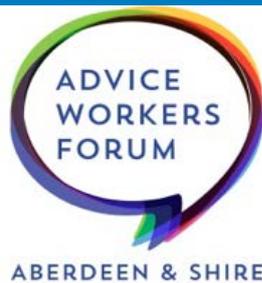


CASE STUDY: Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Advice Forum



Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Advice Forum is a practitioner forum led by Aberdeen City Council's financial inclusion team to help local advice agencies respond to the growing needs of people in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

Stuart Reid, Money Adviser, Aberdeen City Council chairs the forum and he also facilitates a Knowledge Hub group for the Advice Network. [Listen to what he has to say](#) about the network in this video.

The network was created in November 2014; 25 organisations attended the first network meeting. Aberdeen City Council had responsibility for arranging the network meetings, providing a venue and collating agenda items from partners, as well as for arranging any key speakers or topics of interest for discussion.

The forum now has more than 40 members and is open to new members. Representation expands across local authorities, housing providers, third sector partners, parliamentary officers, credit union, health and disability services and many more.

Face-to-face meetings happen quarterly but the Knowledge Hub group can be used frequently on a day-to-day basis for discussion and drawing down support, sharing issues arising on the front line and sharing knowledge and learning, etc.

The discussion topics at the forum usually focus primarily around money and benefit-related advice matters and the forum is used for identifying and supporting training needs and used for networking. The chair of the forum will arrange to co-ordinate and deliver training or source training options and make this available for members of the network.

What was the issue?

The [Knowledge Hub group](#) was set up and introduced to help network members try to modernise how they interact with each other on a day to day basis. It was thought that it would become a useful mechanism to help people share knowledge and support each other as part of the daily business. It is a place for storing any relevant documents including agenda items and minutes from meetings.

Morag Fraser, Welfare Rights Officer, Aberdeenshire Council is an online facilitator of the group along with Stuart Reid, Aberdeen City Council.

Members had not been making best use of the Knowledge Hub as had originally been expected, despite 63 registered users of the group. The main barrier in the way of people using the Knowledge Hub related to lack of knowledge, skills and confidence in using the technology.

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“The main aim of the forum was to create a space for network members to address wider policy issues, be able to collectively input and reply to ‘calls for evidence’ and respond to consultation reports.”

The [Knowledge Hub](#) is an online collaboration tool which is proving a really useful resource for partners to share information on a day-to-day basis.

Members have managed to draw down some training and support from the Improvement Service to develop their knowledge and skills for using the Knowledge Hub. In these videos, [Anne Kain](#), Operations Manager at Aberdeen Foyer, and [Dawn Chalmers](#), Income Management Officer at Osprey Housing Association, talk about how Knowledge Hub has helped them.

Listen to what [Alison McKinnon](#) has to say here.

Intended outcomes

The main aim of the forum was to create a space for network members to address wider policy issues, be able to collectively input and reply to ‘calls for evidence’ and respond to consultation reports. Issues arising in the forum to date have mainly been ones which have required escalating or dealing direct with the local Job Centre and or nationally through local MPs and MSPs.

Action/approach taken

The chair of the forum had noticed how [Dundee Advice Workers Forum](#) had progressed the use of the Knowledge Hub and thought that it would be good practice to try to achieve this across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

One of the main challenges presenting itself to forum members is the impact that sanctions is having on the people they are trying to help. At the last network meeting, the chair presented a draft of a new leaflet designed to help people understand and address the issue of sanctions. Forum members were asked for their contributions to the leaflet and consider using the advice network brand to show the co-ordinated approach across the sector to help improve access to services for clients.

Obstacles and issues

Stuart says, “Organisations have been overwhelmingly supportive of the forum. The forum does not have a budget so it relies on the goodwill of the member organisations to host events”.

Feedback from members confirms the appreciation of the forum for being a place where information can be shared and training can be accessed. Training opportunities in the north-east of Scotland can often be limited and can be expensive so joining resources helps to save money and create efficiencies. This is welcomed by members especially in the current economic climate when budgets are squeezed and resources are more scarce.

Stuart Reid says, “There is a strong appetite for forum members to be

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actively involved in responding to consultations and national issues but time restraints and pressures on funding can present a challenge for some members”.

Results

Listen to what [Dawn Chalmers, Osprey Housing](#) has to say.

Organisations and individuals are appreciative of a local forum where information can be shared, case studies can be discussed and local contacts made.

Members try to pool training from within the organisations that attend the forum. If a training issue is flagged up at the forum, partners try to accommodate that. At times, the local authority may organise training and outside organisations are invited to participate. They also try to have short (one hour) training events at every meeting.

Listen to [Nicky McKay from North East Scotland Credit Union](#).

Lessons learned

Keeping things simple and informal as possible for forum members has seemed to work really well for the group so far.

Next steps

Universal Credit is the driver at the moment for all the next steps going forward. This will include:

- Ongoing Universal Credit advice
- Training and various case studies
- Responding to various consultations
- Developing much closer links with Job Centre Plus and Department of Work and Pensions.

Consideration will be given to how forum members could work together to collaborate on any targeted interventions during the next [UK Financial Capability Week](#).

To consider a survey to go out to network members to identify areas of improvement.

To improve on the performance information and reports for the network.

The Knowledge Management team at the Improvement Service will continue to provide support to forum members as and when they need it and an offer has been made to deliver a more in-depth and bespoke webinar session specifically for members of this group to help them become more confident in all the system functionalities.

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Stuart Reid
Money Advisor, Aberdeen City Council

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Other information

On 1 October 2014, Aberdeen City Council's welfare rights, benefits advice and money advice teams formally merged to create the [Financial Inclusion Team](#).

The service went live on 5 January 2015. Aberdeen City Council has created a Financial Inclusion Team newsletter and the first one was published in January 15. You can find copies of all the newsletters at www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/moneyadvice/.

Advice network members work closely with the food bank providers and this [useful resource](#) was provided to help advice agencies know where to refer people to for free emergency food provision.

To learn more about the strategic Aberdeenshire Financial Inclusion Group, [read the case study](#). This group also uses the Knowledge Hub.

Members of the group also attend the the '[No Recourse, North East](#)' working group.