

Donna Whittle

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Donna Whittle is a Local Service Manager at Gore Avenue, Sanctuary Supported Living's supported housing service in Salford for adults with mental health and complex needs, and has recently been shortlisted for the Housing Manager award at the Housing with



Care Awards 2024. Here, she talks about her passion for supporting people to improve their lives and to live independently.

"I've always wanted to do a job where I could support vulnerable people and make a difference. I started working for Sanctuary as a Project Worker in 1999, meaning I'm now celebrating 25 years here! I've had various roles since then, including as a Resettlement Officer, a Support Assistant, Business Support and then Deputy Local Service Manager, before progressing to my current role in 2019.

I think it's easy for people to see someone who is homeless and to not understand why they've got to that point, or how easily it can happen. I now realise how lucky I was growing up, and how many opportunities I had, but others may not have been so fortunate. It's why I do my job - I know that my team and I can give our customers the tools and opportunities to build a better life.

It's such a varied job – no two days are the same and every day comes with its own challenges and rewards. I do the hands-on work of supporting people, which is great for job satisfaction, but I also love the complexities that come with leading and managing a service. A big part of my role involves working with both internal and external partners, to make sure services meet the needs of the people in our community, and that's what we've done to redevelop Gore Avenue.

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Previously a low-level service, it's been transformed into a 24-hour supported housing service offering holistic support for people with complex mental health needs, including addiction to drugs or alcohol.

We now provide a complete pathway to independence for people who otherwise would have had long-term stays in hospital, unable to leave because there was nowhere else suitable for them. Our recovery-focused approach prevents further crisis, and we support them to manage their mental health, and build their skills and confidence, so that they can live as independently as possible. We also provide floating support in the community, to help people maintain their tenancies in their forever homes.

The difference this has made to our customers is amazing, and I'm so proud to see people who have successfully moved on, come back to Gore Avenue for a catch up – knowing that it's thanks to my caring and dedicated team, and their commitment to supporting people to transform their lives.

You definitely have to be organised and have good time management skills to do this job. My diary is full and can change daily, to prioritise changing needs and be on-hand to help. I want to lead by example, so I'm always happy to cover any roles when needed. I also think it's really important to keep learning and improving myself – if I'm at my best, then my customers can be their best too.

Empathy and compassion are also essential, as you need to understand customers' complex needs, personal histories and emotions, in order to build trusting relationships and support them.

I couldn't say exactly what originally inspired me to work in supported housing, but I feel so lucky to be surrounded by inspirational people every day – from my amazing team, and my manager, to my colleagues across Sanctuary Supported Living, and of course the customers I support. Seeing the difference that we make to people's lives and being part of their journey to independence is a privilege and an honour. That's what inspires me to be my best."

