



Commission for
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Making Best Practice Stick

Rural Youth Projects: Links, Tynedale



An operating division of the Countryside Agency

“Links provides a one-stop shop for housing support, as well as advice on employment, training, health issues and life skills.”

Introduction

Homelessness, often regarded primarily as an urban problem because of its greater visibility there, has actually increased in rural areas as a proportion of the total number of homelessness cases over the past decade.

Links, as it exists today, grew from a drop-in centre and lobbying group set up in 1989. It was originally run by volunteers; however, in 1993 Monica Haigh became a paid worker. Over the last 17 years, the project has gained an excellent track record of high-quality service and a national reputation for its work. The Links' approach is based on a commitment to holistic service provision and multi-agency working.

**Staff may help
the young people
to realise their
potential through
training,
education or
employment.
Or it may be that
the young people
have emotional,
family or mental
health problems
that require
longer term,
more in depth
involvement.**

What Links does

Links helps young people aged 16-30 to make the best of themselves. It offers stability that vulnerable young people, often in difficult circumstances, need in order to make a successful transition to independent living. It provides a one-stop shop for housing support, as well as advice on employment, training, health issues and life skills.

The project is based in Hexham, but covers the whole of Tynedale District, a largely affluent area that nevertheless contains pockets of significant deprivation. There is also a severe lack of affordable single unit housing provision in the area. Private rents are high and changes in the type and nature of housing required, with increased demand for single households, are putting great pressure on the few units that are available.

Links' staff offer one-to-one and ongoing support to the young people. This might mean helping them to fill out forms, sort out their benefits or resolve money difficulties. Staff may help the young people realise their potential through training, education or employment. Or it may be that the young people have emotional, family or mental health problems that require longer term, more in depth involvement.

The Links building contains three three-bedroomed flats and there are two flats in the town. The staff provide high-quality housing advice and outreach support. This support ranges from help with cooking, cleaning and budgeting to advice and guidance on developing interpersonal skills, communicating effectively and cooperating with flat mates. An important aspect of their work has been that they have raised awareness and changed attitudes in the community to young people's housing needs.

In the past couple of years, the length of time that young people have stayed at Links has increased. This reflects the fact that there is a shortage of one-bedroom accommodation to move on to. In addition, anyone under 18 will not be given a tenancy by private landlords. Of greater concern from Links' point of view is the fact that in 2004, one of the main housing associations in the area, changed its policy, and stopped giving tenancies to under 25-year olds. Since around 90% of Links' clients are under 25, this has had a severe effect. Those whom Links are not able to accommodate are referred to projects outside of the area or revert to other solutions such as 'sofa surfing', or staying with sometimes unwelcoming or unsuitable relatives.

“If it wasn't for Links, I don't know – I'd probably be on the streets.”

“Since I have lived in Links I'm not as nervous. I can have my own independence. I don't get depressed and I have made some great friends.”

Some rural youngsters are very naïve about the reality of homelessness, and if it happens to them they are very poorly equipped to deal with it compared with their more streetwise urban counterparts. Staff from Links have been undertaking education work in schools to raise awareness so that they don't turn up, as has been known, saying: "I've come for a house!"

Links has a contract with Connexions to provide Voluntary Sector Personal Adviser support on site. This brings regular income into the project and allows staff to gain access to higher levels of youth service structures where they can lobby and campaign about the particular barriers that young people in rural areas face. This is just one of a large number of agencies that Links staff work closely with. Monica adds: "Our name – Links – says it all. We work with any agency that the young person needs us to work with."

Links' employment training service

Links helps individuals to be equipped for work, to find a job and then to manage the whole business of a working life – from improving their reading and writing, and preparing for interviews, to sorting out what to do with their first pay cheques.

Ross's story

At the age of 17, Ross had no practical experience or vocational training. He became a resident in Links' accommodation and was enrolled on an Entry to Employment course. During the course, Ross took part in various activities, including rock-climbing, canoeing, orienteering and abseiling – where he overcame his fear of heights. Ross completed the full E2E course and was subsequently awarded a City and Guilds Profile of Achievement.

From the start, Ross showed enthusiasm for the workings of the trades training room at Links and staff noted the way in which Ross handled the tools of the building trade well and picked up new skills with ease. He began to show an interest in applying for a modern apprenticeship in the building industry and Links was able to support this move. In discussion with Links' staff, Ross mentioned that he had a relative who was a slater and that the outdoor life appealed to him. He applied to a local slating contractor, and was successful at interview. Ross has now started his apprenticeship with the company and hopes to start a slating course on day release next year.

How this project really works for young people

Links is clearly meeting the needs of young people. The staff have real understanding of the issues, and are acknowledged as experts in the field, frequently called upon by national agencies to give the benefit of their insight. They have been around for 17 years – no mean feat for a voluntary organisation in a difficult social environment and a context of changing policies. During that time, Links has expanded in response to needs identified by young people. As a result, Links ensures that all of its services are individually tailored to meet the varying needs of each young person. In addition, the support services on offer are holistic in nature and can be accessed by young people for as long as they need them.

Links provides what many of the young people most miss – an extended family that is there to give them advice, help them sort things out and look after them. Staff believe in empowering young people by giving them the basics they need to function with and the security that enables them to make their own decisions. They develop close relations with the young people, often over a long period of time. Staff work with the ethos that: *“We really get to know our clients, and focus on their individual aspirations and ambitions. We have a good reputation locally, and are seeing a second generation of young people. There is also no stigma attached to coming in to see us, and because we are informal but not casual, the young people trust us.”*

Links always asks its clients to complete a feedback form. Overwhelmingly, young people say that they feel that their prospects are the better for having been here.

“Links gave me time to sort my head out.”

“I have come out of Links a lot more able to cope with my life.”

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I came to Links but I’ve been helped to work out what I want to do. At the moment I feel I can do anything; everything is going right and I have a job and I’ve just got my own place.”

Links’ close contact with real need enables it to spot gaps in service provision, and to work with partners to meet those needs. There is a real shortage of accommodation for young people with ‘chaotic lifestyles’ who for whatever reason do not have the ability to take responsibility for their own lives. These young people need a high level of support, so the Links accommodation is not appropriate for them. Links has been unflagging in arguing the corner of these young people at all levels. Similarly, staff have been trying to address the issue of mental health provision for young people in the area. Again, the demand for care far outstrips current provision.

For the past 6 years, Links has run a small in-house furniture recycling project, which enables Links to supply young people with furniture when they move out of its accommodation and into their own tenancies.

How it is paid for

Links has been supported over the years by a large number of voluntary and statutory organisations, including: Comic Relief, Connexions, Government Office North East, Learning and Skills Council, Lloyds TSB, Northern Rock, Nomad Housing Group, Johnnie Johnson Housing, Milecastle Housing, Tynedale District Council and The Prince's Trust. It is trying to move away from reliance on grants funding towards secure contracted income.

Summary

Links epitomises the principle of finding individual solutions to individual needs. Over the long period in which it has been operating, Links has recognised the range of young people's needs and has done a great deal to address them.

"If we are to end young people's social exclusion, in an effective and sustainable way, one of the key features of our work is: the ongoing, one-to-one support that each young person receives in seeking the best outcome to their problems." Links Annual Report 2004.

For more information about the work of Links contact:

Monica Haigh
Haugh Lane
Hexham
Northumberland
NE46 3PT
Tel: 01434 607850
Email: hexham@linkstynedale.co.uk
Website: www.linkstynedale.co.uk

**Commission for
Rural Communities**

London Office

20th Floor Portland House
Stag Place London SW1E 5RS

Telephone 0207 932 5800

Facsimile 0207 932 5811

Cheltenham Office

John Dower House Crescent Place
Cheltenham Glos. GL50 3RA

Telephone 01242 521381

Facsimile 01242 584270

Email info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk

www ruralcommunities.gov.uk

