Learning today, leading tomorrow
Skills and learning for the housing industry of the future
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New Charter – learning for life
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By Christine Amyes, Executive Director of People at New Charter

Summary

New Charter has adopted an innovative and transformational approach to life-long learning as a key ingredient in achieving their vision of Great Homes, Great Neighbourhoods and Great People. This has included the development of a broad and holistic culture of learning which embraces staff, tenants, residents and their children.

New Charter: our values and our vision

New Charter is built on core principles of:

- **Our GREAT values** – Genuine, Respect, Excellence, Achieve and Together which run through everything we do.
- **Continuous improvement** – through a commitment to systems thinking, coaching, employee engagement, customer focus, performance management and leadership.
- **Corporate social responsibility** – striving to ensure we meet standards way beyond the expectations of government and regulators.

We believe that an organisation that has a culture of learning and innovation is a place where people want to be and want to succeed. We invest in the development of our people and believe that this is crucial in achieving our vision of ‘Great Homes, Great Neighbourhoods, Great People’. We recognise we cannot do this in isolation and have a history of collaborative working within the housing industry and beyond.

The New Charter Learning Centre

Almost ten years ago we launched the New Charter Learning Centre with the aim of providing lifelong learning opportunities for all our people – employees, tenants and their families. We could not have envisaged at that stage the range of directions this work would take us in.

The learning centre was launched in partnership with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Learning and GMB Trade Union. We jointly funded two learning co-ordinators and
appointed Union Learning Representatives from employees at all levels of the organisation to explore skills gaps and learning needs, provide information; and forge a link to the opportunities available. This was hugely successful with 50 per cent of employees engaging in some way with the centre.

A primary aim was the need to raise core skills – now known as functional skills – later strengthened by our commitment to the Skills Pledge following the Leitch Report into Skills in the UK.¹ A significant proportion of targeted employees achieved Level 2 core skills qualifications – for some this was the first qualification or award they had ever gained.

**Building a culture of learning**

We wanted to establish a strong culture of learning *in itself* being a good thing. We didn’t restrict learning to those skills directly required for job roles but encouraged any learning that increased wider skills. Popular learning areas included foreign languages, craft and DIY skills and photography; in addition to English and Maths.

In order to embed this, we encouraged our people to involve their families in their learning. Many did this and learned new skills with their partners and their children. We encouraged our own staff to share skills and many courses are delivered by employees with skills in relevant areas.

Through our resident involvement and regeneration teams we have included tenants in learning opportunities, taking courses out into community hubs and providing resources for tenants to access learning, share skills, gain qualifications and build confidence. This aspect of our work has now become much greater as welfare reform and continuing high levels of unemployment have impacted on our communities.

The Learning Centre is now incorporated into mainstream learning and development practices. Organisational training budgets have been increased during the recent economic downturn; we recognise that it is only by maintaining and building the skills of our people that we will be able to deliver the aspirations of our corporate plan.

We are an accredited Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) centre and City and Guilds centre enabling us to offer externally recognised qualifications. We have close links with local colleges who are keen to work with us in delivering courses and events that are tailored to our learners’ needs to achieve maximum return on investment.
We work collaboratively with other housing providers. We have developed a successful Neighbourhood Development Programme in partnership with other Airport Group members to meet a skills gap identified in light of the changing roles of housing professionals. This programme is delivered by Airport Group members, is endorsed by ILM and has won a National Training Award. The latest programme has delegates from seven housing providers coming together to develop new skills and share expertise and experience.

Leadership development is a priority and we have a range of interventions available for managers at all levels from Level 2 Team Leader ILM programmes through to executive coaching for Directors. All our managers are trained coaches with many senior managers being trained to certificate and postgraduate diploma level. On our most recent leadership programme, ‘G-Force’, managers from all levels attend modules to explore managing others, managing self, managing the business and managing change. The mix of levels – from first line supervisors to directors is intended to allow for an exchange of views and experiences, shared understanding and awareness; and new networks to form. Initial feedback and evaluation is very positive.

We continue to actively support non-vocational learning and hold an annual ‘Dragons’ Den’ where employees can pitch for funds for any learning activity for themselves and their family members. The ‘Dragons’ include our Chief Executive and awards have been made for activities as diverse as cycle maintenance, Turkish language, ballroom dancing, karate, yacht day skipper and singing lessons!

A more recent addition is our ‘Catching the Dream’ competition where people bid for funds to achieve an ambition. We have enabled two employees to set up a bee hive and three others to do a parachute jump.

In all of these cases we ask employees to give something back. Examples include a New Charter choir being established, a cycling club being set up, a bee hive situated on the roof of our offices; and charities benefitting from sponsorship. We haven’t yet worked out a way to benefit directly from the yacht day skipper course!

There is a clear understanding across the Group that we support learning and employees are keen to talk to their managers and to the organisational transformation team about their development. We provide interest free learning loans, encourage secondments, both internal and external, and wherever possible promote from within. We have a talent management programme called ‘Ingenium’ which is actively supported
by Group Management team and directors who are mentors and coaches for delegates. An in-depth residential coaching programme ‘Courage and Spark’ which forms part of the programme is co-delivered by the Chief Executive and the Executive Director of People.

We have featured in The Sunday Times Best Companies to Work for lists for the past five years, securing a place in the top 20 for the past four consecutive years. Our commitment to learning and development is recognised by our employees in their responses and comments in the survey. We score consistently high for ‘Personal Growth’ and were awarded the Best Companies Training and Development award in 2011.

**Improving lives through learning**

Our work with our customers is built on the same belief that learning is a way of improving people’s way of life. We provide a range of opportunities for our tenants to engage in learning – either to improve their work prospects or to enrich their lives in other ways. We hold joint employee and tenant learning days and celebrate learning achievements for customers and employees alike.

As housing providers we have unique relationships with local communities and many of us use this access to tackle worklessness and create more sustainable communities. We have a wide range of interventions from which tenants can gain experience and workplace skills, build confidence and hopefully go on to employment. Through our ‘Great Opportunities’ programme we arrange and host work placements and training, facilitate volunteering, hold job clubs, provide accredited training and are involved with a ‘time-banking’ scheme where people swap skills. Results from this programme are encouraging; from April 2012 to March 2013 our ‘Great Opportunities’ programme has helped 80 local people into paid work.

In partnership with the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Greater Manchester Housing Providers we, as lead employer, have made an ambitious bid to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) for Employer Ownership of Skills funding to dramatically increase the impact we can make in reducing worklessness. We intend to create a pathway to improve skills by intervening in career discussions in the final year of school in every secondary school in Greater Manchester, by developing and delivering a new six month traineeship and by doubling the number of apprenticeships on offer. We will work with our supply chain and with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to increase still further apprenticeship and employment opportunities for our tenants.
Our own employees will need support and training to enable them to manage and supervise this large group of trainees and apprentices and we will ensure that this is delivered.

**Investing in young people – academy sponsorship**

A more unusual aspect of our commitment to lifelong learning is our involvement in the education of children and young people. Building on the work we have already undertaken in our communities with young people, we took the unprecedented step in 2008 of sponsoring an academy for 1,650 young people in the heart of one of our communities.

Our rationale for sponsoring the academy came from our commitment to create sustainable communities. We want to be able to improve the life chances of young people and felt that our sponsorship could make a difference. We wanted our future tenants to be economically active and able to pay their rent and we also need a future workforce with high skills levels.

We invested in two poorly performing schools (one already in special measures) and two demotivated and underperforming staff groups. We introduced a new management structure, implemented new business support processes, worked closely with teaching and support staff to identify and resolve issues; and began work on the design of a new school building to be funded by the Building Schools for the Future programme (both existing school buildings were dilapidated and were not fit for purpose).

The New Charter Academy⁴ has now moved into its fantastic new home; the school is truly a hub for the community with community access and integration a key feature. The senior leadership team of the academy includes a Community and Regeneration Director, seconded from New Charter Housing, who is the primary link between the school community and our own neighbourhood and regeneration teams. Her team promote links with other local groups and employers to ensure that learning opportunities are available to all – regardless of age, background or experience.

As a result of our experience with the New Charter Academy we were asked to sponsor further schools and formed a multi academy trust, the Great Academies Education Trust, which now sponsors three academies with further schools seeking to join.

As sponsors we have a strong presence on the Great Academies Education Trust and have engaged the commitment of local business and educational leaders to support us.
We are directly involved in each school, with an Executive Director as Chair of each governing body. We commit our time and the expertise of our professional staff to provide business services to the academies; allowing the academy staff to concentrate on education. We provide work placements and careers interventions; we support curricular and extra-curricular support for specific projects – for example, to the academy PR and media club and for enterprise events.

We have worked closely with our academies to involve them in some of our key projects, providing a new dimension to our work whilst offering unique learning opportunities for the students. Our latest venture sees us work with our two secondary academies to involve them in our exhibition at the CIH Annual Conference.

Our academies have improved the educational offer available to young people in our communities and have proved to be a hub where the community can come together to develop skills and further their education. We have joint programmes with students and tenants – for example with the Royal Exchange Theatre, the Bridgewater Hall and the Manchester United Foundation.

In the New Charter Academy the first cohort of sixth formers all achieved their required A level grades and went on to the university of their choice. GCSE results have improved dramatically although there is still more work to be done; and our primary academy has raised standards to ensure that children moving on to secondary education will have a good start in the next stage of their education.

**Visioning the future**

We will continue to build our business in line with our corporate plan. Our commitment to tackling worklessness in our communities will mean that we will continue to find new and innovative ways to engage with tenants and with local partners to develop new opportunities for learning and employment.

We will continue to invest in the development of our employees and strive to instil a thirst for learning in all our people. Leadership development will be a priority as we steer a course through the challenging environments ahead.

We will work more in partnerships with others to generate a greater force to deliver more outcomes for our tenants and our employees. Joint programmes with other agencies will allow a more holistic approach and ensure that learning outcomes are more achievable and sustainable and more likely to lead to employment.
Our investment in our academies will continue to grow. We will work collaboratively with others to improve the educational offer to young people in our communities and ensure they have the skills needed to be successful in the workplaces of the future.

**Key points**

- An organisation that has a culture of learning and innovation is a place where people want to be and want to succeed.
- Learning opportunities which target skills deficits are vital for organisations to succeed, but equally important is the creation of a culture where learning and self-development is seen as a good thing *per se*.
- Learning is a way of improving people’s lives and as housing providers we have unique relationships with our communities and with people who would benefit most from learning interventions.
Endnotes

1 The Leitch Review of Skills was an independent review by Lord Sandy Leitch Chairman of the national Employment Panel commissioned in 2004, ‘to identify the UK’s optimal skills mix for 2020 to maximise growth, productivity and social justice’ The report published in 2006 recommended that the UK should raise achievements at all levels of skills and recommended that it commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020. Available from: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/leitch_finalreport051206.pdf [accessed 10 June 2013]

2 The Airport Group is a partnership of 14 housing organisations who work collaboratively to tackle the issues that matter the most to them and the people living in their homes. Spanning the North of England, together the group manages over 175,000 homes and employ over 5,000 people. www.theairportgroup.co.uk/

3 The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) is a publicly funded, industry led organisation providing strategic leadership on skills and employment issues in the four home nations of the UK. Its aim is to secure a greater commitment to invest in the skills of people to drive enterprise, jobs and growth. www.ukces.org.uk

4 www.newcharteracademy.org.uk [accessed 10 June 2013]