

CASE STUDY: Renfrewshire Advice Services Partnership

The Advice Partnership in Renfrewshire was set up to enable advice providers to work together to ensure that advice services in Renfrewshire are proactive, efficient, accessible and customer-focused.

It meets quarterly and is currently facilitated and chaired by Renfrewshire Council (members determine who holds the chair position).

The Challenge

Prior to the formation of the partnership, advice services in Renfrewshire were fragmented with no clear agreement between providers about who was providing what types of advice. This was causing duplication of services across providers and lack of clarity for customers seeking advice.

There was also no consistent and comprehensive recording system between agencies for onward referral of clients, or for capturing information about which service a client attends and how often.

Intended Outcomes

The intention was to create an advice partnership that would influence the strategic direction of advice provision in Renfrewshire and to create a space for members to collaborate, share best practice and ideas.

The partnership looks at:

- strategic planning of advice services to respond to needs in Renfrewshire, minimising duplication, gaps in services and the need for referral from one service to another
- models of service delivery including triage, sharing best practice
- identifying further suitable areas for outreach services to deliver services in the communities they are needed, whilst avoiding duplication of services
- meeting the challenge of increasing demand with existing resources
- targeting services to those most in need
- reducing barriers to advice including the stigma associated with seeking advice
- standards of advice and continuous improvement
- involving the citizens of Renfrewshire in changes to ensure services are effective and meet their needs
- ensuring funding opportunities are responded to in a strategic way.



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Actions/Approach Taken

The partnership agreed a [vision and terms of reference](#) for the group. It then formed a number of sub-groups to look at specific themes.

Foodbank Project

The group was trying to stop repeat customers by placing advice workers in the foodbank and ensuring they offered a relevant mix of advice provision. The foodbank did a small report on the provision of energy advice and citizens advice to demonstrate the increased savings and engagement levels that resulted from having advisors co-located in the foodbank.

From meeting as a group, and in discussion with the Foodbank. The Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) decided to issue food rather than vouchers at its premises. This allows clients to get advice to resolve their problems along with food, and saves them the journey to the Foodbank and any wait for the Foodbank to open.

An analysis of customer journeys showed that some people were having difficulties transporting food home. The group applied for funding to help those people with transport costs. A supply of day bus tickets was procured, which are given to clients who meet certain criteria (a common sense approach is taken). The tickets can be used for other journeys that day.

Website

The partnership has developed a website to act as a single entry-point to advice in Renfrewshire and point customers towards the right organisation to deal with their enquiry.

The site includes a freephone number and a triage support service managed by Renfrewshire CAB.



The site also includes a service directory of other types of support organisations such as those working with carers, housing associations and care at home.

The website is updated by a council officer, who also reviews requests from organisations to be included in the service directory and adds them if appropriate.

Online Referral System

The partners have also developed an online referral tool to assist those who have either approached the wrong advice organisation or who need help from more than one service, e.g. someone who needs money advice and support with mental health issues.

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The web-based system is designed to assist client engagement. Clients are referred rather than signposted to other services so are less likely to get lost in the system. It provides assurance that their issue will be dealt with by an appropriate agency.

The online referral tool is currently used by the member organisations who have signed up to the Renfrewshire Advice Partnership [service level agreement](#). These are:

- Renfrewshire Advice Works
- Renfrewshire Wide Credit Union
- Renfrewshire Citizens Advice Bureau
- Recovery Across Mental Health
- Local Energy Action Plan
- Renfrewshire Foodbank
- Shelter Scotland
- Connect4Renfrewshire

The intention is to develop and monitor its use with these partner agencies before rolling it out further.

Funding Sub-group

The first piece of work carried out by the funding sub-group was to examine evidence of loneliness and isolation experienced in the area. Roisin Robertson, Community Link Team Manager, Health and Social Care Partnership presented information to the group and facilitated a workshop with the partners.

With little research on the subject available, the partnership commissioned a [report](#) from the University of the West of Scotland. This involved training a couple of community researchers to work alongside the academics.

The partners then successfully applied for funding to carry out some public consultation events to gather more evidence on this issue. The work on this subject is ongoing.

The funding sub-group is currently identifying which funding streams have come to an end, for example, the Scottish Legal Aid Board's Making Advice Work grant funding to pinpoint any resulting gaps in service provision and how to collectively respond.

Obstacles and Issues

There were some hurdles to overcome in developing the new website and online referral system. As the council ICT team no longer provides support for this type of project, the partners had to appoint an external IT provider to build the systems.

Once a procurement decision was made, the development of the website

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progressed quickly. User testing with a range of people ensured that it is suitable for individuals with differing needs, for example, those with disabilities, older people with limited digital skills and people with English as a second language.

The separate online referral system took longer than expected to develop for a number of reasons:

- the advice organisations took time to identify and agree the features they wanted the system to have
- ensuring relevant legislation, e.g. data protection, was adhered to
- a high turnover of staff at the developer
- time taken to organise training with a variety of organisations.

Results

There is now effective co-ordination between the advice service providers in the partnership. The partnership continues to meet quarterly and existing good links have been consolidated.

The number of partners has increased with the University of the West of Scotland student advice team now taking part. This university has a higher-than-average proportion of single parents, mature students and local people and therefore a wider variety of issues requiring advice compared to the traditional school-leaver student.

[Advice Renfrewshire](#), the website developed by the partnership as the single entry-point to advice services in Renfrewshire has been well received with around 400 users per month.

The phone line receives around 70 calls per month, which is fewer than expected. It is now being more heavily marketed to increase the number of people using it.

The online referral system is up-and-running, enabling quick referral between partnership organisations.

Lessons Learned

- It is important to be clear about what you are trying to achieve when implementing new technology. Be clear about development requirements, costs and timescales.
- Recognise that, even with partnership working, the council will be the driving force behind any project and will carry out the bulk of work and organisation
- User testing can be time consuming but is vital. Whilst a consultation prior to starting work on the website helped to set the direction of the development, the user testing afterwards (carried out in conjunction with the website developer) was crucial in making sure the site was easy to use and contained the information that clients would find most useful.

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- When developing the referral system, having a clear, agreed specification for the project helped alleviate problems, especially as digital/tech staff tend to move on to other projects/organisations quickly.

Next Steps

Renfrewshire Council continues to be responsible for maintaining the Advice Partnership website, with Renfrewshire Citizens Advice Bureau running the Advice Renfrewshire 'phonenumber on a grant funded basis.

The council will continue to be responsible for the online referral system. The system will be updated to improve the amount and quality of management information available, and the system will be promoted to increase and widen its use.

Additional Information

Affordable Credit

Renfrewshire has an Affordable Credit Alliance, RACA, www.RACA.org.uk, which is a sub-group of the Community Planning Partnership's Empowering Communities Forum and linked to the Credit Union Forum. Members include financial, community and advice organisations, eg. banks, Scotcash, Citizens Advice and credit unions

Renfrewshire Council also funded a Credit Union Development Officer—Heather Kay, based at the TSI Engage Renfrewshire for 2 years—to support credit unions. This included looking for funding, recruiting and managing volunteers, organising training and supporting marketing activity including providing financial education in primary schools.



Renfrewshire has five credit unions and the increased focus on them over the past two years has seen membership increase by over 3,200 people. Now, 11% of people in Renfrewshire are members of a credit union compared to 7% across Scotland.

The Affordable Credit Group held a practitioners [event](#) on 24 March 2018 and participated in [Talk Money Week](#) Events.

The Rental Exchange Programme

Renfrewshire Council is the first council to work with Big Issue Invest in the Rental Exchange Programme in Scotland.

Big Issue Invest (the investment arm of The Big Issue) noticed a few years

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ago that people on low incomes typically pay more to borrow money, get credit cards, take out insurance, set up mobile phone contracts or get hire purchase on white goods. This has been called the 'poverty premium'. The Rental Exchange was set up to tackle this aspect of financial exclusion by:

- helping social housing tenants achieve a better credit score, which can help them buy goods such as a new cooker or fridge at a lower interest rate
- accepting regular rent payments as evidence of good credit behaviour and therefore giving social housing tenants access to the type of mainstream, low cost credit available to mortgage-payers.

Big Issue Invest has partnered with credit reference agency Experian to help give this boost to social housing tenants' credit history. The scheme is free of charge for social housing providers to join.



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(to discuss the content of this case study and the advice partnership)

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