



Southwark Council Housing Academy

Case study

Southwark Council, the largest local authority social landlord in London, has taken steps to make sure new employees have the skills they need by creating a brand new housing academy. Using Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) qualifications, this forward-thinking organisation is helping its new staff members to build their knowledge, whatever stage of their career they are at.

“ In housing, things are evolving all the time, and that’s where CIH comes in.

Martin Green, head of specialist housing services, Southwark Council

Problem solving

In a fast-paced and ever-changing environment, it’s vital for housing professionals to have a solid and constantly refreshed knowledge of the area in which they work. Southwark Council wants its staff members to be the best of the best, to constantly grow in their knowledge and to represent Southwark as a centre of excellence. “If people have Southwark on their CV,” says Martin Green, head of specialist housing services, “we want that to be seen as the gold standard.”

The issue for Southwark is largely to do with recruitment and retention. “We are working in central London where we’re competing with a vibrant local economy,” explains Martin, “It’s incredibly difficult to get people into housing and local government because often the salaries aren’t very competitive. For us it had to be about ‘growing our own’ and retaining talent, and we put a lot of thought into how we could do that.”

Qualifications and change

Martin has worked in housing for 40 years and is disheartened to hear claims that no particular qualifications are needed to work in housing. In fact, he believes, the talents and qualities needed to work in housing are a real mixed bag: “Housing’s a broad church but it needs a broad set of skills – both hard and soft. Softer skills like empathy and negotiation have to be backed up by knowledge of technical things like retro-fitting. You have to be able to put those various elements together. There’s a specific housing expertise that’s needed and it’s always growing. In housing, things are evolving all the time, and that’s where CIH comes in.”



Working towards the gold standard with CIH

Southwark Council knew that CIH would be a perfect fit with Southwark's vision of excellence. Rather than expecting new staff members to have a certain level of knowledge or failing to encourage them to expand on existing knowledge, the council recognises that in order to attract, nurture and retain the best team it's important to 'grow' its own workforce and encourage constant learning and improvement.

- Apprenticeship (equivalent to CIH's Level 3 qualification)
- Trainee (equivalent to CIH's Level 4 qualification)
- Graduate (equivalent to CIH's new Level 5 qualification)
- Professional (equivalent to a post-graduate level)

CIH is well-recognised within the housing sector as the home of professional standards – a CIH qualification can be completed at various levels, and these are reflected in the housing academy's different placements.

The qualifications assure workers that they can excel and constantly better themselves. "I think people can see there's a career path," says Martin Green, "They can start at the bottom and go all the way up or they can come in at a different level."

“ Our public services are undergoing major cultural change. We are tasked with working more efficiently, doing more with less, raising standards and redesigning services to improve the quality of the customer experience. Within the service, roles are being redesigned and new ways of working are developing. We want clear headed, inspiring and inspired people on board orchestrating our present day and future responses. It's an exciting, creative and challenging environment. It's also very complex. Reflecting on this complexity, we intend the academy to provide a professional standards vehicle helping to map out career potential and qualification needs, now and in the future.

Gerri Scott, strategic director of community and housing, Southwark Council



A positive reception

The programme has been incredibly popular – almost 600 people applied by June 2015 for the apprenticeship and traineeship programmes alone.

Southwark's housing academy webpage reads: "Are you ambitious, talented and very passionate about providing the best possible service to your customers? Then you might be the person we are looking for in the Southwark housing academy." It seems that the ambitious, hard-working people Southwark want to employ and retain are responding well to its new scheme.

- 315 applicants for the apprenticeship programme
- 279 applicants for the traineeship programme

The bigger picture for housing

"We need to make people from outside the industry understand that there is a body of expertise within the housing profession," Martin Green urges, "It's not just about knocking on doors and collecting rent, although that's often an incredibly varied and taxing role in itself. Raising the profile of housing as a career but also the profile of housing in general is really important both to me and to Southwark Council, and we hope we can keep this up in the future."

There are other goals for the future already in place – Southwark is keen to get other councils and housing associations involved so new academies can 'pop up' in different areas around the country. "People can gain experience elsewhere," suggests Martin, "and we can share what we've learnt and the skills we've gained – as individuals and as organisations – along the way."

The housing academy at Southwark Council is still very much in its infancy but its future looks bright. With a range of CIH housing qualifications and learning opportunities on offer for Southwark's employees – from entry level staff to experienced professionals – the constantly-evolving world of housing is slowly becoming less overwhelming and more manageable. CIH's trusted qualifications and reputation as the home of professional standards have combined with Southwark's innovative outlook and passion for excellence to create an exciting new partnership.

Email us at business@cih.org to find out more