



Role play route to getting a roof over your head

Introducing *Inside Housing's* regular best practice section, *Caroline Thorpe* reports on a project teaching young people how to cope with a first-time tenancy

In Living, which launched this month, aims to give young people an idea of what it's like to rent a home

Two years ago, Susan Greenwood sat scratching her head.

The young people's support manager for arm's-length management organisation Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing was trying to figure out how to give young people, soon to embark on their first tenancy, an idea of what running your own home is like. In an attempt to tackle the high tenancy failure rate among 16 to 25-year-olds, she wrote to the 80 young people nearest the top of the housing register, offering advice and training.

'One person replied - and that was someone's mum,' she recalls.

'I was thinking how on earth we could reach the largest number of people with this agenda,' she says. 'I had started doing some outreach work with some of those kids on the real problem estates. I had it in my head about those kids and how their whole lives revolved around their phones.'

Then came her Eureka moment. 'I'd been doing smaller bits of work around independent living, and I was thinking about my children and their Tamagotchis [electronic pets]. And it suddenly came to me about doing a mobile phone game, but instead of looking after a pet, you were looking after a flat,' says Ms Greenwood.

Enter Creative North, a company specialising in mobile phone games. Together with KNH, it embarked on a joint venture to develop In Living - a game to help notoriously hard-to-reach 16 to 25-year-olds learn about holding down a tenancy. Both partners wanted to ensure that young people would actually want the final product. So they asked them to help.

'We started working with young people from the outset,' says KNH's Karen Batty, also a young people's support manager. 'They were key in the development.'

The ALMO roped in 45 young people to form a focus group, drawn from three sources: a local secondary school, a nearby madrasa and a group from Huddersfield Technical College,

described by Ms Batty as 'a really excluded group'.

The choice was a ploy to foster social inclusion, mix people from different backgrounds and ensure the messages about independent living would reach the people most needing to hear them, she adds. 'It would have been easy to have a model class in a school where everybody's happy, but we targeted a really diverse group.'

First up was an initial evaluation to work out how much the group knew about living solo. 'It was quite staggering how much they didn't know,' admits Ms Greenwood. When asked what bills a tenant must pay, most guessed water and electricity. 'But only five mentioned rent and mortgage,' says Ms Batty.

The idea was to create a phone game similar to best-selling life simulation game The Sims. Users would

"The idea was to create a game similar to life simulation game The Sims. Users create a character and guide it through a range of scenarios based on maintaining a tenancy."

create a character, then guide it through a range of real-life scenarios based on maintaining a tenancy.

'Some of the scenarios in the game are really basic but critical stuff,' explains KNH business services director Andy Selman. "I need some money for food", "if I play my music loud it will get my neighbour mad". When people get this from a phone game, the message seems to get through.'

The focus group was asked for its views throughout development. 'We wrote down any changes they wanted, mistakes in the game,' says Ms Batty.

At the start of the game, users create their own character. 'Somebody pointed out we should have clothes

choices for all genders - some males might want a female look and females want a male look. Also about clothing choices for young Muslim women,' remembers Ms Batty. 'We made so many changes.'

Focus group members seem impressed, both with In Living and what it has taught them and the development process itself. 'I've met people that I wouldn't have met otherwise and I've learned how to get certain qualifications... [in the game] to get your job there are certain qualifications you need and if you're late three times you have to leave college,' explains 15-year-old Matthew Haigh.

His friend Marcus Harrison, 16, got even more out of the process - a job. Creative North offered him part-time work formatting graphics and games testing after spotting his potential in the feedback sessions. 'He really impressed us with his eye for details and mature, professional approach,' says Phil Mundy, the company's managing director.

But while Mr Harrison might be ready for the workplace, he's not so sure about a tenancy. '[In Living] has made me realise how difficult it is,' he says.

The game was rolled out to all young people on the local housing register this month. Its creators have high hopes for its success. Not only has it gone down well with its testers, but a second evaluation shows the focus group's tenancy knowledge has improved considerably.

The £40,000 cost of development was split evenly between Creative North and KNH, the latter's share a reward payment from its parent council for hitting a target. It looks set to be money well spent.

'I was worried that the young people wouldn't get it,' confesses Ms Greenwood. 'But now young people are coming to us instead of us hassling them.'

Her idea has certainly impressed the boss, Mr Selman. 'We unlocked a lot of creativity when we became an ALMO and I'm proud of the way we worked in partnership with tenant and private sector partners to bring in innovation.'

In detail

Who: Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing

What: In Living, a mobile phone game to teach young people about independent living

Why: To promote inclusion and strengthen the community's social fabric