

HISTORY OF THE CYRENIANS

Beginnings

Although the Cyrenians was formed in 1968, we have to look back to 1963 to discover its origins.

It was in this year that The Simon Community (also known in some places as Cyrenian Community) was founded by Anton Wallich-Clifford. Wallich-Clifford's idea for Simon was to "reach out to the homeless and rootless, to be a movement of concern and, by working as a community, to offer a radical alternative to institutional care." The Simon (or Cyrenian) community movement is named after Simon of Cyrene, a saint who took the burden of carrying Jesus' cross, which plays into the Simon philosophy of 'sharing the burden'.

In February 1968, at the time when there was a nationwide expansion of Simon Communities, a group of students from the University of Aberdeen, having been impressed by the work carried out in other cities by the Simon Community and the Cyrenians, invited Anton Wallich-Clifford, to deliver two talks in Aberdeen.

The first talk to the students inspired them to take action, resulting in two all night surveys of derelict buildings during the University's charity week in April 1968, to find out the full extent of the problem of homelessness in Aberdeen.

The second talk was open to the general public. This meeting resulted in the formation of a Committee for Rough Sleepers, which discussed the problem of homelessness in Aberdeen and how it could be resolved.

In the autumn term of 1968, the students, still intent on addressing the homeless issue in the City, set up a soup run in the Castlegate. The volunteers involved negotiated with local grocers and butchers to get left-over food to make soup with and also obtained left-over food from the halls of residence at the University. The soup run originally ran for one night a week but soon there were enough volunteers and provisions to run it six days a week.

Throughout 1968 and 1969, the Committee formed as a result of Wallich-Clifford's second talk, met regularly and began having meetings with the student group who were running the soup run. These discussions identified a major need to provide a night shelter in Aberdeen, and the groups merged into one.

With the groups now acting as one, they started to negotiate with the City Council about the provision of a night shelter. There were numerous suggestions of where the night shelter could be situated, but, as was to be the case with future Cyrenian projects, public opinion and opposition influenced the decisions and resulted in disappointments in the search for a location for the shelter. The Council agreed to build a brand new night shelter at the back of the lodging house, on West North Street (locally known as the Modeller), but this would take time and those involved were anxious to start a night shelter as soon as possible and looked for a temporary venue.

On Christmas Eve 1969, the Sheret Court Mission, a religious organisation, offered their venue on East North Street to the Cyrenians for five months. The venue was a basic hall and filled up with sleepers very quickly. With the help of student volunteers it began opening full time and was full every night.

At the completion of this five month period at the Sheret Court Mission, another temporary venue had to be found as the night shelter was not yet complete. After a short search, it was a disused fish and chip shop on Park Street that found itself being used as the second temporary shelter. This venue had to be completely gutted to be of use, but as soon as it was, as was the case with the Sheret Court Mission, it was filled to capacity every night. The Park Street shelter remained in use until the new night shelter was ready to move into.

Like the temporary venues before it, the new night shelter filled up very quickly. A report written in May 1971 stated that a hundred people had used the facility in the space of a year, with twenty of those being regulars.

The shelter was very basic and its reputation went before it. There were two main rooms, one for women and one for men. It also had a small kitchen, three toilets and

an office. There were a small number of old hospital beds used, however these were not enough to sleep everyone wanting to use the shelter, which resulted in people sleeping wherever there was space to lay down.

Although the staff and volunteers tried their best to keep the place lively, it was always a very depressing place. The Aberdeen public considered the place as where the 'lowest of the low' went, as it was thought that people had to go to the shelter as they had been barred from the lodging house. They were partly right - the demand for the night shelter was due, to a certain extent, to the way the Lodging House was run. It had a strict regime and half of the people who needed the service were barred so it would run half empty, resulting in the night shelter running at above full capacity. However, women had no choice but to use the night shelter – the Lodging House was men only.

The Lodging House was run by the local authority, and those that worked there were paid a wage, whereas the Cyrenians night shelter depended on volunteers to keep it operating. As a result, there was a running battle between the night shelter and Lodging House and there was a clear divide between the two. It was concluded among those involved with the two services that fundamental change was needed, and that the individuals using either (or both) currently had no pathway out of their situation.

An example of those requiring the facilities at The Lodging House included those who were out of work, ex forces, single men who had no accommodation due to family breakdown, and men suffering from mental health issues and alcoholism.

The founder of the Cyrenians, Sandy Murray, became the Superintendent of the Lodging House. After his appointment many changes took place in the provision for the homeless in Aberdeen through both the Lodging House and the Night Shelter. There was a complete regime change in the lodging house and attempts were made to address the demeaning reputation of the lodging house and night shelter and the stigma that went with staying there. The new emphasis was to treat residents in a positive way so that they could have their dignity and maintain what was left of their

self-esteem. More attempts were made to find solutions for those who had had no other option of accommodation.

In 1977, Sandy Murray set up the Langstane Housing Association, which would provide affordable rented accommodation to single people and he was also involved in founding the Scottish Council for Single Homeless. The emergence of these two organisations was significant, in that it showed that homeless people and their needs were beginning to be recognised.

In that same year, a Working Party for Single Homeless was established in Aberdeen to plan alternatives to the Lodging House and Night Shelter. The social work department, housing department as well as the Cyrenians were involved in this working party.

This came about as there was a growing consensus that alternatives to the Night Shelter and Lodging House had to be discussed as they were now considered a low form of shelter. They institutionalised, stigmatised and trapped those living within them.

Along with the Working Party, the Cyrenians were expanding the services they were providing to the homeless in Aberdeen. They ran a flat in Craig Place in the Torry area of the City that provided accommodation for three men.

In 1978, the biggest development for the Cyrenians since the opening of the Night Shelter was the opening of the day centre on Blackfriars Street. As the Night Shelter and Lodging House were closed from 9.00am to 8.00pm there was a major need for a place for the homeless to go during the day. The day centre provided shelter for the day, companionship as well as food, advice and basic facilities for washing and personal hygiene. The day centre also had a workshop where small items of furniture and other craft items were made by the users of the day centre. These were often sold at the Castlegate Market. The workshop also provided a framing service which was used to generate profit that could be used to buy more tools and materials.

The 1980s

In 1980, the Cyrenians established a Homemaker scheme which provided tenancy support to those who were provided with a tenancy through Langstane Housing, initially operating in flats in Dee Street. The Homemaker scheme taught tenants basic skills needed for maintaining a successful tenancy such as budgeting, paying bills and house-keeping.

Prior to 1981, the only place homeless women could go was to the Night Shelter which was very unsuitable for their needs. As a result, 91 Crown Street was bought by Langstane Housing, and the Cyrenians took over the running of this as a hostel for homeless women and provided the first service of its kind in the City, jointly funded by the Cyrenians and the local authority.

Initially there was a mis-conception that the hostel was a woman's refuge, however, the aim was to help women who had become homeless due to a range of issues rebuild their lives and be able to maintain their own tenancies. There was no time limit in the hostel which meant that all issues could be resolved before the women had to leave.

In 1986, seven years after the Working Party had been set-up, the Lodging House and Night Shelter were ready for closure. A new project, Wernham House, was set to open. Its aim was to provide long-term accommodation to older men and women who suffered from alcoholism. Wernham House was the first project of its kind in the country as it was the first 'wet' Hostel, which meant that residents could drink on the premises at any time. The first residents of Wernham House were regulars of the Night Shelter and Lodging House who were unlikely to be able to sustain their own tenancies. The Night Shelter and the Lodging House were closed in 1986 and Wernham House originally began in the old Lodging House until the new purpose built premises on Virginia Street opened in 1988.

Staffing at Wernham House was made up of all paid employees and saw a move away from the volunteer dependency that the night shelter had. It was (and is) a professionally run project that set the way for many similar projects nationwide.

In 1988, Stopover opened at 61 Langstane Place. The aim of this project was to provide short stay accommodation to young people aged 16-25 years with the maximum stay being 3 months.

For three years prior to its opening, the future of this project and whether it would open was uncertain due to funding difficulties, and there was much objection from the local community as it was based in an affluent area. However, following a large degree of consultation, and the decision that Urban Aid would fund the enterprise, Stopover was up and running. The project provided a much needed service to young homeless people in Aberdeen, where previous Cyrenians emphasis had been primarily on the older generation of homeless. However, dealing with younger people brought a new range of issues that the Cyrenians had never dealt with previously.

The 1990s

By the beginning of 1990, the day centre at Blackfriars Street was in a bad state of disrepair, and it was decided that the project could no longer remain there. Summer Street became the new home for the day centre, and accordingly the name was changed to the Summer Street Project where it remains today. This centre would go onto establish itself in the community and provide a wider range of support than had been provided at the Blackfriars Street day centre.

The new day centre continued with the picture framing enterprise and further developed the workshop and print studio which produced a wide range of work which was publically displayed at the Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museum and other venues around the country. This work included "A Festival of Banners" and "Behind the Mirror"

The day centre was and continues to be the 'frontline' of the organisation and in many instances is the first contact with the Cyrenians for the homeless. The day centre provides support on two levels. On a primary level the centre provides basic necessities such as food and washing facilities. On a secondary level the centre, which employs four project workers, assists in resolving the varying issues the people who use the centre have. Many of these issues are complex and often the

Summer Street Project is the last 'port of call' for some who have nowhere else to go for help and support. The project provides a range of activities from arts and crafts to aromatherapy and Shiatsu treatments. A recent successful development of the day centre has been the weekend opening, which has been thanks to a large number of volunteers. The centre now provides support seven days a week.

Another development for the Cyrenians that occurred in 1990 was the relocation of the women's hostel to 71 Crown Street. These new premises provided single rooms for each resident and a greater emphasis was placed on 'one to one' support, aimed at helping the residents to resolve their issues. The project workers create a positive environment, by encouraging the women to build up social networks, and provide them with opportunities for social activities. There was never an age limit for those staying in the women's hostel, however, those living there were (and are) aged between sixteen and twenty five.

In 1992, a new project at 311 Clifton Road opened. It was originally called the Leaving Care Project, providing accommodation and support for ten young people who had previously been looked after by the local authority. The residents who need the largest amount of support are given a room in the main house, while those whose needs are not so great have the opportunity to live more independently in self contained chalets in the garden of the house, while still having the support to gain the skills needed for independent living. The main development in the history of the Clifton Road project was the step away from the Leaving Care Project to provide accommodation to all young people who are in need of support. However it remained that a large number of the young people using the service had previously been in local authority care.

1993 saw the opening of two new residential projects for older homeless people in Westray Crescent and Printfield Terrace. These group flats offered a less institutionalised way of living than that which was available at Wernham House, but with support still available to the residents.

The Rent Guarantee Scheme was started in 1995 and was devised to help those who were having trouble gaining their own local authority tenancies. The scheme

involved negotiating with a private landlord to take on a tenant without a financial deposit as access to private sector accommodation has always been difficult for those on low incomes, as they struggle financially day to day they have no way of accumulating enough money to put down a security deposit to landlords. The scheme expanded in 2000 when it became part of the Rough Sleepers Initiative, including even more flats in Aberdeen and extending into Aberdeenshire.

The Cygnet Project (Cyrenians Generating New Education and Training) started in 1996. Those working within the Cyrenians recognised that at the time there was low unemployment in the country as a whole but high unemployment within the homeless community. In order to stop the cycle of unemployment amongst the homeless, help is provided in the form of basic pre-vocational training. The Cygnet programme encourages independence and a better quality of life through employment as clients are more likely to be able to maintain a tenancy. The project was originally funded by the lottery fund and was situated in a shop on Union Street. In 2000, this funding fell through and the project had to vacate the shop front and move in to the Summer Street premises.

A major success of the Cygnet project is the information sessions that are carried out at secondary schools across the area on housing and leaving home. The Cygnet project leads the way in Scotland in relation to this type of service.

In 1999, Craig House on Dee Street opened. Its aim was to offer accommodation and support to young people who were at risk of homelessness due to drug or alcohol related problems, which may, in turn, lead to 'rough sleeping.' The main objective is to ensure that those who leave the project can maintain their own tenancies, so there is an emphasis on teaching homemaking skills such as cooking and budgeting. There is no time limit that residents can stay in the project which ensures that they have the time required to resolve their issues.

The 2000's

2003 was a busy year for the Cyrenians which saw the addition of three new projects.

The first was the creation of the Community Support Service (CSS) at a new location in the Gallowgate. The CSS provides a number of services to those at risk of homelessness in the community. The emphasis is on supporting people, either on a short term basis through a duty advice service, or longer term through a dedicated support worker. The support workers aim is to resolve any issue that would affect the clients housing status so that they can maintain their tenancy. These issues cover a variety of areas, however advice is also given in relation to any drug or alcohol issues the client may have. The level of support offered (or required by clients) varies greatly with some receiving a couple of hours support a week to others receiving a lot more. Clients can be referred to the CSS from outside agencies but a number of them are those receiving support after leaving a Cyrenians residential project and into their own home.

The other two projects which opened in 2003 were located at Trinity Lane and Urquhart Road. Both of these projects provide supported tenancies for those who require housing support. Each individual is given their own tenancy but get visits from support workers who teach basic living skills. This enables them to live independently. Each individual is given their own 'plan of needs' and contact hours vary, with hours generally reducing the longer the time that they have stayed within the project.

In 2004, the Integrated Community Drugs Rehabilitation Service (ICDRS) was established and based with the CSS at the Gallowgate.

The youngest project is the Fonthill project which opened in 2004. This was primarily for older people with alcoholism and initially housed three individuals who had previously been resident at Victoria House. However, on the closure of this council run hostel, they had nowhere to go, hence the Fonthill Project was created. This project has not been without its problems, and as was the case with Stopover, there was a fair degree of resistance from the general public given its affluent locality. The Fonthill Project provides a 'home for life' if necessary and provides persons with added support to teach them basic skills. The project is currently expanding to include supported accommodation for five further residents.

In 2007, Iceberg (Aberdeen) Community Interest Company was established and its first initiative was Iceberg Arts.

Iceberg Arts is a social enterprise that provides training and employment opportunities for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. One main focus of the business will be on providing a high quality printing service, particularly of small print runs, which is attractive to the voluntary sector, the "music scene" and other smaller businesses. This will generate income to sustain the enterprise and eventually contribute to the work of the Cyrenians. The second focus will be on developing the talents of the trainees to produce designs that can be used on cards or other personalised items.