

The Cyrenians

An enterprising charity enabling socially excluded people to change their lives

The Cyrenians, a Newcastle based charity formed with the aim of addressing the problem of the lack of facilities for homeless people in the area, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.



A group of Cyrenians service users

Established in 1970, the organisation has evolved from its roots as a nightly soup run able to provide accommodation for just 24 people each night to the enterprising charity it is today, providing a range of services that address not just the issue of homelessness but all areas of social exclusion.

The main goal of The Cyrenians is to move socially excluded people, homeless or otherwise, into a position where they are able to take control of their lives, helping them to address the

issues that led to their social exclusion and enabling them to transform their lives. The Cyrenians provide practical, realistic solutions in order to achieve this; emergency intervention, stabilisation through the provision of accommodation and support services and progression through volunteering, providing the skills and training needed to enter the labour market.

The Cyrenians strive to address social exclusion of all types and at all stages, from homelessness to sexual exploitation and from alcohol and drug addiction to issues of re-offending, with projects operating in Tyne and Wear, Durham and Northumberland. The charity provides a range of accommodation services including emergency hostels, a drop in support service, floating support, semi-independent living and accommodation created specifically for women who are victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

Recognising the need to respond differently to socially excluded women as their needs are often different, the charity provides a range of services beyond the provision of accommodation. The DASS (Domestic Abuse Support Service) outreach service provides group and one-to-one support for women experiencing domestic violence while The GAP Project is a user-led support service for women involved in sex work – an issue often neglected – providing group sessions, confidence building and a weekly health clinic. The Cyrenians also offer a service aimed at reducing the rates of women re-offending with the WoW (Women Outside Walls) project. Funded by the Ministry of Justice, the service tackles issues of discrimination towards female offenders, and recognising the problems that can lead to women offending, the project builds self-confidence and provides key skills training in order to break the cycle of re-offending.

The charity also seeks to address issues of drug and alcohol addiction among the socially excluded. The Gateshead based Oaktrees programme is an abstinence day treatment centre for those suffering from addiction, with places commissioned by Newcastle City Council and South of Tyne and Wear PCT. Innovative in its approach to recovery, the programme aims to deal with the addiction itself rather than the substance and does not substitute one substance with another. The programme also works with parents suffering from addiction aiming to break the cycle of addiction so as to avoid it being passed on to the next generation.

Perhaps the most innovative service The Cyrenians offer is its approach to achieving social inclusion for its service users through providing skills and training. The charity's Newcastle premises are also home to the Brighter Futures Construction Skills and Training Centre which offers 'taster' and in-depth courses in carpentry, joinery, bricklaying and plastering, providing pathways into further education,



Trainees from the Brighter Futures Construction Skills and Training Centre

work experience and employment. The Cyrenians horticulture project, NE4 VEG, provides users with horticulture and landscape gardening skills and training, producing rare organic vegetables for local restaurants. The benefits of this training are clear, developing both confidence and skills: “You know, not so long ago, talking to complete strangers would have made me uneasy and uncomfortable – but now it feels easy and normal being able to talk about what I am doing”, says one service user.

A strong emphasis is placed on volunteering as a means of gaining skills and building confidence – in fact, a significant number of The Cyrenians’ volunteer

crew is made up of service users, complimented by a mix of non-service users. A particularly interesting volunteering project is The Cyrenians Cruddas Park charity shop. The shop, developed in partnership with John Lewis, takes something of a ‘boutique’ approach to second-hand retail, accepting only donations of quality clothes and accessories. The shop also benefited from a 3 week project in partnership with Northumbria University through which 30 design students volunteered their skills, designing a range of promotional items for the project.

The achievements of The Cyrenians volunteering work has been recognised nationally – in 2009 the organisation received the Queens Award for Voluntary Service, a prestigious award recognising groups who provide quality voluntary services. Indeed, the success of the charity is further evident in its financial turnover. Though initially formed with finance from inner city investment funds, The Cyrenians now generate a significant turnover with a 2009 profit of £6 million with this figure forecasted to increase in 2010. The majority of this income comes from both national government and local authority contracts, and whilst perhaps not strictly a social enterprise in that the organisation, as a charity first and foremost, actively encourages donations and receives some funding, it is the way in which this finance is used that makes the charity enterprising. As Director of Quality and Development, Ollie Batchelor explains, “What money we do receive in funding is used to make our projects lasting and sustainable with a view to mainstreaming, and having a variety of income streams gives The Cyrenians greater financial security during hard times”.

It is the business orientated nature of The Cyrenians that has helped the charity succeed. The appointment of Stephen Bell, winner of the 2006 Community Foundation Awards North East Entrepreneur of the Year, as Chief Executive in 2001 is viewed as a significant milestone in the development of the organisation: “Having come from the private sector, Stephen strived to transform The Cyrenians into a more sustainable, business like charity. We are now more focused on making profit and being accountable and where possible aim to use our own income to develop new projects and purchase properties”, says Ollie. This ethos operates through all levels of the organisation – each individual of the organisations 160 strong workforce, a number of whom are ex-service users, are held accountable in their area of work. The inclusive nature of the charity is reflected in its organisational structure. Whilst strategic decisions are made by a Senior Leadership Team, in recent years much responsibility with regards to budgeting and service development has filtered down, with project managers and service users influencing much of the charity’s work and enabling it to grow.

The future does indeed look bright for The Cyrenians. The charity has recently invested in a new trading arm, TCUK Property Services which, whilst providing a further income stream, will also employ graduates from the Brighter Futures centre as apprentices both providing the graduates with further experience and enabling the organisation to develop a ‘move-on’ accommodation service for users of its hostel. Overall, The Cyrenians main aim is to continue their present work with the socially excluded. As Ollie asserts, “Our aims for the future are not necessarily centred around growth and are rather more about demonstrating the quality of our services – we are an enterprising charity providing solutions to issues of social exclusion and will remain so”.

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