

Room to live

It has given Steven a vital breathing space in his bid to shake off his homeless and drug-using past. He calls it home. **Esther Sample** reports on an innovative new housing scheme in Nottinghamshire that offers an alternative to people looking for a way out.

“It still feels new to me,” says Steven Hayes, of the smart flat he has called home since moving in four months ago. “I’ve got somewhere to be – it’s my own place and I don’t have to be sneaking about and begging people to stay on couches,” says Steven. “I am happy just staying in and watching telly. It’s very warm – some days too warm! It is a lovely place as you can see. I’ve been really lucky.”

After spending three years in prison for dealing, which funded his own addiction, Steven came out of jail off heroin and on methadone. He spent three years sleeping on the streets, in sheds and on people’s floors in his hometown of Sutton-in-Ashfield, one of many economically deprived former mining communities in Nottinghamshire.

“When I stayed with friends, because I wasn’t dealing, wasn’t doing drugs, I couldn’t give them anything and they would get sick of me. It is a horrible situation not having anywhere,” remembers Steven. He says he could have been someone that was “in and out of jail just to be warm and get three meals a day”. But didn’t re-offend because of his own determination and “I had my Dad there, pushing me through”.

Throughout this period of homelessness, Steven was receiving his methadone script through a direct

access treatment service. Last November, his drugs worker Michelle told him about a new housing project that might offer him a place.

“Within three weeks I got this place,” says Steven, in his 30s. He now has a high quality self-contained flat down the road from his family, is abstinent from illegal drugs and is reducing his methadone script: “I do not use on top of my script because I feel mentally strong enough to say no to people who recognise me and offer me drugs. And if I have a really bad day, I can go out and see my dad.”

Solutions is a cross-authority network of high quality, self-contained, supported flats and houses for recovering, adult substance users in Nottinghamshire. The scheme offers an alternative route off the streets to the usual option of a hostel – many of which contain a high proportion of drug users. Applicants can decide for themselves whether they would rather live in their home area or away from past acquaintances.

Steven decided he needed to live within arms reach of his family, but at a distance from those involved in drugs. “Being on my own is better for me. I don’t get talked into anything,” says Steven, who says he has discovered this from experience of prison and homelessness.

With a more settled lifestyle, Steven

now sees his family regularly. He has a girlfriend, who has never been involved in drugs, with a young child. When he is with them he says he doesn’t “talk or think about using drugs”.

Peter Radage, Service Director at Framework, the housing association which runs the Solutions scheme, says the fact the flats are high quality and self-contained helps residents to feel more confident, comfortable and able to re-integrate into society.

Unlike the often basic and sometimes squalid temporary accommodation provided for people in the UK, the Solutions flats are clean and modern from the start. This, says Radage, gives residents more pride in where they live and an awareness that they have something to lose if they go back to drugs and crime.

The unique set up allows residents to avoid the influence of other drug users, have their own space and socialise with friends and family on their own terms. In hostels or shared housing, if one client relapses, often they are evicted, or they can influence other residents to relapse with them. Radage suggests that the Solutions model works because “with self-contained accommodation you can tailor your response to relapse much more sensitively”.

Although some clients, like Steven, opt to just see family and friends, others



Home sweet home: Steven in his fully kitted-out kitchen at his flat in Sutton-in-Ashfield

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choose to form friendships with other residents. There are regular residents' meetings for those who are interested in getting involved.

"This is not residential rehab or a drug-free community," says Radage. "I do not buy into the idea of drug-free communities. Our tenants could walk out their front door and make a decision to use drugs or not. I don't think it is right to develop an artificial construct, because ultimately people are going to have to live in their community."

The scheme has been set up over the last two years by Nottinghamshire DAAT and a partnership involving the PCT, Supporting People Team, Regional NTA and local housing and support provider Framework. In 2006, the DAAT

successfully bid for a Department of Health grant of £600,000 to fund 24 units of supported accommodation and in 2007-08 the project secured an additional £210,000 from the Homes and Communities Agency (formerly the Housing Corporation) to fund the development of a further seven units.

An external evaluation of the scheme, carried out by Perpetuity Research and seen by *Druglink*, is due to be published later this month. It concluded: "There is evidence from this small scale evaluation to demonstrate that the scheme is having a positive impact on the lives of recovering drug and alcohol users.

"Although the numbers in the evaluation are too few to quantify the impact on residents, clearly the scheme has provided residents with good quality, stable accommodation. Residents have regained contact with loved ones, re-established relationships with children and accessed education, training and employment opportunities."

The evaluation found that a possible downside of the Solutions model was that there is no way of enforcing tenants' engagement with treatment. Instead, the scheme relies heavily on 'assessment processes' to ensure that applicants are addressing their substance misuse.

In hostels, managers have the power to add a clause into an individual's licence that they will address their drug use. Legally this clause cannot be built into a tenancy agreement. If a client does relapse, then support workers and drugs workers would provide increased support to help residents get back on track. If this is unsuccessful, and the illegal drug use is causing behaviour that contradicts their tenancy agreement, then a process would begin to move the resident into other accommodation, such as a nearby hostel. But Nottinghamshire DAAT project manager Paul Pearson admitted that they would be "undermining one of the main purposes of the scheme if we were turfing people out to homelessness".

Although tenants can only stay in their flats for up to two years, Framework provides support to find next-step housing and also have a floating support service that clients can access if required. And the outlook is good for Steven. Of the people who have moved out of the Solutions service, so far 80 per cent have done so in a planned way.

More information about Solutions can be found at: <http://www.frameworkha.org/pages/solutions.html>