

The Foyer Federation: aiming to transform the institutions and policies that currently help young people

Steve Hillman discusses the wrap around support offered by the 'Foyer' movement.

There are 14 million 14-30 year olds living in the UK today. As many as 1 in 5 are disadvantaged because they lack the skills, resources, and opportunities to take control of their lives and will therefore be unable to realise their full potential as active and engaged citizens. Some of them will have grown up in the care system, some will have experienced family breakdown, or have become parents themselves in their teens. Many will have to fend for themselves before they have had the opportunity to build the skills and resources they need to face the challenges of adult life. Their experience of the transition to adulthood is often characterised by fragmented services that kick in when they are in crisis but leave them with little or no ongoing support.

Since its creation in 1992, the UK Foyer Network has grown to over 130 Foyers, in urban, rural, and seaside locations, providing safe, quality assured accommodation linked to learning and personal development to around 10,000 young people per year. Working through these and through the other youth projects that their parent organisations support, the Foyer Federation seeks to improve the outcomes for residents, their families, their friends, and the wider community of disadvantaged young people. Most Foyers are owned by registered social landlords (RSLs), mainly housing associations. They

operate a variety of entry and referral routes, depending on local funding and funder priorities, with a high proportion of revenue funding being provided by the Supporting People programme, which now forms part of local authorities' Area-Based Grant. In addition to their work with residents, many Foyers also engage in outreach provision and encourage the participation of non-residents in social, cultural, educational, and social enterprise activities.



Before I joined the Foyer I felt that my life was pointless and I had no one there for me when I needed someone. I would get drunk to overcome my problems and my state of health was in jeopardy. I had to sleep on the street and was lonely and in need of help.

At the heart of the Foyer approach is a 'something for something' deal: a formal contract between the young person and the Foyer, where, in exchange for services that are tailored to their needs, young people

are expected to engage in their own development and make a positive contribution to their community. The Foyer Federation shapes and quality assures the programmes delivered by Foyers; leads campaigns to fill gaps in community services; and seeks to inspire policy and decision makers to make more effective investments in the lives of young people. At the heart of everything we do is a belief that young people will only achieve their full potential when there is a fair exchange between their responsibilities to contribute and engage and society's obligation to tailor services to their needs. For Foyers, this often means picking up the threads of a young person's education, developing their skills for independence and encouraging greater resilience, and often includes rebuilding relationships, overcoming mental health issues, and developing stronger confidence and self-belief.

The Foyer Federation also raises funds and directly delivers projects to tackle specific issues; including, most recently, digital exclusion (*Media Works*), literacy through sports reporting (*Tackling Skills*), homelessness prevention (*Safe Moves*), worklessness (*Working Assets*), mental health awareness (*Strong Minded*), health and well being (*Foyer Health*), youth empowerment (*Lifetracks*), and access to higher education (*University Project*) and has demonstrated how a positive investment in marginalised young people can help overcome disadvantage and build stronger communities.

Foyers are located in some of the most deprived areas of the UK and have a proven record of engagement with traditionally hard to reach groups. Around 50 per cent of current residents are aged 16-17, with a further 18 per cent between 18 and 19, and data compiled on Foyer residents for the Housing Corporation showed that:

- 45 per cent had been excluded from school, either short or long-term
- 25 per cent were young offenders
- 10 per cent had come from local authority care



It's given me the confidence to live on my own. Even though I'm living with 48 other people I'm still living on my own. Because I have my own room, I have to use my own initiative.

- 5 per cent were single parents
- 46 per cent had experience of substance misuse and
- 58 per cent had experienced high levels of mental distress

In addition, more than half claim family breakdown as one of the reasons for their homelessness. Without the interventions that Foyers provide, they would be less likely than their peers to re-engage with education, to develop positive learning attitudes or to achieve sustainable employment and independent living. A study conducted by London Metropolitan University on behalf of the Housing Corporation and the Countryside Agency found that, though 79 per cent of young people entering Foyers were not in employment, education, or training (NEET), less than 22 per cent were NEET on leaving.

Foyers strive to attain a 'balanced community', a mix of residents with different needs, skills and aspirations which enables them to promote ambitious and engaged residents as role models. Peer mentoring, resident empowerment, and youth engagement are all key features of the Foyer model and residents are encouraged to identify their own opportunities and objectives and to assess their own individual needs to achieve them. Foyer residents and other young people have also assisted in the development of the Federation's accreditation and kite-marking schemes, which enables them to influence the quality and

consistency of support provided at each Foyer location.

During 2008, the Foyer Federation set out to identify the twenty first Century challenges facing young people as they made the transition to adulthood. This led us to the conclusion that a new kind of intervention was required: one that built on the learning gained from over 15 years of delivering quality assured, holistic services to disadvantaged young people; that captured the insights of those who had experienced the Foyer approach; and that also reflected the emerging new needs of young people and addressed the obstacles that were preventing current models meeting them.

This research was set out in a report 'A 21st Century Approach to Transition', which concluded that not only was the 'ethos' that underpins what Foyers do as relevant now as it was in the early 1990s, when Foyers were created, but that there is considerable scope for Foyers to break out of the constraints of 'bricks and mortar' and 'stretch' and 'target' their services towards other groups such as care leavers, young offenders, young parents, and refugees, whose journey to adulthood is often difficult and who may presently be housed in a range of accommodation, not all of it supported and much of it unfit for purpose.

Our ambition, as embodied in our 2008-2011 Strategic Plan, is to become the organisation best known for leadership and excellence in developing services for ALL vulnerable young people, as they make the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood.

Our objective is to transform the institutions and policies that currently help young people; and which are primarily aimed at support rather than cure, and to replace them with a vision, not just to eradicate homelessness, but to replace it with the foundations for a secure, viable, and independent life. Evidence from across our network shows that the needs of young people are becoming ever more complex; crime and anti-social behaviour, poor health and well-being, low educational achievement, fears of worklessness,



I taught myself how to use all the kit in the new Media Centre we have here. I made my own music CD, and did an art project that was shown at an Open Day that we had here. Using all the kit in the Media Centre was great and I learnt loads – I even ended up showing some of the staff here how it all worked! At the Open Day I met someone from the College down the road and now I work there part time as a Multimedia Technician. Not bad in a few months!

and declining social mobility are as much a concern for young people now as street homelessness was in the 1990s. The challenge this poses for vulnerable young people is made even more acute by the present recession and, we believe, this demands a broader range of interventions to provide fairer access to the skills, resources, and opportunities that all young people are entitled to. It also requires a fundamental shift in policies and institutions to recognise the different stages of social development that cut across traditional markers of age and identity.

In 2010 we celebrate our 18th birthday, giving us the opportunity both to recognise how much we have achieved and how much more we have to do. Over the next three years we are focusing on the transition to adulthood and will be using our knowledge of young people's experience of disadvantage to develop programmes that fill gaps in current services and inspire policies for more effective investment. ■

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