

CASE STUDY

Embedding a Trauma-Informed Approach to Housing



Overview

[Sanctuary Housing](#) is a not-for-profit housing association established over 50 years ago to provide housing and care in England and Scotland. They focus on playing an active role in the local communities where they work through connecting with citizens, local authorities, third sector organisations and groups with the aim of supporting resilience and sustainability.

The Community Investment team in Scotland became aware of the challenges in engaging with some of the most marginalised tenants in communities and issues faced by housing staff such as rent arrears, antisocial behaviour, failed tenancies and homelessness.

In response, Sanctuary Scotland reframed these challenges from being seen as 'housing issues' and instead considered them through a trauma-informed lens – considering the person's history and context of their current situation. This led to embedding a trauma informed and responsive approach across the organisation through supporting tenants, communities and the workforce to recognise the impact of trauma by building and maintaining trusting and meaningful relationships. In turn, tenants who were at high risk of losing their homes were supported to access relevant support services and rebuild their relationships with themselves and then their communities. Additionally, robust mechanisms were put in place to promote staff support, care and wellbeing.

The Challenge

Sanctuary Scotland's Community Connector Manager came into the housing sector with a fresh perspective as a community worker with experience using a particular approach called asset-based community development. This approach is underpinned by recognising the value of people in communities through believing that they have the capability to be assets to the places where they live through contributing their skills and experiences. Instead of a top-down model, asset-based community development supports people to have the best life they can through connecting people, unlocking capacity and believing in their capability.

This approach received excellent feedback from partners and people within communities, however during conversations with housing colleagues it emerged that there was still a gap in being able to engage with people who had been identified as needing the most support in sustaining tenancies or who were simply not engaging with community activities.

It was acknowledged that instead of actively saturating these groups with information about why they should attend community engagement events, the approach should be to understand why people weren't engaging.

Following attendance at an event facilitated by [Resilience Learning Partnership](#) (RLP) which explored the concept of trauma and the impact it had on people and communities, it enabled the Community Investment Team within Sanctuary Scotland to reframe their perception of those who 'wouldn't' engage with housing as instead people who couldn't engage due to experiences of trauma and the protective barriers they had in place.

In turn, the Sanctuary Scotland team sought to understand what was within their own organisations' policies, procedures and practices that was potentially running the risk of re-traumatising people. They worked closely with RLP to gain a further understanding of trauma and develop a plan of how to communicate this knowledge effectively with housing staff within Sanctuary Scotland.

Following conversations with frontline staff about trauma and explaining how it can impact people and communities, it was clear that housing colleagues were working with people every day who had experienced, or were continuing to experience and be affected by, trauma and they were keen to actively contribute to a new approach.

The Project

Through discussions with housing staff exploring the relevance of trauma within the communities they were working with, it was recognised that the most common challenges facing the housing sector such as rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, failed tenancies and homelessness were in fact symptoms of trauma.

Therefore, it was imperative to understand trauma as a root cause and identify the role in which the housing sector plays in responding to those who

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have experienced trauma. In turn, there was a shift to unpick the challenges facing housing staff and communities, such as working to understand why people had rent arrears and what had happened in their lives that had led to that outcome. Through acknowledging that happy, healthy people pay their rent, work was undertaken to reframe conversations from taking a punitive approach that prioritised chasing rent payments, to one that supported healing.

The conversations around trauma enabled Sanctuary Scotland to begin considering some of the narratives around these issues, and through extensive support from housing management teams and senior management, there was an opportunity to start embedding trauma-informed approaches within the organisation.

The project initially started with Sanctuary Housing in Scotland to assess how trauma affects the work that housing staff do day-to-day, as well as the wider impact within communities. The Community Investment team worked closely with RLP to expand their knowledge and they began to deliver training for all housing staff across Scotland.

Following the success of this work in Scotland and underpinned by the continued support of management, the delivery of the training was taken on internally and is now facilitated by Sanctuary Housing's Learning Academy team across the whole of the UK.

Furthermore, colleagues in Sanctuary Housing conducted reviews of the organisations' policies and procedures and considered how to effectively and meaningfully implement the knowledge and skills gained during the training into practice on the frontline. In turn, a post was created to implement a trauma-informed approach to housing and to tenancy sustainment, which has since expanded to five colleagues across the UK who are working in this role.

The Sanctuary Scotland Senior Leadership Team recognised that these posts shouldn't sit within the housing management team but instead should sit within Community Investment to support meaningful and trusting relationships to be built with tenants, and from the tenant's perspective, clearly set them apart as a role focused solely on support, not enforcement. In addition, these posts were the first ones that were advertised as actively seeking to bring in lived experience of trauma (including eviction and homelessness) into the organisation.

The Housing and Community Connectors work with tenancies who are at the highest risk of failure and who present with specific issues related to the root cause of trauma such as high rent arrears, anti-social behaviour and substance use. Whilst part of the work is to ensure that rent is being paid and to manage the presenting symptoms of trauma, an important aspect of the role is to gain a deeper understanding into the persons' circumstances and wellbeing and how that has played a part in affecting their tenancy sustainment. Whilst it's clear that the Housing and Community Connectors aren't counsellors or therapists, they do support tenants to re-evaluate and rebuild their relationship with themselves, and in turn their communities, and help them to access relevant services such as specialist substance use support, domestic abuse and counselling. During this period of signposting

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and supporting people to access relevant services, housing management teams actively work to keep people in their homes whilst they are seeking help. This is underpinned by the knowledge that housing is only one element of people enjoying a secure and enriched life, and it is important to consider other factors which can impact peoples' wellbeing and health such as trauma.

As the Housing and Community Connectors themselves have their own lived experience, they acknowledge and understand that tenants aren't struggling with issues such as substance use or rent arrears through choice, but instead as a response to trauma that they may have experienced.

Results

The Community Connector Manager successfully managed to secure three year Homelessness Prevention funding in order to trial the trauma-informed role in the Priesthill area of Glasgow. Within the first six months they had already observed the huge impact this was having and in turn came an opportunity to create another post in Toryglen in Glasgow.

The three year funding allocation was key to enable workers to develop and maintain trusting relationships with tenants. There were multiple instances whereby it took up to, and over, a year for workers to have meaningful conversations with tenants, or over a year for tenants to access relevant support services such as residential rehabilitation. However, the impact of taking the time to develop relationships with and support tenants to access support has resulted in many now being able to confidently sustain a positive tenancy. In fact, the number of evictions of the tenants who received support from the trauma-informed workers is extremely low and Sanctuary Scotland have seen a significant impact on rent arrears as well as tenant engagement and wellbeing.

In addition, the longer-term funding for these roles enabled workers to unpick and understand the cycles of generational trauma that affected people and communities through developing trusting and trauma-informed relationships with tenants. Following the trauma training, there continued to be consistent dialogue between the Community Investment team and the housing team around trauma to ensure that all staff had a deeper insight and understanding of why it was important to embed a trauma-informed approach in practice. This has been welcomed by the Sanctuary housing management teams, whose skills, commitment and knowledge are integral to the success of these posts so far.

Learning

Innovative perspective:

It was identified that adopting an asset-based community development approach was a key enabler in this project. The Community Connector Manager came into the organisation from a community development and youth work background which provided a fresh perspective and created opportunities for innovative practice to be implemented. It was the alignment of this perspective with the knowledge and expertise of Housing Management colleagues that led to the model Sanctuary Scotland use.

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Leadership support:

Throughout the project, there was consistent leadership support for the trauma informed approach to be embedded across the organisation. Senior management in Sanctuary have welcomed this change in dialogue, supported a new perspective but also helped ensure that it translates to the challenges presented when working in housing; their input has been invaluable. This included reflecting on processes, challenging practice, reviewing policies and procedures and working to create a culture of safety and support for staff. This was fundamental to the success of the project and in creating trauma informed and responsive systems, services and workforces.

Impact of vicarious trauma:

A key piece of learning throughout this project was the importance of recognising the impact of vicarious trauma on staff. Despite the tangible appetite from the workforce across Sanctuary Housing to embed a trauma-informed approach in their practice, managers were noticing that experienced and skilled employees were leaving the sector due to the trauma they had experienced as part of their role. This led them on a journey of understanding the impact of vicarious trauma and that their organisational capacity to be trauma-informed was directly linked to the wellbeing of their staff. It was recognised that if staff were experiencing burnout, then this limited their ability to fully embed a trauma informed approach to their own practice.

In turn, this created opportunities for conversations to be had with staff to explore the impact of vicarious trauma and how this affected them; for example, it was highlighted how traumatising evictions were for both the tenant and for the housing officer. These engagements with frontline staff, and their willingness to do so, were imperative in understanding the reality and impact of the work they were doing, and also in developing protective supports to ensure that staff felt happy and healthy at work.

These candid conversations between the Community Investment team and housing staff sparked a three-year journey of putting robust supports in place to support frontline staff which prioritised their wellbeing.. In addition, Sanctuary Housing's Learning Academy team began delivering training to teams across the UK on the window of tolerance and the impact of vicarious trauma to build awareness and a shared dialogue across the organisation. This has also helped the workforce in their interactions with tenants by having a deeper understanding of instances where an individual may be operating out with their own window of tolerance but also recognises just how difficult it is to work on the frontline of housing, prioritising staff health.

Since then, the cohort of staff has stabilised with less staff leaving the organisation. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that there are other factors which may have contributed to the increase in staff retention, the feedback from staff has demonstrated the value and impact of having access to support. For example, workers highlighted the importance of having safe and open spaces to have conversations in making them feel like they're not alone in what they're experiencing and how the Housing and Community Connectors roles have alleviated some of the stress and difficulties that were part of their every-day in work.

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Overall, the project illustrates the importance of developing and maintaining trusting and meaningful relationships with tenants, communities and colleagues to provide support and promote healing. Through embedding a trauma-informed and responsive approach to practice, policies and processes, both those who access and deliver Sanctuary Housing services are supported in a way that recognises the impact of trauma, avoids re-traumatisation and promotes recovery.

Resources

[Sanctuary Scotland website](#)

[Resilience Learning Partnership website](#)

[National Trauma Transformation Programme - Implementation](#)

[ABCD Training and Resources - Nurture Development](#)

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