

Helping disadvantaged young adults prepare for employment

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The 800 homeless young people that live with Centrepoin t each day are amongst the most socially excluded and disadvantaged in the UK. Many of the young people Centrepoin t supports have left home early as a result of abuse, neglect, family breakdown, drugs or depression. Many have been in care or prison and have not had the benefit of family support and encouragement. At school most were regular truants who did not achieve well, left school early or were excluded and generally had bad experiences within formal education. Around one in ten has a known mental health need and an increasing number are refugees with language, cultural and isolation obstacles to overcome, and qualifications that are not recognised in the UK.

These often chaotic and unstable backgrounds can leave young people with low confidence and motivation and poor self-esteem. Often they feel intimidated by the thought of going back into formal education without qualifications, especially if they have not been in a learning environment for a long period of time. They do not know what to do or where to start, to put their lives back on track educationally and need a stepping stone to help them back into learning.

Each young person who comes to Centrepoin t has a unique personal history, with their own personal challenges and each in turn presents challenges to Centrepoin t to provide the best all round care possible. Centrepoin t makes every effort to tailor its support to the needs of each individual, working closely with young people who have been away from education for a long time and lacking the motivation to return, instilling confidence to sustain learning and achieve success. Our aim is to enable them to explore their own interests and abilities, starting them on a path of life-long learning. We aim to increase the skills that young people will need to be able to live independently, maintain their own accommodation and to access information and advice from a variety of sources and media. This involves reviewing the way support is delivered to them (taking into consideration that they are still going through the process of adolescence) and by providing the space and time for them to develop in a safe environment, in the hope they become able to proactively demand change in others areas of their lives.

Careers advice is couched within a much broader programme of support, focusing on the all-round needs of the individual. Young people are encouraged to use Foundations for Life Centres at Centrepoin t Foyers. These centres are equipped with computers and staff to enable young people to access online learning resources to bring them out of isolation, help them rebuild social skills and develop a sense of community.

Foundations for Life centres provide a mobile resource offering advice and information about suitable courses, enabling young people to read through college prospectuses and helping them to complete course application forms and improve their interview techniques. The key to the success of the centres is their accessibility, enabling young people, as and when they feel ready, to begin making steps towards getting back into education or taking on employment. Staff will continue to be on hand to support young people once they are in education, to help them manage their workload and deal with any potential problems.

We forge links with colleges and universities to increase their understanding about homeless young people's specific needs when it comes to studying, and we identify tutors and colleges which are sympathetic to this hard-to-reach group. Needs might include addressing basic literacy and numeracy skills, co-ordinating taster courses and providing more intensive one-to-one support.

Since formal structures and an academic route back into education are not suitable or appealing to many of the young people in Centrepoin t's care, we also offer additional learning opportunities. For example, our horticulture programme enables young people to gain City and Guild's Horticultural Skills Vocational 1 (No.9352), helping them gain useful vocational job skills, develop transferable teamwork skills and offering the chance to explore further employment ideas.

Centrepoin t's Lifewise programme is a series of accredited life skills workshops which equip young people with the wide range of skills required for independent living and to move towards mainstream education, training and employment.

The key to this programme is its responsiveness to young people's needs. Working in a group allows them to see that learning can be relevant, useful and fun; however workshops can also be delivered on a one-to-one basis if needed. Young people's comments feed back into existing workshops and are used to inspire new ones. The workshops are delivered by support and development

workers as well as members of the learning and health teams. Workshop schedules vary between services according to the needs of young people, but a range of workshops is available on a regular basis.

The Awards and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) have accredited all the Lifewise workshops as part of their Unit Award Scheme. The AQA scheme provides flexibility, enabling Centrepont staff to either make use of existing units or write new units that respond to young people's needs. On completing a unit, young people receive a certificate recognising their achievement, bolstering their CVs as well as their confidence.

Accreditation can help young people take the first steps towards further education, training and employment, or help them secure a place in a shared flat once they move on from Centrepont. Since Lifewise began in 2007, over 900 young people have received 2800 AQA unit certificates.

The first workshop young people attend is 'The Deal'. The Deal clearly sets out how Centrepont will work with those living with us; what they can expect from Centrepont and what is expected of them in return. Following this, young people working with their support & development, and with their learning workers identify the key skills they will need for a successful transition to independent living.

Moneywise is a programme to improve the financial capability of homeless young people. We researched the extent of financial exclusion experienced by Centrepont residents and developed a holistic programme to educate young people about personal financial management. The programme is part of the Lifewise AQA accredited workshops. It also involves capacity building through staff training and signposting to specific financial capability agencies. As a result our residents have access to high quality advice and leave Centrepont services fully informed of the importance of financial capability.

Since Moneywise training was implemented over 200 young people have received training in money matters, while a further 105 support workers have undertaken the first stage of the staff training programme. Further to this, 20 Moneywise Champions have been identified who ensure that the scheme is at the forefront of support staff minds when they are working with young people.

Feedback from young people shows an increase in their confidence levels and ability to become independent, improving their chances to become more self sufficient once they have left our services. They are also better equipped to identify personal areas of weakness and ask for support.

The core offering of Lifewise units is in managing a home, cooking and managing health, but we have been able to respond to wider issues such as anger management and coping with change, as well as improving employability. Specific units have been developed around Information,

Advice and Guidance (IAG), for example CV writing and interview skills as well as units on such things as IT, digital media and music. The Workwise unit offers the chance to enter into practical employment, either paid or voluntary, as well as apprenticeships, traineeships or work placements. Specialised roles in the learning team have been developed to deliver all these elements.

To ensure our support is making a positive contribution to the young people's lives we gauge the distance travelled. Learning assessments are carried out and reviewed regularly. These documents reflect where the young person started from and what their goals and achievements are upon entering our services. These together with the short achievable goals that are set during their stay, are all recorded and can be reflected on.

At Centrepont the link between health problems and homelessness is also well understood. More than one in ten of the young people Centrepont supports has a known mental health need. Mental health problems are eight times higher for people living in bed and breakfast accommodation, and eleven times higher for those who sleep rough, compared to the general population

To help those with mental health difficulties, Centrepont has a dedicated multidisciplinary team of accredited psychotherapists and trainers, including a drug counsellor and a healthy living adviser. The team undertakes a range of specialist assessments and develops individual packages of psychological support. These can involve one-to-one sessions, group therapy, psycho-educational and healthy living groups, referring where appropriate to external specialists while continuing to work with them jointly.

The Health team works directly with over 800 young people a year, ensuring that all who are perceived to have, or be at risk of having, a health problem are assessed within a short time of entering Centrepont services. Most referrals are young people with a history of homelessness due to abuse during childhood, as well as a number of refugees with a history of trauma, loneliness and isolation.

Our overall service is focussed on individual needs, tailoring support to each young person and their readiness to move forward. At every opportunity, we endeavour to learn from the young people that we support. Centrepont's Youth Educator Programme is a prime example of our aim to learn and discover new ideas to take on the challenges of working with this client group. Our Youth Educators are drawn from among our service users: they impart their knowledge and experiences of homelessness to other young people, helping to prevent young people becoming homeless. They also share their knowledge with Centrepont staff, training them to deal better with the issues that homeless young people face and to improve Centrepont service provision. The Youth Educators also receive formal, accredited qualifications to ensure their achievements are clearly recognised.

The success of Centrepoin't's work is the focus on each individual. Looking at individual needs and making small steps to achieve progress is fundamental to ensure a disadvantaged young person is ready to move forwards. In learning from our young people and being responsive to their needs, our support is persistent and individual care is provided by a few key staff who celebrate each person's success. Our aim is that such advice and guidance should ultimately empower the young person to help him or herself.

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References

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