

Need to know

Lydia Stockdale discovers how recruiting housing officers en masse means lack of experience isn't necessarily a problem

Get a job lot

Why hire one person at a time when you can take on five in one go? When a raft of housing information officers at Medway Council were promoted as a result of internal restructuring last year, the local authority decided to take a blanket approach to recruitment.

It hired Training Synergy, a division of recruitment company Synergy Group, to find local candidates with the right attitude but not necessarily relevant experience. It would then train them in all things housing over a six-month period.

'With the numbers we needed to recruit, it was easier to recruit in bulk and train them up as a team, so they could support each other,' explains Vanessa Wilson, head of housing solutions at Medway Council.

The Kent council wanted to attract candidates with 'the right personality,

attitude and customer service skills, but who lacked the skills we usually require: experience of housing and knowledge of homelessness', says Ms Wilson. This included giving opportunities to the long-term unemployed.

Through its Kickstart programme - not related to the government's house building programme - using this method, Training Synergy has found 3,500 people employment in housing and social care since 2003. It has previously worked with Medway Council's revenues and benefits

department and also with Nacro Supported Housing in Kent to find front-line housing staff.

By hiring Training Synergy, Medway Council aimed to attract as many potential housing information officers as possible - people who might be put off by more traditional methods of recruitment, including lengthy application forms and the perception that heaps of experience was necessary.

Siva Singh, team leader for Training Synergy, explains that the local authority wanted to 'encourage peo-

ple to work in the public sector who don't have that background'.

'A lot of housing officers move around a lot. Kickstart breathes fresh air into housing - it brings people in from a low level and supports them,' he adds.

Take James Chegge, for example. Mr Chegge was one of the five candidates who became fully fledged housing information officers in April. Until he was made redundant two years ago, Mr Chegge worked for insurance provider Norwich Union (see box: James' story) - and his lack of housing experience had held him back when he applied for roles in the past.

Positive response

Seven hundred people applied when Training Synergy advertised the housing information officer roles through local media, Jobcentre Plus and Connexions.

The applicants filled in a brief application form and were whittled down to 100 after telephone interviews with the company. The survivors then attended an open day at Medway Council in September. They got to meet their potential employers, took literacy and numeracy tests, participated in group behaviour exercises and had brief interviews.

'I got a better feel for the people than I would do usually [through interviews],' says Ms Wilson, their potential boss.

Twelve applicants were chosen to take part in a five-day 'introduction to housing' training course, six of whom were invited onto a 23-week programme on which they were taught about repairs and maintenance, key performance indicators, allocations and lettings, time management and health and safety.

When training ended in April, they were 'well-equipped to become front-



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line officers', states Mr Singh.

Up until April, the six individuals were classed as contractors. 'The first six months can be the difficult time,' says Medway Council's Ms Wilson - it's when employers are most likely to encounter problems with new hires.

During their six months of training, the candidates were Training Synergy's responsibility - reducing the risk to the local authority. 'If someone had poor attendance, we could deal with them at one week's notice,' states Ms Wilson. 'I can turn around to [Training] Synergy and say, "I don't want this person anymore".'

Indeed, only five participants were eventually taken on by Medway Council in April - and even now, they're on the local authority's standard six-month probationary period. 'Effectively [this gives us] a whole year of probation,' she says.

Using the Kickstart programme saved time and money, says the head of housing solutions. 'Five trainees take up a lot of time,' she explains - using an external training team meant that the housing staff at Medway Council could get on with their jobs uninterrupted.

'There's no burden on me,' she adds. 'At C1 grade [the grade to which new housing information officers at Medway Council are normally appointed] we would get lots of applications. I only had to attend the open day, rather than spend hours sifting through application forms.'

Pay packets

When the five successful trainees were contracted through Training Synergy they were paid £12.50 per hour. The initial five-day training course cost the local authority £2,000 in total and the ensuing 23-week programme amounted to £10,626 per candidate.

'Overall, it's good value for money because you're saving on administration costs,' believes Ms Wilson.

Instead of starting at C1 grade, as Kickstart trainees the candidates are on a lower-paid D1/D2 grade for their initial six months - again saving the council money.

Giving members of the local community a chance of a new career, allowing them to get a good idea of the job and organisation they are going into before they start as permanent employees, and providing them with a full programme of train-

James' story



James Chegge lost his job working in pensions at Norwich Union two years ago when his department closed. Since then the 41-year-old has found temporary work through agencies at various companies, including Kent-based housing association MHS Homes Group.

When Mr Chegge applied for permanent housing positions he found that 'if you didn't have the experience you had no chance of getting a job'.

'After more than a year jumping from agency job to agency job I wanted to get something more solid - something I could train for,' he recalls.

Through the Kickstart programme, Medway Council 'gave us the opportunity of a job plus training. They gave people a shot, whatever background you were coming from.'

During the 23-week training programme, 'the offer [of a job] was on the table, but it was up to you to take it'.

Now a permanent housing information officer, Mr Chegge believes that Medway's investment in him and their four other new employees will pay off. 'We're looking at putting years into it,' he says.

'We've been given the chance to change careers and do a job that's rewarding,' he says. 'And because training was so thorough, it must reflect in the customer service we offer.'

ing along with others who are in exactly the same position, are all listed by Ms Wilson and Training Synergy's Mr Singh as other advantages for hiring en masse.

Now the council has got to know each of its five new housing information officers 'we can tailor the next six months to the individual as we've seen their strengths and weaknesses,' says Ms Wilson.

And this is just the start. 'I've seen people who were long-term unemployed become area managers after four or five years working for the same organisation,' says Mr Singh.

Medway now wants to use this method of recruitment again, and is currently discussing ways of pooling recruitment with other housing providers in Kent.

 For more on recruitment, visit www.insidehousing.co.uk

Ask the experts

Q *My mother has recently passed away. I have been living with her for the past 35 years in a house owned by the council which was sold to a housing association in 1999. Before the sale, mum had a secure tenancy with protected rights plus the right to buy. Then she became an assured tenant with the same rights. In 2005, we had a meeting with the association to confirm my succession. I was told I would succeed to mum's tenancy and I would also get the right to buy. Unfortunately, I would not be allowed to stay in the house due to under-occupancy rules, but the landlord would find me a suitable place to live. It has found me a place which I'm about to accept; but I have now been told I will get mum's assured tenancy without protected rights or the right to buy, as it is only contractual. I feel cheated and misled. Can my landlord go back on its word? **Martin Holmes***

A **Abimbola Badejo** Your mother had a preserved right to buy of her home as a former secure tenant. When she died, you became a qualifying successor of that home and you also had a preserved right to buy of that home.

The effect of section 171B of the Housing Act 1985 is that you effectively take your preserved right to buy with you to any other property that you move to if you become a tenant of a new property and the landlord of that new property and the landlord of the old property are the same.

I am assuming that to be the case here, in which case you have the preserved right to buy the property you are about to accept. There is nothing contractual about this.

The preserved right to buy is a right that is granted by the Housing Act 1985.

If your landlord still insists that you cannot buy the property that you have just accepted then I suggest you see a solicitor that specialises in housing law.

Abimbola Badejo is a barrister specialising in housing law and practising from Arden Chambers

Julian Ashby
Finance and regulation

 **Abimbola Badejo**
Housing law

Nic Bliss
Tenant involvement, self-determination

Adrian Waite
Management, finance, strategy

Paul Hackett
Development, housing management, sales, shared ownership

Debbie Larner
Best practice, customer relations

Angus Macdonald
Anti-social behaviour, housing management

Blair McPherson
Equality and diversity, SP

Bill Pitt
Anti-social behaviour

Clare Roberts
HR, employment law, performance management

Nigel Rogers
Care and support

Dr Gill Taylor
Skills and training, community engagement

Jon Warnock
Tenant participation

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