

“Wintercomfort – Sarah and Amanda in particular – were an absolute lifeline for me. They helped organise just about everything in the way of getting me off the street, clear of alcohol and into accommodation”

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Chief Executive's welcome



Welcome to the summer edition of the Wintercomfort newsletter.

Normally, I would write about the newsletter content here, but on this occasion I feel I must start by thanking everyone who has supported us during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic; we received a huge response to our Covid-19 Emergency Appeal. The money raised has enabled us to continue to support the homeless and

vulnerably housed during an extremely difficult time.

Second, I'd like to publicly thank our Wintercomfort staff team. They managed to continue working throughout lockdown and have gone above and beyond the call of duty, reminding me, yet again, that it is our team that makes Wintercomfort the amazing charity I am so proud to lead. You will read more on this in the newsletter.

We are still not sure when – or if – our services will return to their normal format, but I will bring you more news on that in our next edition. In the meantime, we have included a write-up of our kitchen team's work during the lockdown period, feeding more than 110 people a day at weekends.

I am pleased to share the news that our cleaning and gardening social enterprise Overstream Clean and Garden is beginning to operate again as lockdown measures continue to be relaxed. More information on that on page six.

We have launched a crowdfunding

campaign to help the operation get back on its feet and, perhaps more importantly, to provide investment to grow this proven enterprise's impact into the future, as we have ambitious plans to get more homeless and vulnerably housed individuals back to work. See page six to learn more and please visit our crowdfunder page if you feel you can offer support.

Finally, I hope you enjoy reading this edition. We are pleased to include Tom's story. He has overcome substantial barriers to move out of homelessness and we are all very pleased to see him doing so well.

Many thanks again for your continued support of the fantastic work of Wintercomfort here in Cambridge.

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'S Halls'.

Sarah Halls
Chief Executive



Meet Tom

When lockdown came, Tom had begun a rehab programme at a centre in Ipswich. It was forced to close, and Tom's treatment was cut short by three weeks, something that could have spelt disaster for someone trying to get on top of a debilitating alcohol problem.

Wintercomfort had helped to organise his place on the programme and once again their staff stepped in and he travelled to Emmaus in Waterbeach where he's been based ever since. After a spell of quarantine in his room, he was able to join a supportive community.

A year ago, Tom's 24/7 drinking meant that he was living on the streets in Cambridge city centre and unable to hold down a job. A previous attempt to come off alcohol on his own had failed.

"Wintercomfort – project workers Sarah Taylor and Amanda Staples in particular – were an absolute lifeline for me. They helped organise just about everything in the way of getting me off the street, clear of alcohol and into



accommodation at Emmaus" he says.

"All the little things they did in between, like ensuring I got myself to appointments, were of equal importance on my journey. Otherwise, I would likely still be scraping around the streets as an alcoholic."

Tom envisages being at Emmaus for about a year while he continues his recovery. "I'm looking forward to working in the bookshop and the cafe. I love the classics, especially Russian writers and the English novelists George Eliot and Thomas

Hardy. And poetry too, particularly Keats and Byron," he says.

Tom is enjoying walking and cycling in the countryside around Emmaus. A box of pastel crayons supplied by Wintercomfort means that he can enjoy drawing, which is one of his favourite pastimes.

He says: "I'm almost 40 and I knew it was time to change. My mind is now re-engaged with the incredible world around us in a sustainable and alcohol-free life."

Meet Sonia

Like thousands of others in Cambridge, Sonia stood at her window every Thursday for 10 weeks and applauded the NHS and key workers for stepping up to the mark at a time of national crisis. "I was also clapping for the staff and volunteers at Wintercomfort," she says, "They have been, and still are, absolutely amazing in the support they've given me."

When coronavirus arrived in the UK, and lockdown was imposed, Sonia was identified as falling into the vulnerable category; she uses crutches as the result of being hit by a truck in Australia several decades ago and has other health problems. Sonia has been coming to Wintercomfort for support for four years, after first becoming homeless in 2016.

"The fantastic thing about Wintercomfort is it offers so much. Not just hot food and a warm place to sit or have a shower, but also the chance to

form friendships and take part in creative activities. I've really benefited from the reading and writing groups there, and also the trips the staff organise to museums."

Since self-isolating to protect her health, Sonia has been in regular contact with staff at Wintercomfort, generally by text. "When you're living alone, that contact means a huge amount," she says, "I've had food deliveries and been given a substitute phone when I managed to drop mine in the loo. I've also been provided with a tablet that enables me to keep in touch with family in Australia."

Currently, Sonia is living in temporary accommodation in a hostel. "Cambridge housing service has been doing an amazing job in helping people find secure places to live. My room in the hostel is absolutely fine for now. I've got a room with an en suite but we share kitchen facilities. I'm looking forward to moving to a permanent flat once the health situation improves."

Books provide a solace, as do animals.

"I especially love horses," she says. "Before lockdown, a staff member at Wintercomfort gave me a brilliant book called *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse* by Charlie Mackesy. If you haven't read it, you really should."

Sonia is keen to remain as active as possible. "I've been taking daily walks on Jesus Green and chatting to lots of people – at a distance, of course," she says. "Wintercomfort has now lent me a camera so I can ask people's permission and take pictures for a photo diary. I've had some fascinating conversations."

Like us all, Sonia is longing for life to return to something more akin to normality. She says: "I miss seeing my mates for a cup of tea and being able to give someone a hug. In the end, it's simple things like that which really keep you going."

Words: Alex Buxton
Photo: Keith Heppell,
Cambridge Independent



Our doors may be closed, but the caring hasn't stopped

When the pandemic took hold of the country, Wintercomfort, like countless other organisations, had to reinvent itself. With its premises regularly hosting 60 or 70 people on a daily basis, social distancing was going to be impossible, so the charity made the difficult decision to close its doors to users for the first time since moving to Overstream House, the charity's base since 1994.

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to close its doors to users for the first time since moving to Overstream House, the charity's base since 1994.

But its work for some of the most vulnerable people in society didn't come to a halt. Far from it. Staff immediately set to and, after a series of meetings,

came up with a plan for how they could continue to offer users as many of the services provided by the centre as possible. Food was a priority.

In just a few days, the Wintercomfort kitchen was producing and delivering more than 100 freshly cooked hot meals to users newly based in four locations around the city. Initially, the Wintercomfort chefs, Liam and Gemma, conjured up meals at weekends only, with the Salvation Army covering week days. More recently, the pair has been producing hot meals on Fridays as well.

Liam has been working for Wintercomfort for seven years, after



...serving an apprenticeship in catering at a local hotel. “Catering has notoriously unsociable hours and the initial appeal of working at Wintercomfort was the nine-to-five nature of the job,” he says. “But soon, I came to realise that the real upside was the value of prepping food for the many people who rely on us.”

For Gemma, Wintercomfort was a part-time job that fitted in with her role as a freelance chef specialising in vegan dishes. “I flew all over the place cooking for celebrities, taking on projects such as producing food in portable kitchens for film crews. Last year, I worked in 18 countries,” she says.

“It might sound glamorous, but I don’t have any regrets saying goodbye to that kind of work and concentrating on producing tasty food for our

guys at Wintercomfort. They need all the nutrition we can give them. It’s immensely satisfying to be doing this job at the moment.”

Flexibility is key. “We rely a lot on ingredients donated by various organisations and groups,” says Gemma, “One day we might get a load of potatoes, the next day it might be tomatoes.

So, we have to think – yes, let’s do potato sagaloo or ok, we can do a cheesy pasta with a fresh tomato sauce.”

Meals are delivered by volunteers driving a mobile library bus. The design of the vehicle means that meals can be handed over across a desk positioned in the doorway, guaranteeing social distancing. Books are supplied by the bus as well as clothes and toiletries. Dirty laundry is picked up, taken to Overstream

“A lot of positives have come out of the present situation”

House for washing, and returned clean.

As well as hot meals, Wintercomfort supplies “pack ups”, which are essentially packed lunches with sandwiches, crisps and fruit, plus ingredients for breakfast and snacks.

Liam and Gemma say that the ways in which different agencies have pulled together in the present crisis is inspiring. “Ally, who drives the bus, is brilliant, as are the other volunteer drivers, Lee and Leonie. We also cook for formerly homeless people who are in council accommodation, and the city council’s director of housing often comes to deliver their meals,” says Gemma.

“There are a lot of positives that have come out of the present situation, as well as the obvious negatives. It’s shown us what’s possible, and that problems can be solved.”

**Words: Alex Buxton
Photos: Alex Lamb**

Overstream Clean & Garden – investing in the future



Our award-winning social enterprise Overstream Clean and Garden is back in full operation after the Covid-19 lockdown – and now we need your help to make it an even bigger success.

We've launched a £15,000 crowdfunding campaign in a bid to scale up the operation so we can win *more* contracts and *more* customers to help even *more* people overcome homelessness.

Our flagship social enterprise was founded in 2015 with the aim of providing employment and training for people wanting to work their way out of homelessness.

Five years on, it employs a team of 10 and generates more than 10 per cent of Wintercomfort's annual income – money that is redirected into our core services. It really works.

The Covid-19 pandemic stopped Overstream Clean and Garden in its tracks, leaving us facing substantial

losses. But we've responded fast to get the enterprise fully operational again as soon as possible and now we've got ambitious plans for expansion. And that's where you come in.

We realise money is tight for many at this difficult time, but if you can spare some cash, please visit our crowdfunding site – <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/overstreamclean> – for more information about how you can help us make a real difference to people's lives.

If you need a reminder about how people's futures have been transformed thanks to their involvement with Overstream Clean and Garden, we thought we'd share Colin and Alicia's stories with you again.

Alicia's story

It was something as simple as spotting a poster for Overstream Clean's training course that has helped Alicia – made homeless after fleeing an abusive relationship – to turn her life around and overcome her fear of men.

Alicia found herself in Cambridge three years ago with just a few personal items and where she initially 'sofa surfed' with friends. But the instability caused her stress and anxiety and, after a time, she was offered a place in a Cambridge refuge and was able to move into a 'move on' house 18 months ago.

While there, Alicia saw the poster advertising Overstream Clean's six-week training course. The course teaches cleaning to a professional level delivered by our in-house team. Although she wasn't completely ready for a return to work at that stage, she felt she needed to engage with something positive.

Having suffered years of abuse from her husband, Alicia was wary

at first and needed to make sure the course was safe and if there were other women taking part. She met Elliot, Overstream Clean's supervisor and trainer, who offered immediate reassurance and encouragement.

Alicia said: "I was really nervous and I had to channel my inner fear of men. The environment on the training course really helped me to move beyond this issue. Elliot was calm, encouraging and very supportive of me completing the course and, at the end, he offered me a paid role.

"My confidence has grown massively. I couldn't believe it when I was offered paid employment. My supervisor at Overstream Clean was really encouraging to all of us on the course. People are so judgemental about homelessness, but the reality is that it can happen to any of us – it's dangerous and horrible."

"I had been cleaning at Centre 33 – one of many customers we have and another brilliant charity supporting young people – but my journey really began here at Overstream House, helping me to overcome the fear that I had of new

places where there were men. I never dreamt that things would work out so positively."

Alicia has been working for Overstream Clean for two years and is currently living in 'move on' accommodation that supports women who are homeless and fleeing abusive relationships. Confidence growing, she is now doing a college course.

Without her role with Overstream Clean, she believes she would struggle to get back into employment.

"It's giving me purpose and an opportunity to contribute once again," she says. "I have not been trained in previous cleaning roles and this really makes me think that Overstream is better than our competitors because of the training. I have just completed my first aid training course, which is another opportunity offered by Wintercomfort."

Alicia now hopes to secure a full-time role working in cleaning, possibly in a hospital. Thanks to Wintercomfort, being part of a team has become important to her.

Colin's story

Colin's life was turned on its head after the breakdown of his marriage left him homeless. Wintercomfort was able to help him rebuild stability in his life and find hope for the future.

Nearly three years ago, after his relationship with his wife broke down, Colin had to leave his home and was faced with a prospect that seemed entirely alien: he was homeless.

Colin spoke frankly of the devastating effect this abrupt change in circumstances had on his life. "It hit me hard," he said. "I've always had stability in my life and that was all taken away from me. I just didn't know what to do."

Despite the overwhelming difficulty of his situation, Colin still considers himself "one of the lucky ones" as he was able to access housing support that allowed him to stay in a hostel, but that was all that prevented him from having to sleep on the streets. He dreads to think what the outcome might have been had that support not been there.

Colin was first introduced to Wintercomfort by a support worker at the hostel who recommended

volunteering as a way to keep himself busy while he was getting back on his feet. For Colin, it was a crucial step in his recovery.

"I've always had a strong work ethic. I've always worked to support my family. That's how I've always been. That's how I was brought up," Colin says proudly. "I need to keep my brain working, and volunteering gave me a sense of direction. I think it's important for a lot of people who go through difficult times to feel useful and a part of something."

Shortly after spending time helping out in the kitchen at Wintercomfort, Colin was offered a job with the then budding social enterprise Overstream Clean as a cleaning operative. He embraced the opportunity wholeheartedly, quickly becoming an integral part of the enterprise.

"I don't mind giving my all to Overstream Clean, as it has helped me so much. It really doesn't feel like work. I'm just giving back in the way that I can," he says earnestly, highlighting the dual roles that social enterprise plays. Not only do they give those in crisis that leg up into gainful employment and the opportunity to reintegrate into society, they also provide the means to be part of the continuation of the enterprise, allowing it to carry on being that lifeline for others in the future.

Colin is now living in his own flat, having navigated the council's social housing list and is working full time with Overstream Clean. "Thanks to Wintercomfort and the support I've been given here, the future's looking bright," he says. "It's just the last few pieces of the puzzle now. I've even begun studying with the Open University. But I know that, if I do have a bad day, there will always be support for me here, because I'm part of a team that cares for me. Knowing that keeps me on level ground to continue moving forward."

Words: Simon Pickering
Photo: Owen Warrell



Remember, to enable us to tell many more success stories like those of Colin and Alicia, we need a minimum of £15,000 to fund our ambitious plans. With your backing, we know we can do it!

Visit <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/overstreamclean>



Covid-19 Emergency Appeal 2020

A massive thanks to everyone who supported our Covid-19 Emergency Appeal in April. We were overwhelmed by the generosity of so many.

The appeal is still open and we'd welcome further donations. You can donate here: www.wintercomfort.org.uk/emergencyappeal

We are working towards reopening our centre in an adapted format from September 2020, adhering to Government guidelines.



30 for 30 – Cambridge Half Marathon 2021

Wintercomfort will mark 30 years next year. We're looking for 30 fundraisers to run the Cambridge Half Marathon to raise funds to support our work.

Places are free, but runners will need to commit to raising a minimum of £250.

To reserve your place, please email fundraising@wintercomfort.org.uk.



minutes
with...

Leon Blake

Leon joined Wintercomfort in July 2019 as Social Inclusion Project Worker. Leon supports our service users to participate in community life and rediscover their interests, supporting their recovery from homelessness

Tell us about your job at Wintercomfort?

My job title is Social Inclusion Project Worker. I interpret that as facilitating rough sleepers, who've been excluded from their community and society at large, to feel a sense of belonging and normalise healthier social behaviours so that, when they're able to move on into accommodation, 'regular' society doesn't seem quite so alien. Depending on the person, this can mean taking a trip to the cinema or the botanic garden and introducing them to the many activities that they may not have done for years. It always makes my day when I see someone's face light up as they start to remember an almost forgotten enthusiasm for a hobby or vocation. For me, it's a big part of my job to catch that spark and work with my colleagues and the person to build on it and get them back to where they want to be.

What did you do before?

Previous to working at Wintercomfort, I was volunteering for a charity that provides aid to migrants living in encampments in northern France. It was a challenging but rewarding environment and it really showed me what a group of

“Sometimes you're in a position to receive help and sometimes you're in a position to provide it”



dedicated people can achieve against the odds. It was also a very humbling experience. After seeing the struggle that the migrants went through just surviving day to day, it showed me, in rather stark relief, how lucky I am to have a family, friends and food in my belly.

What is your proudest achievement in life so far?

It's a pretty close run thing between getting my degree, being part of Wintercomfort and doing my bit, however small, for the relief effort in northern France.

How do you spend your free time?

I love skateboarding. That feeling when you just zone out and focus on getting the trick. There's nothing quite like it!

What is your favourite music?

I'm not sure if I have a favourite genre. It really depends what mood I'm in. I'll listen to anything, as long as I can tell it's been made with some soul. It makes for some bizarre playlists though. It's not often you see Future Sound of London rubbing shoulders with Beethoven piano sonatas.

Tell us something about you we don't know

I once broke every bone in my right hand.

What would you take with you on a desert island?

I would take a satellite radio. If I could flick through the world's radio stations, I don't think I'd ever get bored.

What is your philosophy for life?

Sometimes you're in a position to receive help and sometimes you're in a position to provide it. Always be open to both.

What is the best part of your job

Building relationships up with the clients and seeing their lives develop and change for the better. There aren't many jobs where you can actually have a positive impact on somebody's life.

What makes you want to work at Wintercomfort?

What gets me out of bed in the morning is the opportunity to work with people that I respect and who really care about the people they work with – and, that there's always something new to learn.