

Christmas charity appeal 2011: Tomorrow's People turns teenagers' lives around

- [Tracy McVeigh](#), social affairs editor
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Local teenagers (from left) Brady Ells, Heather Cave, Katy Wells, Daniel Brooks, Gavin Moony and Daniel Craft gather at the Heathfield youth centre. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

Heather Cave and Katy Wells danced into the youth club in matching furry ankle boots. Cave had come from court, where her supervision order had been revoked. It was a big achievement for the 18-year-old, who convinced the court she had given up her old habits of petty theft and antisocial behaviour to work hard at college studying performing arts.

"The magistrates said they looked forward to seeing me act in *EastEnders*," she said. "I had a lot of problems with my mum and was getting excluded from school, the teachers were glad to see me leave. Then there was nothing to do and no money, so I'd shoplift and drink too much and get into more and more trouble. I was just the local bad girl, wasn't I?"

The girls are among 10 [young people](#) who have been getting their lives on track with help from an innovative project, [Heathfield Works!, run by the charity Tomorrow's People in partnership with local businesses](#).

The programme is for disadvantaged teenagers who struggle in that void after school when they are in danger of slipping off the rails into long-term joblessness, criminality, drugs and drink. But this is far from any bleak inner-city housing estate. It is in the lush East Sussex countryside, in the market town of Heathfield, where the traditional red-brick houses and sprawling country homes filled with Christmas lights hide deprivation and isolation that cause unique problems for young people.

With help from the project, Cave and Wells are now on the same course, in Bexhill, two hours' journey there and back each day. Since the scrapping of the education maintenance allowance, the £10-a-day fares would have made college unfeasible for these teenagers. Thanks to Heathfield Works!, they get their fares and a lunch allowance.

"It's a bus and then a train and then a walk," said Katy. "We set off about seven in the morning and get home about seven at night, so it's tiring, but it's great. I never thought I'd be able to do it."

Inside the Heathfield youth centre, project workers Frances Conway and Julie Kaye are discussing the successes of the past 12 weeks. Gavin Moony has his hood over his head, but when teased into taking it down his face is bright red as Conway reads a letter from an officer from his military preparation college singing his praises. Brady Ells, 19, shows the impressive artwork he's been doing. He has landed a supermarket job.

"Having a job is really different from going to school, but you don't know what to expect. If you're not going to university, then school ignores you. I hated that. I didn't want to go to university, so it's just like they think you don't count," Brady said. All the young people around the room nod. None knew what to do when they left school and many have families who could not or would not help. "For a couple of days you lie in bed and it's great. Then you get bored, bored out of your mind," said Daniel Brooks, 16, who has started at catering college.

Abi Levitt, Tomorrow's People communications director, said their success was in forging partnerships with local employers and colleges. "We do not give up on people, judge them or write them off. We had been working in urban areas, but one of our trustees said: 'Look, we have these pockets of terrible deprivation out there in rural areas, they've got some real problems.' The biggest problem was transport. In Heathfield the closest job centre is 15 miles away in Eastbourne, a two-hour bus journey that costs £8 return. Kids in rural areas just can't get around at all.

"There's also the tight-knit communities. Young people can't get away with a bit of bad behaviour, you are labelled, you can't do anything that passes under the radar. Heather was banned from every shop in Heathfield's high street, she had literally nowhere to go. If you are aged 16 to 18, you have no income whatsoever, well, basically you rot away at home. There's nowhere to turn to for support or help, even to write a CV."

All these issues are familiar to Councillor Rupert Simmons, chair of Heathfield Partnership Trust ~~the group partnering~~ Tomorrow's People who feels deprivation in rural areas is overlooked. "We've been really alarmed at the plight of young people in Heathfield, there's nothing for them to do, nowhere to go and now, no jobs."

Heathfield Works! staff are delighted at their youngsters' progress, said Kaye. "I just popped into a shop one lad, Daniel Craft, is working in today," she said. "He was there so confident and talking so politely to his customers, it was so different from the morose lad we first saw."