

Homelessness prevention project, South Yorkshire

Project dates: 2007–2008

How do teenagers plan ahead and get help to avoid becoming homeless? This innovative project will train peer educators with the inside track to take a positive, preventative message about housing direct to schoolchildren.

A few years ago Dawn was sleeping rough, her family relationships had broken down, and she had ASBOs for her nuisance behaviour. Now 19, she has successfully completed her first year in a council flat, gaining full secure tenancy of her own home.

Two key changes started Dawn on a more positive path. Firstly, she learnt new communication and planning skills when she trained to become a peer educator. She also gained the stability of a permanent home, which was central to her efforts to turn her life around.

Dawn was trained and supported by Shelter's Ricochet peer-education project. Shelter's Keys to the Future project will continue Ricochet's work.

It will meet the urgent need for a preventative approach to dealing with young people's housing difficulties in Rotherham.



Photo: Steve Hall

This project looks beyond the obvious routes of getting teachers or housing workers to educate young people about housing. Instead, 1,000 schoolchildren will hear the facts from other young people who have been homeless.

Project summary

- There is a major housing problem in Rotherham, a declining steel and coal town.
- Homelessness remains a largely hidden problem, as young people sleep in disused buildings or on friends' sofas.
- Yet these young people are suffering the damaging effects of having no permanent home.
- The project aims to prevent homelessness among teenagers and young adults by giving them information and advice through peer educators.
- The project also aims to influence housing strategy and policy to ensure that in future young people facing serious housing problems are recognised and supported.

Shelter Keys to the Future



Advice and advocacy

We will:

- provide young people with expert advice and advocacy
- take key advice about housing to schoolchildren via our peer educators
- make sure young people understand the realities of moving out of home, and know where to go for help
- make sure young people's voices are heard by Rotherham council
- influence the policy and practice of housing authorities so young people get vital help and support
- create a model way of working with peer educators to prevent homelessness among young people.

Tackling a hidden problem

There is a hidden homelessness problem in Rotherham. Young people sleep where they can on friends' sofas or floors, in the town's night shelter or in abandoned factories or pubs.

'It has a big impact on young people's health, particularly their mental health,' says project manager Kevan Critchley. 'Their appearance becomes disheveled, their self-esteem plummets and depression sets in.'

We want to prevent homelessness among young people by making sure they understand the facts and know where to go for services that can support them.

This project will provide accurate information to young people on the realities of living away from home.

Trained peer educators who have experienced homelessness will deliver powerful presentations in schools, youth centres and residential children's homes that:

- challenge stereotypes about homelessness
- outline the risks, and the practical realities of housing

- help young people plan and prepare to leave home so they avoid any damaging periods of homelessness
- direct them to sources of help and advice on housing and homelessness.

The most emotive parts to the presentations are the real-life experiences, when the peer educators tell their own life stories, making the sessions an unforgettable experience for the young people who hear them.

A new start

There will be direct benefits for the peer educators, who can study for a BTEC in peer education. For many, it will be their first formal qualification, leading to better job prospects.

'You can see the pupils' mindset change from "If someone handed me a set of keys at 16, I'd be off, having parties every night" to "I wonder how I'd cope?"'

Peer education worker, Tracey Porter

What we hope to achieve...

- prevent young people from becoming homeless
- improve job prospects for the peer educators, trained and qualified by the project
- young people with housing problems get expert advice and are linked to services that can help them
- housing and other support organisations gain a better understanding of the needs of homeless young people.

...and how

- 1,000 young people will be educated about housing and homelessness
- they will know where to go for advice and help
- 400 of these young people will get expert housing advice and support
- a number of peer educators will achieve BTEC qualifications
- we will provide in-depth guidance to local agencies on the law and local housing issues
- we will keep local services that work with young people up to date with key housing issues
- we will communicate the facts about young people's housing problems to council departments so that they understand the impact of housing policies.

A permanent home is a solid base for young people to turn around their lives.