

Case Study: Adopt a Block

By the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service and Leeds City Council

“It is encouraging that our work has been shared with, and is supported by, the Health and Wellbeing Board as we think it offers a strong example of how public services can mutually support suicide prevention messaging and activity.”

Craig Bedford, Leeds Assistant District Prevention Manager, West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service

Why “Adopt a Block”?

In early 2017, the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (WYFRS) through its membership of the Leeds Strategic Suicide Prevention Group, became aware of the heightened risk of suicide amongst lone, white, middle-aged males, in areas of deprivation including those living in high-rise accommodation.

We realised that WYFRS have opportunities to reach this cohort of at risk people, and given our commitment to deliver safe and well community work, we decided to run a pilot with Catherine Ward and Vineeta Sehmbi at Leeds City Council to include suicide prevention work alongside our existing ‘Adopt a Block’ safety checks.

“It’s fantastic to see the Fire and Rescue Service taking such an active role in suicide prevention and we’re delighted to be working with them to reach more vulnerable people in the city.”

Catherine Ward, Health Improvement Principal, Leeds City Council

What is “Adopt a Block”?

The ‘Adopt a Block’ programme sees the WYFRS crew visit high-rise ‘blocks’ and accommodation that have a heightened risk of fire to review the condition of the on-site firefighting installations and offer fire safety advice and a home fire safety check (HFSC) to occupiers.

Our crews, whose station areas cover the at-risk high-rise flats, help to identify at-risk individuals and initiate conversations with them about help-seeking, as well as supporting the dissemination of Crisis Cards.¹

By utilising data from our incident reporting system and from Housing Leeds, we identified the premises or ‘blocks’ associated with the highest number of relevant incidents. On a monthly basis, a nominated watch visits a dedicated high-rise block within their station area and carries out an inspection. This is in the form of a walk down from top to bottom, noting any discrepancies in the fire fighting and fire safety facilities, and including a review of combustibles stored in stairwell and lobbies. Whilst doing this they also attempt to carry out a home fire safety check at each flat and meet the occupier(s). The expectation is that over the course of time they become a familiar, trusted and approachable presence that can broach other wellbeing and public health topics.

Achievements

- WYFRS have a greater level of tactical and operational knowledge about local high-rise accommodation. The crews report that they feel much more familiar with the top 14 flats (out of 129 high-rise flats) that have the highest incident attendance.
- The crews have managed to initiate conversations with the inhabitants of the blocks they are visiting, talking about how people feel generally day-to-day, their resilience, and issues around social isolation. In some cases this has resulted in providing a Crisis Card to signpost individuals to services including relationship help, debt advice, food banks and mental health.
- Development of a closer working relationship with Housing Leeds. Their Housing Risk Reduction Officers play an important role in the initiative, feeding back crews' findings about defects to the maintenance department within Housing Leeds, and providing advice and logistical support.

Enablers

- Crews received relevant suicide prevention training from public health colleagues to build their knowledge, skills and confidence in having relevant conversations.
- Crews established relationships with local providers in the area, including third sector community based organisations who work around improving health, social prescribing and reducing social isolation, as well as frontline NHS mental health services.

Challenges

- Identifying people, at the right time, who might benefit from a visit, a conversation and a Crisis Card.
- Targeting and extending our approach – a comprehensive review of past incidents would allow this.

What would you do differently if you had to do it all again?

To increase our impact our focus is now on extending the pilot, as opposed to significantly changing the approach. We want to expand the geographical area and deliver the message as part of other safety initiatives such as those on water safety. This is because we believe that many water rescue incidents have victims who are likely to meet the 'at risk' criteria.

Our commitment is to have each of our crews hold a small stock of the Crisis Cards so that we can leave the free cards with anyone they feel may benefit. We intend to maintain a simple record of who we have issued cards to, and why, as we expect this could yield some interesting data that will complement the information collected by public health around the trends of actual and potential incidents.

We also want to back up the card distribution with additional training for our crews to provide them with relevant and up-to-date knowledge, skills and confidence in support of their conversations with people potentially at risk.

Find out more about [the Leeds approach](#)

Reference

¹ *The Crisis Card is a resource produced by local men, on behalf of Leeds City Council, that is disseminated by frontline staff and in public places, to individuals at risk of mental health crises and suicide. It offers signposting to services and seeks to reduce the barrier of help-seeking*