

CASE STUDY: Partners work together in West Lothian



West Lothian
Council



In West Lothian a network of key advice agencies come together to ensure residents have access to high quality advice and information.

The network includes the Council's [Advice Shop](#), [Citizens Advice Bureau](#), [Weslo Housing Management](#), [West Lothian Financial Inclusion Network](#) and the [Bridge Community Project](#).

The network was created in 2014. At that time, welfare reform coupled with constraints on organisational budgets were a driver for agencies to look at what they could do better and more efficiently, and how they could improve their partnership working. West Lothian Council began consulting with key agencies on the idea of creating a network and how it could be supported and co-ordinated.

The purpose of establishing the network was to enable the organisations to map their services, identify gaps in services and increase understanding of how partners could work together more effectively to improve access and support. It's ultimate aim, then and now, is to target resources effectively to those people living in the most disadvantaged circumstances.

The group meets bi-monthly and the Council has a lead role in co-ordinating the network, issuing agendas and minutes, and arranging speakers.

What was the challenge?

When setting up the network, the main challenge for the Council was building up trust with the agencies and persuading them of the benefits of being part of the network.

As this was a new way of working for some agencies, the Council had to demonstrate that this approach was going to support them. It argued that establishing a network would hopefully bring efficiencies for everyone and stronger partnership working across the area would lead to better outcomes for people.

The network also required a cultural shift to encourage the sharing of ideas and information between organisations.

What was the advice network trying to achieve?

The creation of the advice network was about trying to develop a co-ordinated approach to advice delivery in a number of ways. This involved:

- Mapping advice services for the area
- Identifying and addressing gaps in service delivery
- Developing robust referral processes to improve the customer experience
- Sharing information and resources to ensure best practice

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Meeting the challenge

In order to encourage participation in the advice network, the Council ran various events and visited other organisations to discuss the approach and present to agency boards.

Several organisations have now signed up to be network members and have reached a partnership agreement which will allow them to:

- Develop an online referral and tracking system to promote joint working and information sharing
- Develop, deliver and co-ordinate training opportunities for employees and volunteers
- Share and promote good practice with each other
- Work together to access external funding

Listen to what Elaine Nisbet, Anti-Poverty and Welfare Advice Manager has to say about the network.

“If I wasn’t part of this network, I would be working in isolation but this way I get to know the person behind the service.”

Ann Kerr,
**Welfare Rights, Weslo
Housing Management**



(Video opens in browser window)

- [Download a copy of the Partnership Agreement](#)

Obstacle and issues

Agreeing the terms of the Partnership Agreement was difficult initially because of the number and range of organisations involved; the original draft legal agreement had a large amount of content and level of detail.

Organisations also had to consult with their own management committee members about the agreement. All organisations’ concerns had to be worked through before they could agree on a final version of the agreement which all partners feel is achievable within the current structure and resource.

Results

The network has been up and running since 2014. Ann Kerr, Welfare Rights, Weslo Housing Management says, “Being part of the network is good for communicating, making the effort with partners and sharing the resource.

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It allows me to share good practice across both Falkirk and West Lothian as my job spans across both areas. If I wasn't part of this network, I would be working in isolation but this way I get to know the person behind the service."

The network held a successful information and networking event focused on how to help people in a crisis. Over 100 people from frontline services gathered at Howden Park Centre to hear presentations from organisations including West Lothian Foodbank, the School Bank West Lothian, Scottish Welfare Fund, West Lothian Court Advice Project and the West Lothian Energy Advice Forum. Many more agencies hosted stalls offering information on how their service can help people in crisis. Attendees had an opportunity to network and find out about the range of support available in West Lothian.

A further event is now being planned with a different focus.

The network also feeds into the energy forum with a focus on tackling fuel poverty. A joint winter campaign resulted in helping 168 people, generating £26,000 in warm home discount schemes.

In addition, when the network discovered that a fuel poverty worker post had ended, resulting in a gap in service delivery (no other organisation was providing a home visiting service which was able to respond to people's needs, especially people in vulnerable situations), the council appointed someone to the post temporarily. This temporary post will fill the gap until the network can identify a new funding stream.

Carol Henry, West Lothian Financial Inclusion Network, states "As a small independent organisation, being part of the network is really beneficial for us as it helps us to have a level playing field and it makes it easier to co-ordinate resources, share training and strengthen the links and referral pathways between agencies."

Karen McGhee, Manager, West Lothian Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) says, "Although there is a strong anti-poverty working group in West Lothian being part of this network is very important for CAB as it allows us to strengthen the partnership with other independent organisations in the area. It's about avoiding duplication and complimenting each other. It takes commitment and it works really well having the Council lead and co-ordinate the network." Listen to what Karen has to say below.



Karen McGhee, Manager, West Lothian Citizens Advice Bureau

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West Lothian Financial
Inclusion Network**

Lessons learned

For all partners, understanding what the other organisations had to offer was crucial. This involved listening to partners and understanding the key pressures for the various agencies and the people they support.

Identifying needs and how to work together and be creative in meeting those needs was also important. The network also had to be clear about the purpose of the partnership and the support that may be offered by any lead partner.

The network also plays to each organisations strength. For example, the Bridge Community Project can provide more intensive support for some of the most vulnerable customers; this frees up time for other agencies to focus on more of the front line service delivery.

Next steps

The network is now working towards having one central point of contact for triage and a common referral tool. This would allow any relevant agency to pick up the enquiry and deal with it as appropriate. The network is currently looking at how it can fund this approach.

The network will also continue to gather wider expertise and input from mental health and children and family professionals to ensure that any future funding applications are strengthened.

The Bridge Community Project recently became a new member of the network. The aim is to continue to grow the membership and have full members and associated members with a view to reaching and including as many people as possible in the area.

The network will explore how it could use the [Knowledge Hub](#) and will seek support from the Improvement Service going forward.

Partners are also continually trying to assess needs and gaps in service delivery. In response to one partner's suggestion, funding was agreed for a feasibility study into the need for an affordable legal advice centre for people in low paid work or benefits claimants. The study has now completed and will be shared with the network at the next meeting. The next stage will be for partners to express an interest in moving any of the actions forward.