

Commercial in Confidence



**INVESTORS IN PEOPLE**

Review Report for  
ACTION HOUSING AND SUPPORT LTD

February 2009

Assessor: Robin Simpson MBA MA BA ACIPD MIBC

on behalf of Yorkshire & Humberside Assessment Limited

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## **I. Review Details**

Name of organisation	Action Housing and Support Ltd
Address	6 Genesis Business Park Sheffield Road Rotherham S60 1DX
Type of organisation	Supported Housing
Senior person	Russell Ward, Chief Executive
Contact	Jon Friend, Personnel Director
Number of staff	178
Number of sites	8
Type of assessment	Review
Site visit dates	12 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup> February 2009
Feedback Meeting	20 <sup>th</sup> February 2009

## **2. Recommendation**

Having carried out the Review process rigorously and in accordance with the guidance for Assessors by Investors in People UK, I am satisfied that Action Housing and Support continues to meet the requirements of the *Investors in People* Standard.

Robin Simpson  
Assessor

## **3. Background Information**

Action Housing and Support is a Housing Association, providing a range of services to disadvantaged groups of people, many of whom traditionally find it difficult to find and maintain tenancies.

Conducted in February 2009, during this Review a total of 38 people were interviewed, representing approximately 20% of the total workforce. Employees were interviewed from each of the satellite sites and Head Office, with visits made to offices at Rotherham, Armthorpe and Mansfield.

## **4. Objectives of the Review**

To review the organisation against the 10 Indicators of the *Investors in People* Standard, and to consider progress against the previous Assessor's recommendations.

## **5. Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank all the staff at Action Housing and Support, who helped to make it an enjoyable process, with special thanks to Nicki Pickard for ensuring that the interviews ran smoothly.

## **6. Areas of good practice**

Action Housing and Support is very much a values-driven organisation, with these values figuring prominently in the current Business Plan. The staff are extremely dedicated and highly conscientious, and 'live and breathe' the values in their everyday work, with service users at the centre of much of their activity.

The organisation has a recent history of heavily promoting staff development, which is manifest in the comprehensive internal training programme. This equips staff with much of the information that they need to carry out their roles effectively. Overall, staff spoke very favourably about the level of training provided.

Staff feel empowered, being encouraged to act on their own initiative and make decisions. People feel that they can put forward ideas and that they will be seriously considered and implemented where appropriate.

Managers are supportive of their staff, utilising both formal mechanisms -such as Appraisal and Supervision - and informal approaches, to effectively monitor progress, review development needs and provide motivational feedback.

The organisation continues to develop, pursuing a progressive approach which continually benefits disadvantaged groups. Staff can typically see the direct application of the training through their work with service users.

## **7. Recommendations for improving effectiveness**

To highlight to staff the linkages between meeting performance targets and continued support for service users. All employees need to recognise the importance of meeting targets, to ultimately benefit the people they are seeking to help.

To consider how staff can have formalised input to the Business Plan, such as through questionnaires, Employee Forums and Planning meetings.

To show the explicit influence that staff and their representatives have on Business Planning and policy-making processes, indicating how decisions have been changed as a direct result of staff input.

To develop some all-embracing management standards, which incorporate the organisation's values and ethos, so that existing and new managers will continue to follow a consistent approach.

To encourage people to work towards agreed individual targets, while recognising that there will be a certain amount of variance between individual performance, such as from differences in client caseload.

To encourage greater 'cross working' between the different project teams - such as through networking, joint meetings and secondments - so that staff can share ideas and good practice, benefiting from each other's expertise, for the mutual benefit of service users and the organisation.

To ensure that local induction is carried out consistently, especially regarding advice on working safely, such as the policy and guidance when visiting a service user in their home.

To show the measurable impact that staff development has had, relating it to specific changes in performance measures that it has helped to bring about.

To report back to staff on changes that have been made to the internal training programme, as a direct result of their feedback.

## 8. Findings against the Investors in People Standard

A well-structured Business Plan clearly sets out the values of the organisation, as well as the key targets to be achieved. The Business Plan is in the public domain, on the organisation's website, so is freely available to any member of staff. Senior management conduct regular reviews of progress and there is formal reporting into the Board of Trustees. Action Housing and Support is an extremely values-driven organisation, with some highly conscientious staff who are very committed to the work they do. A strong ethos runs through the organisation, which can be seen at all levels, and translates into service users being placed at the centre of much of the activity which takes place. However, not all staff are fully aware of the linkages between this caring ethos and the requirement to meet performance targets. Despite information being available, some staff are not aware of the key targets for their project area, and consequently do not see the links to meeting the overall business goals. Quarterly meetings are held with staff representatives within the Joint Negotiation and Consultation Group (JNCG) and they are consulted on future plans for the organisation. Other employees have the opportunity to put forward suggestions through line management and will speak directly to senior managers, although there is no formal process for them to input to the Business Plan.

Supervisions are carried out every 6 weeks, and appear to be carried out reasonably consistently on a regular basis throughout Action Housing. Staff find this a valuable process and, combined with the annual Appraisals, is a great mechanism for identifying individual training needs. Development needs are identified within Projects and the programme of training provided centrally reflects the broad training requirements across the organisation. A Staff Training and Development Strategy outlines the main areas for development, which is refined as the more detailed programme of training courses is put together for the year. There is a dedicated Trainer for the Company and monies are made available for corporate training activities, such as management development, and for specific project requirements. People confirmed that **“I’ve found Supervision extremely helpful”**, **“Appraisal is used to look at development over the year and areas to improve”** and **“we discuss training as part of the progress meeting”**.

Staff continue to feel informed about development opportunities and the comprehensive programme of internal training is freely available for staff to access. While some of the training provision has been scaled down, it is noteworthy that the more advanced training that staff request is often provided. People mentioned gaining significantly from being given the chance to talk to outside specialists. There is evidence of good progression within the organisation, such as one member of staff advancing from Key Worker to Area Manager within four years. Certainly staff feel that the option to develop their career is there with Action Housing. Someone remarked that **“staff development is built into the ethos...it’s part of the organisation”** and others that **“I’ve been encouraged to go on the training”** and **“it’s brilliant...the Area Manager wants us to gain experience from lots of areas”**. Some networking has taken place between project teams and at least one person was being seconded to another team for a period of time, both of which are great ways to learn from colleagues. There is a good team spirit, with people saying that **“we support each other”** and **“we have used each other to help deal with issues”**.

Through various policy documents, managers are given good guidance of what is expected of them. For instance, the Supervision and Appraisal Policy and accompanying Guidance Notes give detailed advice to both appraisers and appraisees of what to do and what to expect from the two processes. Similarly, there is an Induction Policy, and responsibilities of managers are outlined in the Training and Development Policy, as well as in their personal Job Description. While no separate ‘management standards’ exist at present, these various documents give a sound outline of what a manager should be doing to effectively manage their staff. This has continued to develop as training is becoming a standing agenda item within team meetings.

A recent organisational review sent out a strong message from senior management about the type of organisation that they want to see and how they expect people, particularly managers, to behave within it. Management performance is monitored through line management, which is typically characterised with regular one-to-ones, which include discussion of how staff are progressing. Management development has been carried out in the past and a Leadership Programme is presently being developed, plus National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are being considered at levels 3 and 4. There were some instances of where management performance had dipped in the past, though currently staff seem fairly happy with how they are being managed. Managers and Seniors were seen to be extremely supportive and people spoke of being praised and thanked.

Staff commented that **“our line manager praises us...he’s excellent”, “you get a lot of recognition from Seniors, and the Area Manager will say well done”, “I’ve had loads of support”, “he’s a great gaffer” and “we have one-to-ones every six weeks...she does them rigorously”**.

Minutes of senior management meetings are available through the intranet, along with various other documents. If staff want to access the information, there is plenty available on how the organisation is doing. People do feel valued and believe that, overall, the recognition is there for the job that they are doing. However, there does seem to be a reluctance on the part of some managers to agree targets for individuals, arguing that there are so many variables in the job; in spite of the team working to an overall target. This in turn seems to make it harder for those individuals to recognise how their specific contribution is helping towards meeting project targets.

There is an ‘Ideas Board’ at Head Office, where people can jot down anything as they are passing. Management are receptive to suggestions from staff, with their thoughts passed through team meetings for discussion at senior management meetings. From time to time, senior people attend local team meetings and are able to hear people’s views directly. It was mentioned that **“there are lots of Working Groups for new policies...they do ask for feedback”, “if it will make things better, she (the manager) will take it on board”, “you can mention ideas at your one-to-ones” and “we have team meetings and can discuss anything in them”**. Staff have been involved in some of the key decision making, such as helping to formulate a Drugs Policy. People are genuinely empowered and there is a strong sense of staff being encouraged to use their own initiative and to take decisions within their area of work. People enthused that **“we get a lot of autonomy”, “I am allowed to use my initiative, which has given me the scope and confidence to develop” and “they make me feel like they trust me...I can make a lot of important decisions on my own”**.

On the whole, staff were very complimentary about the quality and level of training provided internally and feel that it is of a high standard. Staff reported that **“they are very good with training”, “there’s training sessions galore”, “the training’s been good”, “it’s a real strength of the organisation” and “I can’t praise it enough”**. At the same time, the opportunity has been given to network with other agencies and individuals – some of which people have found highly beneficial – and also to attend more advanced external courses. Yet, while staff find value in meeting up with colleagues, such as on training courses, there are not always the formal opportunities to do this.

For new starters, there is a structured induction process, part of which is an introduction from the Chief Executive. The formal process now takes a full week and is typically followed by more frequent Supervisions, to monitor how someone is settling in. There is a Staff Handbook and new people are given good support on the job, although there was some slight variation between teams of what had been covered and when.

The organisation has seen some tremendous growth over the past decade, with staff numbers increasing six-fold in that time. While the last year could be said to be one of consolidation, Action Housing continues to look for new areas of work and is quite groundbreaking in some of the activities it undertakes. It has a good reputation in the areas in which it operates and the staff are highly dedicated towards meeting service user needs. The internal training courses equip people well to carry out what are potentially very challenging and highly stressful jobs. Staff were able to see direct links between their development and helping to do the job better, such as attending training on Welfare Benefits enabling them to give fuller advice to service users about the financial support available. Someone else spoke of gaining a better understanding of self harming and being able to suggest alternate approaches which help to prevent lasting physical scars. While some measurable examples were given, such as a Drug Rehabilitation programme having some influence on reducing drugs usage, most examples tended to be anecdotal and a number of people lacked the information to fully realise the improvements in project performance that the training had brought about.

There is a Leadership Programme in the planning and due to be launched in 2009. The Trainer is keen to gauge feedback on any new courses and will send out an Evaluation Sheet for the first few times that it is run. While every effort is made to meet people's specific needs through the internal courses, a lack of information about any improvements made to the programme mean that staff do not always fully recognise the changes that have been made for their benefit. Despite some areas standing out as 'work in progress' - notably the need to strengthen the core values with clearly communicated performance measures which everyone can relate to - there are clear signs of progress since the previous *Investors in People* Review three years ago. For instance, the induction process has been extended and, following a 'blip' last year, the internal training programme is operating well again.