

National Housing Maintenance Forum - Best Practice Award Submission

Willow Park Housing Trust – Property Direct Team

Introduction

Willow Park Housing Trust is a Large Scale Stock Transfer in the South Manchester area with 7870 homes. The Trust is more than just a landlord it is an agent for regeneration in the Wythenshawe area providing additional features such as two community / sports centres, extensive CCTV coverage, warden service and employment initiatives that have supported over 300 people directly and 1700 indirectly in the current financial year.

Property Direct is the internal delivery team for the maintenance operations of the Trust. They deliver 40% of the Improvement Programme and the caretaking and grounds maintenance operations with 180 staff and £11,000,000 turn over. They utilise a mobile working solution for their gas and electrical operations, this was developed with the software provider, Orchard, and won a Customer Innovation Award in 2009. During 2010 and 2011 Property direct have developed into new markets, including delivering 30% of the re roofing programme from a base of zero and delivering over £1,000,000 of Photo Voltaic installations.

Property Direct is an intrinsic part of Willow Park's operation it is not separate or disparate from the rest of the organisation in the way other DLO's are but is simply part of the team in the same way that the rents team or IT team are. They play a major role in supporting non core activities either through direct provision or via the creation of efficiencies that can be used to support other activities. I consider that this relationship is unusual within many organisations; even where no client / contractor split exists. And I believe that it is this relationship that makes the delivery of projects discussed below possible.

In this submission I will be concentrating on three main projects that Property Direct have undertaken in the last twelve months which I consider make them a candidate for Best DLO category; these projects have contributed to improved efficiency, improved and extended service provision and contribution to the wider corporate objects in relation to improving the employability of local residents.

Whilst the delivery of these projects is significant it also set against continuing achievement in the main performance areas including; 100% of emergency and Urgent 99.98% of routine category repairs completed within target time, 100% gas certification, average of 13 days under repair for voids. Additionally productivity was improved and sickness absence rates were below 3%.

Question 1 - What is Innovative about the Service Provided

In order to address this question I will concentrate on three specific projects implemented over the past twelve months which I consider sets Property Direct apart. Whilst the first two projects are similar to what some organisation are doing I believe it is the scale of them and the fact that these are being funded and led by the DLO that makes this submission unique:

The Willow Futures Academy

This is umbrella of all our employment and employment opportunity arrangements and is funded by efficiencies achieved within Property Direct from improved productivity, reducing overheads percentages due to the increase in turnover and improved supply chain arrangements which have generated recurring savings in the region of £400,000. The total of recurring efficiencies achieved in the last five years is in excess of £1,000,000 previously these were used to support business plan performance.

£300,000 of the savings was used to support the creation of the Willow Futures Academy and the employment initiatives detailed below and the management, administration, support and drive for this work, in addition to the funding comes from Property Direct.

Apprenticeships and Trainees – the Trust as employed 10 additional apprentices in Property Direct this year which is one more than originally planned. Nine of the apprentices are in construction disciplines eight of which were recruited from the 4 Wythenshawe high schools. The additional apprentice is in administration and is currently working in supporting the employment initiatives work. An ICT trainee has been recruited and further five Trainee Managers and Surveyors are to be recruited early in the New Year. Two apprenticeships in Housing Management are currently being recruited for and are anticipated to start following the Christmas Break this has been achieved via additional funding to supplement main stream budgets.

NVQ Level 1 Adult Placements – this is a specific programme working with The Manchester College and Forum Learning to assist mature students in acquiring work experience in order to satisfy the requirements of their NVQ in administration. The programme is scheduled to take place between January and March and three places have been allocated.

University Placements – This programme assists under graduates to complete their thesis through a work based project. Two placements have been identified, one has started and the other has been scheduled to start in January.

Manchester College Placements – working with the college we seek to place up to 32 trainees who are undertaking construction related studies but who do not have an employer and so can not access the necessary 'on site' experience.

This is also an opportunity for the Trust to identify potential trainees or apprentices.

Future Jobs Fund trainees – the Trust employed 24 trainees through this initiative, all participants gained useful experience from the programme. As a consequence of the skills, experience and personal qualities they developed five participants have secured positions directly with the Trust in a variety of roles including wardens, CSOs and administration. One other was employed by the Trust via an employment agency for a specific, short term, piece of work relating to the roofing programme again using the folk lift truck driving skills he had developed with the Trust. One trainee having done his FJF placement with Trust as now secured an administration apprenticeship with a neighbouring RSL.

Willow Park Job Fund – In order to replace the FJF The Trust as created its own version, which is fully funded by Property Direct and is offering 30 placements during the financial year, The roles offered cover a wide variety of functions, including Housing Management, Grounds Maintenance, Administration and Street Cleansing. Up to six positions will be used to develop skills related to new environmental technologies, including fitting solar PV panels, cavity wall insulation etc.

In addition to on the job training all trainees have a personal development plan that incorporates and records formal and informal training and skill development activities, including driving lessons paid for by the Willow Futures Academy, to assist them on their journey into employment. All Willow Future Trainees will be offered an appointment with the Business Enterprise Manager to assist them in developing their employment options to include self employment.

For each position advertised the Trust invites members of the Talent Pool, (see below) who have expressed an interest in that particular type of work, to apply. The team then runs a recruitment event with all those who have expressed an interest, supports them in completing the application and provide advice on interview skills and techniques, thereby assisting wider group in developing their job seeking skills

The Employment Initiatives team also support and facilitate a number of employment events to support local people into employment; the highlights of which are:

Get Hired – The Trust, working with other local partners, as played a lead role in delivering Get Hired events in Wythenshawe, these events give local people the opportunity to access first hand available jobs, with local employers using the event to showcase their vacancies. These events have been attended by over 1700 people and have resulted in 124 people have now come off benefits since the event with 101 of these starting work.

Talent Pool – in order to encourage local employment and provide a more dedicated support to local applicants the Trust maintains a list of work ready local people known as the Talent Pool. This was an initiative originally set up with the Local Employment Partnerships, but the WFA has continued this work as funding to other agencies as diminished. 25% of entry level jobs, including Willow Park Job Fund positions are targeted at the Talent Pool and in the last twelve months 66% of entry level jobs at Willow Park were filled using people from the Talent Pool.

In addition the Trust has supported the Manchester City Council apprenticeship programme by utilising the Talent Pool to identify applicants for the street cleansing and business administration apprentices they are currently offering. 24 members of the Talent Pool are now being considered for apprenticeship roles with the City as a result of this work.

Next Step – this service is provided by Manchester College and is a dedicated support mechanism for individuals to help them develop a personal action plan to get into work or training. The Trust supports this initiative by; undertaking referrals to the services from identified during property inspections, arranging and providing accommodation for interviews. Property Direct have appointed four staff worklessness champions to help support the implementation of these arrangements and to date 25 people have been signposted to this service.

In addition the Academy monitors, administers, supports and funds a number of other activities targeted at improving the employment prospects and opportunities for local people, which it does not directly manage, this includes, Business Enterprise (discussed in more detail below), volunteering and school work placements.

Further details of the work of the Willow Futures Academy can be found at www.willow-park.co.uk/futures whilst the format of this site still requires work the content reflects the work undertaken accurately.

Business Enterprise Centre

A further £100,000 of the savings was used to convert surplus office accommodation into a Business Enterprise Incubation facility. The Trust has an effective business enterprise service that has been in existence for several years. However, the move to a new head office in March 2011 provided to opportunity to create business incubation space in an old housing office that had been used as the temporary HQ. Whilst the structure of building was sound the internal layout and services were not suitable.

Property Direct used part of the surplus from last year to fund the improvements and changes to the internal layout that was required and undertook the design of the space and delivered the works to complete this project. Whilst some specialist sub contract work was required, the majority of the work was delivered

using Property Direct management and technicians. The quality of the finish is second to none; the redesigned layout provides not only fantastic space for new business but flexibility for them to expand and a range of space types and size to accommodate different requirements.

The majority of labour deployed on this project was apprentices and trainees which not only helped to keep costs down but more importantly provided a unique and interesting variation of work for them.

Change to Operating Hours

Following a review of the Repairs Policy in 2010 an increase in times when the service was available was considered desirable. Whilst the previous arrangements included for appointments outside of normal operating hours this was limited to urgent jobs and was not well advertised or taken up.

Following a pilot, new operating hours of 8 am to 6 pm Monday to Friday and 8 am to 3 pm Saturday were agreed, giving full service cover across all responsive repair types, including voids and gas servicing for 56 hours per week. With staff and technicians working a 35 hour 5 day work pattern it was difficult to achieve the new requirements within the existing work pattern framework.

In addition the existing work pattern was deemed to be inefficient as it led to operations being curtailed to accommodate the end of the shift rather than to suit the job requirements, i.e. no point mixing plaster after 2 pm and so on. Technicians also worked on a rota for the 'late shift' in order to cover out of hours appointments, which led to further service disruption. Despite these difficulties Property Direct were still delivering performance that was top quartile and in many instances top 10%.

A series of new work patterns have been introduced that are based on a longer working day but working only four days a week. We believe that this unique within the housing and construction sectors; however this is providing not only improvements in service, performance and cost saving but also improvements in the work life balance of staff.

Question 2 - What are the benefits

The Willow Futures Academy

The work of the Willow Futures Academy is a major component in the Trust's achieving the element of its Purpose "...to contribute to improving the quality of life in the area". It has been recognised that educational attainment and unemployment are the biggest factors contributing to social deprivation and quality of life in this area.

The work of the Willow Futures Academy through its diverse approach is addressing not only direct and immediate needs by supporting apprenticeship and training programmes, but also raising aspirations, confidence, skills and knowledge through its support mechanisms, thereby improving the prospects of not only those who get a job but all those it touches and the local focus gives a direct impact on local residents and neighbourhoods.

There is also a business perspective in that the age of the work force is such that in next 10 years a considerable number of Property Direct employees will be reaching retirement age and the lack of investment in training within the construction generally over the last 30 years means that there simply aren't enough suitably skilled people available. The initiatives undertaken now by the Willow Futures Academy is helping to plan for the future and ensure we will have enough suitable skilled staff available not just in the trade but also in the professional disciplines

Business Enterprise Centre

The centre has immediately addressed a demand issue for local people seeking incubation space. Whilst the centre only opened in September 2011, 14 of the 25 units have already been let. Five of the businesses have won work from the Trust further enhancing our performance in terms of supporting local employment. In addition the conference and meeting facilities are almost permanently booked out.

It was always intended that trainee's employed via the Willow Park Job Funded would be provided with Business Enterprise advice, however the relationship with businesses at the centre ensures that the advice can be supplemented with practitioners who have actually gone through the process of setting up their own business, recently, and from a variety of different backgrounds, perspective and business types.

From a local resident and neighbourhood perspective this also brings, further employment opportunities with new, local businesses, availability of local services that previously would not have been there and a positive and effective use of a building that otherwise would have been empty and a target for vandalism.

Change to Operating Hours

Whilst performance as always been impressive, considerable improvements has been made including:

- Performance on routine repairs is now at 100%
- Average time to complete an appointable repair i.e. not including emergencies is reduced from 7 days to 5 days.
- A reduction in overtime working by around 60% on responsive repair activities

- A further four technicians have been moved from responsive repairs to planned works.
- Customer Satisfaction has been improved from 92% to 96%.
- Staff are reporting improved work life balance leading to more time with family and friends, undertaking more leisure activities i.e. several of them now go fishing together on their rest day.
- Reduction in fuel consumption due to less journeys to and from work, though this is difficult to quantify as this coincided with a new vehicle fleet.

In addition tenants can now get an appointment for any type of response repair, including gas servicing between 8 and 6 Monday to Friday and 8 and 3 on Saturday, providing full service provision for 56 hours per week.

Question 3 - What were the financial costs and cashable benefits

The Willow Futures Academy

The costs associated with setting and funding the various aspects of this work are close to £600,000, however £200,000 relates to apprentices which have been part of the budget for Property Direct for ten years.

Some 140 people have come of benefits as a consequence of the work undertaken in this area even at basic job seekers allowance of £67.50 per week this is a saving of £475,000. Whilst this does not come into the Trust it does have a knock on effect in terms of ensuring rent is paid, as many of these people live in our homes.

The main objective of this project is not about money but more about the intangible benefits coming from employment on the health and general well being of the community and benefits on the local economy of have local people in employment.

In addition the money used to support these activities has been generated from efficiencies elsewhere in the service without any reduction in performance or service delivery.

The trainee's deployed on the Willow Park Job Fund activities are delivering additional services or enhancing the services already provided. For example the team of street cleansers are supplementing the work undertaken by the City Council, producing a dramatic improvement in the environmental appearance of our neighbourhoods but at a fraction of the cost. This is evidenced by the compliments received from local residents.

During the current financial year some 2000 local people will be touched by the work of the Willow Future's Academy, this equates to just £200 per person or £2,700 per new job compared to the £3,000 likely to be paid to the Primes delivering the Work Programme. These figures exclude the apprentices.

Business Enterprise Centre

This initiative took £100,000 to establish, but with current occupancy levels will break even during its first year and will pay back on the investment within 3 years, after which time it will generate a surplus.

Change to Operating Hours

The costs associated with implementing this initiative were negligible and largely relate to management time and stationery, in reality less than £10,000.

The savings associated with the reduction in overtime will lead to circa £25,000 saving in addition the overall agreement included the removal of a bonus payment accounting for a further £30,000 saving. It is difficult to calculate the exact saving attributable to the reduced journeys due to the introduction of a new vehicle fleet and the increase in fuel costs generally, however this is estimated to be in the region of £10,000. The move of four technicians from responsive to planned works as saved in the region of £110,000. The savings from this project are intended to be used to support further investment in the Willow Futures Academy.

Question 4 – How relevant is this as an example that might be followed by other examples.

Generally

Whilst I consider that there are elements of each of these projects that can be replicated what I believe they exemplify is the benefit of having a 'DLO' that is an integral part of the organisation not one that is remote, arms length or in anyway excluded which unfortunately appears to be the typical scenario.

The Willow Futures Academy and Business Enterprise Centre

I believe that all housing companies, particularly those with a regional perspective will recognise aspects of our work that they would aspire too. Whilst it may not necessarily be funded or driven by the DLO it is at the heart of what we (the social housing sector) do.

Whilst some of the aspects of these projects have been made possible by the geography and set up of Willow Park it is all relative. We can impact a large number of people and influence other agencies locally to impact on the outcomes and as the main agent for regeneration in our area it is part of our overall ethos and reason for being. But this is the case for all housing organisations it is just a matter of scale and most of all a willingness to try.

At Willow Park we have two people who are the main players in driving this, however their 'expertise' is home grown and developed out of an ability to communicate, a desire to succeed, a willingness to try and to learn and a passion for the work they do. Whilst I accept these are rare qualities they don't necessarily require particular expertise.

Training for managers and staff is more about raising awareness to the issues, the potential solutions and the wider perspective of the work they do. If I was to start again I am not sure that I would do anything differently other than talking to others before starting. In order to gain assistance before starting others should speak to as many people as possible already doing this kind of work, including us.

Change to Operating Hours

I think any DLO or indeed any organisation requiring an extension of operational hours can benefit from considering a solution similar to this. Whilst I don't believe there is anything overly unique about our circumstances you do need to be able to communicate to staff the need for change and the benefits to them.

You also need to have teams who are receptive to change and unfortunately this isn't achieved over night. We have been open and honest with our staff and introduced a number of changes over many years and developed a trust from them by saying what we mean and doing what we say, to ensure they adopt and adapt to the new arrangements.

Again I don't think there is any specific expertise necessary just an ability to engage with staff. If I were to do this again I might have been a little meaner with the enhancement paid to staff covering the Saturday shift but in the whole scheme of things this is insignificant.

Summary

What I have attempted to demonstrate by discussing these three projects is not the explicit benefits of the projects individually but the benefit that Property Direct brings to Willow Park. Not just in the delivery of excellent maintenance services but in the contribution to the wider objectives of the Trust in a range of measures that are unrelated to the core business and which in my view makes Property Direct stand out from other DLO's and why I believe them worthy to be considered for the Best DLO category.