

Scotland's Family Services Unit lightens the load

Gentle intervention and support can be the only way to get drug using parents to accept help. DDN talks to Grant Sugden about reaching families in need.

Offering practical support in an informal style is our way of gaining the trust of families struggling with a drug or alcohol problem, says Grant Sugden of the Family Services Unit in Scotland.

The FSU has been active in Scotland for more than 30 years and has rooted projects in some of the most challenging areas, to seek out marginalised children and families. Last year, the Harbour Project in Edinburgh and the Hearth Project in West Lothian, were established specifically to support children and families affected by drug and alcohol use.

The unit's 'softly softly' approach involves working with a whole range of other services. Referrals might come from social work, housing, health visitors, drug services or education, and the FSU links back into these services to make sure the family has ongoing support, matching their needs with local expertise.

From the outset of making contact, the FSU takes a 'whole family approach', explains Sugden, who joined with a background in children family social work. This means looking at the whole spectrum of needs, from the day-to-day practical considerations, such as helping mums with timekeeping, to coaxing a child with a drug-using parent to share their anxieties and build their self-esteem.

'A lot of our work is helping parents to make changes to their own lifestyles, helping them with parenting skills,' says Sugden. 'We find a lot of parents we're working with are not able to organise their lives enough to even get their children up in the morning for school.'

Domestic chaos is a familiar companion to drug use, and Sugden and his colleagues draw up achievable goals to try and instill a sense of routine and responsibility.

'We draw up a work plan with the parents that identifies very clear and specific goals,' he explains. 'We outline what our responsibilities are to them – and what we expect them to do as well. Research shows that's the best way to work with parents who have got problems.'

Such simple but structured intervention can make a huge difference to cases like the mum with a long-term heroin problem, who was on a methadone script but began buying extra on the streets. When her child was referred to FSU he was in his first year at primary school, but much of the time she was unable to get him up in the morning.

'So one of the first bits of work was to help her to get up in the morning, so that her son's school

attendance would improve. We discussed with her what you do the night before, have you got an alarm clock, those kinds of things. And then we went in each morning and actually helped her to get into a routine,' – gentle support at the beginning, says Sugden, which might turn into visits three or four times a week, until over time she

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learns to manage. The support might need to be intensive at certain stages, but it's a case of being responsive – stepping up when beckoned and retreating when self-sufficiency catches on.

FSU doesn't deal with the parents' addiction directly, but the support and encouragement often takes them a step closer to drug and alcohol services. 'Putting in a link is something we've been pretty successful at,' says Sugden. 'We make sure everyone knows what everyone else is doing, and that services are co-ordinated.'

Being a voluntary organisation can make a bond of trust easier to establish, Sugden has found. The fear that often lingers around social services' power to take their children away can often make a dialogue more difficult. The FSU takes time to look at the parents' strengths as well as their support needs, giving them confidence to ask for help

where they need it. They are sensitive in approaching parents who often deny their children have noticed their drug use.

'They'll say their child's not affected by my drug use,' says Sugden. 'We'll have to work on the issue – "well I think your wee girl might know more about this than you think she does... let us work with you to look at how we can improve things a bit".'

The bond of trust is equally essential in dealing with their children, addressing the fear and isolation they often feel. From the network of FSU projects, such as the Harbour Project in Edinburgh and the Hearth Project in West Lothian, have sprung support groups that encourage children to share their experiences of living with a parent with a drug problem from the 'safe base' of an environment containing others in the same situation. 'They realise they are not the only one,' says Sugden.

Building a positive school experience for these children is another important mission. The FSU works closely with school staff and does individual work with each child to help them deal with any difficulties they are having at school or in the community.

FSU team meetings often provide additional inspiration. Qualified in health, education or social work, the current team comes from a range of backgrounds – a range that can really help in dealing with a client group that is traditionally difficult to engage with. 'Having the different approaches to draw on has been really helpful in allowing us to be a bit more imaginative,' Sugden explains. Discussing cases and sharing experiences can offer up new ways of linking services and engaging clients – and it certainly seems to be working. Last year the Harbour Project engaged with 90 per cent of referrals, and the team is proud of their high take-up rate.

'I think we achieve that by being very flexible,' says Sugden. 'We won't just visit a family once, we'll keep trying until we can get someone in. We'll do what feels most comfortable, we'll speak to the professional that's referred the case and look at how we can be as successful as possible for the family.'

With that level of commitment, it's not surprising that parents in a chaotic and stressful situation decide to accept the offer of some helping hands.

A directory of FSU services is at www.fsu.org.uk. Visit the FSU Scotland section for more on the Harbour and Hearth Projects. DDN