pandemic began. In turn, this has freed up supported accommodation and short-term bed spaces for others.

There of course have been many challenges, particularly the initial period when there was no guidance for supported housing services - it was new to everyone after all – and it has sometimes felt like homeless services have fallen between the gaps.

There were also difficulties due to external agencies not running – including drug and alcohol services, mental health services and property maintenance - not to mention the decline in almost everyone's mental health. And when the world moved online, for those in our services, this was a barrier, as they

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often don't have access to the technology or the skills needed to navigate the online world.

Living in shared accommodation during a pandemic is high risk; you have to share kitchens and bathrooms, there are multiple people coming in and out, and not everyone did or could adhere to lockdown rules. Some people refused to wear a face covering and believed it was all a conspiracy.

This of course increased worry and anxiety for other residents and staff. Thankfully, the risk to people in shared and temporary accommodation was noted and, at my services in Haverhill and Sudbury, all clients who wished to have the vaccine, had their first dose quite early on.

Although the challenges have been there, people in homeless services have not been isolated and have not been alone during this time. However, mental health and loneliness has been a key issue for everyone else, everywhere. Living in shared accommodation has had its positives – there has always been someone available to talk to, whether it been another client or a member of staff.

Our teams also provided 'lockdown packs', which included sudoku, colouring and quizzes - anything to keep

people's minds busy. Socially distanced group meals were provided, and Christmas still went ahead!

I'd like to praise our teams for the hard work, commitment and passion they've continued to show in their roles, throughout the pandemic. I'd also like to thank our local community, as their kind gestures, donations and positive thoughts have kept us all going – not just frontline staff, but also the people we support.

As we move closer to life as 'normal' and restrictions lift, let's hope we learn lessons from lockdown. Let's try to keep a focus on looking after each other, especially the vulnerable people in our communities, and be a more supportive society.

Covid-19 has also highlighted what a vital role supported housing plays in providing a safe and secure environment for homeless and vulnerable people, where they can get the right support for their needs and make lasting changes. Being able to support clients through a global pandemic has been so rewarding – we've seen just what a difference our services are making to people's lives; changing both individuals and our communities for the better.”

