

Local pathways to homelessness prevention

Local multi-agency approaches including mentoring and befriending support are helping young people to avoid homelessness. **Dominic Wood** spoke to those involved and discovered how MBF aims to use best practice examples to promote similar models nationally

Joe spoke in hushed tones about a future that didn't include his closest family members. "My mum was ill and constant rowing with my dad made home life unbearable. I couldn't see a future there. So I was ready to leave without anywhere else to go."

Desperately unhappy with his family and alienated from school after failing his GCSEs, Joe was set to become another homeless statistic: joining the tens of thousands of homeless youths widely believed to be sleeping rough or in hostel accommodation across the UK.

Then, when a chance meeting with his favourite teacher led Joe to attend a local authority outreach group, he was referred to a charity project that offered him a peer mentor. His mentor, David, had experienced homelessness first hand so, when he shared his stories, Joe began to discuss his own problems constructively for the first time. Through trusted encouragement from David and practical education tips from the charity, Joe's life gradually began to improve. One year on, Joe had passed his retaken GCSEs and started to live happily with his recovered mum after his parents had separated.

Joe's story is typical of how many young people are finding the support they need to avoid homelessness, through a multi-agency approach including mentoring or befriending.



Wesley and Maxine: the Emma Project works with homeless people in Darlington

Last year, the charity St Basils formed a national youth reference group asking formerly homeless young people about the value of mentoring and befriending. Tamzin Taylor-Rosser, who co-ordinates the group, says: "Many of the young people we interviewed said that peer mentors play a crucial role in schools because they understand the realities faced by other young people at risk."

"The Government is clearly taking peer mentoring and befriending seriously. MBF will gather best practice and then showcase it online"

New homelessness module

Success stories like Joe's – and the knowledge that young people seriously benefit from mentoring and befriending – recently prompted the Communities and Local Government department (CLG) to commission the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) to develop a module showing how multi-agency partnership working can steer young people at risk away from homelessness. The module will include lots of best practice examples, showing how successful mentoring and befriending projects have linked with other services. Due for completion in February, the module will be added to the wide-ranging National Youth Homelessness website – www.communities.gov.uk/

youthhomelessness – set up by the CLG 18 months ago.

Sarah Willey, MBF's national contracts manager, says: "The Government is clearly taking peer mentoring and befriending seriously and values it as part of a multi-agency partnership approach that can truly tackle youth homelessness." She adds: "MBF will gather best practice and showcase it online. If local authorities, schools or charities have worked together to produce relevant success stories, we want to hear from them with their essential details."

The good practice module follows increasing efforts by government departments to encourage the use of peer mentors as part of a holistic package to help reduce youth homelessness.

"Peer mentoring has made a difference in preventing homelessness by providing support at a crucial time for young people"

In March 2007, the CLG launched the National Youth Homelessness Scheme, which commissioned YMCA England and Centrepoint to develop a nationwide network of supported lodgings schemes accessible to young people. The scheme also established ten regional centres of excellence to promote and lead on multi-agency partnership working. The centres – comprising one local authority in each of the nine English regions and one national registered social

landlord, St Basils – were chosen for their good progress in tackling youth homelessness. They are now sharing their expertise with neighbouring councils and homelessness prevention agencies to help replicate successful models.

In May 2008, housing minister Iain Wright MP launched *Strategy in practice: joint work with housing and children's services* – a joint paper by the CLG and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The paper called on local authorities to work "better together" to ensure that young people get the support they need when on the verge of homelessness. The minister outlined the Government's vision to encourage local authorities to offer peer mentoring, family intervention and mediation services as part of a new strategy to reduce youth homelessness, alongside

Mentoring – part of a package to support homelessness

Steven Bell was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD when he was seven. After spending years living in supported schools and colleges to help him deal with his condition, he now lives in supported accommodation in Newcastle.

Steven's support worker at Outpost recommended him to the Depaul Trust's Baseline project, where he was matched with volunteer mentor Rachel. She regularly meets Steven for informal chats and enjoys ice skating, bowling or going to the cinema with him. "Rachel has been a great boost for Steven's independence," says Baseline's mentor co-ordinator Amy Milne. "She helped him to deal with his accommodation problems, apply for a passport and gain a place at his local college to start an NVQ in health and social care.

Steven is one of 15 young people helped by the project last year. "Apart from Outpost, we take referrals from Newcastle College and accommodation projects run by local authorities," says Amy.



Steven Bell with Baseline mentor Rachel

Baseline is currently part-funded by Newcastle City Council. "We're seeing an increase in referrals from local authorities. It's great that more of them are realising that mentoring works as part of a package to support homelessness."

Contact Baseline by calling Margot Chesney on 0191 261 6248, or email margot.chesney@depaultrust.org

approaches such as supported lodgings. He said: "Peer mentoring has made a difference in preventing homelessness by providing support at a crucial time for young people who may be experiencing personal difficulties or family breakdowns." He later added: "Better joint working is essential to success in tackling homelessness for the long term... and it is particularly important in preventing youth homelessness in the first place."

Multi-agency approaches

St Basils, which provides accommodation and support to prevent homelessness in Birmingham, runs the Schools Training and Mentoring Project (STAMP), which is funded by Birmingham City Council to deliver homelessness awareness sessions in local secondary schools.

"We help school leavers most at risk of homelessness," says Matthew Green, learning skills and work manager at STAMP, which is

currently working towards the Approved Provider Standard (APS). "We raise awareness of homelessness among school leavers and prevent them from reaching the crisis stage."

STAMP provides information and insight to a range of young people in school classes and youth groups, and offers targeted support such as one-to-one peer mentoring to those most at risk of homelessness.

"Going into schools is great for STAMP. It's good that schools are starting to realise that homelessness is a problem"

It calls on the experience and authentic knowledge of young people who have been homeless themselves to act as peer educators and mentors.

"Going into schools is great for

STAMP," adds Matthew. "We're trying to reach those young people at risk of becoming homeless and school leavers are a high risk. They are a captive audience and it is good that schools are beginning to understand that homelessness is a problem."

STAMP works in up to 40 schools, helping around 1,500 pupils in class-based sessions every year. Matthew says one of the challenges is that limited funding is outweighed by the high demand for the service.

"Schools are champing at the bit to get it. We try and accommodate everyone but there is lots of demand and not enough resources. We can afford one member of staff to co-ordinate delivery of the sessions and we've got sessions booked up until this summer."

Some of the minister's sentiments were echoed in *Youth homelessness in the UK: a decade of progress* – the first UK-wide review of youth homelessness in the UK for ten years. Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2008, the report highlights how support schemes are successfully linking with mentoring and befriending programmes to help young people at risk of homelessness build up their social networks. It says networks help to reduce social isolation, foster self-worth and raise aspirations.

This process is taking effect elsewhere too, particularly helping specific groups of young people in conflict. The Emma Project - run by the 700 Club charity in Darlington - uses mentoring to help young people who are ready to leave a hostel, but not ready for independent living. Mentoring support is part of a package of support available to young people living in supported



Streetlife: early intervention mentoring projects such as STAMP are helping to reduce youth homelessness across England

housing accommodation that includes living skills courses, social clubs and a 24-hour emergency line.

Nearby, the Outpost Housing Project is a charity providing housing advice, support and accommodation for young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGBT) in Newcastle. It manages eight bedsits in a city centre tower block.

Outpost allows young LGBT residents – referred because of parental disputes, homophobic abuse at home or bullying in other hostels – to stay in semi-independent accommodation for up to 18 months. Its collaboration with the Baseline Project – run by the Depaul Trust – means that each new resident is assigned a peer mentor, helping them to make the transition to independence.

The APS-approved project began working with Outpost 18 months ago. “Outpost approached us to provide mentoring because it didn’t have the resources to do so itself,” says Margot Chesney, Baseline’s project volunteer programme co-ordinator. Mentoring includes

support for housing issues and other specific aims in a comfortable environment.

“We sit down with a young person and their mentor to identify aims that the young person wants to achieve around multiple issues, which might include drug or alcohol issues,” she adds. “The mentoring support helps them to achieve those aims and might help us to signpost them to another service.”

“We’ve seen an increase in referrals from local authorities. More of them are realising that mentoring works as part of a package to support homelessness”

Although Margot believes that partnership working benefits all involved, she sounds a note of caution. “In the voluntary sector, we tend to support one another when one organisation lacks resources. But what happens if there is an

increase in partnership working, but not an increase in funding for one partner? Those partnerships are likely to break down.”

As Joe discovered to his benefit, the local authority outreach centre’s close links with the charity that found him a mentor was the glue that helped to steer him away from becoming homeless. Such partnerships mean that more people like Joe can access help from a system of linked partners, all geared up to help them overcome their problems.

“We want to help local authorities develop their responses to youth homelessness by providing ideas, good practice resources and tools,” says Sarah at MBF. “They should be aware of the benefits of peer mentoring, have access to case studies to help them see how it works in practice, and be given the resources and links to enable them to implement their plans. MBF can also help them to commission and deliver mentoring services. We want to see as many local authorities as possible getting involved because we know it works.”

How to gain recognition for (or develop) your own youth homelessness mentor programme...

- Contact MBF on 0161 787 8600 if your mentoring or befriending project would make a relevant best practice case study.
- Identify the need for youth homelessness services in your local authority by mapping what you have to build a clear picture of what is missing. Think about building partnerships with specific local charities that help hard to reach groups.
- MBF can co-ordinate your peer mentor training and help you to promote your programme.
- MBF can provide guidance on how to set up a sustainable peer mentoring programme and advice on how to embed it into your local authority plans.
- MBF can provide bespoke training events based on your particular objectives, whatever you want to achieve.
- MBF can help you gain external recognition for your programme via its Approved Provider Standard (APS).