

Helen Carlin tackling homelessness in a new way

Helen Carlin is attacking homelessness in Edinburgh with a brand new funding approach.

Ms Carlin established a community benefit society, Common Ground Against Homelessness (CGAH), to buy a property which will become home for nine men when it is refurbished. With a background in housing policy, and sheltered housing she set up charity, Rowan Alba, 23 years ago and the intention is for both organisations to work in tandem.

Shares up to £700,000 were offered in CGAH on a commercial basis with a return for investors. Unlike other charitable bodies dealing with homelessness, this funding is not in the manner of a loan, and it is not charity. It is a sustainable commercial investment and there is a commercial return for those who bought the shares.



Helen Carlin CEO of Rowan Alba

This is where the arrangement is unique in Scotland, and Helen hopes that the innovative funding model can be used again to purchase more properties until street homelessness comes to an end. First they have just purchased a property in Peffermill for £415,000. The renovations to create nine self-contained flats will cost a further £990,000. Helen says she has done little else the last three years but look for a suitable building.

CGAH will fund the acquisition and renovation of the building, which will become the second “homes for life” development run

by sister organisation, Rowan Alba.

Helen said: "I used to work for Age Concern Scotland in housing policy and got research funding to examine reasons behind homelessness. It was as you would expect relationship breakdown, alcohol, people leaving the armed forces, so I was determined to do something about that."

And do it she has. Glasgow-born Helen admits she is a wee bit embarrassed by her recent award from Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce who recognised her as Director of the Year. She clearly prefers to just get on with the job at hand.

Rowan Alba supports people who are homeless and who often have addiction issues with a broad range of support services. This is also a unique set up, as individual flats are rented on Scottish secure tenancies in partnership with Bield Housing Association. Bield organise the tenancies and Rowan Alba steps in and provides them with a stable home as well as ongoing care. At present they run a self-contained block at Thorntree Street in Leith which is a home for life for its residents, most of whom stay for around seven years or so on average. There has been just one eviction from Thorntree since it was set up in 2004.

The 24/7 support includes preparing three meals a day and residents gather to eat together in a common area. The same facilities will be offered at Peffermill which is set to be complete by 2022.

The charity has recently evaluated its work and found that for every £1 spent on supporting the men in these flats they save the public purse £3. Although the share issue has come to an end there is still room for anyone wishing to do so to [donate monies](#) to Rowan Alba which will help them in their continuing work.

The success of this work means that as soon as a person becomes a tenant, they are no longer designated as homeless.

At present, Helen says there are about 50 people who are regularly on and off the city's streets according to council figures, but when we spoke to her she estimated that number had reduced to around 9.

Admitting to being a self-confessed housing policy geek, Helen said: "We need to get them off the streets, and we need a landing point that is right for them and they need to know that they will have a home for life. Most of our tenants at Thorntree are 50+. I would like the public to understand that there are a certain number of folk who just cannot live independently. CGAH and Rowan Alba are a bit more pragmatic about it all."

To relax, she is sitting her Grade One piano exam this summer, practising as much as time allows on her electronic keyboard. She said: "I had a very bossy mum who had played the violin. So I had to play violin too and my brother got to play the piano. Now I have a very patient piano teacher."

If she applies some of the drive and determination she uses in her day job, we are sure she will do more than just pass.

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