



# Co-operative Councils

## Innovation Network

### DOMESTIC ABUSE

### Stevenage Borough Council

## When “Stay Home” does not mean “Stay Safe” – Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse

No sooner was the national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic announced, than serious concerns were being raised by domestic abuse charities and campaigners about those trapped in unsafe homes with abusive partners or family members. The Government’s messages of “stay home” and “stay safe” did not match the lived experience of those suffering domestic abuse.

These concerns were echoed by Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) and a commitment was made by Members, managers and staff to ensure that, despite the necessary restrictions and adjustments required, the services it provided would continue to offer support and practical help.

Since the lockdown was imposed, SADA has seen a 90% increase in referrals compared to the previous period. In response, the team of staff at the council take turns on a rota to ensure support for clients and partners around the county can continue, staying in contact with all of their clients via weekly ‘drop-ins’ enabled by video and telephone calls. Maintaining a media profile has been essential to letting people know that support is still available, with social media campaigns launched alongside the police and the fire service, and interviews given by the Leader of the Council to the local media.

In recognition of the team’s efforts, £10k was donated from various local sources to ensure the service could continue to respond to the increasing demand. The amount of available accommodation that SADA is able to use has increased, including flats in the borough and a property nearby, normally available through Airbnb. In total, five new properties were secured, with three to be used as move on accommodation, enabling one vulnerable but ‘excited’ survivor to leave a refuge.

The notion of ‘Safe Spaces’ was central to SADA’s philosophy when it was launched, by the Leader of the Council, to bring a strategic and co-ordinated approach to tackling and

reducing domestic abuse in Stevenage. Working with partners and taking a co-operative council approach, the service co-produces outcomes with clients, aiming to positively improve the lives of those around them. This includes children, whose voices very often go unheard. By working in partnership with other agencies and those who have experienced domestic abuse, it can help tackle problems and find solutions. SADA is believed to have been the first such service in the country to offer families a 'Safe Space', provided by the council, to stay for up to seven nights whilst they make the life changing decisions about their future that are right for them.

One client helped during the lockdown wrote to the team to let them know how much she appreciated their support,

"thank you so much without you and your support I don't think I would have made it through all this so a huge thank you to you your amazing I have felt like I know exactly where I stand and I'm not the brightest star in the sky but you have made me feel like I understand things and know what I have needed to work towards so a massive thank you for everything "

Meanwhile the Refugee Council who worked with SADA on a case e-mailed to say,

"I am relieved that he has been moved out and I hope the family will be much safer now. It's awful that it came to something like this, involving the children, for action to be taken and I can't help but wonder how many times it has happened before now. The police have been brilliant, and we've worked with SADA before and they provide great support too, so I am hoping the family will have all the support they need.

SADA's strategy is structured under three broad and interconnected headings - safe and secure, protected and provide. Prevention is key, including campaigns, education and services that intervene early in the trajectory of abuse. But at whatever stage the team gets involved, the focus on protection and support is accompanied by interventions to break cycles of domestic abuse. Innovation is crucial to understanding what works in breaking the cycle and to developing and rolling out solutions.

Since its launch, SADA has gone from strength to strength. Regionally and nationally recognised, it has expanded its operation, operating as Survivors Against Domestic Abuse in neighbouring East Herts and North Herts and to Welwyn Hatfield Councils.

An essential element of SADA's make-up is the Domestic Abuse Forum, a group of survivors who have come together to develop and propose actions to improve local provision. An electronic 'resource pack' guides professionals through the referral process and a Survivor's Handbook gives details of support available and legal rights and pathways. All cases are discussed at the Stevenage/Survivors Against Domestic Abuse Panel, which is a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) for low risk and standard cases. A strategic Board is chaired by the Leader of the Council and this collaborative approach has developed a range of offers, including survivor's courses such as 'You and me, Mum', as well as interventions aimed at perpetrators.

New Government funding to help vulnerable children and victims of domestic violence and modern slavery during the lockdown, echoes the development of new services in Stevenage

to support victims and survivors who have or are experiencing modern slavery, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation. SADA continues to learn from experience and to develop new offers to meet identified gaps. The accent placed on prevention has seen an increase in cases referred for one-to-one support that were perceived as 'low-risk' to prevent future escalation. Bespoke support is provided for men, BAME and LGBTQ communities, whilst support is provided for all family members experiencing and witnessing domestic abuse, including children. As part of the same Community Safety team as the 'No More' service, the teams work closely together, recognising the relationship between alcohol and substance misuse, complex needs, and domestic abuse.

Stevenage's co-operative approach guides everything it does and the work of SADA was prioritised because, even during the lockdown, it has stuck firmly to its principles of: knowing the specific needs of the community; providing personalised and community based services; embedding an open, creative and reflective culture; and being a fair council that treats people equally and with respect.

The people who make up Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse have many and varied backgrounds, experiences, professional interests and lived experiences. Their extraordinary levels of dedication, passion, empathy energy and sheer humanity have helped to support those experiencing abuse before the lockdown, during it and will be still be in evidence afterwards to ensure that 'home' really does mean 'safe'.

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**For further information contact:**

Rob Gregory

Assistant Director for Communities & Neighbourhoods – Stevenage Borough Council

[Rob.gregory@stevenage.gov.uk](mailto:Rob.gregory@stevenage.gov.uk) | 01438 242568 | [www.stevenage.gov.uk](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk)