

Friday, 03 May 2013

Keep it in the family

03/05/2013



A housing association in Birmingham is tackling rising unemployment by pledging to fill 10 per cent of its job vacancies with its own tenants. Austin Macauley reports

'I'm very thankful to Family for the trust they put in me. I wouldn't be where I am now without them.'

It's a sentiment Asha Sendawula repeats a number of times during our conversation. But the 36-year-old project co-ordinator is also proud of herself for making the most of the career opportunities at 2,500-home Family Housing Association - and hopes to inspire others to follow suit.

Ms Sendawula is responsible for five initiatives at Family, ranging from a handyman scheme to employment programmes. Not bad when you consider six years ago she

was a disillusioned business administration and health and safety management graduate, working in a shop, frustrated by the lack of opportunities to fulfil her potential.

When she became a resident involvement assistant in 2007 she was not only an employee but also a Family tenant, living in a two-bedroom terrace house in north east Birmingham.

She was Family's first, and so far only, tenant employee. Landlords looking to employ their tenants is nothing new, but Family is breaking new ground by setting itself a specific target.

In April it pledged to fill at least 10 per cent of vacancies over the next three years by employing tenants. Whatever the job, tenants will hear about it first, and as long as they meet the minimum requirements they will be guaranteed an interview.

Financial pressure

Around two in three Family tenants are out of work, and most live in areas of Birmingham that fall into the 5 per cent most deprived nationally. The economic downturn has led to a rise in national unemployment - up to 2.56 million or 7.9 per cent nationally according to figures released last month by the Office for National Statistics - and welfare reforms are expected to put tenants under even greater pressure.

'For communities to thrive we need to do our bit to help people prosper economically and improve their quality of life,' says Claire Hardwick, head of community investment at Family. 'That has an impact by enabling communities to function better, which makes it easier to manage homes in that area and means that rent gets paid.'

'It's also about the insight that can be brought into Family by employing tenants. Their first-hand experience of being a resident of Family, although it is only the experience of those particular residents, is still invaluable "insider" knowledge.'

Family arrived at the 10 per cent figure because 'it sounded challenging but not impossible to meet,'

Ms Hardwick says, adding it 'is a clear statement of our commitment to make this happen, rather than it just being a nice idea which may or may not be realised'.

Over the past three years Family, which employs 99 staff, has filled 38 vacancies. If that level of recruitment is sustained, around four tenants should be taken on between now and 2016.

Challenging target

Four jobs doesn't sound a lot, but a recent vacancy for a gardener highlights the challenges ahead. Family texted details of the post to all its tenants - something it will now do as a matter of course for all vacancies, as well as using other channels such as its tenants' magazine.

Around 100 tenants requested further information on the role, 17 applied, one was shortlisted - but a non-tenant ultimately got the job. Successful candidates will

always be chosen on merit, says Ms Hardwick.

Tenants who show an interest in a vacancy will be offered support in their search for work, such as help with their CV. Even if they decide not to apply for the job, that should better equip them for future opportunities.

Progress on the 10 per cent target will be reviewed regularly and if tenants aren't applying for advertised posts, Family will talk to them to find out why, possibly even training them to match vacancies.

Family is also about to launch a voluntary work programme which will give tenants experience of working across its departments for up to 12 weeks, doing 30 hours a week. It's partly a response to the ending of the last government's future jobs fund, which subsidised jobs for 18 to 24-year-olds.

'We didn't want our work experience opportunities to dry up,' explains Ms Hardwick.

Unlike under the future jobs fund, participants will not be paid. But they will be provided with bus passes, lunch tokens and £70 of clothing vouchers.

Fine balance

John Gray, secretary of union Unison's housing associations branch, says there is a clear dividing line between tenants being given valuable experience, such as shadowing members of staff, and 'doing a job for which they should be paid'.

'It's quite wrong to expect people to do work unpaid,' he adds.

Ms Hardwick says Family doesn't have the resources to offer paid work experience but insists those on placements will not be replacing paid staff.

Six people will pilot the voluntary work programme from May, after which Family plans placements for 20 residents a year.

Aptly, the person in charge of organising the programme is none other than Ms Sendawula. Having started off at Family on a five-month unpaid work placement, who could be better? Her own placement gave her an edge when applying for a paid post, she says. No longer one of the housing association's tenants - a mum of two, Asha moved home in 2010 to accommodate her family - she believes landlords employing tenants is mutually beneficial.

'Before I started working for Family, all I knew was they were my landlord, they provided me with a house, I paid my rent and called them about repairs. Working for them you soon realise they're so much more. I think they just needed to find better ways to let tenants know,' she says.

'As a tenant I know what people want as customers and it's easier for me to talk to tenants and get them more involved.'

Resident resources

Landlords employing tenants is a growing trend, according to Michelle Reid, chief

executive of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service.

One example is Helena Partnerships in St Helens, where 24 out of 680 staff members are tenants. Last year 17 per cent of its new recruits were tenants.

Ms Reid says 'More and more landlords are realising the huge local talent pool within their tenant communities and are supporting people to make great contributions to the economy and influence the way their services are delivered.'