

Aberlour Evidence to Scottish Parliament Cross-Committee on Tackling Drugs Deaths and Drug Harm

March 2023

About Aberlour

Aberlour is Scotland's largest, solely Scottish children's charity. We work with vulnerable, marginalised and discriminated against children, young people and families throughout Scotland, providing services and support in communities around the country. We help to overcome significant challenges including the impact of drugs and alcohol on family life, growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, living with a disability, or the impact of poverty and disadvantage. We aim to provide help and support at the earliest opportunity to prevent problems becoming intractable or spiralling out of control. We are committed to #KeepThePromise and to the incorporation of the UNCRC.

Introduction

Scotland has the highest rate of drug related deaths in Europe, with most recent statistics showing the number of drug related deaths of women has risen¹. Women with substance use issues are at significant risk in the perinatal period, including as a result of suicide. Too many women experiencing substance use issues are having their children taken into care. Many will not approach or engage with support agencies due to the fear of their children being removed.

The Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths report evidenced that women with substance use issues are at significant risk in the perinatal period, including suicide and physical health complications. The report stated that for a significant proportion of these women who die in the perinatal period: *'their deaths are closely associated with child protection proceedings or the removal of a child into care'*.²

Through our work we see the impact of problem drug use on families every day and recognise that for too many families the support available does not meet their needs. We believe that the provision of rehabilitation and recovery services for mothers and their children which allows families to remain together is essential to further prevent drug related deaths of mothers during and after the perinatal period.

¹ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/drug-related-deaths/21/drug-related-deaths-21-report.pdf>

² <https://www.npeu.ox.ac.uk/assets/downloads/mbrance-uk/reports/MBRRACE-UK%20Maternal%20Report%202019%20-%20WEB%20VERSION.pdf>

Until 2015, and prior to the national mission to reduce drugs deaths in Scotland, Aberlour delivered a residential rehabilitation and recovery service for mothers and their children living in Glasgow. The service closed in 2015 due to a lack of funding. However, we have seen drugs deaths rise significantly across Scotland since then, including in Glasgow. Our knowledge and experience of delivering such a service has given us clear insight and evidence that such services work and are needed and that they must be part of the framework of treatment and recovery services for women and their families living with addiction across Scotland.

In a recent study published for the National Library of Medicine – ‘Why are drug-related deaths among women increasing in Scotland? A mixed-methods analysis of possible explanations’ (Tweed et al, 2022)³ – it was concluded that: *‘Policy responses to rising drug-related death rates require a gender-informed approach, recognising the commonalities and differences between men and women who use drugs; the diversity of experiences within each gender; and the intersections between gender and other forms of inequality, such as poverty.’*

It is clear that residential rehabilitation and recovery services for women and their children can play a vital role in our drive to tackle drug related deaths in Scotland and in addressing the rising number of deaths of women. Such services can also help Scotland to **#KeepThePromise** for families living with addiction by enabling families to stay together during treatment and recovery and reduce the likelihood of children being taken into care.

Supporting Families Living with Addiction

At Aberlour we see the impact of drugs and alcohol on children and families every day. Working in communities around the country we support families affected by substance use and living with addiction. We deliver a range of trauma-informed services across 26 Scottish local authorities providing both early intervention and intensive whole family support services. Substance use, alcohol and drugs are common issues in the lives of families we work with across our family support services.

We see the impact of drugs and alcohol on children, young people and families we work with across our family support services, and in the communities where we work. For children growing up in poverty and experiencing disadvantage too often drugs, alcohol and substance use are common issues they encounter affecting them and their families. We know that where there are higher levels of poverty and disadvantage these issues are more prevalent, and we see the evidence of this through our work in areas of multiple deprivation such as in parts of Glasgow and Dundee. The devastating impact of drugs and alcohol on families is also a common factor in the lives of children who can no longer live at home with their families and who live with Aberlour in our residential children’s houses.

We deliver two dedicated community based family support services for families affected by substance use and addiction – one in Dundee and one in Dumfries and Galloway. These services

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7612287/>

work with families who are struggling to cope as a result of drugs and substance use in the family. We work with whole families by supporting parents directly as well as children on their own, from birth onwards. Our family workers support children with emotional and practical help at home and at school, as well as working with parents to build confidence and parenting skills, establish routines and to access wider community networks and support. We deliver group work activities for the whole family and peer group activities for multiple families. We also work with parents at home to help them create a safe environment for their children.

Aberlour – Cowan Grove

Cowan Grove is a residential rehabilitation and recovery house located in Dundee for women and their children aged up to five years old. It was established as a national service and is funded by the Scottish Government. The service also looks to target local need around disproportionate drug deaths in Dundee. It has a capacity of four women with up to two children each. The aim of the service is to support mothers to stabilise their drug and alcohol use, prevent drug deaths of the women accessing the service, avoid children being taken into care and to keep families together.

Cowan Grove opened its doors on December 5th 2022 and welcomed two women the same week. The service currently has three women and three children residing at Cowan Grove. There are ongoing referrals from local authorities across Scotland to access the service. The service is gender specific to respond to the specific issues women living with addiction who are mothers face when seeking treatment and to enable and empower women to have choice in what services they can access.

The program on offer at Cowan Grove follows a holistic approach to recovery that includes support with life skills, parenting, emotional wellbeing and therapeutic input through the Parent Under Pressure Program. This includes wraparound nurture and safety within the first twelve weeks of the program through enabling women to build trusting and positive relationships before entering into positive risk taking and strategies for future community recovery management.

The development of the service at Cowan Grove aims to embed best practice and is consistent with the Medication Assessment Treatment (MAT) standards. The support that women receive is personalised and informed by the women directly enabling informed choices about how they are supported. The house has been designed to ensure it is a nurturing space and psychologically informed environment, and the focus is on community based support including prescribing through our GP practice partner.

However, it is important to highlight that referrals into our service appear to be a last resort when other options have been tired or exhausted. The option for residential rehabilitation must be recognised as a choice and an offer for women much earlier in their care planning.

We have provided a case study of a mother supported at Cowan Grove as part of our submission. We would also like to offer members on the Cross-Committee the opportunity to visit Cowan Grove and to meet and hear from the women supported by the service.

Intensive Perinatal Support Service

We know that substance using pregnant women and their babies face a multitude of health and social problems. Neonatal and obstetric outcomes are poorer amongst pregnant women with problematic substance use and the effects during pregnancy is well documented (e.g. ectopic pregnancy, placental insufficiency; reduced foetal growth; preterm delivery; Foetal Alcohol Syndrome; and Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome).

The child's experience in utero and during the early years can have a life-long impact, including learning difficulties, behavioural and mental health problems. These impacts can lead to the need for costly intensive resources at a later stage in children's lives. Children taken into care typically experience poorer outcomes than children in the general population.

Aberlour's Intensive Perinatal Support Service based in Falkirk provides support to pregnant women and new mothers who are affected by substance use and who have a baby under 12 months of age. The service was established in April 2021 and is delivered in partnership with statutory and community partners and through co-production with women. The primary aim is to maximise opportunities for new babies to remain safely in the care of their mother through facilitating recovery from problematic substance use and developing and enhancing parenting capacities.

The service provides family focused, relational support which encourages engagement in care planning and co-production of care/support, highlighting parent strengths and enabling disclosure of challenges that parents face. Working in partnership with other agencies helps to facilitate optimum outcomes for parents and families and for developing shared and consistent trauma informed practice.

The women who are supported by the service are at high risk of having their children taken into care prior to referral. In the last two years 21 women have been supported by the service and of those 17 have kept their babies in their care. The majority of women were referred into the service during pregnancy. This offers a longer period for building relationships, receiving support and maximising opportunities for babies to remain safely in the care of their mothers, through facilitating recovery from problematic substance use and developing parenting capacity and confidence. This illustrates that the earlier women receive support the better the outcomes for them and their babies.

Key Existing Challenges in Delivering Drugs Deaths Taskforce Recommendations

- We remain concerned regarding the continuing lack of holistic family support approaches and the disconnection within and between services at a local level resulting in a lack of early intervention and systems that struggle to take a strength focussed, practice led approach – we cannot say that we are Keeping The Promise for too many children and families affected by alcohol, drugs and substance use.

- There is a clear gap in the availability of support for parents whose children are removed from their care. This is particularly acute during the perinatal period where services withdraw if the baby is 'safely placed', leaving parents with little or no support at a time when the risk of relapse, overdose and maternal suicide are heightened.
- From our experience there continues to be ongoing challenges around referrals and decision making within authorities regarding residential rehabilitation and recovery.
- Referrals to our Cowan Grove service still appear a last resort rather than as an early referral – the majority of enquiries so far have been for women who have already had children removed permanently from their care.
- We have had significant challenges in developing partnerships locally with key ADP partners to help us identify a prescribing partner. There is a drive for more GP's delivering community-based prescribing, however this does not appear to be having much traction in some areas where we work.
- Addictions services across the country are significantly under pressure and ADP budgets are insufficient to meet the demand for support for those affected by addiction – more funding is required across addictions services.
- We know through our partnerships that drug rehabilitation referrals are often time limited (12 weeks) due to funding challenges.

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