

Case study 144

What Works in Tackling Poverty

Fife Gingerbread

What are case studies?

Case studies share what people and organisations have learned from delivering or developing a project or programme. They can help you to see what has worked on the ground and can give you ideas about how to tackle problems. They can also signpost you to people and organisations you may want to talk to.

Fife Gingerbread

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In a nutshell

Fife Gingerbread is a voluntary sector organisation working with lone parents all over Fife. They were established in 1987, although in those early days they were known as Fife Federation of Gingerbread. By the time of their name change in 2002 there was already a marked change in household patterns and demand for services through an increase in one parent families. Their remit however has remained the same; to provide accessible, approachable and non-judgmental support, advice and information to all lone parents with children of all ages, from all backgrounds and walks of life. They offer a wide variety of services to local communities, including:

- Advice and information
- One to one support / local support groups
- Advocacy and representation
- Family activities and events
- Volunteering opportunities
- Buddy programme
- Increased skills opportunities
- Teen parent project.



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The issues

Fife has 7% of the Scottish population spread across inner central and remote rural areas. Despite relatively buoyant growth the experiences of people are very unequal, with opportunities and quality of life varying considerably across areas and amongst different groups. In the 2009 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, Fife has seen an increase in concentrations of deprivation within the 15% most deprived as well as increases in levels of income and employment deprivation (51 datazones now fall in the 15% most deprived with 8 ranked in the lowest 5%).¹

Lone Parent Profile

The Office for National Statistics reports that children are now three times as likely to live in one parent households compared with 1972.² One Parent Families: A Profile, details further:

- In Scotland, it is estimated that there are over 174,000 lone parents with 295,000 children
- The median age for a lone parent is 36; *only* 2% of lone mothers are teenagers
- 10% of lone parents are men
- Lone parents *remain* the poorest family type - 66% in Scotland live on an income of less than £15,000 compared to 11% of two parent families
- They are more likely to have fewer educational qualifications and face more barriers accessing education, training / work
- They are twice as likely to *cycle* back and forth between welfare and work
- 60% entering work go into low paid jobs with poor earnings prospects
- A one-parent family is now viewed as a *stage* in family life that lasts on average about five and a half years.³

The report, One Parent Families; The Issues, captures the fact that many lone parents are grappling alone with the challenge of being sole breadwinner and carer. There is often the

crisis of relationship breakdown / separation, divorce, bereavement or abuse and further issues around:

Personal attributes, ie poor confidence, low self esteem, lack of social, educational and vocational skills as well as emotional barriers

Personal circumstances, ie barriers to accessing affordable and flexible transport and childcare, attitudes, perceptions and prejudices, poor health, social isolation, benefits trap, debt and poverty

Structural influences relating to availability of education, training and employment opportunities, government interventions and childcare infrastructure.⁴

The approach to the issues

Fife Gingerbread is based in Leven with outreach services aimed at the 10,000 or so lone parent families living in the whole of Fife. Starting out as a community activist led group in 1987, in response to the UK wide self-help Gingerbread model, they worked solely on a volunteer basis. Fast forward to today and they are now supported by a number of funders and sponsors, employing eight staff and 39 volunteers. The organisation is the only of its kind in the Fife area, priding itself on being open, inclusive, approachable and friendly. The team of Support Workers is the backbone of the organisation and is on the front line when it comes to engaging with lone parents. They work with anyone who has responsibility for bringing a child up on their own, including grandparents or army husband / wife for example.

Advice, Information, Support and Advocacy

The support team works in partnership with a whole range of local voluntary and statutory services to identify and engage with lone parents. They offer a wide range of emotional and practical support, be it one to one, home visits, group and peer support or telephone advice. Further, they accompany parents to meetings with wider advice and service agencies.

¹ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2009

² Office for National Statistics; Social Trends, 2007 edition

³ One Parent Families Scotland; One Parent Families – A Profile, August 2009

⁴ One Parent Families Scotland; One Parent Families – The Issues, August 2009



The staff and management board are responsible for keeping abreast of information, ie on local services / developments or changes to housing and welfare benefits. They keep members informed and consult with them to represent their views throughout Fife and wider, nationally.

Buddy Project

Fife Gingerbread's Buddy Project is an innovative programme that aims to match hand-picked lone parent volunteers with parents in need of practical and emotional support. This confidential partnership gives parents a chance to experience a relationship that focuses solely on them. Every buddy receives initial induction approval and training as well as 'top-up' development on an ongoing basis. Wider volunteering opportunities are on offer for lone parents to develop their confidence and gain new skills; administrative, group facilitation, event support etc.

Student Support Services

A dedicated Student Support Worker is on hand to offer support and advice to any lone parent who is considering or has plans to get back into education or learning. They help address barriers in terms of childcare, transport and changes to benefits as well as support parents to access skills development and training.

Teenage Parent Support

Although Fife Gingerbread work to break down the stereotypical image of a lone parent as a teenage mum (only 2% of lone mothers are teenagers), they also recognise that some of the difficulties faced by teenage parents are unique. A dedicated Teenage Parent Liaison Worker works in partnership with health and education agencies and wider voluntary and statutory partners to support teenage parents in establishing good parenting skills, developing group and peer support networks and promoting engagement with other services.

Community Support

Various events are organised throughout the year to enable lone parent families to get out and about and socialise. Previous events have included a family fun day, summer picnics and a trip to the zoo – things that many families would not be able to afford otherwise.

Evidence of success

- Membership base of 888 lone parents
- In 2010, 250 families received one to one support
- 106 people attended group support sessions
- 6108 hours (equivalent to 255 days or 36 weeks) of childcare was secured / provided via protected places and groups (approximate value £24,432)
- £104,000 of financial gain secured for lone parent families (including benefit income maximisation, education grants etc)
- 241 people attended the summer family fun day with over 300 to the fundraising gala
- 55 teen parents supported to engage with peer networks and other services
- 47 buddies recruited and trained
- Since inception of the Buddy Project, 75 buddies have been involved;
 - ✓ 23 have gained employment
 - ✓ 24 are at college / university
 - ✓ 14 are involved in wider volunteering in the community
 - ✓ 6 continue to volunteer with Fife Gingerbread
 - ✓ 8 unknown (prior to tracking)

Suzanne*, a mother with 4 small children, was in an unstable relationship and feeling lonely isolated and overwhelmed. She self initiated her own referral to Fife Gingerbread, looking for help and someone to talk to. After many one to one support sessions at home she felt able to join a local support group. Being out and about was a daunting experience for Suzanne at first however she soon made friends with people in similar situations and gained enough confidence to help out at local groups and events. She then progressed to train as a volunteer buddy and has now moved on to Buddy Mentor, overseeing all buddies in her local area. Her dedication and hard work are valued by the Fife Gingerbread team and she continues to develop her skills and experience with the view to future employment.

* name has been changed

Lessons learnt

1. Recognising both the similarities *and* differences in lone parent circumstances and needs is central to developing services. It is important not to pigeonhole a client group
2. Taking a *tick box* approach to supporting lone parents is ineffective – the length and depth of engagement is dependent on the individual. A membership approach allows for a constant relationship, for the door to remain open for people to dip in and out depending on their circumstances
3. Reputation and word of mouth referrals can be the most persuasive and effective marketing tools - 25% of all Fife Gingerbread's referrals are self initiated
4. A cocktail of funding allows for more flexibility in service delivery compared with reliance on larger core funds
5. Changing the mindset in a people focused culture to value and embed recording and evaluation paper trails takes perseverance. The involvement of staff in the design and development of systems and processes is crucial to successful transition
6. Lone parents can internalise worries and bury their head in the sand, particularly in light of current welfare reform. In order to counteract media sensationalism and prepare parents for change that will affect them, information needs to be accessible. Keeping up to date with trends in communication, ie facebook, twitter and making available newsletters, fact sheets and specialised support sessions are all more open ways to engage people.

One great thing

Whilst a small independent voluntary organisation has limited security in terms of not being tied to a parent body, the autonomy this brings in terms of decision making and strategic direction has been something Fife Gingerbread has embraced. The overall approach is grounded by flexibility and having a sense of adventure. Being able to constantly evolve, open to trying out new ways of working, branching out in new directions and molding services to fit family's needs rather than having a set agenda are key to Fife Gingerbread's success. This has only been possible through promoting a strong internal

communication system however. Everyone from members, management board to office and support staff is involved in shaping strategic direction.

Why would this approach work well elsewhere in Scotland?

The *Gingerbread* model is a proven model of success in working with lone parent families across the UK. Learning from good practice is key to successfully approaching advice and practical support for families.

What next?

The change in financial climate and the impact of welfare reform on lone parent families is influencing the direction Fife Gingerbread is migrating:

- New group work programmes are planned for the end of summer 2011. The aim is to engage and consult with parents re: direction and work in partnership with other local organisations to map expertise and develop rolling, end to end up-skilling development sessions
- With the funding for the Buddy Project at an end, and not wanting to lose momentum in terms of success, the aim is to integrate the volunteering as central to Fife Gingerbread's approach to supporting lone parents.



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