

Echelon helps Festival Housing Group do more than win a major award

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Festival Housing Group (FHG), the West Midlands-based housing association, has won a UK Housing Award – in the ‘Developing Skills and Capacity’ category – for helping selected Year 10 and 11 pupils at Droitwich Spa High School to develop skills, and gain nationally recognised qualifications in, property maintenance. Known as the ‘Skills for Life project’, it began as a management training opportunity for FHG staff but has gone on to create an imaginative link with Droitwich Spa High School which provides employment and training opportunities in property maintenance for Year 10 and 11 pupils at the school.

These students learn a range of property maintenance skills as part of their curriculum and their two year course includes one day a week working with FHG. Moreover, FHG has agreed to take on at least one of the current pupils as a full apprentice when he leaves school.

Guided by coach Nicole Wehden from the organisation development consultancy Echelon, FHG - which prides itself on ‘building successful communities’ across Herefordshire and Worcestershire – initially got the pupils to spend one day a week with FHG’s maintenance company. This not only provided them with the practical skills and experience in such things as plumbing and electrics but also enabled them to have those skills recognised via City & Guilds qualifications.

Clare Huyton, FHG’s executive director, said: “We are delighted to have this project recognised on a national stage.

“To win this award is not only a tribute to my colleagues at FHG but also to the pupils and staff at Droitwich Spa High School who have worked so hard to help make this project work. We look forward to continuing this success for many years to come.”

Subsequently, through links which Droitwich Spa High School has with a Kenyan school, workers from FHG’s maintenance company visited this school and not only built a classroom there but also trained pupils and teachers in maintenance of their school buildings. And now that the project is into its second year, FHG is building on its success by adding a partnership with another secondary school on the theme of community safety and work with several local primary schools.

“The aim of the project was to give four local youngsters, who had very little in terms of future prospects and motivation, a real start in life,” explained Kay Dovey, HR Director for Festival Housing. “After working on the project for a year, the project team worked with the local Droitwich Spa High School as well as Festival Housing management and staff to create a new experiential programme of work which could ultimately result in a Modern Apprenticeship for the students involved.”

The aim was also to provide a group of FHG employees with a unique learning and development experience to develop their management, leadership and communication skills. Consequently, the project team:

- Developed a clear business/project vision that meets customer and student needs as well as organisational objectives.
- Created a detailed strategy to realise the vision.
- Developed and worked effectively with Gantt charts that include clearly defined objectives and actions, milestones, roles and responsibilities, timescales, risk management, ongoing review and correction.
- Significantly enhanced time management skills.
- Developed confidence and capability in public speaking.
- Became adept at problem solving.
- Developed the capability to create a winning team that achieved peak performance.
- Developed highly effective delegation skills.
- Learned to deliver excellence in customer service.

- Although beginning with little confidence and limited capability, evolved into a team that delivered significantly beyond customer and organisational expectations and developed and belief and confidence that it could do anything.

The project was the brainchild of Echelon's Jenny Hill and Nicole Wehden. Jenny Hill explained: "FHG was an early adopter of our Community Project Challenge (CPC) management training initiative.

"The initiative supports FHG's corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals and helps its managers achieve a 'Cert.M' qualification. Participants use action learning methods to manage a 'real time' project.

"Support is provided via a programme coach and a bespoke project website, which includes a variety of online project management and knowledge tools. A personal learning log provides evidence for qualifications and continuous professional development (CPD)."

Nicole Wehden commented that the team has achieved some impressive results. She said: "When we first started working with the project team they were a group of enthusiastic individuals with limited management experience and hungry to learn.

"With guidance, they developed a vision, strategy and clear, comprehensive plans to achieve their goals. They implemented plans with real commitment and inspiration and learnt a host of management skills along the way, applying them all with panache.

"What they achieved as a result far exceeded anyone's expectations and I am extremely proud of them - and they achieved all that while continuing to carry out their day jobs successfully!"

Linda Gittings, Training Officer at FHG, explained that one of the key benefits of this project for FHG is that: "We are developing an understanding and methodology for coaching at work and embedding learning into the organisation in practical and sustainable ways.

"It is helping improve individual and team effectiveness and aligning our outputs more closely to customer needs which, in turn, is improving customer satisfaction. Longer-term, CPC provides support succession planning by identifying relevant programme participants," she said.

FHG's Kay Dovey added: "The project has attracted a great deal of media interest resulting in a substantial amount of free PR for FHG, both locally and nationally.

"This has served to enhance the reputation of the organisation within the local community and across the housing association community. In addition, it raised the profile of FHG as a preferred local employer.

"One of our strategic objectives is to develop key strategic alliances across the community - in particular with schools in order to attract school leavers to the organisation. As a result of the project, Droitwich Spa High School has become a strong local partner of ours to pioneer highly innovative career initiatives for young people.

"The relationship has become so strong that FHG management have been invited to speak at major school events. In addition, management and project team members have been introduced, by the school, to local 'movers and shakers'.

"In short, FHG's overall local profile has been greatly enhanced as a result of the project – and, now, numerous local schools are anxious to get involved."

"One unforeseen benefit of the project has been the impact on the staff involved in developing the youngsters, outside of the project team," said Linda Gittings. "Workmen are learning and developing coaching, teaching and mentoring skills that have resulted in the youngsters becoming so motivated and enthusiastic that they have asked to work during school holidays, when they weren't scheduled to do so.

"Moreover, the project has proved to be a highly effective form of recruitment, since it introduces FHG to four potential new workers each year.

“And the growth in confidence and capabilities of the eight project team members has become obvious for all to see,” she continued. “As a result of the project and the experience they have gained from it, the organisation now has eight individuals who have developed in many aspects – in terms of skills, experience and character - and are now considered to have serious management potential.”

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Echelon is an organisation development consultancy with a 20-year track record of delivering targeted communication, training and performance support solutions that really make a difference to corporate, government and not-for-profit organisations and professional bodies.

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