

Giving youth a fair chance at Fairfield



All too often today's youth are portrayed in the media as hoodie-wearing hooligans with a CV adorned with more ASBOs than qualifications. But a groundbreaking scheme in Perth is 'giving youth a chance' by offering school leavers the opportunity to learn a trade. **CRAIG MACLAGAN** visited Fairfield Housing Co-operative to learn about the Toolkit scheme.

TOOLKIT WAS LAUNCHED

in April 2005 to give young people who fall into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) category a taste of what working life is like in the construction industry.



Under the scheme, youngsters are placed with a contractor, usually a small firm or lone tradesman, for six months and given a "no frills" education in a trade of their choice. The concept behind the scheme is that at the end of their placement, if they have shown enough enthusiasm and application, they will be offered an apprenticeship with the firm.

Grant Ager, Director at the Perth-based landlord, explained, "Toolkit provides kids who have been tossed onto the scrapheap at an early age with a real chance. That's not to say that these kids have no abilities. Personally, I've been surprised at the high standard of

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applicants we've received. Often it's simply the case that they've lost interest in education."

Sandy Campbell, an independent consultant in community regeneration, approached Fairfield with the idea, and a little over six months later Toolkit had its first five trainees on site.

With backing from Communities Scotland, Scottish Enterprise and Perth College, the scheme got off to a flying start, with all of the first batch of five trainees going on to earn full apprenticeships with after the six month 'taster' course.

Grant said, "It is a very simple project, and that is what attracted us.

"Toolkit is about what registered social landlords know best, construction and people, which are at the core of everything we do.

"From concept to conception, it took just six months to get the first trainees on the job. Any housing association can replicate this idea."



The project is funded by Scottish Enterprise's 'Get Ready for Work' scheme, and one of the pivotal factors in its success was the appointment of Jimmy Shepard as Project Coordinator.

Jimmy has a wealth of experience as an electrician in Perth, and extensive contacts within the construction industry in the area. His knowledge, coupled with an affable charm, opened a lot of doors for Toolkit, and several contractors were soon on board.

One of the attractive features of the scheme is that it provides contractors the chance to trial youngsters, as Jimmy explained.

"These days, a lot of contractors are small, with a workforce of as little as one or two.

"If a tradesman was looking to take on an apprentice, there is a four year commitment, so if it is not working out, it can be quite a financial strain.

"Toolkit provides these guys the chance to 'try before you buy', if you like. If they're impressed after the six months, then they can take them on as a full apprentice.

"A lot of the kids worry that they won't get an apprenticeship at the end of it, but I stress to them that the ball is firmly at their feet and they have the

opportunity to run with it.

"They will be one step ahead of everyone else, with six months' on-the-job experience, and a good reference."

School leavers apply through the job centre, and although the scheme offers just five placements every three months, Jimmy and Grant regularly have to sift through around 30 applications.

Jimmy said, "It is tough telling kids that they haven't been able to get a placement, but hopefully those who do receive a placement appreciate it.

"We screen the candidates very closely, that is something that we've been quite deliberate about because a good reputation is key.

"Tradesmen speak to each other, and if word gets around that Toolkit trainees are 'rubbish', then no one would take one of our boys."

At the moment there are no such worries, and firms are queuing up to take on a Toolkit trainees.

Jimmy added, "We've only touched the tip of the iceberg. We've approached around 20 firms, and had a fantastic response, but there are probably 100 firms out there that we could get in touch with.

"But the more lads we take on, there would undoubtedly be a sacrifice in quality, both in terms of the employees and in the support that I can provide.

"If the standards slip – no one would take our trainees. So it's a delicate balance that, with around ten trainees at any given time, I think we're getting right."

The project aims for an 80% success rate – getting four out of five trainees into full apprenticeships. An ambitious endeavor for any association, but Fairfield Housing Co-operative, which has just 261 units, was undaunted by the task.

The association plans to put 60 teens through the scheme throughout the first three years.

"We are aiming for a success rate of 80%, which we are currently meeting," explained Grant.

"After three years, that should equal 48 kids in apprenticeships."

It is hoped that in the longer term, projects like Toolkit, including its predecessor Toil, run by Port of Leith Housing Association, and Yets, which was started a year ago by Govan Initiative, could help bridge the skills gap in Scotland.

While the current influx of Eastern European workers is plugging some of the skills gaps, Jimmy feels that the construction industry needs to once again become an "appealing option" for young Scottish workers.

He believes that the current system of training in Scotland could be the root cause of the current crisis: "There is no doubt that support is needed to help smaller



firms take on apprentices.

"As things stand, a lot of tradesmen are a one-man-band, or perhaps work with only one or two others.

"We need them to be passing their skills onto the next generation, but with an apprentice, no sooner have you taken them on, they're off to college for six or eight weeks on block release."

Jimmy added, "Small firms can't afford to have them away for that length of time."

"If we went back to training people on a day release system, or going to night school, the way it was when I was training, a lot more firms would be able to take on apprentice."

Contractors that take on a trainee pay £40 per week towards their wages, which are topped up to £100 by Scottish Enterprise, and Jimmy feels this investment is enough to ensure that they receive some practical experience.

He explained, "Although £40 isn't a lot of money, the tradesmen are going to want these kids to do something, whether it's keeping the place clean, stacking two-by-twos or simply going to the shop.

"With similar schemes, such as YTS, the government paid everything and the tradesmen made no contribution and therefore had no investment, no vested interest in whether they did anything."

The cost of putting someone through the Toolkit programme is just £5,000 per head – a fraction of the cost of some other schemes.

Enthused by the positive results so far, Grant is already looking at ways of expanding the scope of the scheme.

"It is such a simple concept, that you can apply it to almost anything, not just the construction industry, but mechanics or even office work.

"We are looking at ways to open up the scheme to girls, and one thing that we're considering is taking on

two traineeships within our own organisation, either as part of Toolkit or funded ourselves.

"One of these positions would be office-based, while the other would be geared towards estate management, so there are a lot of possibilities stemming from the original concept."

And not only does the scheme provide career development for the trainees, it can also boost personal development, giving trainees a renewed sense of vigor and confidence in the workplace.

Jimmy points to an example of one recruit, Rory, whose timid nature and intense shyness could have proved a barrier in the workplace.

He recalled, "When Rory first arrived he couldn't even look anyone in the eye. He was very quiet and timid; he



would look at the ground and mutter one word answers.

"When I saw him recently, I couldn't get him to shut up!

"It is a real plus for the scheme that it has brought him on, not only in terms of career development, but personally as well.

"If Toolkit failed tomorrow, at least you'd look back and say, 'Well, there's one lad who gained a lot from it'."

Mick McManamon, a window technician with a Perthshire firm, is the tradesman who has been working with 16 year-old Rory, and his positive experience has given him a renewed faith in today's youth.

He confessed, "My main concern was that I would be given a Ned, but I'm glad to say that things are working out well with Rory. He's a good lad, and does what he's told."

And the tradesmen too are reaping the benefits of the programme. Jimmy told how the scheme had also provided a surprise plus for one tradesman – by motivating him to do more and set a good example.

"He is not lazy, but because he was working on his own, he sometimes wouldn't start until 10.00am, or would finish up at 3.30pm," said Jimmy.

"But now, because he has the responsibility of training a young lad, he's away at 8.00am to pick him up. Now he's doing more work, and probably making more profit, even though he's paying out for a trainee."

Grant feels that this is an idea that the social rented sector can replicate successfully, as he noted, "All too often, the social rented sector has initiatives and activates flung at it that we're supposed to become experts in.

"Toolkit works. It's easy, it's what we know. It's construction and people, which are at the core of everything we do."

He concludes, "This is a refreshing and exciting project to be involved in.

"It has many more positives than we expected at the outset. Not only does the scheme help get kids from difficult backgrounds into employment, but it improves their confidence and it has given a lot of tradesmen a renewed faith in the youth of today.

"It's a win-win situation for everyone concerned." **HS**

