



OPENING THE DOOR TO PARTNERSHIPS ISSUE 55 AUGUST 2007

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HomePoint News



**Communities
Scotland** 
Working for housing
and regeneration

PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

Editorial by Eleanor Clark

‘Two heads are better than one.’ That sums up the strength of partnership working. You draw on twice the resource, twice the perspective, and the advantage of different ways of working that can provide high quality services – especially in a challenging advice area like homelessness.

In Fife the Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008 states as its vision that ‘everyone in Fife should be able to find a decent home they can afford and have access to the services they need to help them keep that home.’ Fife is home itself to some great examples of partnership working.

Cornerstone (Levenmouth Homelessness Trust) and Open Door Fife are based in different locations, providing advice, information and support to people at risk of becoming homeless. Operating 20 miles apart, the two agencies worked closely together, making mutual referrals and even operating joint Housing Advice teams covering mutual territory. Each organisation applied separately for accreditation under the National Standards. Both were successful.

This summer the two concluded work they had started months ago to formally join their services together as one organisation. What made them decide to join up as partners when each was successful in its own right? Were there barriers? What were the challenges? And what does the future hold for the new partners? In this issue we look in depth at the new Frontline Fife Homelessness Services, and ask them the secrets of how successful partnership works.

PARTNERS ON THE FRONTLINE

Open Door Fife and Cornerstone (Levenmouth Homelessness Trust)... these are two names familiar to Fife service users looking for housing advice. Open Door has operated out of Dunfermline and Cornerstone out of Leven for nearly 15 years to support homeless people or those threatened with homelessness.



This year they embark on a formal partnership to help increase coverage and quality in advice to prevent homelessness across Fife. We met with them to ask how they hoped the partnership would help their service users, and to offer advice to other agencies considering partnerships.

HOW THE SERVICE STARTED

In Dunfermline, Open Door Fife started in 1994, using a one-bedroom council property for emergency accommodation for young people. The team also started a Court Representation service and piloted the Fife Keyfund. Open Door Fife then moved to the brand new Home4Good Centre. There, in partnership with the Council, they offered assistance to homeless people or people threatened with homelessness in central and west Fife, helping people find suitable accommodation and providing information, advice, advocacy and representation.

Founded in 1992 as Levenmouth Trust with Urban Aid funding to provide B&B accommodation for homeless people, Cornerstone Fife discovered a large part of its work was helping young people with drug problems. Its first project was a rescue centre at Leven. But when the local Boots closed down its needle exchange service, Cornerstone took over, providing people with the services of an addiction centre and support for those with drug issues. They developed a pilot shelter for rough sleepers, then joined up with partners in Lochgelly and Cupar to establish further addiction services and scatter flats.

The Cornerstone Resource and Housing Advice Centre, part of the Levenmouth Homeless Trust, operates a day centre in Leven for homeless people and those in housing need, providing housing and welfare advice, advocacy for people threatened with eviction, rent issues and neighbour problems, help with drug issues, a hostel service and supported starter flats.

JOINING UP

Both organisations operated housing advice teams working separately to help homeless people, provide information and advice, advocacy, and court representation. In 2001 they united under one umbrella called CHAT – Community Housing Advice Teams – to provide a Fife-wide service to help Fife Council meet the obligations of new homelessness legislation.

The two agencies worked well together and growth was natural, service based and organic, yet funding for both tightened. What would happen, they wondered, if the organisations themselves merged? Would it bring conflict of interests and principles, or increase support? How would it affect service users? Was it expensive? They sat down to talk.

frontlinefife
homelessnessservices

'WHEN DO TWO BECOME ONE?'

The process of merging two organisations isn't simple, says Billy Lynch, Strategic Development Manager at Open Door Fife. The cost was not the least of their concerns. But the process surprised everyone.

DIY FOR PARTNERSHIP

'We had been providing an independent housing advice service in the west of Fife for nearly 15 years,' commented Open Door's Operations Manager Carole Simpson. 'We are used to working in partnership with other agencies. We joined forces with Levenmouth Homeless Trust in 2001 to provide a Fife-wide service. But though we had a Fife-wide service,' Carole continued, 'we didn't have a linked-up service. The two organisations got together from time to time for meetings and did joint training. But that's where it stopped.'



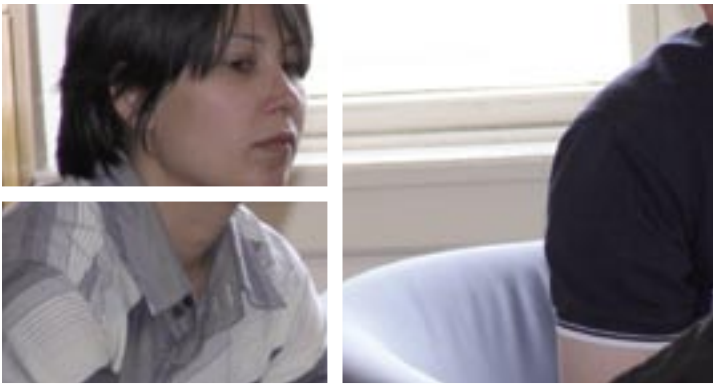
So they got together with the Levenmouth team and started to talk.

Levenmouth Homeless Trust's Mary Miller described the process. 'Cornerstone wanted to continue its good work but we didn't want to be part of a huge organisation. After two unsuccessful bids for Supporting People funding we were working with Fife Council, making sure we were not duplicating any services but were consistently raising service quality and reducing costs. We felt a partnership was what we needed to keep going. It was a big step to take. What we were looking for was a partner with openness, honesty and who acknowledged the difficulty – and challenge – of change.'

Cornerstone and Open Door Fife had a strong history of joint work. So the two organisations marshalled teams to sit round a table and talk about their common concerns and goals. 'The teams fed in what they were willing to change on,' Mary recounted. 'We found after a lot of talking to Open Door Fife and CHAT that we had similar values, we were both open to change, and our Boards both felt it was worth the work to make it come together.'

'HAPPY FAMILY'

Carole summed up what happened. 'When we looked at how to join up our organisational procedures it was unbelievable. We sat around a table, we talked a lot, and we agreed on everything. Because we'd grown towards partnership organically, because we'd worked together closely



We're focused on the people we serve. That's why we're here.



in the past with regular meetings and support, the geography didn't matter. We came together and agreed procedures and training, the same service to be provided in Kirkcaldy, Cupar, Dunfermline and Leven. We were both separately accredited to the Scottish National Standards. We are able to think of ourselves as different teams in one big happy family.'

Billy Lynch, Strategic Development Manager at Open Door, took up the story. 'There were a lot of issues to explore: legal procedures, staff pensions, liability insurance, bank accounts, financial governance, leases, premises... We saw other merging organisations racking up massive legal fees. But we did a DIY job and achieved our own solutions. It was a merry-go-round of meetings, but we managed to do it by the beginning of the funding year.' He went on, 'A merger is a long and complex process but because we had a common vision, values and culture, and we agreed on systems and strategy, it worked.'

Billy paused to consider. 'When do two become one? Not overnight. But we're focused on the people we serve. That's why we're here. In the future we will be building best models of partnership to include real accountability and clarity, working with each other to share learning. Thanks to our staff for their hard work in change!'

LAUNCH OF FRONTLINE FIFE HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

On a rainy day in June, more than 120 people rolled up to the Rothes Halls in the middle of Glenrothes to support the launch of the new Fife partnership. The chair of Frontline, Wullie Clarke, commented on the 'amazing' number of people present, necessitating extra chairs at the sides.

Beside him, MSP Tricia Marwick, formerly Public Affairs Officer at Shelter Scotland, said, 'I am delighted to be here to launch Frontline Fife, two respected organisations joining together to do inspirational work. Nobody should have to sleep rough in Scotland. I hope Frontline Fife goes from strength to strength and wish both organisations well in their life together.'

SHIFT IN VIEW

'We've seen a fundamental shift in how we look at homelessness,' speaker Robert Aldridge of SCSH stated. 'Organisations like Frontline now tend to ask how they can help, instead of simply trying to move people out of the homelessness system statistics. They give a sustainable, joined-up response to homelessness which will provide a solution that lasts.'

Larger providers can be cumbersome and bureaucratic, he observed. Yet smaller agencies are more vulnerable to funding changes. A happy medium is partnership working, where flexibility and innovation can support diversity. 'Frontline brings us an excellent record in good quality staff and work ethos. Remember, the voluntary sector doesn't just deliver a service, it delivers quality of service.'





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A JOURNEY

'Partnership working in Fife is our main strength,' observed John Mills of Fife Council. 'Frontline Fife are well placed to show us what works.'

Cornerstone and Open Door Fife have been working in partnership with Fife Council for 20 years. Even the Scottish Executive commented on the 'strong' Fife partnership. The aim of advice services is to be aware of people's real needs. 'We have homeless people along to our consultations,' said John, 'and we use people who have experienced homelessness in our services. The aim is not just to get people into a home but to support them so they can stay there.'

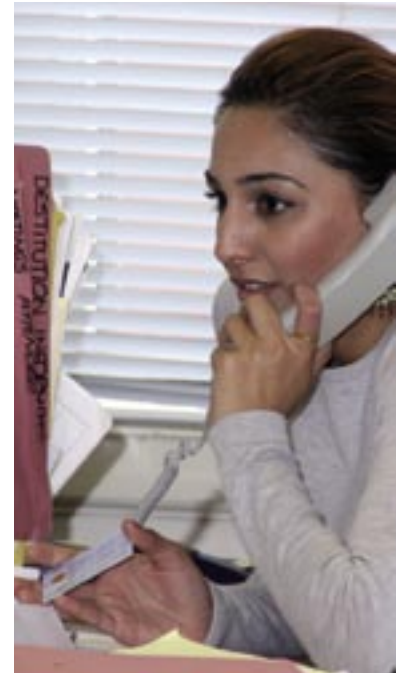
Commenting on the new partnership, he said, 'My hope is that each partner identifies what they're best at and they work together in strong ways to deliver not just what they've always delivered but what is really needed.'

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Says Billy Lynch, Frontline's Strategic Development Manager, 'Whatever we do, we do because we're committed to helping people who have experienced homelessness to connect with opportunity and prevent others from going through these experiences.'

But it isn't easy. 'We have a long pedigree, good backing, excellent expertise and a foundation for working together. But the challenge of the partnership is to get to know each other, manage change, and manage costs.'

He concluded: 'We need a common vision, values and culture, agreed systems and strategy, and to agree quality control and outcomes. The future will require best models of partnership including real accountability and clarity to work together to share learning. We won't just pay lip service to funding needs. We want to create better information systems and plenty of chances for innovation.'



OFFERING WHAT PEOPLE NEED

Cornerstone and Open Door – now combined into Frontline Fife – between them offer a whole range of services. Users can be confident that standards are equally high across all their offices. 'We aim to provide a service across Fife where service users can walk in anywhere and get the same service,' said Carole Simpson.



COURT REPRESENTATION

In the year 2005-06 Open Door dealt with 192 people facing eviction at Dunfermline and Kirkcaldy Sheriff Courts. In coping with increasingly complex issues, workers dealt with 875 individual areas of case law in that year alone.

People are often threatened with eviction not because they spend the rent money on taking holidays but because of either a family crisis or a benefits problem. The Community Housing Advice Team work to help people sort out their problems, negotiate a repayment scheme with their landlord (whether public or private), or refer them to specialist agencies for assistance. An increasing amount of work now involves the private rented sector.

Areas of case law covered by staff from April 2006–March 2007 included housing benefit, disrepair, harassment and illegal eviction, homelessness, transfers, mortgage and rent arrears, housing options, private sector rent issues, discrimination, and security of tenure. This amounted to 3187 cases.

WORK IN SCHOOLS

In partnership with Cornerstone, Open Door is available to all schools across Fife providing information and advice about housing options and the risks of homelessness. Most of these sessions are one-offs, but Open Door developed a six-week programme in a Dunfermline high school to expand and share awareness of homelessness issues. The service tries to reach young people to deliver the message that leaving home is not something you do on the spur of the moment. 'Plan to leave,' advises Carole Simpson. 'Don't walk out the door unless you are actually unsafe in the house.'

THROUGH-CARE

Frontline, in partnership with Social Work Through Care Service and Fife Council Housing, provides support flats throughout Fife for young people leaving care. During their stay young people get help and support planning for their futures and finding a permanent place to live. The aim is to help them settle comfortably into the community in a way that encourages them to remain there.



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LOCAL CLINICS

The service offers advice clinics in various areas. It goes to local council offices to meet people on request and also provides home visits for people with disabilities. In Fife they project that the number of people aged 65 and over will increase by 9% in the next 3 years. The number of people aged 85 and over is projected to increase by 23%. It will certainly mean the need for new information partnerships.

PRIVATE LANDLORDS

The service works increasingly with private landlords and tenants to educate them in their legal obligations, including the correct procedure and timescale for issuing an eviction notice. With more private tenancies and fewer social ones, the service finds advice shifting to meet new needs.

THE WEB

The new Frontline website will be up and running soon – perhaps by the time you read this. The site provides information on all services offered by Frontline with news and details on ways people can interact with it. Keep your eyes open for it soon.



HOME4GOOD

This was a success story in working together – not just in sharing practice but in sharing a room!

Both Levenmouth Homeless Trust and Open Door worked closely with Fife Council and other voluntary agencies concerned with homelessness in Fife to help set up three Home4Good Resource Centres, first in Leven, then in Cupar and Dunfermline. A fourth is due to open very soon in Kirkcaldy. The centres, funded by Fife Council, provide a mix of permanent and hostel housing and a pleasant, bright one-stop office giving advice and interview space. Each is unique though they all have their service in common. Advisers from CHAT are based at each centre to complement the services provided by Fife Council, the NHS and other voluntary organisations. There is even a drop-in café in one.

The Dunfermline centre is a sparkling example of friendly layout and natural light. Interview rooms contain play areas for children and views of garden lawns and large trees. The carpets are cheerful and there is plenty of room for choosing a place to talk for either staff or service users. Not only that, but upstairs, Open Door staff and Fife Council staff share a workroom.

They didn't always share. When it was first suggested the wall between the two rooms be knocked down, there were mutters of protest. Once the wall was gone, though, 'everyone brightened up,' recalled Carole. 'Suddenly the Council staff and Open Door staff were talking, trading stories, sharing practice tips.' The Council's Homeless Officer intervened: 'We can have the odd disagreement,



but it's non-confrontational. Disagreement is healthy. It's about learning other ways of doing things. There's no sense here of being told this is how you do it. Though we come from different directions the aim is to give the customer a home.'

Aileen Christie, Community Housing Advice Worker, agreed, 'Better working relationships are being developed and the ability to speak to a Council Homeless Officer straightaway regarding cases is proving invaluable.'

Home4Good will be taking on more resource workers, liaising with other services in the area. They will undertake the HomePoint training to Type 1. 'It's about utilising our resources more effectively, getting the right people at the right point to serve the need,' Carole pointed out. 'We still need to work on better recording of statistics. It's such a busy service we want to make sure we record all of the valuable work we do. We forget to show how effective we are!'



PARTNERSHIP IN A NUTSHELL

Common vision, values and culture

Identify what you're best at

Agreed systems and strategy

Respect for quality monitoring and outcomes

Clear purpose and clear goals

Mechanisms for meeting and talking regularly

Share your good practice and celebrate your successes

Thanks to staff of Open Door Fife and Cornerstone Fife, now merged as Frontline Fife Homelessness Services



HomePoint publications are available on request in large print, Braille or audio cassette format.

HomePoint, Communities Scotland, Thistle House, 91 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 5HE
T: 0131 313 0044 F: 0131 479 5355 E: homepoint@communitiesscotland.gsi.gov.uk
www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk www.homepoint.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

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GUIDANCE FOR APPLICANTS – HOMEPOINTERS 55

The updated versions of Guidance for Applicants are now available from HomePoint. These publications are aimed at organisations who wish to be audited against the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Providers. They give your organisation guidance on completion of the audit application forms and guidance on the evidence auditors will be looking for. There are four versions of the Guidance depending on the 'types' of advice your organisation provides:

Guidance for Applicants Type I

Guidance for Applicants Type II

Guidance for Applicants Type III

Guidance for CABx

To receive a copy of any of these publications, please contact HomePoint.