

‘It’s a struggle to get a lot of the young people that we work with in for just one day,’ says Fran Hardman, project manager for Fairbridge’s Kilburn Centre in London. ‘But that’s what we’re here to deal with – to re-motivate them to the point where they’re ready to engage with the next step.’

Funded by a range of sources, including trust funds, organisations and a ‘dedicated team of fundraisers’, the national charity works with young people who have become disengaged or disenchanted with the education system at some point in their lives – which can lead them to a life of substance misuse, criminal activity and violence.

Working in 15 of the most disadvantaged urban areas in the country, Fairbridge aims to reach 13-25 year olds who are not in education, employment or training, and in the last couple of years has been working with schools to help those at risk of exclusion. Hardman believes that this preventative approach will give young people opportunities earlier and make sure there is less need later on for services to pick up the pieces once problems have developed.

‘We’re not an education provider but we’re able to stimulate young people and give them the opportunity to learn about themselves,’ she says.

After referral, each young person has an induction tour of the centre, which includes DVD footage and photos of what they offer. They meet with the staff to identify their individual development needs, before being put onto the Access Course. ‘When they see with their own eyes what we do, they find it appealing,’ she says. The real test is whether they can actually commit to the course: ‘It can be quite difficult to engage them particularly if there’s a question of territory – some don’t want to be seen going to a certain kind of provision on their doorstep; others may be put off if it’s in another postcode.’

‘But we are very determined to be here for them and to work with the issues that they bring us – and there aren’t many organisations that can really work with young people at that level,’ she says.

Fairbridge offers programmes of personal development and helps clients to realise that their lives could be very positive if they made some different choices.

Those attending the centre can get



hands-on experience of the business market through the ‘Learn to Earn’ 12-week course, which involves training sessions on promotion, IT skills or finance; or express their creativity through the ‘Offbeat Studio’ course. Other extra-curricular activities include caving, developing their own web pages, or spending a week learning to sail on a 92ft replica Victorian Pilot Schooner – all of which challenges their behaviour and perception of themselves.

‘On each course, the focus is on the young person,’ says Hardman. ‘So in a cooking session it’s great that they can make a nice apple pie, but at the end of the day it’s about whether they came on time, did they work in a team, did they clean up afterwards, and did they achieve what they set out to achieve?’

After the Access Course, the majority of young people will meet with their key worker to set future goals in an action plan and decide which further sessions and projects will give them the opportunity to reach them. Every few weeks their progress is evaluated and more goals are set.

‘For some young people this process goes on for a matter of weeks, for others a matter of months.

The next step

But each person does it at their own pace until they get to a stage where they’re ready to commit to something else and take it a step further,’ says Hardman.

Many of the young people that enter Fairbridge are living without the support of their families, in care, or feel that they are on the margins of their local community. They may not have people who are setting boundaries for them and teaching them about the consequences of certain actions – which is something the charity tries to provide for them.

‘Our responsibility is to encourage young people to experience the “buzz” out of life by giving to others, achieving something and taking part in activities,’ says Hardman. ‘Once they discover this, it then encourages them to use that skill elsewhere, when previously they might not have seen the attraction in doing so.’ **DDN**

For information on Fairbridge’s regional projects, visit the website at www.fairbridge.org.uk

Keeping young people engaged can be a difficult task.

Fran Hardman, from Fairbridge, tells **DDN** how they keep their clients coming back for more.