

21 August 2012

Cycle project gets teens on the right track

Fix it: Jack Dowlang, 13, and volunteer Richard Rowan at Sparkplug, King's Cross
Picture: Lucy Young



Londoners' passion for cycling is helping some of the most disadvantaged children and teenagers in the capital, thanks to the Evening Standard's Dispossessed Fund.

The Sparkplug Project in King's Cross is teaching young people who are not in education, work or training how to repair and maintain bicycles.

Organisers of the six-week course hope it will encourage them into schools, colleges and employment.

Sparkplug was set up in 2002 to work with young men who had been caught joyriding on scooters. They learned mechanics for motorbikes and were given the chance to enjoy off-road riding with mentors.

Recently, however, Sparkplug realised the huge rise in cyclists in London had not been matched by an increase in bike repair shops. It will use a Dispossessed grant of £19,843 to fund the new course: broken and dilapidated bikes are being taken to the workshop, where youths are taught to mend and maintain them — with the promise of keeping the finished article at the end.

During the course, project staff talk to them about life skills, numeracy, literacy and employment, including getting formal mechanic qualifications and setting up bike repair businesses. About 10 per cent of Londoners aged 16 to 19 are classed as Neets — not in employment, education or training. This rises to one in five in some boroughs, such as Islington. Research suggests Neets are 20 times more likely to commit a crime than average, and 22 times more likely to be a teen parent.

Sparkplug also works with younger children at risk of falling out of mainstream education.

Organisers said the new project had sparked an overwhelming response. Steve Devereux, 46, a mechanic on the project, said: "Working with bikes is just a way to engage them, but it works because they don't feel they're being hassled about school or jobs when we talk to them. A lot of things come out that they haven't told other people.

"A lot don't have dads and don't have skills like changing a tyre or repairing a broken chain, or anyone to talk to. Someone I worked with on the motorbike project is now in a repair shop, getting good money and happy."

The Dispossessed Fund now stands at £8.3 million, thanks to the generosity of Standard readers and a £1 million donation by Sport Relief.