

Mentoring: a case study from Wakefield and District Housing

A large, third sector employer in West Yorkshire.

This case study is drawn from an interview with Tim Craven, Community Leadership Manager, November 2009.

Wakefield and District Housing (WDH) is one of the country's largest housing associations with over 1400 employees managing more than 30,000 properties. WDH has been involved in mentoring young people aged 14-16 in local schools since 2006. An original interest from two members of staff has increased to 30 volunteer mentors from all parts of the organisation.

Why does WDH bother with mentoring?

The mentoring programme is part of a concerted plan to increase the involvement of WDH with local schools. It is a means of increasing understanding among young people, their friends and families of what WDH actually does, building its reputation as an employer. It's a way of demonstrating the commitment of WDH to the community, showing that WDH is getting behind young people and supporting their success. The mentoring programme also has many positive effects for staff volunteers.

What's in it for the volunteers?

Mentoring helps employee development. It's considered to form excellent evidence within competency-based annual appraisals. It increases job satisfaction and helps people to value the jobs they do more highly. Many of the volunteers were educated locally and are motivated by the opportunity to give something back to a school system which they themselves experienced. None of the mentors have dropped out of the scheme since it began because they didn't think they were getting anything out of it. Volunteers come together occasionally to compare experiences and that forms a great opportunity for building relationships across the organisation and with other supporting employers in the area. Volunteer mentors get to know teachers, gain a better understanding of the education system, and the experiences of young people who may well be tenants of the housing association.

WDH also offers more than one hundred work experience places every year, supports a popular Outward Bound initiative and is engaged with the new Diplomas.

How it works for WDH

WDH got involved in mentoring after an approach from Compact, the local Education Business Partnership (EBP). The EBP makes it very easy for WDH to get involved. EBP staff meet potential mentors, arranges a day's training for them, sorts and pays for CRB checks and liaises with participating schools. The EBP has a lead person who works directly with the mentors and makes sure good communication is in place. One school, the King School in Pontefract, now has a direct relationship with WDH. The School also has a lead and they take responsibility for ensuring that mentors are properly supported. There are no financial costs for WDH – it just has to agree to release staff mentors for an hour or so every four to five weeks over the school year.

How it works for WDH employees

The mentoring opportunity is occasionally advertised in a weekly brief that goes to all staff. Prospective volunteers come forward and have a chat with someone from the Skills and Enterprise team to confirm interest before the arrangement is agreed with the relevant line manager. Mentors are matched with a young person. Meetings always take place inside schools.

What sort of young people are mentored?

All the young people mentored are aged 14 to 16. The mentoring relationship usually starts when the young people are 14 and have just entered year 10 and continues to the end of year 11 when they take their GCSEs. Mentored students fall into two main groups: young people who have the ability to stay on after 16 and go on to university, but who don't come from families with strong higher education backgrounds; and, young people who are struggling, but close, to being on track to achieve their 5 GCSEs at A to C grades.

What the schools say about the mentoring experience

WDH knows that schools value mentoring relationships and would be delighted to have more mentors available to match with young people. Schools believe that through mentoring young people will achieve more and help them to go into adult life with better advice and encouragement than they would otherwise receive. Mentoring can help give them an extra edge.

What does WDH think young people get out of the experience

The mentored students have opted into the programme – they need to have parental permission. Experiences do vary, but many have clearly responded well to mentoring, improving behaviour, applying themselves more at school and thinking more ambitiously about their futures. Mentors see young people become more confident and more articulate over the programme. Mentored students get to see a different view of the world and find it easier to understand the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they need to get ahead. Some mentors can give specialist advice, or help young people to access it, for example in getting onto an apprenticeship, a desired work experience placement, or dealing with typical work place situations.

What would WDH say to other employers thinking supporting mentoring schemes

Do it. It's easy and rewarding. It's a low cost way of making a positive difference to the young person, employee, school and community.