

Don't forget Northern Ireland's 'hidden' homeless urges Ballymena Fixer

Tuesday 16 July, 2013

A Ballymena-based Fixer is campaigning to challenge the common misconception that a life on the streets is always the result of addiction to drink or drugs.

Matthew Smyth, 22, who volunteers in a homeless shelter, says there are actually a multitude of reasons behind why people become homeless.

Working with Fixers, the national movement of young people 'fixing' the future, Matthew's campaign is shedding light on Northern Ireland's 'hidden' homeless community.

A report about Matthew's campaign is scheduled to feature on UTV Live on Friday, July 12, from 6pm.

"Homelessness is a big problem for young people," said Matthew. "Despite what people may think, not all homeless people are drug addicts or alcoholics. In fact, many young people become homeless because of family breakdowns and financial problems.

"Just because someone is homeless doesn't make them any less of a person than anyone else."

Working with Fixers, Matthew – who volunteers at a community drop-in shelter on Sandy Row, Belfast - is planning to make a short film to take to community groups and schools to challenge perceptions about homelessness.

Matthew's views and insight are echoed by homeless charity, the Simon Community.

"More and more we are seeing younger, semi-professional and previously what we would have seen as middle-class people, who are falling into the homeless bracket," said Simon Community team leader, Kerry McWilliams.

"My experience is that it is a huge problem and I don't think any of us are going to know exactly how big it is because young people are dealing with it in their own way, quite creatively. They might be living in a tent or they might be staying on various sofas through the week, and as a result they're not showing up on any statistics. They are an invisible set of victims."

Fixers is a charity which supports thousands of young people across the UK to take action and change things for the better, addressing any issue they feel strongly about.

The movement aims to recruit more than 2,300 Fixers in Northern Ireland by March 2016.

How each Fixer tackles an issue is up to them – as long as they benefit someone else.

The award-winning Fixers project has already supported over 8,400 young people across the UK to have an authentic voice in their community.

Now, with funding from the Big Lottery, Fixers aims to work with a further 20,000 young people over the next three years.

It was set up in 2008 as a project of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT).

"Fixers started as just an idea... an idea given a voice by some 8,400 young people over the past five years," says Margo Horsley, Chief Executive of PSBT.

"They have reached thousands of people with their work, on a national stage as well as in and around where they live. They choose the full array of social and health issues facing society today and set about making their mark. Fixers are always courageous and their ideas can be challenging and life-changing, not just for themselves."

Frank Hewitt, Big Lottery Fund Northern Ireland Chair, said: "The Big Lottery Fund is extremely proud to be supporting Fixers to engage with more young people to change things for the better. Fixers has a tremendous potential – one young person's initial idea can be transformed into reality, spread across a

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community and make a positive influence on a wide range of people. There are thousands of young people campaigning to make improvements in their neighbourhoods and Fixers provides a platform to highlight their voluntary work and many achievements."

One photo attached. Caption: Matthew Smyth

For images, interviews or more information, please contact Sarah Jones in the Fixers Communications Team by email sarahj@fixers.org.uk or phone 01962 810970.

There are lots more stories about young people doing great things on the Fixers website, Twitter and Facebook pages:

www.fixers.org.uk
www.twitter.com/FixersUK
www.facebook.com/FixersUK

Notes to editors:

- Fixers started in England in 2008. Now with a £7.2 million grant from the Big Lottery Fund, Fixers is extending into Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. To date, over 8,400 young people across the UK have become Fixers and created more than 960 projects.
- The Public Service Broadcasting Trust is a charity that brings together mainstream broadcasters, public and voluntary sector services, and viewers.
- The Big Lottery Fund (BIG), the largest distributor of National Lottery good cause funding, is responsible for giving out 40% of the money raised for good causes by the National Lottery.
- BIG is committed to bringing real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need and has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since June 2004. The Fund was formally established by Parliament on 1 December 2006.
- Since the National Lottery began in 1994, 28p from every pound spent by the public has gone to good causes. As a result, over £29 billion has now been raised and more than 383,000 grants awarded across arts, sport, heritage, charities, health, education and the environment.

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