

InLiving mobile learning at Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing

www.inliving.co.uk

Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing's furnished tenancy scheme offers a high level of support for vulnerable people aged 16-25 taking on a tenancy after homelessness. The offer now includes use of a purpose-designed mobile phone game.

Tags:

14-19, SEN/LDD inclusion, Mobile, Co-creation, Independent Living, Multi-agency, Informal learning

Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Engaged and empowered learners

Sectors:

14-19, SEN

Innovation

Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing uses a mobile phone game, 'InLiving', as part of a package aimed at equipping vulnerable young people with skills needed for independent living. The game has been developed in consultation with young people and illustrates the innovative use of a game for informal learning accessed through a technology already integral to an individual's lifestyle.

Background

Many of the young people in the furnished tenancy scheme have experienced a problematic family life, often with periods of time in care. In addition, many have complex social and educational needs, allowing little opportunity to acquire the competencies associated with independent living such as budgeting, personal care and interpersonal skills. The lack of these skills

makes this group especially vulnerable to tenancy failure, with rent arrears and anti-social behaviour being particularly prevalent.

Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing had previously offered courses to this group of tenants to help teach necessary skills; however, it was found that engagement was low. In 2007, Susan Greenwood and Karen Batty, the Young People's Support Managers at Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing, in conjunction with Phil Mundy and Anton Iacono from Creative North, jointly funded and developed a mobile phone game to simulate independent living. To ensure the game was effective at tackling relevant issues in a stimulating way, feedback was sought from a range of young people throughout the development and roll out of the game, including from people already on the furnished tenancy scheme, young people excluded from formal education, Year 11 students and students from a Madressah Islamic School.

Technology

The game is played on a user's personal mobile phone. The game is downloaded to a phone either by texting a request which returns a link to download, or the game is delivered via Bluetooth from laptops at places such as housing organisations and schools. Downloading and playing the game is free, which is critical for the target group as many are often without phone credit. A web-based version of the game is currently being developed after requests from schools and children's homes.

Teaching and learning

In the game's virtual environment, users take the role of a character and guide their character through his/her daily life, making decisions in scenarios which simulate real life situations such as finding work, budgeting and dealing with other people. Karen Batty reports that the majority of people in the target group are motivated to play the game and are willing to explore different options within it. As many of the client group both lack life skill knowledge and have low self esteem, it is thought to be important that these decisions can be tried and rehearsed in private with no consequences outside of the game. Further, delivering the game to the user's mobile phone allows 'anytime anyplace' access through personal technology.

The tenants have regular visits from Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing staff and can contact them easily between visits. This relationship allows tenants to discuss issues arising from the game and helps to relate game issues to real situations that the tenants are facing.

"If someone sits down and tells one of our young people about eating healthily, paying bills etc, they're not going to take it in, they're just going to turn off. InLiving gives you some credibility, all of a sudden you're not there as an official saying read this, do that, and the young people start asking the questions." **Karen Batty,**
Young People's Support Manager

The game is available at no cost to anyone living in the Kirklees area and is now being promoted in citizenship classes in schools and in care homes.

Impact

In the first few months that the game was integrated into the support package, successful tenancies increased by ten per cent, and currently only three of the 94 furnished tenancies are struggling. Although Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing does not attribute this solely to the game, it is believed to be instrumental. A full evaluation will be carried out in April 2009.

One noticeable impact has been of the enthusiasm and general engagement of the young people using the game, many of whom have reported that the game has increased their knowledge of independent living.

"It made me aware that you have to get yourself up and other things."

InLiving user

"It is very expensive to have your own place." InLiving user

In December 2008, six months after the game's release, 600-700 games had been downloaded. This is in addition to those delivered through Bluetooth technology by schools, care teams, housing associations and other agencies.

Challenges

Ms Greenwood and Mrs Batty believe that it is essential that the game should be free for users to download, as many of the target group don't have credit for their phone. Further they wanted the young people to be able to download instantly on receipt of the text number. In the first few months the telephone operators charged for the download, with tariffs typically being 10p-50p, but now Creative North has been accepted onto a pilot scheme allowing Creative North to be charged with no cost incurred by the user.

Due to security issues, the machines that provided the games via Bluetooth could not be part of the council network. To overcome this, the council provided free decommissioned laptops which can be moved around to deliver wireless downloads.

Wider adoption

Mrs Batty stresses that it is crucial that the game is used as part of a wider support package.

The game has received wide interest from outside Kirklees, and is being adapted for different target groups and in other areas of learning such as university students, the NHS and the police. Ms Iacono warns that a key factor to ensure its success is the promotion and marketing of the game. She stresses the need for organisations to seek feedback and for the continual development of the game to ensure its effectiveness in promoting relevant skills.