



Striving for Social Mobility: Employability and Skills at Ashram

Jas Bains believes Housing Associations have an ethical duty to help people get out of long-term unemployment, and it's not hard to see why. In 2006 the worklessness rate in social housing was nearly twice that in the private rented sector.¹ Housing Associations get a steady supply of tenants who rarely move out of the social housing sector. In Ashram's case, 70% of tenants are economically inactive: therefore they are likely to continue to receive housing benefit and live in social housing.

But of course many of these people want full-time employment. Jobs bring confidence, self-esteem, and social mobility. Narrowing the inequality gap in society is a key Ashram principle – but it requires serious effort. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation gives an idea of the scale of the challenge facing the UK: 13m, or 22% of people live in households below the low-income threshold.² Poverty rates specifically for the West Midlands are slightly higher than the nationwide average, and all of the current top five areas for unemployment are in the region.

The current economic climate means Ashram is helping jobless people with differing levels of skills and experience. In the case of the long-term unemployed there is often a need for basic skills development. Worklessness carries a stigma which means people need to be given confidence, and this can be done through basic training. Through Matrix Partnerships Ashram residents are offered five training courses a year. These include assertiveness training, fairness, chairing skills and knowing one's rights. Ashram has an extensive list of partners with whom it works to deliver opportunities: local authorities, Government Office, the Learning and Skills Council and the Regional Development Agency. Opportunities for external skills development are often signposted through Ashram, for example via the VIBE newsletter.

People can also be upskilled through voluntary work. In some cases voluntary work serves as an initial exposure to the workplace; something that widens people's experience and also their confidence. In all cases it allows volunteers to work closely with supervisors to identify potential for training and filling in skills gaps. Haps of Ashram's Health and Social Care Department set up the Pathways to Employment programme in May 2009. It offers maximum year-long placements for six people: the length is flexible

¹ John Hills, *Ends and Means: The Future Roles of Social Housing in England*, *CASereport 34* (2007), p116.

² See the Joseph Rowntree Foundation sites: <http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/key%20facts.shtml> and <http://www.poverty.org.uk/02/index.shtml#g1>, accessed 12/08/09.

depending on how the individual progresses. Haps says those involved weren't sought out on the basis of their skills (or lack of) – rather they approached the organisation. Haps and assigned staff supervisors worked carefully to design appropriate opportunities for these volunteers. Fozia, for example, has supported women in need from her community for a while and wants to translate this into a job. She has been placed at Nissa Ashram for the next two months, where she is holding communal sessions for women with mental health problems: sessions in e.g. cooking, or walks in the park. She will go on to take advantage of other shadowing and volunteering opportunities that will bring her closer to her ambition to run a business that provides support to women and young people.

Sam does desk-based research for Ashram, specifically for the Research and Policy Team. He is an example of the competitive nature of the jobs market, as he has an impressive CV (his skills do mean he can earn money through freelance translation work). He likes working on the Prevent agenda partly because "it's controversial", he says, and he is very interested in the effects Ashram's work will have on local communities. He believes it's helpful for his CV as policy work is an area he'd like to find full-time employment in.

There are challenges in undertaking voluntary work – beyond the fact that it's unpaid. Volunteers can't always get involved in all aspects of the projects, so it's important that they are made to feel welcome and valued. Sam has a good relationship with Ed Evans, his supervisor, who he says "makes me feel as if I'm part of a team". Simple things like Ashram providing him with an email address helps him feel a part of the workplace, says Sam. Haps echoes Sam's thoughts when I ask her how workplaces can make volunteers feel welcome. She believes it's important to focus on getting practicalities sorted – a name badge, a fob to enter the building, a desk. She also believes that other employees must understand how valuable volunteers are. "The team and the group need to be on board," she says.

Ashram has a good track record with its volunteers. Through the Bend it Like Birmingham project women have gained coaching qualifications. Ashram has had ten interns in the last two years, who have informed the direction of the organisation through development projects. Since Ashram's inception, thirty people have started as volunteers and ended up as employees. One particularly heart-warming case is that of Jon, who is now employed by the group-wide Customer First team. He came to Ashram through a Pertemps scheme aimed at the long-term unemployed. After volunteering on Ashram's reception desk for a while his commitment impressed the organisation to the extent that he was referred to the CF team and became a paid employee. Both Haps and Ed emphasise how likeable Jon is.

There are other examples of opportunities for both direct and indirect skills development. Mystery shoppers serve a role as lay evaluators: as tenants they are stakeholders and need to scrutinise and monitor Ashram's service, but the opportunity also builds skills and confidence. Often school pupils are

offered work experience, particularly those from schools in areas where Ashram has a large housing stock. Since Ashram's inception 50 students have been recruited. Recently Zara, Dean and Scott from Yardley School worked at Ashram for a week in May and wrote about their experiences for the VIBE newsletter.

It's clear that both Haps and Jas think that offering good volunteering and training schemes is very important. For Haps, it's a natural extension of Ashram's commitment to empowerment of its service users. And she points out that the current economic situation means we may reveal new choices for people. "People are struggling to get jobs" she says, and they are starting to look at careers that they haven't considered before. It's about "giving opportunities" and upskilling people where necessary. And Ashram will in the near future expand in this area, with possible apprenticeship schemes, partnerships with corporate CSR and more.