



Saltbrook Place
January 2024

healthwatch
Dudley



Background

Healthwatch Dudley teamed up with a local provider of supported accommodation for homeless and vulnerably housed people for six months in the second half of 2022. The team worked with Midland Heart Housing Association, to establish a monthly breakfast club at Saltbrook Place in Lye.

During regular drop-in sessions over tea and toast, we signposted residents to services and listened to the barriers they experienced accessing health and social care in Dudley borough.

We added value to our visits with creative workshops, funded by Dudley Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) "What it's like to be me" programme. The arts-based workshops enabled residents to holistically share stories.

The Visit

As Saltbrook Place residents got to know and trust our team, they shared their stories. From these conversations, group discussions and creative workshops, a common theme emerged. For many, just one change in circumstances triggered a spiral into homelessness.

During our sessions, we heard about family breakdowns, domestic abuse, mental illness and the impact of long-term health conditions, employment and poor housing.

Residents told us how they welcomed the safety net of living in supported accommodation and the available help. They shared what worked well and where they thought systems and services could be improved to have more impact.

The creative “What it’s like to be me” sessions allowed residents to explore their experiences in different ways. Sessions were also attended by a representative from the NHS Black Country Integrated Care Board to listen to the needs of residents.

We returned in December 2023 to see how things were going and were happy to see the continuation and growth of the breakfast club. What began with six people now has 15 residents regularly attending. Saltbrook Place had also set up a Christmas grotto with lucky dip presents.

We spoke with staff to find out what had changed since our last visit and what more can be done to improve the experiences of homeless and vulnerably housed people in the Dudley borough.



Saltbrook Stories

Finding affordable accommodation after prison

I was released from prison into temporary accommodation in Blackheath. I didn't start looking for anywhere else because I didn't know it was going to be short term.

I thought someone would help me look. A month later I was told my probation funding has finished and I couldn't remain where I was living.

My probation officer helped me to find a temporary room in Birmingham but all my connections are in Dudley and I wouldn't have been able to afford a bus to see my kids.

I had been sofa surfing for three weeks when the council referred me here. I want my own place but benefits will not cover rent on a flat. It costs at least £1000 a month to keep us here so why are we only entitled to £400 housing benefit? I can't find a flat for cheaper than £450 - how do they expect us to find anywhere?



Family Breakdown

I'm here because my relationship broke down and my wife asked me to leave our home.

I had always worked and owned my own home. A year ago I came home to police who told me I couldn't go in because my family were scared of me. They took me away and dropped me off at the park where I slept on a bench.

I didn't want to tell my family because they had their own problems. Three days later I took an overdose of painkillers. I was taken to Russells Hall Hospital and then sectioned.

When I got out of hospital I went straight back to the park bench.

An estate agent helped me find a bedsit but it was horrible. There were nine people in a seven bedroom house. I had to go upstairs to the toilet but struggle with rheumatoid arthritis and get up five or six times a night, because of a prostate problem, I couldn't make it half the time. I only stayed for two weeks before Dudley Council moved me here.

It doesn't help that everything has to be done online. I never learned how to use a computer, I might be better with a tablet if someone could help.

Fleeing Abuse

My partner tried to kick my front door in and I was so frightened that I just ran in the clothes I was wearing.

The council house was in my name, so when I didn't hand back the keys I got into debt with the rent and was told I'd have to pay for the damage to the door.

Because of this I couldn't bid on another council property and I have to stay in supported accommodation.

Staff here have helped me to cancel the debt so I can bid on a new place.

After everything I have been through I am finally excited about my future.

My Life as a Care Leaver

I've been homeless pretty much my entire life.

I was born in Staffordshire where I lived in care homes and foster homes from the age of ten.

That's when the abuse started and it has followed me since. When I was 17 they moved me into adult supported living in Birmingham. I left care completely at 18 and ended up homeless. I lived anywhere I could find.

When I became pregnant I came to Dudley with my partner, we were living on the streets while I was heavily pregnant.

The council couldn't house us because we hadn't lived here for two years so we came to Saltbrook Place.

I'm 19 now and have been told I have to leave in 28 days, I have no idea where I am going to go.



Making Changes

When speaking to residents they made suggestions of things that could be improved at Saltbrook Place. We are pleased that staff have listened to this feedback and made progress.

Getting Information

"It would be good if there was a board that is updated so we know what is happening each day and always know where to look rather than having posters in different places that we might miss. It would also help new people who come here to settle."

There are now new boards in place detailing upcoming events.

Posters with information about upcoming events etc are up all around the scheme.

All 58 residents receive the same information by way of leaflet posted through their door.

The plan now is to obtain permission via Midland Heart to email all the customers with any information as some people prefer it that way.

Budgeting and Finance

"I would like help with how to budget. Most people here could do with this, there should be regular classes."

1-2-1 sessions are now available for people to help with budgeting and other things like using digital devices.

External organisations are being invited to provide information on managing money.



Mental Health Support

“Lots of people here struggle with their mental health. I think there is a substance group but there could be more help for people who are struggling with their emotions. Perhaps a group or one-to-one conversations, to help us think and talk things through. It’s really isolating sitting in our rooms, it makes your head spin.”

Aspire4U are now supporting residents with mental health support.

There is now a sensory room available for residents to go to relax and have some quiet time.

There is an open door policy and residents are welcome to speak to staff at any time.

Saltbrook Place will also be running a well-being workshop in February which will promote social engagement and healthier lifestyles.

Creativity

“Could there be a weekly session where we can come and make things and get creative? We don’t need a teacher, just some ideas and materials to get us going.”

There are budgeting issues with a lot of the creative projects residents suggest.

There are some resources available including: colouring books, reading books and board games (board game sessions are being planned).

“Doing crafts gets people out of their rooms and socialising - it also helps us work through our emotions.”

A drawing workshop is being considered to allow residents to express their feelings visually.



Cooking and Access to Healthy Food

“It would be good to learn how to cook, just where to start really with simple healthy meals. How do I know what is healthy and what isn’t? I would like someone to help me with that.”

Saltbrook Place have created a recipe sheet detailing some simple meals for customers to make. Three communal kitchens are available for residents to use. The kitchens have the equipment needed to cook healthy meals.

“Lots of food comes in from the food bank but we don’t know how it gets given out. I asked for food but would have preferred to have been offered it. Some people will not ask because they are too proud.”

Saltbrook Place receives some food donations, these are dropped off by reception and residents are free to help themselves.

Smaller food items are made into support packages for “No second night out” referrals. These are people who are street homeless and stay at Saltbrook Place for one night. The support package contains toiletries, noodles, snacks and drinks to see them through the night.

IT Access

“They want us to be responsible adults and have our independence but not having access to information makes it feel like you’re in prison – can’t they just block the sites they don’t want us to go on?”

Midland Heart have removed all of the computers and replaced them with laptops. Residents can request a laptop to use under staff supervision to explore opportunities relating to housing, financial support and job opportunities.



Physical Activity

“If we had a quick morning activity session where anyone could take part, it would help us to get moving and start the day in a positive mood. It wouldn’t have to cost anything, they could put a recorded workout on a screen, the staff could all join in too.”

There was an overhead projector in the lounge however, it was broken and has now been removed.

“We haven’t been able to use the gym for a long time, it’s full of boxes, it looks as though they might be sorting this. It would make a big difference as I would love to be able to do weights and use the benches.”

The gym re-opened at the end of 2023 so residents are now able to exercise.

Family Mediation

“I miss my family and I think I would be better if we were back in touch as they might stop me from losing my way again. It would be good for residents to get help with reconnecting with families. Also to have counselling to help me understand more about the decisions I make.”

Saltbrook Place are partnering with Lye Hub to provide some customer support. The needs of new residents are now discussed upon sign-up and referral to appropriate support made, including family support with people with children.



Employment Issues

“It costs £287 each week to live here. Before we moved in here my partner had a job, if you’re only picking up £300 a week how can you afford to pay that? We couldn’t find a place to live so it was easier to pack in the work.”

Some people feel trapped when they are on a low income and receive housing benefits and income support.

Customers are asked if they would like employment support on sign-up with the scheme.

“You can’t work and live here, that isn’t right when you are trying to get back on your feet and work is an important part of it.”

Gender Specific Support

“My support worker is a man. I’ve been through such a lot. I don’t feel comfortable telling him some of the things that have happened to me so I don’t talk about it. You should be asked if you want a man or a woman to help you.”

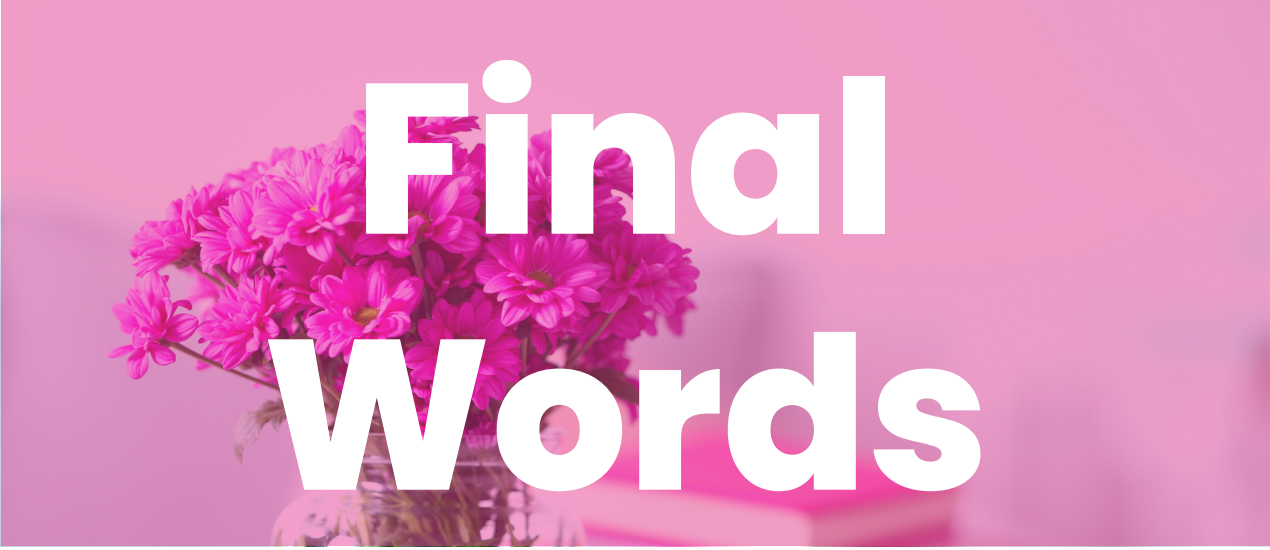
Midland Heart told us that customers can request whether they want male or female support.

Outdoor Activities

“I really like gardening and it’s great that there is lots of space here for a garden and allotment. Some of us have got the skills and can do it together with a bit of support.”

The greenhouse is still awaiting repair. Staff are planning some outdoor activities to make the most of the outside space.





Final Words

It was good to speak to residents and staff at Saltbrook Place. We are pleased that after our initial support, the breakfast club is still running and has continued to grow and improve.

Whilst steps have been taken to address the concerns of residents, there is still room for improvement, namely in the form of improving access to further opportunities.

We are grateful for the support we received from Dudley CVS, who helped fund the creative experiences. Thank you also to Erica Pearce from Black Country Integrated Care Board for listening to the needs of homeless and vulnerably housed people.

We are committed to hearing from seldom-heard voices and are keeping lines of communication open with Saltbrook Place to continue to hear from vulnerably housed and homeless people.

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