

Evaluation of Cowan Grove Mother and Child Recovery House – Summary

A Report for Aberlour Children’s Charity



Social Research



Service Design & Innovation



Strategy & Collaboration



Evaluation Support



Social Impact Measurement

July 2024



Overview

This section of the report introduces Aberlour Children’s Charity and the Cowan Grove Mother and Child Recovery House and describes the scope and method of the research.

Aberlour

The Aberlour Children’s Charity (Aberlour) was established in 1875 as an orphanage. Over the years Aberlour has grown into a leading care organisation in Scotland, delivering a range of services, including residential care, fostering services, addiction services, Early Years support, disability support, early intervention services and emergency financial relief.

The Cowan Grove Mother and Child Recovery House

Aberlour received a grant of £5.5 million from the Scottish Government over this parliamentary term to set up two Mother and Child Recovery Houses – one in Dundee and one in Falkirk.

These houses provide residential placements for mothers affected by problematic alcohol and drug use and their children. The Falkirk service is due to open its doors to referrals in Summer 2024. The Dundee service, Cowan Grove, started accepting referrals in December 2022, and is now in its second year of operation.

The aim of the service is to stabilise or abstain drug and alcohol use, prevent drug deaths, avoid children being taken into care and keep families together. The service has the capacity for up to four women and their children up to the age of five.

Mothers are typically referred by their social workers, although some independently research the service, and

request social work make a referral on their behalf.

Mothers are invited to participate in a programme of activities based on their personal needs and Recovery Plan. Below is an overview of the programme of activities:

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- PuP (Parents under Pressure): for parents facing multiple challenges that impact on family functioning.
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- Solihull Parenting Programme: focusing on the emotional health and wellbeing of parents.
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- Freedom Programme: for survivors of domestic abuse to make sense of their experiences.
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- SMART Recovery: provides training and tools to self-manage problematic behaviours.
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- Sleep Hygiene
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- Counselling
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- Financial Aid/Resource
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- Life Skills
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- Employability Skills
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- Active Lifestyle Activities
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- Recreational Activities
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- Mindfulness Activities, and
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- Play and Child Sessions.
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After the residential placement, women are offered outreach support when they return to the community.

Research Objectives

The overall aim of the evaluation was to better understand the impact of the service delivery model.

The detailed objectives of the study were to:

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- evidence the impact of Cowan Grove on women and their children and the wider service landscape.
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- capture the views of the women that have had a placement and staff members working in the house.
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- assess the effectivity of the various programmes delivered to the women through the service.
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- assess the referral process and explore how to increase referrals.
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- extract key messages and lessons learned to inform the roll out of the service to Falkirk and beyond.
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Scope

This evaluation covered the Cowan Grove Mother and Child Recovery House ('the house') from its opening at the start of December 2022 until the end of March 2024 (17 months).

Our Research Methodology

For this study, a mixed method approach was applied encompassing the following elements:

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- Desk research and review of service data held by Aberlour.
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- Semi-structured interviews with 3 Mothers in residence.
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- Semi-structured interviews with 2 Mothers receiving Outreach Support.
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- Semi-structured Interviews with 15 referral partners.
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- Semi-structured Interviews with 6 key stakeholders.
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- Semi-structured interviews with 5 Cowan Grove support staff.
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Interviews with stakeholders were conducted through videoconferencing platforms. Interviews with mothers took place both over the phone and in person at the Cowan Grove house. Interviews were semi-structured and based on pre-defined topics.

The following is a summary of the evaluation findings and recommendations, presented for ease of reference. In-depth information on the outputs and impact of the service, and views on service delivery, can be found in the accompanying full report.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section summarises the key findings from the study and makes some recommendations for the future.

Conclusions

From the research the following conclusions can be drawn:

Strategic Fit

1. The Cowan Grove Service is well aligned with key national policy priorities. The service is in step with the Scottish Government's national mission to reduce drug deaths, both in its aims to provide improved support for families affected by substance use, and its offer of a residential rehabilitation service. In addition, the trauma informed, person-centred approach taken by Cowan Grove is precisely the kind envisioned by the national framework for improving holistic support for families affected by drugs and alcohol.
2. Cowan Grove is contributing towards the commitments set out in the Promise through the provision of additional opportunities to keep families together for as long as possible.
3. The Cowan Grove offer is filling a gap in the service landscape. Traditionally there have been few services focused on supporting mothers with addictions to keep their children and limited opportunities for mothers and children to stay together during the recovery process. Cowan Grove's ability to package multiple interventions and supports is also different to what is commonly

available in community-based services.

Impact

Impact on Mothers and Children

4. Cowan Grove enables mothers to develop their parenting capacity. This was evident in mothers improved parenting skills, household skills motivation to be better parents.
5. The safe, nurturing environment and the interventions provided by the service supports mothers to develop stronger attachment to their children. Parents have gained a greater awareness of the importance of bonding and how to grow these bonds with their children.
6. Mothers have improved their understanding of trauma, becoming more attuned at recognising past trauma in their own lives and their own personal triggers. The service has also enabled mothers to contextualise this trauma in relation to their addictions and their relationship to their children.
7. Cowan Grove has had a positive impact on the mental health of mothers admitted to the service. Mothers reported better general mental health because of the positive environment in the house, from developing techniques for emotional self-regulation or from stabilising/reducing their drug use. Better mental health was also reflected in mothers' improved

confidence and self-esteem, as well as increased aspirations and optimism for the future.

8. Mothers also saw improvements in their physical health, developing healthier diets and lifestyles while in the house – as well as the obvious physical benefits of reducing substance use.
9. Mothers form positive relationships because of the service. With Cowan Grove staff, mothers have developed a high level of trust and staff have provided a caring presence often lacking in mothers' lives outside of the house. While in the house, mothers also typically draw a significant amount of support from each other.
10. The trusting relationships built between mothers and Cowan Grove staff pave the way for improved relationships between mothers and other services. While it may not always be possible to completely overcome long-standing animosity held by mothers towards statutory services, Cowan Grove has had success in improving the contact and communication between mothers and other professionals. This in turn has improved mothers' access to key services and support.
11. The service is playing a role in keeping children out of care. Had Cowan Grove not been an option, based on mothers' situation and history, there was agreement that most (if not all) of these children would have been accommodated. Some children have entered the care system, but currently half of the children that came through Cowan Grove are still living with their mother in the community. In either case, their time at Cowan Grove has allowed

families to stay together for as long as possible.

Impact on Society

12. Health and wellbeing and other outcomes are of value to society, but the significant benefit is that babies who otherwise would be taken into care, Kinship or Foster care can stay with their mothers are a significant cost saving to society.
13. The service has delivered a cost saving for The Scottish Government of at least £221,000 in avoiding care cost for the 10 mothers they have worked with over the first year.
14. The Present Value (the value of the total sum at this moment in 2024) is £4,524,916. With input costs, for the period of the mothers' involvement, of £425,793 this means that in total for every £1 invested in the Cowan Grove project a future estimated value of £10.62 is created.

Approach

15. Though it can be intimidating for some, and an adjustment for mothers coming into the house, the intensive nature of the service is a key aspect of Cowan Grove's success. Cowan Grove staff can devote time and resources to working with mothers that would not be available to most other services (particularly community-based services) and this is an enabler of achieving positive outcomes for service users.
16. The residential setting of the service provides benefits in taking mothers out of harmful, chaotic or abusive home environments which can be counterproductive to recovery. Living in house also creates greater access to services and greater ease in

navigating this support than might be possible out in the community.

17. There is scope to refine the process of transitioning mothers back into the community and the support they receive through the outreach service. Aside from common concerns around sustained recovery in residential services in general, there was recognition that some mothers transition back to the community was not managed as effectively as it might have been. It was also suggested that the geographical spread of mothers, limited staff time, and a lack of control over uptake was limiting the ability of the outreach service to make more of an impact.
18. Several additional elements of Cowan Grove's approach to working with mothers were identified as being key to its success. Commonly cited was the service's commitment to being person centred and trauma informed, the nurturing environment created in the house, the relational approach taken, and the flexibility the service has demonstrated (both in a broad sense and in working around mothers' needs day-to-day).
19. The comprehensive package of interventions delivered enables Cowan Grove to address the full range of issues that mothers may be facing and achieve a good balance between working on areas of concern and supporting mothers' general wellbeing.
20. The Parents Under Pressure programme has been a particularly successful intervention which has been eye-opening for mothers, allowing them to improve their understanding of trauma, reflect on this, and improve their attachment to their children.

Service Delivery

21. The Cowan Grove staff team is functioning well. There are no issues around communication, with staff and management open to suggestions and constructive discussions. Staff workloads are manageable, and the recent addition of staff development days has aided planning capacity. There is a good mix of skills and experience within the team.
22. Cowan Grove staff have established positive relationships with potential referral partners and key stakeholders. They have also provided a useful intermediary role between mothers and other services.
23. The referral process is working well, and partners value the level of information, the clear communication, and the efficiency of Cowan Grove staff in responding to queries. It is understood that the service will not be the right fit for all mothers, and that this will not always be apparent until they enter the house. However, service data and feedback collected indicates that the service is working with the right mothers – those that are 'high tariff' and those that have not had success in working with other support service available to them.
24. Initially the service was not fully understood by all stakeholders in terms of what its offer was, how it is run, or what it can achieve. However, managing these expectations has not posed a significant issue and understanding has generally improved over time. There may be scope to improve wider understanding of the recovery process and all services' role in this.

Key Lessons

25. In addition to those described above, staff and stakeholders reflected on

crucial elements to the success of Cowan Grove so far and potential areas for future development. They identified key lessons to inform the ongoing delivery of Cowan Grove and the roll-out of similar services in other areas. These were:

- i. Retain the broad range of interventions.
 - ii. Be positive and build on strengths.
 - iii. The house should always feel like a home.
 - iv. Staff presence at the right times is important for keeping the house secure and harmonious.
 - v. Schedule time for planning activities.
4. Aberlour should review the outreach service provided by Cowan Grove to assess whether the current approach (particularly how it is staffed) is the most effective.
 5. Consideration should be given managing the mix of women in the service through robust risk assessment. Impact assessments should be completed for all residents prior to entering the house.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, we make the following recommendations:

1. While Cowan Grove is achieving positive outcomes for mothers and babies, Aberlour should consider how it might add further value to the service.
2. Aberlour must work with Local Authorities to gain additional funding beyond 2026, but also with The Scottish Government to continue the funding beyond 2026 as, like recovery, this is a process that will take long-term funding.
3. Aberlour should explore further opportunities to grow broader understanding of the recovery process among partners and communities. As well as improving the quality of aftercare and support provided to mothers upon leaving the house, this would also assist in alleviating misconceptions about Cowan Grove's role in the recovery process.

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