



NEW BASE: Downham Youth Project manager Ben Hyde outside the hut on Howdale Road.

DOWNHAM MARKET

Youth project set to open social centre

Youngsters in a West Norfolk town will soon be able to enjoy a new facility to relax, socialise and learn new skills.

For years the Downham Youth Project has hired rooms to run after school clubs and evening youth cafes to get the town's youngsters off the streets.

But now project manager Ben Hyde and his team are preparing to open a permanent base, opposite the Howdale Community Centre, for teenagers to access the internet, play games and meet with friends.

Mr Hyde said: "The project started in 2007 because it was decided there wasn't a lot going on for young people in the town and there were fears about youngsters causing anti-social behaviour.

"The town council provided funding for two part-time youth workers for six months and we spent the time building up relationships with many young people.

"We then got funding for another three years and the project has grown to be able to support many different young people through the different aspects of the project's work.

"The only trouble we had was

by **DAVID BLACKMORE**

having to hire a room once a week because we didn't have a permanent base, so we are delighted to have this building and I think it is really going to help us."

The youth hut on Howdale Road, close to Downham Market High School, will not be fully operational until next month.

When it is officially opened youngsters will be able to enjoy an after-school club on Mondays from 3pm to 5pm and an evening youth cafe on Tuesday evenings from 7.30pm to 9.30pm.

Mr Hyde continued: "There is a lot of negativity about youngsters on street corners in Downham Market which is quite unfair because there are limited places they can go to and socialise.

"With all this negativity aimed at them, we are hoping to give them some positive things that they can get involved in and pursue their interests.

"Once we have this hut up and running, the youngsters can use our internet cafe, play against their friends in the games room or just sit

in the lounge area and chill out. We are hoping the youngsters will see this as a nice, friendly place that they can meet their friends to relax for free, go on the internet and, more importantly see it as a safe space.

"At the moment we will only be open for one after-school session for 11- to 15-year-olds and one evening youth club for 15- to 18-year-olds.

"But we are trying to get extra funding - around £160,000 - to get a full-time team working together to have three after school clubs and maybe three youth clubs every week."

He added: "We will be especially pushing for 11- and 12-year-olds to come along so we can get them in and support them throughout their secondary school years."

Mr Hyde said he also wants to expand the project's support of pupils at Downham High School by being able to offer one-to-one support for up to 12 youngsters.

He also said he wanted to continue the recently-launched young parents support project and explore running specific interest-based projects such as DJ tuition with the teenagers.