

Rushmoor CAB and Step by Step

With Alex Hughes and Laura Jones



The focus of this talk was a new initiative called Advice for the Future that brings Rushmoor CAB and local homelessness charity Step by Step together to explore new ways of delivering advice, especially to hard-to-reach communities. CAB's long experience of more conventional advice provision and Step by Step's proven success with peer education will, together, open up new opportunities that will benefit a great many more Rushmoor residents, many of whom have been badly effected by recent welfare reform.

Alex began by giving us a brief history of CAB, from its early days operating from horse boxes during WWII, though the 'Swinging '60s' to the present day, when just over 19,000 enquiries were received in 2012/13. Welfare benefits made up 30% of those enquiries, debt 20%, and housing 10%. All of these are directly affected by welfare reform. Alex pointed out that the perception of welfare generally has changed over time, from the positive idea of a welfare state protecting people from cradle to grave to a much more negative view of scroungers, fraudsters and skivers living off the state, and thus the tax-payer.

Far from seeing people living a life of luxury, Alex told us that CAB is seeing more and more people in utter despair, with increasing homelessness and dependence on food banks and pay-day loans. Alex itemised the welfare reforms that have been, or are going to be, introduced:

- Personal Independence Payment
- Employment Support Allowance time-limiting
- Fraud and effort penalties
- Greater use of sanctions
- Benefit cap
- Social Fund changes
- Housing Benefit changes
- Revised Appeals Process
- Proposed Universal Credit

The sheer number of changes over such a short period of time has created a big challenge for CAB, both because of the large increase in cases and because of the training required for the advice staff.

The effects in the community have been: an increase in child poverty and strain on families as a whole; impacts on health and wellbeing, including an increase in mental health problems and an increase in demand for social care; increased homelessness; more people in rent/mortgage arrears; greater demand for smaller properties.

It is to meet these challenges that Advice for the Future was conceived, funded by the Advice Services Transition Fund, with the priorities of mitigating the impact of the digital agenda, i.e. online claims, helping people to cope with financial management, preventing homelessness, and dealing with the delayed Universal Credit. The aim is to develop new ways of working: sharing expertise and knowledge; developing new partnerships; building on existing relationships and reaching more people in different ways.

Step by Step is particularly vital to this enterprise because of its proven success in the use of peer education. As Laura explained, their aim is to build empowered and resilient communities with the skills to articulate relevant knowledge and experience, to access appropriate information and services, and to influence services and policies to meet needs.

By combining Step by Step's expertise and accreditation in peer education, plus their experience of engaging with young people, and CAB's quality advice, experience of Welfare Reform and IT Learning Suite, there will be new opportunities for sharing expertise, trying out new models, reaching new groups, developing new partnerships and reaching more people.

Laura told us how Step by Step's 'Peer Education Project' now has over 10 years of experience of visiting local schools and community groups to raise awareness of youth homelessness, by providing free assembly presentations, training and participatory workshops. They also attend community events and maintain a dynamic presence using social media. Thus they have been able to explore the causes and effects of youth homelessness, to challenge the perceptions of youth homelessness, to inform young people and local communities about the support and services available in their area, and to celebrate the achievements of the many young people whom they have helped to overcome hardship and adversity.

In developing peer ambassadors, Step by Step helps young people overcome such challenges as fear of public speaking, concerns about what others might think, appropriately dealing with questions, not revealing too much about themselves and learning not to be too prescriptive. Some of the strategies used to help young them overcome these challenges include rehearsing different scenarios, using drama and role-play, creating clear boundaries and helping them to understand that their experiences can make a real difference to others. Eventually, they will recognise five peer education approaches: befrienders; listeners; mentors; mediators and presenters.

Through the Peer Education Project, young people will acquire valuable skills that will serve them well in later life: how to draw on their strengths; the value of shared experience; creating presentations; developing workshops, holding Q&A sessions; using creativity, for example drama, video and music; making and distributing promotional material; getting involved with radio and television broadcasts, writing articles for online blogs and social media; training and mentoring new peer educators.

Laura finished by explaining that the Advice for the Future project will enable more research into customer 'journeys', preferred channels for receiving information and digital ideas. It will also enable more recruitment of volunteers, so that Step by Step and CAB can build on their combined experience, develop new partnerships and expand the opportunities for more peer education.