CornerHouse - a mental health community development hub

Paul Field
Director of Services, CornerHouse, UK

Abstract
This article profiles CornerHouse, an organisation that has played a key role in facilitating the emergence and development of a large number of mental health services and self-help groups in West Surrey. CornerHouse takes a community development approach, facilitating and empowering small local mental health groups, and building an active and sustainable local mental health community.

Key words
CornerHouse; Community development; Self-help groups; Empowerment

CornerHouse is also an important local source of information on mental health. It provides a wide range of posters, leaflets and flyers on mental health services and organisations operating both locally and nationally. People can pop in to obtain any information they might require, or ring or email to have it sent to them. CornerHouse also has an impressive website detailing all the activities and organisations at the centre, as well as links to a comprehensive array of information and resources regarding mental and emotional health (www.cornerhousewoking.org.uk). A regular news blog provides information on the latest mental health news and events locally and regular news emails are sent to our mailing list.

CornerHouse aims to provide a broad menu of services, groups and information access to the widest spectrum of people affected by emotional and mental health issues locally, which in effect can be considered to be all local residents. As carers, partners, friends, colleagues, neighbours and members of the public, we are all affected in some way.
**The need for CornerHouse**

A number of national voluntary sector bodies that work in the mental health area, such as Mind, Rethink, SANE and the Alzheimer’s Society have succeeded in achieving a size and reputation that makes them stable and enduring organisations. While their fortunes fluctuate, they are large enough to be able to employ good quality staff, develop administrative structures and acquire properties so that they can expect to operate on a continuing and substantial basis.

At the other end of the voluntary sector spectrum stand many small and local groups that aim to meet only a very local and specific need. Given the sensitivities of mental ill health, such groups often meet the needs of particular clients more closely. However, by their nature, they are less able to develop any form of enduring administrative structure and the people involved are concerned more with the needs of clients than with the niceties of governance. They find it difficult to access financial support, and they find it difficult to find properties from which to operate. Crucially, they are also often highly dependent on the enthusiasm of one or two people; when those people wish to move on, the group’s future becomes threatened.

It was the basic vision of the people who formed CornerHouse that these difficulties could be greatly alleviated by the creation of an organisation that could provide a property and basic administrative skills to such groups. Not only would there be strength in numbers, but a supportive environment might enable and encourage the formation of new groups. It was also apparent that many small initiatives were being taken in Woking, but in isolation. There was no common centre for information about such initiatives, and often people working in the area were unaware of what was going on. The need for a single point of information seemed self-evident.

**A brief history**

CornerHouse arose from a joint initiative between The Bournewood NHS Trust, Surrey County Council, Woking User Action Group, and Woking Mind. It was agreed that the Trust would make a building freely available to a new, special purpose company for the use of voluntary sector bodies working in the mental health area in Woking. Surrey County Council agreed to make a grant available for salaries and a modicum of running costs. Also key to the start-up costs and financial future of CornerHouse was a material cash endowment inherited from the recently defunct Woking User Action Group, who previously had been the recipients of the Surrey County Council grant for the area.

There was common ground among partners that the organisation should not be a provider of services to ultimate users of mental health services, but an enabler providing building and management support to existing and new voluntary bodies. To achieve this, it was thought that the body created should be conspicuously independent of the statutory sector. It was also thought best that the organisation should be a focused group who would develop and manage the support facilities, rather than a dispersed membership group.

Woking Mental Health Resource Centre Ltd, the company’s formal title, was incorporated in March 2002, and commenced preparations in May of that year. The company achieved charitable status in 2006.

**Funding**

CornerHouse is funded by two local statutory authorities. Surrey County Council provides a grant through their adult and social care responsibilities, which currently represents approximately 50% of all CornerHouse income, while Surrey and Borders Partnership (SABP) NHS Foundation Trust provides the building from which CornerHouse operates at a nominal rent. The positive and tangible support of these two local statutory bodies has been and remains crucial to the ongoing financial viability of CornerHouse.

Approximately 12% of income is derived from office rental and room hire by local voluntary sector organisations and groups facilitated by the accommodation arrangement with SABP. The balancing 38% of income is gained through fundraising events, service income, project income and donations.

In turn, CornerHouse directly provides limited funding to some local groups in the form of start-up and ongoing publicity and operating costs, sufficient to ensure operating viability until they obtain their own project funding from commissioners and trusts. Some self-help groups
who require very limited resources are entirely funded by CornerHouse.

**Current services**

CornerHouse currently provides accommodation to some 12 local groups for drop-ins, meetings and activities, as well as serviced office space to six organisations working locally, including Woking Mind and Rethink Carers Support. Rooms are also made available to Woking College for provision of ESOL lessons to clients of Shifa, an Asian Women’s emotional health group based at CornerHouse.

Approximately 230 people attend the groups and services based at CornerHouse per week, and many community connections, advocacy, information, and signposting enquiries are also dealt with via phone and email by CornerHouse and the various services situated at the centre.

There are a number of self-help groups dealing with such issues as depression, anxiety and eating disorders, as well as a group for older people. There are two carer’s groups, one of which is specifically related to eating disorders. Four groups provide drop-ins, and services based at the centre use rooms to meet clients, carers, colleagues and other professionals.

Richmond Fellowship, who support people who have, or are recovering from, mental health problems and wish to return to paid employment, voluntary work or training, have their West Surrey base located at CornerHouse.

Some groups have arisen from initiatives by others, which have then received facilitation and support from CornerHouse, while others have been initiated and developed by CornerHouse in response to a demonstrable local need.

The levels and particulars of developmental support given to the various groups are varied. Some groups such as Woking Mind have a well-established board of trustees and management committee and require only minor support, whereas others require much more in terms of organisational and individual assistance for their groups to survive and prosper. Examples of practical support provided by CornerHouse to various groups are leaflet printing, creating websites, payroll services and catering. Help is also provided in volunteer recruitment, governance advice, fundraising and financial accounting.

**A community development approach**

Community development is generally accepted to be about working collectively in ways that aim to empower communities and increase community well-being. CornerHouse’s role has been to facilitate and empower small local mental health groups, and to increase both the well-being of the growing community of groups, and of the local general population through the success and development of such groups and their services.

CornerHouse has strived to help build an active and sustainable local mental health community through appropriate levels of facilitation and support, but avoided the acquisition of inappropriate control and power. This resistance to local empire building has been vital in the sense that the charity’s core understanding of local needs is for diverse but robust groups providing specific and often specialist support to people, and not just a single organisation providing more generalised services to a broader spectrum of service users. The result has been the collective provision of effective and focused support across the widest spectrum of emotional and mental health needs, and a network of providers aware of each other within the CornerHouse hub and working in partnership, not competition.

This has been essentially a bottom-up approach to local mental health community development, harnessing and potentiating the needs, wishes and energies of people who want to contribute locally and help others with needs they often best understand and empathise with.

Lift Up together organiser Jan Atkinson with CornerHouse Director Paul Field
This path of community development has evolved and developed over the past eight years in response to changing local needs and circumstances. There have also been challenges to overcome or effect change in response to these changing needs and circumstances. Turnover of personnel and volunteers operating at the coalface of group activity can threaten the continuity and efficacy of a particular group.

The nature, and sometimes absence, of relationships with stakeholders or local statutory services can sometimes present problems. A culture of ‘us and them’ can prevent effective partnerships and mutual organisational understanding and, most importantly, work against service user interests. CornerHouse has endeavoured to work closely and co-operatively with all stakeholder organisations in both the voluntary and statutory sector, and actively encourage others to replicate this approach. CornerHouse has helped to increase local community cohesion through, among other things, hosting local mental health forums, participating in staff inductions and training, and organising the Woking Mental Health Fair, an event with 45 exhibitors who provide local mental, emotional and social support.

**Working with the mainstream**

As well as involving local mental health groups in their development strategy, CornerHouse has also formed relationships and worked together with a number of local mainstream organisations, that is, groups not directly involved in mental health.

A good example of this work is an ongoing relationship with The Lightbox, Woking’s impressive Art Gallery and Museum. The Lightbox has a ‘History of Woking’ permanent display, in which there is a section showing artefacts from former local mental asylum, Brookwood Hospital. As part of the exhibit, there are paintings by CornerHouse service users representing their own responses to the existence, history and artefacts of the asylum on display.

This was achieved through a joint art project run at CornerHouse facilitated by a professional artist. Subsequently, the Lightbox has provided exhibition space for additional CornerHouse arts projects, involved local service users in curating an important exhibition, and currently runs a creative writing project for people with mental health issues.

The Next Steps Depression Support project promotes physical health by holding weekly walks as part of the national walking for health scheme, an activity that is open to the general public as well as service users.

Working in such ways with local organisations not only gives access and involvement for users of CornerHouse to more mainstream activities and locations, but also serves to help raise local awareness and understanding of service users’ talents and skills, as well as mental health issues generally.

**Case study: Shifa**

A good example of the community development approach taken by CornerHouse has been the facilitation of the formation and development of Shifa, a support group specifically for Asian women with emotional and mental health needs.

At six per cent of its total residents, Woking has a large, predominantly Muslim, Asian population (Woking Borough Council, 2010), due in no small measure to the presence of England’s first purpose-built Mosque, established in the town in 1889.

Shifa clients predominantly come from the Sheerwater and Maybury wards of Woking where CornerHouse is situated, areas whose score in multiple deprivation indices is among the highest in Surrey (Surrey County Council, 2010), and that have a 34% BME population (Woking Borough Council, 2010). Many BME residents experience difficulties in accessing local statutory mental health services.

In 2003, Ghazala Waheed, a former ethnic link worker from the local community mental health team contacted CornerHouse with a view to helping provide support to local Asian women. Encouragement, practical help and accommodation were provided to her, resulting in the formation of Shifa. Utilising established networks and resources, CornerHouse then helped Shifa by facilitating access to some basic statutory funding, and raising awareness of the new group among local community organisations and the local population. CornerHouse worked with Shifa to formalise their constitutional arrangements, seek and secure both core and project funding, and generally expand their services to the point where they now have two part-time workers and a group membership exceeding 250 local Asian women.
Shifa provides a safe and secure setting where members can access help, support, learning, signposting to other relevant services, and the chance to socialise without feeling stigmatised, judged or isolated.

The provision of support and information has increased members’ abilities to better self-manage their own emotional health, and aid prevention of future episodes of ill health. The self-help, self-development, physical exercise and learning aspects of this project have contributed to long-term solutions to help members break aspects of dependency, leading to self-reliance and increased social inclusion.

**Case study: Mental Health Fair**

CornerHouse organised the first Woking Mental Health Fair in 2004 in an effort to increase the charity’s profile locally, and to provide a relevant networking opportunity for local groups, organisations and statutory providers, and to showcase the mental health sector generally to the public. The Fair aims to offer something to everyone with an interest in mental health and provides a great opportunity for people to find out more about mental health and the range of statutory and voluntary sector services available to them locally.

Organised entirely by CornerHouse, the event’s direct costs are funded by sponsorship from various organisations such as Alpha Hospitals, Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and Surrey County Council, as well as by a modest charge to exhibitors.

The 2008 Woking Mental Health Fair attracted 45 exhibitors and 300 attendees, and received significant attention in the local press. Although exhibitors have, over the years, come to represent a much wider area than Woking alone, following the West Surrey Review of Day Services (TriNova, 2010) it has been agreed that CornerHouse will now organise and rebrand the event as the West Surrey Mental Health Fair.

Comments from exhibitors and attendees alike regularly express surprise at the variety of exhibitors present, and to the fact that previously they had not been aware of the number or variety of these local resources. The Fair also provides an opportunity for SABP staff and other mental health professionals to engage with and obtain feedback from service users and voluntary sector groups, as well the chance to provide information about the local statutory services and their future plans.

A series of seminars are held during the event, providing information on relevant issues, and the event is widely promoted in order to help raise public awareness of local services and mental health issues in general.

**Challenges**

There are a number of challenges that we face, both in maintaining the current services that CornerHouse provides – given the forecast financial cuts across much of future public service provision nationally – but also in contributing to new local plans to improve the cost-effectiveness and equity of day service provision across West Surrey.

It will not only be the maintenance of its own income that may affect CornerHouse financially, but also the ability to support and facilitate access to continuing funding for the various groups and services using CornerHouse, from some of whom rental income is derived. This, in turn, may challenge the ‘virtuous circle’ of monies being available from CornerHouse to new and fledgling groups for their start-up and development costs.

The continuing availability of a building from which to operate, under the same nil cost conditions as currently enjoyed, is fundamental to the very survival of CornerHouse. Plans by SABP to provide larger and more modern premises...
have been affected by factors including significant problems in the property market. Meanwhile, some groups have grown to the point where the available drop-in accommodation is constraining their development, and pressure on office and room space continues to grow.

Following the outcome of the Review of Adult Mental Health Day Services in West Surrey commissioned by Surrey County Council, the CornerHouse model has been recognised as a cost-effective and efficient way in which the future equitable provision of day services to other identified areas within West Surrey might be achieved (TriNova, 2010). The CornerHouse board have recently agreed that they are willing in principle to extend the work of Woking Mental Health Resource Centre to other localities. There will be clear challenges in achieving any expansion to our activities and service model, which will include eliciting a clear mandate and set of requirements from commissioners and our provision of a coherent plan of what we might be able to reasonably achieve, both strategically and practically, subject to any resources made available.

Conclusion
In 2002, there were only two small groups providing services for local people with mental health issues. Today there are 18 groups and organisations providing a comprehensive range of services and activities to local people, covering a wide spectrum of emotional needs. Some of these also provide services to people from a much wider geographical area, and the model that has achieved this level of community development has been recognised as a template that might be adopted in other localities.

Fundamentally, this has been achieved by a combination of two main factors: the active and positive support of key players in Surrey County Council and SABP; and the management and Board of CornerHouse possessing a clear vision of what was to be accomplished with the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to bring this about.

The CornerHouse approach enables small groups to be supported during start-up and inevitable periods of vulnerability, and provides a fast track for them to publicity, funding, governance advice, financial advice and other resources. Many of the groups are user-led and the approach is a highly cost-effective way of harnessing the energy, commitment and resources of people in the community experiencing mental distress.

Along the way, lessons have been learned and a number of groups have come and gone as people and resources have changed but, consistently, the drive to encourage and support an array of groups and services has paid off, with the local population currently enjoying the support for a wide spectrum of mental and emotional health issues.

References

Paul Field is the CornerHouse Director of Services and has been managing the charity since it first opened in 2002. He has worked as a person-centred counsellor and mental health advocate, and has substantial business experience gained as a partner in a land surveying practice over many years. Paul has also had voluntary sector experience in the past as a trustee of several charities. To contact Paul Field call 01483 757461 or email paul@cornerhousewoking.org.uk; www.cornerhousewoking.org.uk