

# INVESTIGATING NEW LANDSCAPES OF TRAINING FOR WORK:

## THE EXTENDED ROLE OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Report of Findings



Catalyst  
Housing

eastTHAMES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Housing Associations (HAs) are increasingly expected to offer their tenants training-for-work programmes to precipitate a transition into paid employment. Working with three HAs operating in the London area, and drawing on interviews with training providers and tenants, this report highlights the important and positive role HA training provision plays. Key findings from the project are summarised here:

### Reasons for getting involved

- HA training provision is a crucial first step for tenants in their transition to paid employment.
- An improved financial situation and a better standard of living are the main drivers for participation in training programmes.

### Barriers to participation

- Lack of knowledge is the primary barrier to participation in training with calls for HAs to better promote and advertise their programmes.
- Lack of confidence and time out of the labour market are key barriers to moving into training and paid employment.
- Skills mismatch with the local labour market, physical and mental health issues, and uncertainties over moving off benefit payments add to concerns over participating in training for work programmes and finding paid employment.

### Benefits of participation

- Tenants perceive multiple benefits to participating in training programmes run by HAs.
- Increased confidence is considered the most important outcome of training programmes, with one-to-one staff support key to this.
- Opportunities for voluntary work or placements within the HA or partner organisations are considered highly beneficial.
- Skills acquisition, especially in relation to job search and interpersonal contact, is central to developing confidence.
- Support with the costs of participating in training programmes, notably transport and childcare, is important, as is proximity to the training centre.
- The value of additional training-to-work support, such as help with dressing for interviews, is recognised.

### Keys to success

- HAs are perceived as offering a positive and welcoming space for tenants to engage in training, encouraging them to meet and interact with others.
- In contrast to Job Centre Plus, staff availability and accessibility is good, with friendly constructive advice given.

- HA staff members are perceived as offering 'hope' to tenants participating in training programmes and encouraging them through a tailored person-centred approach.
- A personalised approach enables individual barriers to be understood and addressed.
- HA staff members work in a caring and empathetic way helping tenants to feel respected and supported.
- HA staff members are considered experts in their work, empowering tenants to move into paid employment.

### **Suggestions for improvement**

The findings from this research will be important for shaping the future training provision offered by HAs to their tenants. It is clear that HAs are well placed to work at the local level and with particular communities, and to fill gaps left by government. In addition to detailing key findings, this report makes recommendations for HAs and partner agencies that relate to **information** and the **extension of current provision**.

- HAs need to raise awareness among their tenants of their training provision, as many still 'stumble' across it by chance.
- HAs could draw on the range of services they provide to further promote their training provision. A more joined up information-provision strategy is necessary.
- HAs need to find new and innovative ways of engaging hard-to-reach groups.
- The timing and spaces used to disseminate information need further consideration.
- Wider programme offer will encourage more people onto and through training programmes.
- Further tailor provision to particular groups.

## INTRODUCTION

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Housing Associations (HAs) are increasingly expected to engage with the Government's Work Programme and to provide employment training for their tenants, a majority of whom are unemployed. Operating in the space between the state, labour market and society, HAs are now at the heart of the employment and skills agenda. However, little research has focused on this new landscape of training for work or on the experiences and expectations of HA tenants engaging in such training.

This report stems from a wider research project aimed at providing better understanding of the role of HAs, the social processes and outcomes of training for work and, more broadly, the impacts of current policy interventions intended to engender social inclusion and ensure welfare to work.

The wider research project focused on the following issues:

- The aims, purpose and potential conflicts of HA training programmes.
- The reasons and expectations tenants have for participating in training programmes.
- The social and spatial processes, experiences and implications of participation.
- The impact participation has on perceptions of further training and/or (re)employment.
- The extent to which HA training programmes act as a transformative space through which tenants negotiate and challenge a range of identities and subject positions (benefit claimant, tenant, learner, worker, citizen etc.).

The project was based on interviews and focus groups with tenants who are currently or have recently taken up training courses through HAs, as well as interviews with HA managers and training providers.

This report draws on the experiences of training providers and tenants participating in training provision to focus on the following issues:

- Reasons for getting involved in training
- Barriers to participation
- Benefits of participation
- Keys to success
- Suggestions for improvement

Further project details and findings can be found here:

[newlandscapesoftrainingforwork](#)

## CONTEXT

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The role and function of social housing in England are being recast. A sweeping programme of reform is being pursued in response to a perceived failure of the sector to serve as an effective welfare service, and a perception that it promotes dependency rather than social mobility (HM Government, 2011a). This project considers some of the processes and impacts of this radical reform agenda through an exploration of HAs and their extended role of training tenants for work.

In 2011, the Government launched its economic policy objectives in the Plan for Growth (HM Treasury, 2011b: 5) which included a key goal to 'create a more educated workforce that is the most flexible in Europe'. The plan, combined with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) welfare reforms that aim to 'make work pay', sets the direction for employment and skills priorities and budgets until 2015/16 (DWP, 2011). The Government's flagship Work Programme provides support, work experience and training for up to 2 years to help people find and stay in work (DWP, 2012). As a significant proportion of HA tenants are out of work, with only 29% in full or part time paid employment (CORE, 2013 in NHF, 2013), individual HAs have been encouraged to engage with the Work Programme and help find sustainable work for the unemployed. Overall, social housing residents are around twice as likely to be out of work and not looking or available for work as those living in other tenures (Wilson et al., 2015).

As social enterprises committed to creating economically and socially sustainable communities, many HAs are actively engaged in the worklessness agenda (Wilson et al., 2015; Williams, 2015). In 2010/11, HAs ran 1,000 projects to tackle worklessness, with more than 200,000 people receiving training. This number had doubled since the first Neighbourhood Audit in 2008 and clearly shows that employment and training programmes have moved up the agenda of many HAs (NHF, 2013; Wilson et al. 2015). Operating in the space between state, labour market and society, this radical reform means that HAs are now at the heart of the employment and skills agenda through job creation, employment support and training for work.

Little research has focused on the experiences and expectations of HA tenants (Jacobs and Manzi, 2014; Robinson, 2013), and only quantitative and limited case study policy-related research has pursued a focus on those tenants engaged in training (NHF, 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). This report, drawing on the views and experiences of training providers and tenants in three London-based HAs, is aimed at filling this gap. This is needed for a fuller and more judicious understanding of the role of HAs, the social processes and outcomes of training for work and, more widely, the impacts of current policy interventions aimed at engendering social inclusion and ensuring welfare to work.

## THE RESEARCH

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This report is based on fieldwork conducted between January and June 2015 in London in collaboration with three Housing Associations: A2Dominion and Catalyst Housing, both based in Ealing, West London, and East Thames, in Stratford, East London (though all three HAs have a wide geographical remit).

**Stage 1** consisted of 5 'expert' interviews with 8 HA staff involved in training programmes. Quotes from these respondents have been attributed to the anonymous category of 'training provider'.

**Stage 2** involved 2 focus groups involving a total of 20 participants and 6 one-to-one interviews. These groups and interviews were held with tenants and were organised through A2Dominion, Catalyst Housing and East Thames. The groups each lasted approximately 2 hours and the interviews up to 1 hour. Both involved discussion of participants' experiences, expectations and outcomes of training programmes. Bearing in mind the constraints of those on low incomes all participants in this stage of the research were offered expenses of £20 to cover incurred costs of attending.

Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and the informed consent of all participants was sought prior to participation. The study also received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Health Sciences and Social Care, Brunel University London.

### Research partners

#### A2DOMINION

A2Dominion is a leading housing provider and property developer in London and the South East, managing over 34,000 homes and with thousands more in the development pipeline. The Group offers high-quality sustainable homes for sale, shared ownership and private rent, available through its FABRICA by A2Dominion brand. It also provides affordable rented homes, student and key worker housing, temporary accommodation and housing for older people and vulnerable residents.

The Group has a unique approach to housebuilding, generating profits for a social purpose instead of for shareholders, with millions of pounds reinvested each year into building much-needed affordable homes and supporting local communities.

A2Dominion is part of the g15, a group of the largest housing providers in London, and is also one of The Sunday Times Top 100 Not for Profit Organisations to Work For.

## Catalyst Gateway

Catalyst Gateway was formed in 2010 to bring together and further develop Catalyst Housing's twenty year history of community development work. It delivers a range of projects to support and empower local communities. Catalyst Gateway runs many projects and also provides funding and support to other local groups.

Catalyst Gateway has three focus areas:

- Employment and skills
- Young people and family
- Community enterprise

More than 7,500 people took part in Catalyst Gateway activities last year. Catalyst Gateway is active throughout London and the South East, mainly focusing on the areas where Catalyst Housing works.

## EAST THAMES

East Thames is a registered housing provider and social regeneration charity with more than 14,000 homes in east London. They also build new homes, provide care and support services and offer employment, training and community programmes.

East Thames maintains a dedicated Employment and Inclusion Team who provide a range of products and services including supported job search sessions, group training workshops, 1-2-1 advice and guidance, accredited vocational training and access to work experience and mentoring.

The team have supported more than 1200 people (young people and adults) into employment since 2010. In 2014 / 2015 they moved 283 into work.

## FINDINGS

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This report focuses on findings that are of particular relevance to HAs and their tenants, namely participants' reasons for getting involved in training programmes, barriers to participation, benefits gained from taking part, keys to success and suggestions for improvement.

### 1. REASONS FOR GETTING INVOLVED

Participation in training-to-work programmes managed by the HAs is currently voluntary. Reflecting this, the majority of participants we interviewed were highly motivated to find work.

Many participants had been long-term unemployed. For a large number, unemployment had been triggered by physical or mental illness or by the need to care for children, sick or disabled relatives or, in a few cases, elderly parents. Some participants had also been made redundant from their jobs. A small number of them were young people either out of school or university who were struggling to find work.

There were two main types of often overlapping motivations to get involved in training programmes: a desire to improve their 'situation' and financial impetus.

#### i. IMPROVE 'SITUATION'

Many participants spoke about an overwhelming personal desire to improve their situation. Indeed, many participants expressed that they were at a stage of their life where they felt they were ready to get back to work. As this training provider explains:

I think for us and the sort of people that we're working with, it is very much ... self-driven. So they want to do it to better themselves, and to get themselves in a better position. (Training Provider)

However for some, finding a job was not an immediate goal and involvement in training programmes was considered a helpful first step on the road back to the labour market. This also reflected a desire to be more active outside the home:

Definitely to get more awareness, to get my foot on the work ladder again, you know, in a positive way and just go into something different. (Interview)

#### ii. FINANCIAL MOTIVATIONS

Financial motivations included being able to provide for their children as well as to afford a 'nice lifestyle' which isn't possible on benefits. Whilst HA officers are acutely aware of the imminent financial pressure on their tenants to be employed as a

consequence of welfare reforms, participants did not mention these changes as a reason to enrol in the training programmes offered by HAs:

Nothing is free in this world anyway. You always need money. (Focus group)

Financial motivations are often combined with pull factors making programmes attractive to participants. It may be that a programme's location is ideal or that, with children growing up, parents find themselves with time on their hands. As with this participant, it can also be the programme itself which provides inspiration, reflecting identities and hopes for the future:

When I found out about the title, which was Women in Social Housing (WISH), I just thought that was fantastic. I just thought the Wish Programme was made for me, my wish had come true. So ... you know, I really wanted to take a different direction to be honest with you. (Interview)

While the participants we interviewed were motivated to start to actively look for work, many of them felt they needed help with ensuring their CV and job applications were up to standard, honing their interview skills, gaining work experience and more generally building their confidence. These are discussed further in relation to the benefits of participation.

## 2. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

### i. LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

The main barrier to participation was lack of knowledge of training programmes. An overwhelming majority of participants found out about these activities by chance and were surprised that HAs are active in supporting their tenants (and non-tenants) into work:

I have been a [HA] tenant for 15 years and I knew nothing at all about ... what was going on. Had I not have made that phone call myself to help myself I would not have known. (Focus group)

### ii. LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Anxiety, depression and lack of confidence, often linked to isolation, were issues experienced by a large number of participants:

When I don't do something I go very low down and that's just like, that's where I'm lacking my confidence abilities and I just think that, I don't think I can't do it, I just try to work on it. (Interview)

When I actually lost my job I think it actually took away all my motivation, it took away my confidence; it took away me as a person. You know, I became ..., I was filled with sadness, you know and I just ... stayed in that kind of a mode, you know, for a long time. And I could not really see the light at the end of the tunnel. (Interview)

Discouragement also affected a number of participants who had been looking for work for a long time and felt there was a lack of available jobs that paid enough to make getting off benefits possible and worthwhile:

They said to me that there are not enough jobs to go round. That's what people say to me. (Interview)

Well, if you've been trying for years and years and years then it might have answered the question depending on what sort of job you're looking for you know. And if you're travelling far then you have got to think about the travel expenses so if you want a job locally where you don't have to travel or it's just a bus ride away, it's very difficult. (Interview)

### **iii. OTHER BARRIERS**

Skills mismatch with the labour market and the lack of local, entry-level jobs that paid enough to live on is an issue also highlighted by a number of training providers. Other barriers include travelling costs, timing of the sessions (especially for those with childcare responsibility) and childcare (although one provider noted that participants are often reluctant to use facilities when available on-site).

According to training providers, barriers to increased tenant participation include both physical and mental health as well as low levels of literacy, learning difficulties and addictions. HA advisors also noted that uncertainties around transitioning out of benefits and into work can make potential participants more reluctant to engage in the process. In this respect, the first encounter with a training advisor is key to making participants feel comfortable and hopeful about future prospects, as this training provider articulates:

Once they come and see me and we have that conversation, I guess they see something at the end of the tunnel. (Training Provider)

Indeed, once enrolled in the process, the overwhelming majority of interviewees have found their experience of taking part in training-to-work programmes promoted by HAs a very beneficial one.

## **3. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION**

The programmes are seen as beneficial on several levels: it helps participants increase their self-confidence and morale, gain both hard and soft skills, and improve their chances of getting a job.

### **i. INCREASED CONFIDENCE**

As stated above, a lack of confidence is one of the most important barriers to employment faced by programme participants, and participation in HA-run training programmes is key to increasing confidence levels. A vast majority of participants reported feeling low, unconfident and 'hopeless' before taking part in programmes:

I mean, if [the HA] didn't sort of like save me, you know, where would I be? I'd still be stuck in that dark tunnel somewhere, you know. Or just at home thinking nobody wants me or, you know, there's no hope for me... (Interview)

In both focus groups, increased confidence was seen as the most important outcome of the programme by participants; this was also articulated in the interviews:

My son says "mum you shine, you shine". You know, he goes "mum, you know, you've got this 'glowy' thing about you; you are so happy these days". (Interview)

Boosting the confidence of participants is a simple process and one that requires great skill and aptitude from HA staff. Being able to engage participants in conversation is an essential step in the process:

Sometimes a lot of them it is not always all the paperwork it is just talking to people and just giving them the confidence. (Training Provider)

For many participants, the availability of one-to-one support is crucial to increasing confidence and engaging successfully on the route to employment. Through conversation, training providers find it possible to work with programme participants on identifying their skills and potential:

I have spoken to somebody and they say "I can't do anything but clean" and I said "yes: you can you cook, you clear your bills, you're being an accountant", and when you talk to them like that they do not realise that they actually are doing different stuff. (Training Provider)

HAs also use a number of strategies in addition to one-to-one support to develop participants' self-confidence. One strategy consists of using residents who have gone through training, which benefits both volunteers and potential participants:

One of the best ways to engage people is to have people like them, engage with them. ... I mean the volunteering programme is... a big help to us, because you know, again, you are engaging residents who are in that position, who are then recruiting other residents because they're doing something now, and they get a better sense of self-worth from that. (Training Provider)

Another successful strategy conducive to increasing participants' confidence is to engage them in voluntary work within the organisation:

The Community Champions programme we run, we pick a group of people from an estate, who've never done anything like this before, and train them, and give them skills, and give them a project to survey, whatever, get them out knocking on doors, gathering data, analysing the data, and then doing a presentation to the local authority, councillors and anyone you can think of, and it's fabulous. And these are all people who lived on the estate, who felt hopeless and were signing on, and here they're talking articulately about how they've been through this training course, and how they've talked to residents. This is what the residents want on the estate, and we should do it as part of any big regen[eration project] ... And then, at that point, you can

lead to employment programmes, because they're kind of ready now aren't they? And you can talk to them about ... "get your skills up and get a job". (Training Provider)

They actually took their time and listened. If I was not put on the voluntary work I would have been sitting at home in my own comfort zone where I cannot concentrate and apply for jobs. It got me out of the house. It got me focused. It built my confidence. I was just at home doing nothing. I have gained a lot from them like self-esteem. (Focus Group)

HAs also work with a number of partners in order to secure work placements for programme participants. These cover a variety of organisations such as construction companies and voluntary organisations, as well as more corporate partners such as banks and legal firms:

They go into that placement, with that kind of "oh gosh", look on their face, "oh, what have I got myself into"? And they come out the other end, beaming, you know, because they've had a fantastic time, they've learned things; they've met people they wouldn't otherwise meet. They've been in this beautiful environment, for two weeks. They found actually they could do things; perhaps if they apply themselves, they could actually get a job somewhere like that. (Training Provider)

However, it is worth bearing in mind that whilst these programmes can have a transformative effect on many participants, some individuals simply face too many barriers for this strategy to be successful:

There are people that we've not been able to help. There always will be. You know, people who we don't have the skill or expertise to deal with whatever their issues are, because we may never really get to the bottom of it. Because you know, people are complicated, and we're not psychologists, you know, we don't psychoanalyse the people who come here, we just have conversations with them. And try and figure out what's the best way to get them into a job that they're actually going to enjoy and keep and stick with. Some people aren't ready for that. Some people aren't going to be ready for that in 10 years' time. (Training Provider)

Yet, for many participants increased confidence provides them with resilience allowing them to overcome their fear of failure and persevere in their job search:

I had that ... happy feeling that even if I failed first time I could still go back and I could still work on it. But I have, I have, I know someone who can help me reach where I want to be and then, ... , so then I, I used to come here like, you know, I did have that faith, I would put it that way. (Interview)

I am not the kind of person that will walk up to you and talk to you but after the training from the experiences ... I can walk up to managers and introduce myself and tell them "I spoke to you on the phone recently" and so it has built up my confidence levels. (Focus Group)

## ii. SKILLS ACQUISITION

Another way confidence is boosted is through the acquisition of skills. Here, the knowledge of the HA staff about the local labour market is valued by participants. Their ability to assess participants' skills and support them through placements and the job search/ application process is also seen as reassuring:

I really notice how [HA name] and here, at the skills centre, they really, really notice my skills and my abilities, you know, which is so important for me it is, personally. (Interview)

Assistance with the job search process is valued highly and allowed participants to feel that they were going in the 'right' direction:

You just come along, you just get your CV done and you get the help, you get the support, you get somebody who actually knows what they're doing. (Interview)

Participants are often encouraged to apply for a number of jobs as a way of increasing their chances to find employment but also practising their job searching skills:

So just getting better at applying for jobs, being used to applying for jobs, with someone on hand who can help you look for the right jobs, and give you some advice about filling out application forms online, that sort of thing. (Training Provider)

Soft skills and interpersonal skills are important elements targeted by many training programmes. As this provider explains, presentation skills and attitude are crucial for many employers:

If people have got a reasonable level of literacy and numeracy, but very few other skills, but they can communicate well and they're pleasant, we can usually get them a job. Because the vast majority of all employers I speak to, say "look, if they're nice people, they want to be here, [...] they turn up on time every day, they're eager to work ... we'll train them". (Training Provider)

This is particularly key for participants who are further away from the labour market and are dealing with a range of personal issues:

We've almost had to kind of step back, to an earlier point, and bring them up to the point where we would have started training them, before, if that makes sense. ...Clearly a lot of them have got undiagnosed mental health issues, some of them have diagnosed mental health issues, some have physical health issues. And some have difficult family environments, and some of them just have never worked, don't really understand anything about how they would fit into the workplace, at all. (Training Provider)

As a result, some of the programmes delivered through HAs focus on developing skills which then enable a transition to work readiness through more generic 'skills for life' programmes. As such, HAs are aware of the need to take a more holistic approach when encouraging tenants back into work:

A lot of that it's about, you know, who are you, what have you got to sell, how do you cope with the workplace, how does your employer see you? How do you get the employer to see your positive aspects and skills? (Training Provider)

Examples of more generic skills sessions focus on tenants learning about 'personal image' and 'how to dress for interviews' to ensure appropriate presentation and promote self-confidence.

As explained above, finding placements and jobs for programme participants within the organisation is encouraged in all the HAs we worked with. In these circumstances, staff's internal knowledge and understanding of roles within the organisation are seen as extremely helpful. This programme participant who became employed by the HA explains how her advisor was vital in providing her with the information and confidence to apply for the position:

It kind of gave me the confidence also to sort of apply for the role. Because I wasn't sure if I had enough transferrable skills, I wasn't sure about ... how organisations work, there was a lot of stuff that I wasn't sure of, and I was hoping to just to have a go and see what happens but I think Wish gave me the sort of confidence to go for it and think, well maybe yeah they would be quite lucky to get me. (Interview)

### **iii. PRACTICALITIES AND PRESENTATION**

Further benefits of HA training provision are linked to help with transport and childcare. In another case, training providers meet participants in locations that are within easy reach of their homes, for example at the library, or help through reimbursing transport costs. One project booked taxis for participants on days they were to attend sessions, which had the double benefit of helping participants overcome the psychological hurdle of leaving their home while also boosting their self-esteem:

It's not always easy trying to leave the house as well because you got so used to being in it. But ... it's fantastic that they offered that incentive and I just thought if I give this up I'd be crazy, so ... I let them know I was available and they just booked me the cab for the pickup from my home and the drop off afterwards as well. So that helped me immensely and that boosted my confidence as well that, you know, I'm being picked up in a cab, you know. ... It made me feel really special, it really did and that in return started in a weird and wonderful way a process of, you know, the confidence boosting and the motivation. (Interview)

Training-to-work programmes also include help with dressing for interviews, some through vouchers, and others through a borrowing scheme:

They have about four wardrobes of suits for ladies and gents so she told me "Take something, whatever you want to wear for your interview". (Focus Group)

Some schemes also include classes on dressing for interviews and employment which participants found both practical and useful.

#### **iv. CONTACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

The ability of HAs to provide volunteering, shadowing and apprenticeship opportunities either within the organisation or with some of their contractors also gives those involved in programmes a perceived 'edge':

They have a lot more things to offer than if I was to go and look for jobs or apprenticeships on my own. I've got a lot more chance ... to get a job or an apprenticeship or some experience. (Focus Group)

These opportunities are important for those who have been out of the labour market for a long period of time and would not be able to provide a new employer with references. They were particularly valued by younger participants as a foot in the workplace, which for some led to a paid position:

One thing that was very encouraging with the project was that it wasn't just learning, learning, learning, they gave me an opportunity and trusted me enough to put it into practice so instead of sitting there and watching how my colleague at the time dealt with a resident I would do that and then "ok it's your turn next" and it was like "oh my God" it is really nerve-wracking, but they encourage you instead of pushing you. (Interview)

## **4. KEYS TO SUCCESS**

### **i. A POSITIVE, WELCOMING SPACE**

HA tenants appreciate the positive and welcoming environment created by HAs. Creating an atmosphere where programme participants feel comfortable using various resources and seeking help when they need it relies heavily on the supportive attitudes of staff members:

I know all of them [providers] as well so, you know, everyone is always here to help you and that's the nicest thing. You can just walk in, you know and if I need to photocopy something or I need to drop some forms off here or there, you know, they'll just go: "come in, help yourself". Or you can come in and use the computers. You know, it's like an open walk-in service ... where there are no barriers, you know, everyone just treats you as an equal. (Interview)

I was going to say that I think it is the energy that the team has that just ... all I'm trying to say is that it's all positivity here. (Focus Group)

This encourages participants to get 'out of the house' and gives them the chance to meet and interact with new people. This is considered a vital first step for tenants to get into paid employment.

## ii. ACCESSIBLE, FRIENDLY STAFF

Tallying with this is the need for staff to be both accessible and friendly. This again is considered crucial and in contrast to the Job Centre. In relation to writing CVs and covering letters, focus group discussions turned to the important role of HAs:

The Job Centre, they haven't got time to help you, then go to your Housing Association and they will help you with other forms as well, you know. (Focus Group)

Staff availability and accessibility as well as one-to-one sessions provide the hand holding that many participants needed in order to overcome their fear and lack of confidence.

I was struggling at that time and ... she [training provider] said to me, just come here and if you ever need my help you just ask me and she would say to me: "email me your CV and I'll have a look at it in my spare time", and she used to give me really positive feedback. So I really appreciated that. (Interview)

She sort of broke things down in a way that I was able to understand them, she was very open and very forthcoming and I felt quite comfortable to ask anything really so if I couldn't understand something or wasn't sure about something I could go back to her she was quite easy to access at all times by email, phone .... She showed me that it was okay to go to her and ask her all sorts of questions. (Interview)

Friendly follow-up calls from advisors are also perceived as a positive feature of training programmes, making participants feel valued and supported:

So I came a few times and you know, I felt quite comfortable coming here and then [my advisor] would ring me up and ask me "how are things?" And you know, "is anything going on, have you seen anything that you'd like to go for or I can help you with?" And you know, she just checked up on me which was really lovely that somebody had just taken their, you know, obviously it's her job but it was just lovely to know that someone's calling to find out what's going on. (Interview)

Positive feedback from advisors is also an important component that this one-to-one relationship allows:

Sometimes there is no way to get that boost, there's nobody to say to you and give you that pat on the back that you've done well or you know, you're getting there, you're getting there .... Because I'm a single parent with my son at home, there's nobody to give me that pat on the back and you know, I've found that I was really, ... I don't know, supported. (Interview)

And I recently had a job interview and I was panicking, I said "what am I going to do?" And so I spoke to my ... [advisor] and I said look can I have some interview training practice and she went out of her way to find time as this was about 4:00pm/4:30pm and they finish at 5:00pm, she went out of her way and she sat with me until 5:30pm to give me some interview techniques you know. So I don't think the Job Centre would do it. They don't have

enough time for this ... .. you would be lucky if you sit in front of the advisor, if you have 10 minutes with them you are lucky. (Focus Group)

With accessibility also comes a sense of flexibility, reiterating the sense of a positive and welcoming space:

It is about the flexibility of time. They are approachable and they can talk anytime so it is about the flexible approach in terms of timing. We can come any time. (Focus Group)

Being able to get help as and when needed, even outside formal appointments, is also key to providing programme participants with the confidence to seek support. Again staff's attitude and accessibility is important:

Any time I wanted to just check something on my CV or add something I could ring [my advisor] and in all honesty I could ring her any time. You know, I had her mobile number, I had her work number, you know, she said: "any time you need anything just pick up that phone" and you know what, I did! (Interview)

She was the first person but she always has been there as well. Like if something I needed to know, if I need advice on anything, I normally call her to talk to her about it. (Interview)

With friendly staff, tenants explained that they feel encouraged rather than pressured into training and paid employment:

They encourage you instead of pushing you. (Interview)

When somebody's pressurising you, you don't feel you want to do it, you know. Because I know I'm like that. You know, I didn't even realise they were supporting me it just happened so naturally but when you're supported, you, you feel a certain kind of, I don't know, a happiness and it puts a smile on your face when you feel supported. (Interview)

Importantly, none of the participants involved in the research expressed they had felt pressure from the HA to attend training and make a return to paid employment.

### **iii. ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT**

One of the keys to success is the approachable and friendly staff members who give a sense of 'hope' to participants, with an emphasis on the quality and sustainability of the support they provide. The absence of immediate 'targets' is seen as crucial in enabling this approach and is sometimes a reason for avoiding external funding and linking directly to the Government's Work Programme:

External funding is great but it does take you away from some of the core work that you do with the residents because you are too busy focusing on the fact that you need to hit targets. (Training Provider)

However, some HAs use targets in a way perceived to be achievable while enabling delivery of quality programmes. This is considered to be in contrast to government

agencies which are pressured to 'tick boxes' and get people into jobs regardless of circumstances. The programmes we studied aim to have long-lasting results:

It is not like ticking boxes myself, I do not have a target so it is about the quality of what we do. (Training Provider)

It is not mandatory; it is a voluntary programme (Training Provider)

A focus on long-lasting results requires providers to accept that those enrolled on their programmes are not necessarily work-ready and need to take various steps before being in a position to apply for jobs. This also means taking a tailored approach and taking into account individual constraints (such as childcare) and preferences:

One guy went into apprenticeship for two weeks and said: "I am not enjoying it". I helped him get a job with [another company] and now he is working! And he had been on benefits for about four years. (Training Provider)

#### **iv. HOLISTIC, TAILORED ASSISTANCE**

Many HAs operate a triage system whereby individuals are classified as either green (work-ready), amber (needing support) or red (further removed from the labour market). Response to individuals is adapted to needs and circumstances and focuses on making improvements to their situations rather than solely moving them into employment:

Someone, let's say for example, with an alcohol problem, you can push them to a job but if they still have that problem they will get sacked within two days and they are back to square one. They are not really overcoming their barrier so in the sense of what we do it is a lot more quality and a lot more one to one. (Training Provider)

It's not necessarily about trying to get them into employment, but it might be that they're in a better position in their headspace. (Training Provider)

Support mentioned included helping participants with obtaining a new fridge, arranging for their housing benefits to be paid directly to the HA, or learning to budget their incomings and outgoings.

#### **v. PERSONALISED, ONE-ONE SUPPORT**

Probably the most valued element of training programmes offered by HAs is their emphasis on a tailored, personalised approach to supporting participants. In many cases, programmes involve several hours of one-to-one discussion which are key to building trust and allowing advisors to get to know individuals. As this provider explains, trust building through conversation is particularly crucial when working with those who might be further away from the job market:

It's about ... being able to have confidential conversations about your situation. People don't disclose everything at the first meeting. You know, we

register people and we ask a lot of questions about their health conditions, and stuff, and they often don't tell us anything much. Everything seems fine, and you wonder why they haven't got a job. They seem to be ready to go. And then over weeks and months, their habits come out. "Well actually I do have a police record, and actually I do have a health... a bit of a health problem", you know. And these things come out gradually, as they learn to trust you, they start to tell you stuff. (Training Provider)

This approach allows advisors to identify and address the actual barriers faced by participants and to develop tailored action plans, which address not only individual needs but also their interests:

What motivates me is that people actually listen to you. ... When you go to the Job Centre they are just interested in signing you on. They haven't got the time to listen to what is preventing you, what values you have got, that you can't find employment (Focus group)

HA training providers are considered to be proactive, using a range of different methods to contact and support tenants back into paid employment:

But I think they are trying to call us, to send emails, send SMS, you know, to try and get us back to work which is really important. (Interview)

One-to-one sessions also allow advisors to work on the specific needs of participants and take a personalised approach, focusing on particular issues they face and providing crucial emotional support:

I used to really panic. Like, I used to like think, you know that it's not gone right. We did a lot of, I would say we had a lot of like trials, where she would interview me and she would ask me questions and then I would give her a reply back and then she would say to me, like we would record it as like now and then she would give me feedback and say, look this is where you need to work and this is, this is good but if you want to improve it you could say it like this. Yeah, so it was about me saying something first and then she was just helping me to improve myself. (Interview)

## **vi. CARING, EMPATHETIC STAFF**

The ability of training providers and advisors to empathise with participants appears essential to gaining their trust and engaging them in a process where barriers can be identified and worked on:

I relate to them as a person and I think that sometimes you can have chat and a laugh and you can break down a lot of barriers straight away and learn a lot of about them ... and you let them know that you are with them. (Training Provider)

This sense of care and empathy was repeated across the interviews and focus groups and is summed up by the quotes here:

[My advisor was] very supportive indeed. I mean, we actually kind of became friends in a way. ... it gave me the confidence, helped me to get the confidence I didn't have in the first place. (Interview)

I am really impressed ... the care they are providing. (Focus Group)

Again, this is particularly so compared to tenant experiences of Job Centres and other training providers. Care and empathy translates into more considered and assured tenants. Recognising this, and when discussing the type of staff employed by HAs, empathy is considered a key characteristic:

You need real empathy ..., people ... who can actually put themselves in the shoes of someone who's completely different: age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, you name it, perhaps all of the above, you know. And still empathise with them. ... People like that are quite rare to find. But then they've got to have a certain confidence themselves, to be able to stand up in front of a group like that, and work with that group. And... they also need to understand the labour market, and they have to understand the skills people need to get. They have to understand how to approach employers. (Training provider)

## **vii. EXPERTISE**

Advisors' expertise in the skills and techniques necessary for job search was prized by participants. Some explained how a lack of job-searching skills was holding them back:

You know searching for jobs online when it says you have to do the CV, I wouldn't know where to start, you know what I mean. And I just thought, oh forget it! Leave it! I won't bother with that kind of thing. (Interview)

Again, one-to-one dedicated help is important in order to overcome possible apprehension about learning these new skills:

I never really knew how to do a CV. I was very nervous about doing it and I wasn't completely sure how, where to start with it, you know and she sat down with me. I'll be honest with you, she sat down with me in that room and she went right through everything. (Interview)

Help with CVs and internet searches was particularly valued by participants who had been used to more informal ways of finding work. The assistance received with CVs also had an empowering effect for many participants who lacked confidence and were thus able to identify their strengths, skills and experiences:

My advisor's vocabulary and her experience just speak for itself. I mean, if you look at my CV, the way that she's helped me construct it, it's just fantastic because I think I would not be able to write words about myself like that but it is how she sees me and how she's worded it. I just thought, wow, you know, with this I really felt I could just go out there and get a job. That's what it was for me. (Interview)

She organised my CV, she helps me with my job searching on a weekly basis like we have two sessions on a Tuesday and a Friday and I try to take part in both days as and when I can, and I think it is very useful and I think that soon I will find work. (Focus Group)

## 5. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Arising from the above findings, two key suggestions for improvement to HA training provision are made relating to Information and the Extension of Training Programmes.

### i. INFORMATION

The main criticism participants had was the lack of visibility of the training programmes to tenants. Most participants had no prior knowledge of the training remit of HAs and found out about programmes 'by chance' (a word that came up many times in interviews and focus groups). Some were told about training opportunities when they telephoned to tell the HA about a recent job loss, others when they stopped by to enquire about voluntary or job opportunities with the HA, or support for disabled family members. A few happened to pick up a leaflet when visiting the HA office for other reasons. An overwhelming majority of participants were surprised to learn that HAs provided support with training and employment.

I never realised they ... did the sort of work they do now because I just thought Housing Association was to do with housing ... (Interview)

If I did not come to sign my agreement like I said, I would never have known that Housing Associations ... do these things. I was actually shocked. (Focus Group)

As a result, many participants felt they could have easily missed out on the benefits of the training programmes and thought many more tenants would be interested in, and would benefit from, taking part in similar activities:

I did not know about their service because, you know, to me it was just ... a housing association. I had no idea whatsoever that they had a skills centre, until I did come here first of all and I thought maybe I was too nervous. I honestly didn't have that confidence; I walked back out thinking you know what.... (Interview)

I mean obviously if I'd not gone up there I would not have known because, I mean, I just assumed it's just a housing..., just pay your rent and that's it. I didn't know that they'd help you to, you know, as far as employment [is concerned]. (Interview)

However, all HAs involved in the research do advertise the programmes in their magazine (which is sent to all residents on a regular basis) and promote them in person at community events, children's centres, schools etc. Collaboration with other departments within the HAs (for example tenancy support officers) also promotes referrals of residents who are in arrears and have been long-term unemployed. Ideas for better publicising training programmes include increasing the volume of what is already done (leafleting, in-person promotion).

There is also a drive by HA training providers to involve other departments within the HA to help raise the profile of the projects to residents:

What we need to do more of is using ... our natural touch points, with residents, to promote the services .... So neighbourhood managers, customer contact centre, repairs and maintenance operatives, anybody who comes into contact with our customers, should bear in mind if it looks like they might need help to get a job: "And by the way, did you know that [HA name] can help you get a job?" (Training Provider)

However, it was recognised that success in reaching out to staff in other branches of the HAs has been limited so far. This is attributed both to the different cultures within the HAs and the already considerable workload borne by these members of staff. Ultimately, it was hoped that the success of these programmes would be the best way to increase their visibility:

You can give it all the promotion in the world, but I think for us the biggest... or the best means of promotion with the investment is word of mouth, and that you know... you can't control that. You can do your best to make sure people are aware of it, and you can have something good to say about it, and it's something that they want to talk to other people about. (Training Provider)

Ideas from tenants themselves include advertising through posters in communal areas of social housing, the handing out of flyers in local housing offices and further use of the Job Centre. In particular, the giving of information through face-to-face contact was favoured:

I think it could be promoted a little bit more face to face if that makes any sense. ... Like, maybe if a neighbourhood manager or somebody in the office or anybody that was at the forefront with residents ... sometimes sitting down with people, it becomes a lot more personable so instead of just reading something, because sometimes I'm like: "that's really interesting". I will put the letter down and then I don't see it for weeks. ... I think if someone was there and was to fill out an application or maybe a visit for something else and then they were to get a call and it was like "oh yeah I did put my name down actually. Okay, I will come along to that" so I think maybe just going and making it a bit more face to face. (Interview)

Tenants and training providers also recognise that the timing of information provision, not just the spaces where it is provided, matters:

When someone becomes a resident we should be doing more at that stage to make them aware of the services that we have rather than leaving it until they have got a problem with their roof or something and then stepping in. They are not interested then because they have got a problem with their property whatever that might be because when they first become a tenant they are usually quite positive about the organisation etcetera, etcetera, so we should be doing more at that stage. (Training Provider)

This is partly linked to the desire on the part of HAs to reach out to those tenants who are not currently getting involved in training programmes:

We're pretty good at recruitment, but we need to up our game in terms of recruiting our own residents. They are the hardest to engage. (Training Provider)

Thus HAs are challenged with finding new and innovative ways of working with hard-to-reach groups.

## ii. EXTENDING TRAINING PROVISION

The second prominent criticism was again prompted by the high level of satisfaction that participants had experienced with programmes delivered by the three HAs involved in our research and focuses on the limited scope of the training programmes currently offered. Participants were keen to see HAs provide more of what they are already doing, but also extending their training offer. Examples of training provision tenants were interested in include more work experience and apprenticeships, a wider range of training and volunteering opportunities:

If they can get more training that would be good. Yeah. (Interview)

There was a strong sense that government is not offering opportunities and HAs are well placed to work at the local level and with particular communities:

If DWP are not going to provide that sort of help for the unemployed then the Housing Association should take over. (Focus Group)

Where certain training offer was impossible through the HAs, participants suggested the use of bursaries to access other training/ education providers.

There was also recognition by training providers of the need to further tailor programme provision to particular groups. Here one training provider explained that it was provision for young and older people (over 50) where there exists a gap:

... it seems like there are two schemes: the middle bit is okay but it is the two end bits that are often ignored and they are the ones that are finding it the hardest. (Training Provider)

Accessing hard-to-reach groups remains a challenge for HAs but is more necessary given welfare cuts and the current more pervasive welfare to work agenda. However, our study has shown that HAs, with their personalised support and holistic ethos, have the potential to tackle this challenge and effectively engage tenants in training for work.

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