



WORKING TOGETHER ON ORKNEY ISSUE 56 NOVEMBER 2007

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HomePoint News



**Communities
Scotland** 
Working for housing
and regeneration

THE ORKNEY EXPERIENCE

EDITORIAL BY ELEANOR CLARK

With a population of around 20,000 and only two main towns, Orkney is a very special place. Thanks to funding provided by Orkney Islands Council, HomePoint was able to spend two days in Orkney working intensively with the organisations who intend to go for accreditation against the National Standards this year.

Using the council as the hub of a networking wheel, the Information and Advice Subgroup brings together these organisations and others to share best practice and cross-referrals. HomePoint wanted to learn from them what is different about providing an advice service in the context of an island community. What are the challenges of working to meet many different advice needs with a limited pool of staff? What are the particular conflicts of interest or confidentiality issues?

I was particularly pleased to go on what was my third trip to Orkney for HomePoint in as many years and to see the progress each organisation has made on ensuring their service complies with the Standards. However, it is the last time I will be doing this for HomePoint, because by the time you read this I will have left Communities Scotland for pastures new. I feel as if it is the end of a personal era, having been with HomePoint since two months after it started in 1993.

In those far off days with the late Pat Bagot I started touring Scotland, learning about the complexities of the information and advice sector. This was before HomePoint published the National Standards, and listening to and learning from the advice providers was an essential grounding for both of us. It was a lesson well learned and set out the way HomePoint would consult and involve advice providers in all future work. I am very proud to have subsequently led the expansion of the National Standards to include money and welfare benefits advice and to have managed the development of accreditation for agencies who meet the Standards.

Together the Standards and the accreditation process put the Scottish advice sector in a very strong position to demonstrate the value we place on good quality advice for people when, where and how they need to access it.

I am sorry to be leaving my colleagues and all of the many contacts I have made through HomePoint, but I am sure our paths will cross frequently in the future. I wish Annabelle Ridley, who is taking over from me, the very best in undertaking one of the most interesting jobs I have ever had.



ORKNEY ISLANDS COUNCIL

PARTNERSHIP HUB

It is Britain's smallest local authority. Orkney has 18 inhabited islands and a population of approximately 20,000. It hasn't had an easy time working towards the National Standards, but Orkney Islands Council now sets its own inspiring tone for its partner agencies. We spoke to Frances Troup, Acting Principal Housing Officer at the council, about what they're doing and how.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

'Community planning is something that effectively happened in Orkney long before it was given that title,' Frances informed us. 'Joint working works well due to our small size. It also helps with how readily accessible the public find our services. We want the Standards to help us show we deliver a good, well-structured service. What they've already shown us, though, is that we don't generate as much of a paper trail because we are small enough to talk directly to people and seek their views. Demonstrating results is important and we're addressing that.'

Frances chairs the Information and Advice Subgroup, which includes the other four organisations working towards the Standards. The group originally grew out of Orkney's homelessness and housing advice strategies. A strategic subgroup oversees implementation and subgroups were set up for the

practicalities of delivery. 'We all get round a table and discuss what we need to do and which agency is best placed to do it. It's very much a two-way process between the council and the agencies - everyone puts something in. It's very hands-on.'

PARTNERSHIP SAVES COSTS

Partnership helps spread training costs burdens. Linking into national meetings and seminars is important, but time and money spent sending staff to seminars and training courses in Edinburgh or Glasgow can be prohibitive. To ensure all agencies benefit together, the council asked HomePoint to run seminars for them there - and invited their partners to participate.

'We feel we're all in this accreditation process together,' said Frances. 'We were able to speak directly to HomePoint, looking at remits and documentation together. For instance we produced information-sharing documents and looked at the structures we need to make referrals. By sitting together with our partners we were able to share the good practice we already had and find out what was still missing. Everyone put something in.'

KNOWING EACH OTHER

They must consider carefully potential conflicts of interest, as in a small community staff may know service users personally. The council covers this at interview when hiring. 'Sometimes you'll get a person walking up to you on the street or approaching you socially and asking for advice.'





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They know you work for the council. Care must be taken when talking to service users at Reception in case conversations are overheard by members of the public. Interview rooms need to be used even for basic conversations. We've developed a written policy covering such considerations.'

SPECIAL NEEDS

Given the islands' relatively large ageing population, the council provides induction loops and fully accessible premises in their one-stop shop. They also mount roadshows to raise awareness of advice services. 'The uptake on the outer islands is low,' Frances told us, 'but it's worthwhile just to let people know we're there.'

Translation services are required from time to time, though demand is rising with the rise in numbers of migrant workers. The council has struck an agreement with NHS Orkney; they now share LanguageLine translation facilities, reducing the cost to both organisations.

JOINT WORKING WORKS

'As a small local authority we have exactly the same statutory duties as a larger authority but less in the way of resources for delivery,' commented Frances. 'As each staff member's role is relatively broad, you feel more involved – you know you're not just a cog in a machine. We work with our partners again and again on different things. Building on existing joint working structures has been vital to us.'

The accreditation process has been welcome. 'It means we are looking more in depth at why we provide our services in a certain way. We are very different from an authority in the central belt and this is reflected in our service provision. We want to have a way of showing anybody what we're doing, and how. We believe we do a good job and we're proud of what we do.'



ORKNEY ISLANDS PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT LTD

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC HAND IN HAND

You might not think of the National Standards in connection with private property development. But according to Joan Mackie, one of the two employees of OIPD, people walk in off the street and ask broad ranging questions all the time. And they need answers.

PAINTING A PICTURE

A private independent company founded to increase housing options in Orkney, OIPD offers rentals, property development, care and repair, and Rural Home Ownership Grants. Some of this property includes supported housing and a care centre. 'If people ask us about Rural Home Ownership Grants,' explained Joan, 'we can guide them through the process. We use our experience and our expertise in the field to help. But we need to be able to show the information we give is of high quality.'

OIPD works in partnership with the NHS and the council developing properties, receiving funding for building and for Rural Home Ownership Grants from Communities Scotland and the council. OIPD is managed overall by a member of the council. As members of the Information and Advice Subgroup, OIPD began to work towards formal accreditation.

When the idea of accreditation was first introduced, Joan was

slightly sceptical. 'My first thought was everything works very well already,' she confessed. 'But working to the Standards has thrown up a lot we didn't do before. There are only two of us here at OIPD. Often we had no written procedures - we knew exactly what was happening, but someone coming in wouldn't know it.'

'It was quite daunting at first,' she went on. 'We didn't have paperwork to back up our advice work. But we employed someone on a short-term contract to help us. Having her on the spot was a real boost.'

DIALOGUE

OIPD is in constant dialogue with the council and its partners. 'We have a number of events we attend. The council generously shares its training events with us. And most of the other agencies are within five minutes' walk of our door.'

Joan appreciates the support offered by the council and partners. 'Our relationship with



the council is very positive. Since starting work on accreditation this support has increased. We now have regular meetings around the Standards. The process has been very positive for us. I understand it better after working through the evidence with HomePoint. And we can always check with our partners because we're all working towards the Standards together.'

ORKNEY HOUSING ASSOCIATION

LISTENING WITH CARE

Orkney Islands Housing Association Ltd (OHA) was established in 1985 as a non-profit-making charitable organisation. It complements the housing activities of the council and is a member of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, receiving money from Communities Scotland to build and renovate housing. OHA has, to date, provided over £40 million of housing in Orkney.

CONFIDENCE BOOST

OHA provides information and advice to tenants, waiting list applicants, or people coming in off the street. They give information and advice in person and in correspondence with people on the housing list. They also run a surgery in Stromness once a month where people can come along and discuss issues.

'Working with the Standards has given our staff a confidence boost. We can now say, "Yes, I am doing this right, and I have been doing it right",' affirms Liz Melvin, OHA's Housing Services Manager. 'That leads to job satisfaction, feeling you've helped people by providing information and advice or by signposting them to another agency for help. The Standards have clarified to staff what a great job they're actually doing.'

Supervision of casework is hands-on. 'Once a month I personally review what staff are doing,' said Liz. Though Liz has team and weekly one-to-one meetings with the Housing Officers, her

office door is always open. She believes if you need an answer, 'you need it now. Not next week,' she says.



NETWORKING

Whenever one organisation brings in trainers they share the event with others to save costs. Joint training mixes people. At conference events we find the high point isn't simply the content but the chance to meet other advisers.' A training event in rent arrears brought a particularly pleasant surprise: Liz realised they had no housing benefit problems. 'Housing benefit arrears aren't a

problem for us,' she told us. 'If a problem develops we just get on the telephone, speak to staff in the Housing Benefit office and sort it out.'

'NO PROBLEMS'

In fact Liz showed an invigorating attitude to sorting things out. 'If you talk to people there aren't problems,' she said. 'There's just something someone doesn't understand. They ask why it's that way, they hear an explanation and they begin to understand. Then they can deal with it. The key to not having problems is listening.'

Liz praised the Standards accreditation process. 'The advice and assistance we've received from HomePoint from the word go has been invaluable. My message to other organisations working towards the Standards is that they are likely to find they already have most things in place. They are already doing it. There's nothing to be afraid of!'

WOMEN'S AID

PROTECTION AND PARTNERSHIP

Working together to protect and shelter women and children affected by domestic abuse and in difficulty is no easy task anywhere. In a small community it brings its own challenges.

CONFIDENCE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

'When I first moved to Orkney ten years ago I received a letter addressed simply to Fiona Tully, Orkney,' Fiona, Women's Aid Orkney, told us. 'And it reached me. Everybody knows everybody. If they don't, they'll find out who you are. This can make things difficult. But it's also wonderful. It means everybody works together.'

'We welcome women walking in our door at any time,' Fiona said, 'but practically speaking it is preferable if they can telephone

and make an appointment. Living in a small community has two sides: the problems and benefits of being known.' The problems arise when women do not want the community to know they are asking for help, and consequently may stay away. But Women's Aid has come up with an effective answer to this problem.

Women often speak to GPs about their problems. Women's Aid can meet women in GPs' surgeries or anywhere women will feel safe, Fiona explained. 'The GP can organise a meeting with a Women's Aid worker on

request. In fact it was a GP who first telephoned and asked us to arrange a meeting with a woman who wished to speak to us.' Women's Aid workers meet any abused woman who asks for an appointment in a surgery, a safe environment for the meeting, and one that does not attract any comment or notice.

But the very same scrutiny of neighbours can also be a benefit. 'In a close community, people are also protected,' she said. 'People look out for each other. If something goes wrong, people know it. And they step





Two outreach workers go out to the islands and remote communities on request. However, on the outer islands, 'the whole community may know who you are before you're even off the boat.'

in to help. Nobody in Orkney is anonymous.'

OUTREACH

Two outreach workers go out to the islands and remote communities on request. However, on the outer islands, 'the whole community may know who you are before you're even off the boat,' said Fiona. 'It is likely they will know the Women's Aid workers. If we arrive at somebody's house everyone knows right away what it's about or will hazard a good guess.' They therefore offer support via telephone, email, and neutral

venues. 'You can't hide here. You just have to work with the environment. But working with it has produced wonderful partnerships.'

WORKING TOGETHER

Working towards accreditation, Women's Aid operates hand in hand with other agencies as a matter of practice. 'Inter-agency working works very well for us,' said Fiona. 'Seven years ago people kept their work much more to themselves. Now we all go to similar meetings, come together on strategy planning, and get to know each other.

We're proud to be working so well together. I sometimes hear about conflicts or rivalries between agencies on the mainland. It just doesn't happen here.'

Fiona monitors casework, asking for supervision from the Housing Division or the CAB if needed. If conflicts of interest arise, clients are referred elsewhere. 'In a place without many services, some conflicts are inevitable,' Fiona concludes. 'But you simply remember good practice. Always encourage people to find out what their choices are.'



ORKNEY CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY

Orkney Citizens Advice Bureau provides free, confidential and independent advice on housing, debt, evictions, arrears, neighbour problems, domestic disputes and more. The range of a Bureau's advice is in fact so great that Citizens Advice Scotland requires all its CAB offices to meet the tailor-made CAS standards. However, Orkney CAB felt it was also worth their while to work toward accreditation under the HomePoint National Standards.



HIGH QUALITY

Geraldine Ferguson at the CAB explained, 'HomePoint's National Standards allow us to analyse our work and define where we need special skills. The Standards lay out a framework. The HomePoint accreditation process is pushing us to strive for even higher quality.'

Together with Information and Advice Subgroup partners, the CAB is working to fill advice gaps in the Orkney community and share good practice. 'There's a strong sense that we all want to help each other,' said Geraldine. 'We exchange information and that helps us understand more clearly what the other agencies are doing. Others also gain a better understanding of what we do and the high level of advice we give.'

As with Women's Aid, absolute confidentiality is impossible. 'It is possible to be confidential about the subject of a visit,' said Geraldine, 'but the fact is your visit isn't. On a small island everyone can see who's asking for help. And going to a CAB can seem a stigma.' This isn't so much a problem in Kirkwall, where the CAB is kept quite busy. But on the islands, 'even a taxi to somebody's farm tells people there's a problem.'

In disputes between two parties, the CAB can act for both parties if they agree, but this requires two different advisers and written permission from both parties. 'Actually,' reflected Geraldine, 'you have to have high ethical principles to give good advice. In any conflict the judgement is delicate, and it's different every time.'

FILLING THE GAPS

Orkney CAB has no person competent to supervise legal advice work at Type III level. But they are seeking a solution – on Shetland. 'Shetland has a qualified lawyer and we are negotiating to get their assistance in supervision at Type II and Type III level,' Geraldine explained. 'They have helped us whenever needed.'

The sense of responsibility is keen. 'If we don't offer advice, who will? We see the gaps. On the mainland you can refer people on. Here, there is only us. But whatever the difficulties, we plan to use the Standards to benefit and improve ourselves. We want to be the best. We feel Orkney deserves it!'



WELCOME TO ANNABELLE

HomePoint is delighted to welcome its new Strategic Development Manager, Annabelle Ridley. Already familiar with HomePoint's work, Annabelle comes to us on secondment from Citizens Advice Scotland. No stranger to standards and competences, she was responsible for helping create and develop the CAS competences scheme, set up to support the national quality system for CABx. Annabelle was responsible for setting up MATRICS jointly with Money Advice Scotland and its work on development and implementation of the certification process for money advisers for the Debt Arrangement Scheme.

'Because I've worked on supporting and implementing standards in different contexts,' said Annabelle, 'I see a large part of our work as helping agencies understand how standards work for them. Standards enable agencies to demonstrate the good service they provide and continuously to improve it. Coming to HomePoint I'm learning a lot about advice networks from a new perspective and broadening my own understanding. Helping to take HomePoint forward into its next era is an exciting challenge.'



Welcome to HomePoint, Annabelle!

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

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AND FAREWELL TO ELEANOR CLARK, HOMEPOINT CO-ORDINATOR AND LAURE PATERSON, JOURNALIST TO HOMEPOINT

As you will have read in the editorial, Eleanor Clark is leaving Communities Scotland after spending fourteen years within HomePoint. HomePoint would like to extend their thanks for her support over the years and wish her every success for the future.

After many years interviewing for and writing fifty-three issues of the HomePoint News, as well as editing and writing some of the HomePoint publications, Laure Paterson is off to seek new adventures. HomePoint also wish to say a huge thanks for all her hard work over the years and to wish her every success in her new endeavours.



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