



Fife Short-term Housing Support and Homelessness Services PSP

Fife Council has chosen the Public Social Partnership model to redesign its housing support and homelessness services, with a desire to build on the existing relationship with the third sector providers. The opportunity to stimulate innovation and make budget savings, whilst at the same time maintaining the quality of service provision were also important considerations.



Background

In 2014 Fife Council reviewed the 13 short-term housing and homelessness services delivered by third sector providers it funded. At the same time, Fife Council was confronted with the general requirement to make budget savings.

The Council commissioned a consultancy firm to scope a number of Alternative Delivery Vehicles for these services that contributed to saving budgets but at the same time retained the quality of service provision. A number of options were suggested, including an Arm's Length External Organisation, competitive tendering, an independent trust and a Public Social Partnership (PSP). The Council decided to choose the PSP model.

The Fife Short-term Housing Support and Homelessness Services Public Social Partnership was formally established on 1st April 2016 with the signing of a partnership agreement. The PSP is a partnership between Fife Council and 12 third sector service providers¹ and its main aims are:

- To undertake a review of current service provision.
- To deliver commissioned short-term housing and homelessness services on behalf of the Council.

¹ One service provider made the strategic decision not to deliver homelessness services anymore, unrelated to the PSP.

Scope and Focus

The scope and focus of the PSP was determined by a number of parameters:

- There was a need to achieve budget savings and the PSP model enabled this without losing the quality of service provision. Rather than telling providers to deliver 'the same for less' the PSP model aims to design the best quality of services for the available budget.
- The Council has a strong wish to continue to be involved in the design of the services.
- Service provision should be brought in line with the new Local Housing Strategy 2015-20. This strategy provides the basis upon which PSP partners undertake the review of services.
- There was strong commitment from the Council officers and Elected Members to build on the existing good partnership relations with the third sector.
- Elected Members had expressed a strong resistance to competitive tendering in the past.
- The PSP model is designed to maximise the opportunities for innovation.

Implementation

Initially Fife Voluntary Action, the local Third Sector Interface (TSI), acted as the chair of the PSP to provide an independent facilitator of discussions.

When the PSP got the opportunity to employ a co-ordinator, it was decided that the post was better hosted within one of the third sector partners. After a careful procedure, Trust in Fife was elected in April 2015 as the 'Lead Agency' and employed a PSP Coordinator.

Initial priorities from April 2015 were:

- To place the PSP on a legal footing by replacing individual Service Level Agreements with a Partnership Agreement.
- Agree the PSP Governance Framework and associated supporting protocols (Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU), Communications Plan, Information Sharing Protocol, etc.).
- Establish a service redesign project structure and carry out initial service redesign assessments.

Trust In Fife is a local homelessness charity that manages two temporary accommodation hostels in Kirkcaldy and delivers the Tenancy Share Project and the Fife Keyfund, a deposit guarantee scheme for Fife. Trust in Fife also operates two charity shops in Kirkcaldy and Lochgelly (www.trustinfife.org.uk).

The PSP Governance Structure included two bodies;

- Governance Group: comprising senior Council officers and the executive officers of the third sector providers. The Governance Group made the strategic decisions.
- Project Group: consisting of Council and third sector staff involved in the day to day running of services. This group focussed on operational issues.

Key Challenges

There were a few challenges to overcome.

- One of the main difficulties from the outset was overcoming an inherent suspicion on the part of several partners regarding Fife Council's reasons and motivation for establishing the PSP. Negotiating individual SLAs clearly provided each organisation the opportunity to seek the best 'deal' for their individual organisation and the PSP removed that process.

Once the third sector partners saw that the PSP created an equal partnership with the Council and they could have genuine influence on the design and delivery of services, these feelings quickly disappeared.

- There was an initial reluctance to 'open up' and engage in partnership discussions and also concern regarding the commitment required in terms of staff time to the various PSP groups with no apparent immediate tangible benefits from that investment. Linked to this point was the fact that in the early stages of the PSP's development, third sector partners had to balance their obligations to their individual organisations with the 'greater good' of the PSP.
- The PSP agreed to make important decisions by voting, whereby a simple majority sufficed to carry any decision. All members, the Council and the 12 third sector providers each had one vote.

However, not all providers deliver all services and there were occasions where service providers had to vote on issues that did not affect them, but could significantly affect other third sector providers.

- Another challenge was the size of the PSP, 13 partners (12 providers and Fife Council). It was difficult to achieve consensus with so many partners having different ideas about what they wanted from the PSP and what the service redesign project should prioritise.
- A major challenge was the need to make budget savings. Third sector providers found it very

difficult to decide where the cuts should be made and thus become partly responsible for the result.

- Some third sector organisations were previously funded by a Council grant through a Service Level Agreement, while others were funded through the Supporting People programme.

Those funded by grant had a Link Housing Officer, who they met quarterly and they were used to providing detailed monitoring data through the Fife Online Referral Tracking (FORT) system plus an Annual Monitor & Forward Plan (years 1&2) and 3rd Year Evaluation.

The services funded through Supporting People (SP) had gone through a competitive tendering process in 2003 and had their contract renewed year on year through a Letter of Agreement and were only required to submit evidence of weekly hours of service delivery to customers. Most providers have been subject to a service review only once or twice during those 13 years.

The PSP required all providers to submit quarterly monitoring data through the FORT system and some of the former SP funded services found that a more challenging transition. This was overcome through discussion and mutual agreement of the wording of outcomes and training on the method of collection.

Outcomes

Although it has taken almost two years for the PSP to become established and assume overall responsibility for collectively delivering homelessness and short-term housing services on behalf of Fife Council. This was much longer than initially expected and only the first phase of the PSP process has been completed. However, a number of significant positive outcomes have already emerged.

The formal establishment of the PSP and thus agreeing the process of the necessary transitions is a major accomplishment. Currently Phase 1 including identifying 24 priorities focussing on service quality and efficiency improvements as well as increasing revenue income, is at its

completion stage. This means that service outcomes are now shared by the commissioner and service deliverers.

Another tangible outcome is that all 12 third sector providers are still being funded and delivering their services in these times of austerity.

There are also a number of significant service outcomes achieved:

- A detailed map of services in the area. There is now a publicly available directory of services.
- Streamlining the process of transfer of support packages when a client moves between service providers.
- A shared description of service outcomes and guidance on these across all services in Fife.
- The introduction of new outcomes for the housing support and homelessness services (e.g. fuel poverty) which improves the Council's data collection.
- All data are now collected in the FORT system, which again improved data collection for the Council. The issues with the Supporting People funded services have led to improvements to the FORT system, such as the automatic quarterly generation of an Outcomes Overview for each provider, which greatly helps them with their submission of data to the Council.
- Jointly monitoring temporary accommodation occupancy levels and voids. This has led to a reduction of voids.
- In 2009, Fife Council's Audit Service required all temporary accommodation providers to cease collecting service charges on behalf of customers. Instead, customers were to pay their service charges directly to their rent account. This change led to a significant reduction in service charge income, with most charges no longer being paid. One of the service providers has found a way to deduct these charges directly from DWP benefits, which has now led to an increase in service income across the board.

- Previously, service users presenting themselves at Council emergency services after office hours were not being given a Housing Assessment interview, and were placed immediately on the Homelessness Register. Discussions are now underway to change the after-hours service to enable service users to be signposted to a third sector provider for one night, where they can get a Housing Assessment interview the following day. This will prevent people unnecessarily being assigned to the Homelessness Register.
- There was a gap identified in the support provided to long-term clients with low-level support needs. These vulnerable people have progressed through the short-term housing support or homelessness route and would potentially return to a ‘crisis’ situation if the support delivered to them by the PSP was withdrawn. The PSP partners are now jointly exploring external funding opportunities for this service.
- Improvements to and standardisation of risk assessment processes.
- The review of Prevention of Homelessness processes.
- The introduction of ‘hot-desking’ across PSP partners.
- There was a gap identified between short-term and long-term support.

Critical Success Factors

There were a number of factors that were essential to the success of the tender:

- **Strong support from the Council at the highest levels**
From the outset the Council senior management and Elected Members have shown strong support for the relationships with the third sector and the PSP model as a way to build these in. For example, Elected Members previously refused to support a competitive tendering process for these services, excluded the short term housing support and homelessness services from Health and

Social Care Integration to protect the local third sector providers and agreed to three years funding for the PSP.

- **Shared buy-in to the process**
All partners acknowledged the budget restraints of Fife Council and the need to review and redesign services. Partners subsequently agreed, via the PSP MOU, to engage fully with each other and the commissioners (Fife Council) to examine services and carry out a service redesign project.
- **The role of the PSP Co-ordinator**
The Co-ordinator has played a decisive role in overcoming the challenges described above. Having someone in place whose main purpose is to bring partners together and keep the process on track has proven invaluable in achieving the end-result. It is difficult to imagine an existing member of staff working for one of the PSP partners being able to undertake the functions of the dedicated co-ordinator and carry out their ‘day-job’ at the same time.
- **Building on existing relations**
The existing good relationships between the Council and the third sector providers has helped to create buy-in from the partners and smoothed the way throughout the process.
- **Building trust among the third sector partners**
Prior to the establishment of the PSP, most of the third sector partners had limited experience of working together in partnership and were occasionally in competition with each other. The PSP process and its initial outcomes, has convinced partners that it is possible to work in partnership, while at the same time working towards meeting their organisational objectives. The trust established has led to a willingness of partners to pool skills and knowledge.
- **A focus on the end goal**
There was a genuine desire with the Council and the third sector providers to redesign services to deliver the best outcomes for clients.

- **A willingness to try new things**

The partners were willing to ‘think outside the box’ to achieve service innovations.

- **Voting to make decisions**

The decision to make important, mainly financial decisions by voting, rather than by consensus has helped to speed up the process, giving each partner its rightful place in the process and provided clarity on what is actually decided. Partners have agreed to use the voting system more often in the future to include non-financial and operational issues.

- **An independent chair**

The PSP appointed an independent chair to the PSP Governance Group who brings extensive experience of working within the homelessness sector and can moderate between the public and third sector when necessary.

Next Steps

The PSP is now well established and ready to enter Phase 2: to redesign and implement services.

Service user engagement in the redesign process is critical and despite very good existing local client engagement processes, the PSP will seek to enhance these and ensure the needs of service users are incorporated into the redesign plan.

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