

Tuesday, 28 January 2014

Sowing the seeds

24/01/2014



Sanctuary Housing is collaborating with charity Fixers to inspire young people to tackle issues they feel strongly about in their community. Austin Macauley reports

It has generated everything from an anti-bullying film to a clothes swap shop for teenagers that made it on to the ITV evening news. There have been awareness campaigns on bullying and peer pressure and creative workshops designed to help young people with mental health conditions.

The link-up between 95,000-home Sanctuary Housing and national charity Fixers has been a big hit so far, with 100 residents and 15 of the landlord's staff taking part in activities designed by 16 to 25-year-olds across eight communities in England and Scotland over the past year.

And yet the initiatives it has spawned are incidental to the main aim of the partnership. 'We are using the Fixers project as a way to identify the community champions of the future,' explains Sophie Atkinson, Sanctuary's head of community investment and sustainability. The young people who sign up as 'fixers' can tackle pretty much any cause they like - it's the journey it takes them on that matters.

Growing autonomy

'The outcomes for us are around the number of young residents involved in setting up their own projects,' she adds. 'It's the process that's helping young people to learn about different community issues. There are skills that they learn through that process.'

Sanctuary is the first social landlord Fixers has worked with. The charity, which normally works directly with young people and hasn't until now teamed up with other organisations to identify individuals who may benefit from its support, is part of the lottery-funded Public Service Broadcasting Trust and has its roots in the ITV fundraising telethons of the 1980s. Sanctuary began working with the charity after seeing its work with young people showcased at a parliamentary reception.

Launched at the start of 2013, the two-year project will see Sanctuary invest £60,000 - most of which goes towards staffing and travel costs - match-funded by Fixers, to help 240 young people to become 'fixers' in Banbury, Hackney, Sheffield, Torbay, Aberdeen, Cumbernauld, Dundee and Glasgow. The landlord has set aside a further £15,000 to allow employees under 25 to become fixers.

Margo Horsley, chief executive of Fixers, says the key message she needed to get across to Sanctuary was that it had to let go and give the fixers a free rein. Prescribing a timetable is likely to 'scupper things', she says. But every Fixers project delivers a 'triple benefit': the issue the fixer is working on will be solved to some degree; there will be a social benefit in the local area; and the young person will have gained both skills and confidence, she explains.

Recruiting fixers

The process starts with a team from Fixers visiting young people in a community, explaining the role of a fixer and then, as Ms Horsley puts it, 'standing back to see who comes over to talk to us'. Once they have shown interest they work on the issue they want to 'fix' with support from someone locally, such as a youth worker. The charity's key role is about ensuring each fixer gets attention for their project - whether it be introducing them to their MP, helping them to make a film, using social media or sending press releases to local and national media. It also has a close relationship with ITV regional news teams across the UK and, while 'there are no guarantees', it has secured coverage for 465 projects over the past five-and-a-half years.

'What you know is they will be much more articulate, confident young people,' says Ms Horsley.

'Suddenly they have a platform to work from. They have had their voice heard and it's a great experience.'

Fixers also recently began working with 10 young residents of supported living accommodation managed by 24,500-home Family Mosaic in Totton, Hampshire. Ms Horsley is keen to work with more social landlords to ensure Fixers gives opportunities to the most vulnerable in society.

'Trying to get down to that grassroots level has been an interesting experience for us. Communities can be quite close knit and don't necessarily like people coming in from

the outside. You need to build trust up and to some degree social landlords already have that.'

Projects that require it will receive continued support from Sanctuary once the partnership with Fixers has ended in 2015, says Ms Atkinson.

'I think it's grown more quickly than we anticipated and has been more successful in the sense - when one project grows legs and takes off other people follow suit,' she says. 'It has been very successful in encouraging people to take more of a role in their community.'



Case study: Josh Wilson

Josh Wilson became a fixer because he was fed up with the way parts of his neighbourhood had become a dumping ground for fly-tippers.

The 16-year-old, a Sanctuary resident in the Shiregreen area of Sheffield, decided to focus his efforts on transforming a local nature reserve called Woolley Woods. In December 2012 he rallied 30 volunteers to take part in a litter pick - but that's just the starting point.

'My long-term fix is to cut the amount of fly-tipping and bring my local area back up to its former self,' he explains. 'I have lived in Shiregreen all my life and wanted to do something that would make a positive change for the area.'

Josh was elected to Sheffield Youth Council in March and is continuing to campaign on local issues.



Case study: Rhiane Winter

Challenging a bus company to change its fares may sound like a lost cause but teenager Rhiane Winter's campaign is gathering momentum.

The Sanctuary resident's target is to persuade Stagecoach to raise the age at which young people in Torbay pay an adult fare from 15 to 18. Rhiane, 17, and her team of fixers launched their campaign on Facebook in December and within 24 hours had received 500 'likes'. There are now plans to film a campaign video with help from charity Fixers.

'We think [adult fares] should be raised to 18 to ease the financial burden on pupils who are in full-time education and their parents,' says Rhiane.

Fixers organised a meeting between Rhiane's team and Michael Watson, managing director of Stagecoach South West, this month.

He has agreed to consider the group's concerns when the firm reviews its budget in

spring.

'I certainly came away with a better understanding of their needs when it comes to bus travel,' says Mr Watson. 'We will now be exploring a range of options on what could be done to support young people travelling on our buses.'