



## Inspiring and Informing Together



### **A Learning Exchange Between National and Local Organisations Addressing Health Inequalities**

**North East of Scotland  
Autumn 2013**

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## **Background**

Three national health intermediary organisations, the Community Health Exchange (CHEX), Community Food and Health Scotland (CFHS, part of NHS Health Scotland) and Voluntary Health Scotland (VHS), were funded by the Third Sector Division of Scottish Government to jointly deliver a programme of learning exchanges. CFHS also provided some additional funding for the programme.

### **Overall aim of learning exchange programme**

The aim of the learning exchange programme is to build a bridge between policy making and implementation, by providing civil servants with the experience of visiting organisations delivering improved health outcomes in the communities they serve. It is hoped that by engaging in this process civil servants will ultimately develop well informed policy leading to improved policy outcomes. It is also hoped that through these exchanges there will be increased understanding across the sectors and strengthened links between ‘on the ground’ organisations and policy makers.

### **Programme delivery**

In the autumn of 2013 a programme of learning exchanges between community-led and voluntary sector health organisations and Scottish Government civil servants took place in the North East of Scotland. These learning exchanges were intended to facilitate dialogue, develop relationships and provide an opportunity for public sector and voluntary sector colleagues to examine mutually beneficial areas of work.

The host organisations were brought together to consider planning for their visits and to become familiar with the intended outcomes of the exchanges.

The visits then took place at each organisation on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013.

## Learning Exchange 1: Visit to Inspire, Aberdeen

Inspire empowers the life choices of children, young people and adults with learning disabilities and additional support needs. Its focus is to include, involve and inspire individuals to ensure that care and encouragement is available for those that need it.



The organisation provides a range of more than 50 services throughout Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray including residential, respite care and day services, holiday activity schemes, social support groups, social enterprises and training for employment initiatives.

A civil servant from the Third Sector Intra-Government Team attended a full day programme that outlined the organisation's history, approach and fit with key policy areas, in particular empowering individuals and communities to participate in decisions that can affect them and helping services to work together to deliver better outcomes. The civil servant in attendance was keen to see the work of Inspire at first hand and to hear about Inspire's local and national relationships and support.

The day began with an introductory presentation on the work of Inspire, including the newly established Info Hub and local area co-ordination work. The Info Hub enables people to; share ideas, information and skills; link in with local communities and helps services work together to create more opportunities for inclusion. Similarly, Inspire's local area co-ordination work enables people to explore and identify what is important to them by using a person-centred approach to accessing and developing health and social care services that best match their needs.

The learning exchange day included lunch at Café Coast, Inspire's social enterprise, with people supported by Inspire through their Café Academy project.

The Café Academy is a project launched in 2011 that offers work-focussed training in customer service and hospitality for unemployed individuals with additional

support needs. In 2012, 38 individuals completed the course, 22 progressed into employment or further education and six received ongoing support through the weekly job club.

*“At Inspire our core values are to INSPIRE and treat with RESPECT those around us in both our internal and external communities”.*

The day continued with an interactive game of Boccia, and a visit to Project SEARCH. Project SEARCH is a worldwide initiative that originated in Cincinnati, and has subsequently spread to 200 sites across the United States, Canada, England and Scotland. It aims to secure competitive employment for people with disabilities. Inspire’s partnership with Project SEARCH is an employment focused education programme based in the University of Aberdeen campus. At the time of the visit, Project SEARCH had just begun its first year and a discussion with interns highlighted the benefits that the project has provided for individuals so far.

*“At Inspire we believe in the potential of every individual we support and our services evolve to ensure that the correct care and encouragement is given to those who need it”.*

<http://www.inspireptl.org.uk/>



## Learning Exchange 2: Pillar Kincardine, Stonehaven

Pillar Kincardine provides people with advice and support on every aspect of living with – and recovering from – mental ill health. This enables people to build a supportive network of friends and contacts as they move along the road to recovery and wellbeing.

Pillar offers a range of individual and group services including stress and anxiety management, healthy eating and cookery, gardening, creative arts and crafts. Many who have benefited from their services return as volunteers and may become members of their Board of Directors. This ensures the continued support and development of the organisation by those who most fully understand the importance of the work their organisation undertakes.

Through its range of activities Pillar is delivering to a strong mental health improvement agenda. This focus on a recovery model facilitated by peer support as a major mechanism for its delivery aligns to current government policy on mental wellbeing.

Two civil servants visited Pillar Kincardine, one from the Food Standards Agency and another from the Mental Health and Protection of Rights Division. The visitors were presented with the background and history to the project.

*“Pillar Kincardine started in 1989 as an offshoot of Pillar Aberdeen which had been around since 1980. Originally it started for mental health patients who ‘didn’t have enough to do’. Now members take responsibility for running the organisation and many of our activities”* Board Member



The learning exchange included a visit to the organisation’s allotment. This was an opportunity to experience at first-hand how members of Pillar grow fruit and

vegetables which were used for the members' Meet and Eat lunchtime session later the same day.

*"It feels good to sit down with other folk and enjoy a good feed in a friendly atmosphere especially when you've grown the stuff yourself."* Member of Pillar

This highly inclusive way of working builds strong social capital and tackles isolation which can be a major source of health inequality, as well as building in opportunities for physical activity and information about healthy eating.

The Board of Directors also spoke about their personal experiences of the journey they had each taken from struggling to deal with mental ill health to their current role in providing services for others at Pillar Kincardine.

*"I was in a horrible scary place, scared of my own shadow – over time I've become more confident again, built trust in people, which I had lost. Now being on the Board I've gained more confidence and I'm more self-assured. Now I'm not scared of anything."* Board Member

This comment illustrates perfectly the personal development and confidence building capacity that Pillar provides. People acquire skills and confidence which stay with them for life and which they are willing to share for the benefit of others. In turn this translates into improved local services: an example of 'community capacity building' work and an important mechanism for tackling health inequalities.

During the learning exchange, the visitors also joined with members of Pillar to prepare and then share lunch with people who had come along for their regular Meet and Eat session at a local Church hall. A group promoting healthy eating and wellbeing where people work together to cook the meal and join in with an exercise class.

*"We are informal when we can be and formal when we have to be. We have a bit of a laugh. Laughter is the best medicine"* Member of Pillar



After lunch the group discussed the challenges and opportunities for Pillar. There was a structured, interactive discussion group where key points were captured at each table.

Key points included

- the power of peer-led support in helping people on the road to recovery and the great value that members placed on that support
- the importance of having members of the Board who were themselves service users
- the inspiration gained from hearing other people's personal stories, Members sharing mutual feelings, coping strategies/skills confirming that we are not alone
- the flexibility of the service which can truly meet the person-centred needs of individual members
- the benefit for policy makers of seeing a service in action 'on the ground'
- the need for good referral routes from statutory services as well as being able to self-refer
- the every present issue of sustainability of the organisation



As the visit drew to a close everyone around the table agreed that they had found the visit was of great value to them. Members of Pillar were proud to show what they do and the positive difference it makes to people's lives. For their visitors seeing at first-hand what Pillar achieves was considered very valuable.

*"It's hard to beat an 'on the ground' visit for helping to remind ourselves of what is important for people facing some of life's greatest challenges and what local organisations have to offer them."* Visitor to Pillar

[www.pillarkincardine.co.uk](http://www.pillarkincardine.co.uk)

## Learning Exchange 3: Cairngorm Outdoor Access Trust, (COAT), Aboyne

Cairngorms Outdoor Access Trust (COAT) is an innovative environmental charity promoting sustainable access to the Cairngorms area.

COAT came into existence in April 2008 after it evolved from the former Upper Deeside Access Trust. The Trust works closely with land managers, users, the local communities and others in the area to help develop and implement projects, and has established an Affiliate Membership to strengthen its links with the wider public. The trust has five main strands of activity:

- Community Path Networks - Upgrading paths and developing new paths in, around and between communities to facilitate more and higher quality access opportunities for locals and visitors alike.
- Upland Paths - Repairing eroded paths in the mountains so that access can be sustained without damaging the landscape and environment.
- Walking To Health - Developing a suite of structured health walks.
- Strategic Routes - Working on delivery of strategic long distance routes.
- Promotion and Interpretation - Providing information about Outdoors Access through leaflets, interpretive boards and signposting.

### The Exchange Day

A Scottish Government official from the Intra-Government Team of the Equality, Human Rights and Third Sector Division spent a day with COAT which allowed them to gain a better understanding of the wider range of activities undertaken. The SG official was able to meet with the COAT co-ordination team as well as partners from Paths for All to find out more on the planning, organisation and funding of activities.





The afternoon included a circular “health walk” with a local group in Braemar. The Cairngorms Walking to Health Project encourages more people to become physically active in their local community. This is achieved through regular, short, safe, social-led walks with trained Health Walk leaders. The walks take place all year round, with cancellations only in the worst of weather.

The Project has been operating in the Cairngorms National Park area since 2005. During that time it has built a reputation for delivering high standard Health Walks in local communities as well as working with a diverse range of organisations to support service users with a regular Health Walk, including Alzheimer’s Scotland (dementia), local NHS Highland and Grampian services (diabetes, smoking cessation, and weight management) and CLAN (cancer).

The walk made use of the community path networks which form the basic infrastructure to provide the public with reasonable access throughout their area. By linking key amenities and recreational opportunities, these paths provide an opportunity to reduce dependency on vehicular travel and enable easier access to the environment.



Walking with the group allowed the opportunity to meet with participants and discuss the immediate benefits they felt participation brought to them and other members of the group and also to consider the wider health, social and community benefits of the service as part of a ‘prevention’ agenda.

<http://www.cairngormsoutdooraccess.org.uk/>

# Feedback

## From Civil Servants

In feedback from Civil Service participants comments included:

*“It was of particular use meeting people affected by policy”*

Those who had rated their previous understanding of community-led health as ‘poor’ subsequently said that the learning exchange had helped to further their understanding of this way of working. Similarly they also recorded that they now have an increased understanding of the challenges, limitations and barriers faced by the community and voluntary sector.

The learning exchanges were also credited with having helped civil service participants to recognise and identify opportunities to engage with the community and voluntary sector in the future.

Regarding future plans for changes to work practice the following comment was made:

*“I plan to try and think about better ways to reach people my work affects and how to make ‘co-production’ more real”*

## From Voluntary Sector Participants

In response to the question “What was of particular use?” comments included:

*“The day went very well and the group enjoyed the opportunity of meeting with the civil servants”*

When asked “Do you have an increased understanding of the challenges, limitations and barriers faced by Scottish Government?” all respondents replied “yes”. Similarly there was a unanimously positive response to the question “Has the learning exchange programme created space to generate ideas to strengthen working in collaboration?” Again all respondents replied “yes”.

When asked how confident they would feel if asked to engage with Scottish Government following their experience of the Learning Exchange all respondents indicated that they were either ‘Confident’ or ‘Very Confident’.

As part of planning the visit voluntary sector organisations were brought together to discuss how best to present their organisations. The benefits of this are seen in the response to the question. “Have you made any new work-related contacts as a result of the learning exchange?”.

*“Yes both the other organisations and the civil servants”*

*“Yes, CHEX and NHS Health Scotland”*

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