

KEEPING IT TOGETHER

David Gilliver hears about a Liverpool-based supported housing project providing intensive, round-the-clock support for families affected by substance use



DDN has spoken to countless people over the last few years that have made an impassioned case for more services to meet the needs of the families of drug users. Official policy acknowledges the crucial importance these services can have in determining the effectiveness of treatment, but – although things are undoubtedly improving – the situation on the ground often doesn't match the rhetoric. In Liverpool, however, a supported housing project is taking the concept to its logical extreme and providing accommodation and support for whole families affected by drug or alcohol problems.

It's estimated that there are around 1.5m adults in the UK caring for someone with a drug problem, and the Summergrove project was developed after extensive consultation with both commissioners and service users. 'Traditionally people have worked with children or parents – they don't tend to work with whole families,' says service manager Keri Tozer. 'After a lot of consultation the plan became to create supported accommodation for families. It's completely holistic – it looks not only at parents and children and the dynamics of that relationship, but the dynamic of the extended family as well. When people have been using substances and come out of that chaos, the relationship with their wider family is affected. Often their children are placed with the wider family, so it's about bringing that entire family dynamic back together.'

Opened in 2003, Summergrove is operated by Manchester-based social business the Big Life Centres. Funding comes from Liverpool PCT's integrated commissioning for addiction and offender health and Supporting People and the building – owned by Maritime Housing Association – is divided into 11 two-bedroom self-contained flats with 24-hour cover. The facility employs seven project workers and two night staff, alongside a part-time administrator, holistic therapist and in-house counsellor.

'It's a small team and we work a rolling rota,' says Tozer. 'We make sure there are always two people on hand 24/7 because of child protection issues and, when people's sleeping patterns are so disrupted, it's important there's someone they can come downstairs and have a chat with. There's no sharing of facilities, which means families can have their normal family life but have the support there when they need it. Because there are 11 families, people socialise together so it's also about learning to socialise drug-free. There are lots of activities for people to come together.'

The project offers intensive, coordinated support, with parenting and home management classes alongside a range of therapies and day programmes, and residents are also supported to find voluntary placements. People can self-refer or come via social services, treatment services across Liverpool or local women's prison HMP Styal, and referrals are welcome from single parents or couples. Although people can be using drugs at the point of referral, they must be drug-free on entry. 'They need to provide a negative sample, but when we assess people if we know there are still issues around substance misuse we can make Summergrove a part of their plan,' says Tozer. 'We'll refer them to detox and work with partner agencies to put together a support plan with Summergrove as the end of that road.'

Accommodation is offered on a 12-month assured shorthold tenancy basis and everyone signs a resident's contract on admittance. 'A 12-month tenancy is a big

commitment, but change doesn't happen overnight and it gives security to the family,' says Tozer. Summergrove also helps arrange move-on accommodation – within three months of a family moving in, staff are already looking into long-term plans for resettling in the community.

Testament to its success is the fact that the project been almost fully occupied for the last two years – residents aren't rigidly limited to 12 months however. 'We never say "your 12 months are up now, off you go"' she says. 'After 12 months of the client investing their time and us investing our time, why risk that recovery if there are things that haven't fallen into place yet?'

Drug-free for two years, Amanda has been at Summergrove for the past 18 months, after hearing about the project at a local NA meeting. Originally from Cheshire, she ended up in Liverpool via a bail hostel. 'I'd been in recovery before,' she says. 'It lasted six years but I had a massive relapse and was using again for six years. In that time my children had to go and live with my mum and dad. I got in a relationship and had another child but I was still using. I was under social services anyway but it got to the point where my house got raided, the dad got nicked and my son got placed in foster care.'

It was at this point that she discovered she was pregnant again. 'I was at a crossroads,' she says. 'It was either carry on and lose the children or start my recovery. I went from detox to a hostel to have my baby. My partner, the father, was still using. I explained this to someone at the NA meeting and they gave me the number for Summergrove. That was the turning point.'

Desperately worried about her child being put into care, she was convinced that she would be too far down the list to qualify for Summergrove in time. 'I was prioritised to stop my youngest child being taken into foster care,' she says. 'I was asked to come for a viewing of a flat and I moved in with my child. I've accessed everything available to me here, all the different courses and I've taken on the support from the key worker and the whole of the staff. The support is there any time you need it.'

After demonstrating she was consistently drug-free, social services changed the terms of contact to allow her three-year-old son to come to the flat, but the situation was still traumatic. 'They allowed me to have contact with him in my flat in Summergrove but obviously it's difficult having your child for a couple of hours and for him to have to go. I was finding it very difficult and so was he. The staff could see this and contacted my social worker on my behalf. My son was so distressed it was taking three people to put him in a car seat. Why should he have to go through that?'

Eventually he was allowed to move in with the family at the facility. 'I had to show I was serious about my recovery for my son to come here,' she says. 'Things just seemed to fall into place and it's gone from strength to strength. The staff have showed their commitment to me and my family because I've demonstrated my commitment to living here.'

Summergrove can take children of any age up to 16 but is best suited to those up to about 14, says Tozer. 'The older ones tend to struggle a bit with the curfew, and there are also issues of not wanting to bring friends back because of the stigma – we're not walking around with name badges on and it's quite an informal



atmosphere but they still have to explain where they're living.'

Being at Summergrove has also meant many children being taken off the child protection register, as well as children being returned to their parents from local authority care or the care of other family members. 'It's about building the family back up,' says Tozer. 'Children's services are happy to place families with us because they get the feedback, they get the negative drug tests – we're overseeing, monitoring parenting skills, putting things in place. The vast majority of children who come here are subject to a child protection plan but, providing the parents are abstinent and working towards a long-term recovery, that will be removed.'

While there's no funding for outreach – something Summergrove would very much like to secure – staff will stay in touch with clients after they've moved on. 'It's a way of lessening the impact of the move after 12 months of living in the project and relationships being built,' she continues. 'Once a week a key worker will go out for a cup of tea and a chat and to make any final adjustments for the support plan, but we also put in place long-term support through partner agencies.'

Partnership working is crucial to the project and ensures continuity of care when clients move out. 'We rely on our partner agencies,' she says. 'We're not a treatment centre in that we don't do group work – we have an in-house counsellor and holistic therapist, but the bottom line is about our partner agencies putting in that support. Clients can then take that package of support into the community with them. It's not like rehab, where the treatment stops.'

Tozer believes it's crucial that more places like Summergrove are established across the country, particularly for the growing number of people with alcohol problems. 'More supported accommodation for families is definitely needed, along with longer-term investment,' she says. 'I think there needs to be a single stream of funding for families – we get caught up in funding for adults and funding for children but it needs to be one single stream. At the moment Summergrove's funded for adults so we've had to put in for grants to do work with children – we've been really lucky that Sure Start have funded some of our activities but we're not guaranteed that. If we don't support children who've been through so much with parental substance misuse then we're looking at the next generation of problematic substance misusers.'

Meanwhile Amanda is now mentoring for a local drugs organisation as well as doing voluntary work for the NSPCC. Where would she be if she hadn't come to Summergrove? 'I don't know,' she says. 'But it wouldn't be a good place.'

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