

Inquiry into Apprenticeships

Evidence from Bron Afon Community Housing

Inquiry into apprenticeships in Wales: Submission from Bron Afon Community Housing

Introduction

Since 2008 Bron Afon Community Housing has had on average around 43 apprentices every year. We are currently supporting 42 apprentices/trainees at all three levels and across all trades (plumbing/electrical/carpentry/plastering and painting & decorating) and in other areas like administration, customer service and horticulture. Our changing business needs mean that going forward with the completion of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) we will not be able to afford this level of apprenticeship programme and are likely to reduce to around 12 per annum.

Bron Afon works with Torfaen based training organisations and careers services to advertise, recruit and train apprentices. We have an overwhelming demand for both work placements and apprenticeships and have to turn down 100's of people. We have worked hard to try to ensure that the recruitment process is fair and provides equality of opportunity for all. We have learnt that providing both short and long term placements throughout the organisation has helped candidates have a fuller understanding of the organisation and types of apprenticeships that we offer.

Since March 2008, in conjunction with Careers Wales and local schools, Bron Afon has supported more than 250 placements. As part of our commitment to equality of opportunity and tackling disadvantage we have targeted these opportunities for young people who are often at risk of exclusion or are experiencing some form of disadvantage or a disability such as autism. In 2010 we discovered that lots of those who had come on placement did not get through the apprenticeship short listing and recruitment process. To counter this we decided to guarantee an interview for our apprenticeship scheme for any young person who had a placement with us and we also provided these young people with coaching and support in terms of the application and interview process. In our opinion these changes have significantly improved the access of young disadvantaged people to our apprenticeship scheme which is reflected in that in 2011 50% of the apprentices we recruited were young people who had been on placement and received coaching.

There are a number of issues that we still feel need to be addressed and where we continue to try to actively work with schools, training providers and careers services to look at ways to resolve:

- Gender stereotypes e.g. boys into trades/girls into admin retail – how can this be overcome? (We have only 3 female trade apprentices out of 42).
- We still find it difficult to gain direct access to promote our apprenticeship programme through schools.

- We need to find a way to help young people to understand that even though a practical based qualification to pass an apprenticeship they still have to study theory and undertake exams.
- The funding focus on age range 18-24 means that there are very limited opportunities for more mature individuals to retrain, (even though we have considerable interest) which is a shame as we have found the input from older people on the apprenticeship scheme has a positive effect in supporting the development of many of the younger students.
- Another problem we experience is that the qualification frameworks, are constantly being changed /reviewed and the process often takes along time with the result that it is confusing and this often has a negative impact on the learner.
- Individual's who do not live at home or with families who can support them can find it very difficult to financially support themselves through the apprenticeship scheme and this is especially evident if they themselves have dependents. We at times have had to find ways to provide indirect financial support for some individual's.

Issues that the Committee may wish to consider as part of these terms of reference include:

- *Are employers able to find sufficient numbers of young people with the skills and aptitudes that they require?*

As can be seen above within Torfaen we have no problem recruiting, there is significant interest in apprenticeships both with the 18-24 age range and outside from more mature applicants. This is demonstrated that in 2011 saw Bron Afon receive 250 applications for 10 apprentice positions. We have however identified that there are still equalities issues in respect of make up of the apprenticeship as we have very gender traditional applications.

- *Do relationships between employers and training providers work effectively?*

Bron Afon has over a number of years developed a very effective relationship with local training providers we have found that what has worked for us was developing a clear communication strategy and agreeing performance targets and feedback frameworks. This has included developing a very specific working agreement with Torfaen Training around time frames for individuals to achieve their qualifications. We have also found that regularly meeting with training officers using a quarterly reviewing mechanism means that we have not only improved turn around times and standards of practice but intervened early in supporting and meeting specific individual need.

We have however, found that contracts and funding are very complex and more work to clarify and de-mystify this would help all and be of particular benefit for employers new to the scheme.

- *Are apprenticeships still limited to certain sectors?*

There are a wide variety of apprenticeships available however the way funding and contracts are allocated by central government can mean that a

local approved provider is restricted in terms of the framework around what types of apprenticeship they can provide. Which means if Bron Afon wants a slightly unusual or specific opportunity which is not covered by the local provider's framework we have to find out for ourselves how to access this and where to find any potential funding. Making the process more flexible with information more readily available would be a help to all.

Bron Afon has identified a need for both multi-skilling and "green" skills within it's workforce to ensure it's keeping up to date and can offer flexibility. New and adapted qualifications could offer a wider variety of units outside of the core units/core trade to support this. It would really benefit employers if they could identify a core programme and then cherry pick additional multi-skilling options outside that programme to meet their specific business needs. This way we could develop a much more flexible and agile workforce which would help us adapt more quickly to the changing needs of our business.

- *Has the number of apprentices employed by local authorities, and the public sector generally, increased or decreased?*

Bron Afon have sustained the number of apprentices we support over the past 4 years, however, this has largely been because we have been in a unique position linked to the WHQS project and associated funding. With these works ending in 2013 unless Bron Afon secures further large scale contracts or alternative funding streams then we will not be in a position to continue to afford this level of programme. In addition the fact that since 2011, alongside level 3, level 2 apprentices have to be employed does increase the risks and costs for employers. For example the introduction of minimum wage and auto pension enrolment for employees and associated costs of NI for these level 2 candidates has meant that Bron Afon has had to reduce the number of places we offer on our programme by two.

. *The Welsh Government is encouraging Community Benefits clauses in public sector contracts which can be used to promote the employment of trainees and apprenticeships. Is this an effective mechanism for increasing the numbers of apprentices?*

Bron Afon has written community benefit clauses into arrangements with contractors and this does deliver some success up to Dec 2011 15 jobs had been created and 288 people had received training as a result of our contracts.

Internally we already have this as a key outcome target around routes into employment. As the costs of apprenticeships has significantly increased with the introduction of minimum wage and employment status for both level 2 and 3 we are aware that this means some of our contractors have had to limit how far they support people on the programme. We frequently get contacted by partially qualified trade apprentices looking for opportunities to compete their qualification.

- *What is the average profile of an apprentice, for example age, gender, employment sector? Is this profile changing and, if yes, what are the reasons*

for this? The National Training Federation for Wales reports that the average age for an apprentice is 26. What are the reasons for this?

Traditionally and still predominately this is a route into employment for youngsters 88% of our apprentices are aged 24 and under and 93% are male.

However as part of a proactive campaign, including a Jobmatch employment route, recognising that tenants were unable to retrain into the apprenticeship programme Bron Afon has been positively encouraging more mature applicants, We have noted a significant increase in over 25s applying for apprentice schemes and 2011 saw Bron Afon employ 5 25+ apprentices to support them to achieve existing studies. The advent of react funding supporting re-training after redundancy has positively impacted on this.

- *Are apprenticeships generally successful from the perspective of the apprentice? Have apprenticeship completion rates changed in recent years?*

In our opinion yes, very successful. Since 2008 90% of completing apprentices have secured employment with either Bron Afon or other organisations. Bron Afon has seen no drop off in completion on average 95% of those who start complete.

In Bron Afon's experience success of apprenticeships has, in the past, been measured purely on the number getting a permanent job in our own organisation. This is slowly changing as we now place great importance on the marketability gained through the placement, qualification and experience of apprentice, so that they can secure work anywhere.

- *In practice, are apprentices guaranteed a job at the end of the apprenticeship?*

Bron Afon do not guarantee jobs to apprentices as recruitment activities need to be fair and equitable, in addition to this we have a business need to reflect the requirements of the organisation so can not just create vacancies. However, to minimise the risk of losses of apprentices to the business we carefully plan and reflect business need/ skills gaps and known staff turnover. We use this information to workforce plan and ensure that we only created apprenticeship opportunities which reflect projected business need.

This means when apprentices are about to complete we review the structure and uses of agency staff and can at times create fixed term contract opportunities which meet our business need. If any jobs become available Bron Afon guarantees all apprentices an interview even up to 6 months after completion of their apprenticeship programme. We also provide training and support around completing application forms and interview skills, which we have found is invaluable.

- *Do Careers Wales and Jobcentre Plus provide effective support for people wanting to find apprenticeships? Does the new Apprenticeship Matching Service, run by Careers Wales, work effectively?*

Bron Afon have forged excellent working relationships with Careers Wales, we developed clear communication strategies and ways of working that have, we believe, provided maximum support to the work placement programme. As a result the placements we support better meet the needs of the individual and we are prepared and capable of dealing with identified additional needs.

In contrast our dealings with jobcentre are less positive as we find that their focus on employment means that they do not see the benefit of voluntary placements or work programmes. This means that on occasions we have experience of officers blocking opportunities for individual's which we believe could have led to people gaining the experience they needed in order to secure an apprenticeships and possible future employment .

One issue of concern which applies to both organisations is that they are not always very good at identifying or meeting individual's specific special needs. We have found that this is particularly apparent where people have disabilities or come from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have had issues where individual's with autism and conditions such as dyslexia, diabetes deafness or low income have not had their individual needs effectively identified and therefore they have in our experience been placed at an unfair disadvantaged.

For example a recruitment group exercise we ran unfairly disadvantaged a young applicant because we were not made aware that he had autism. We have had some apprentices who did not live with family where we have had to provide them with food allowances and transport, to and from work, to help them be in a position to afford to complete the programme.

In addition, from our experience the Careers services within schools could be more flexible and work more closely with employers to give more students access to information about apprentice opportunities. The matching service needs to be more widely advertised as in conversations with tenants interested in opportunities they are unaware that this route is open to them.

However, we must say that one example of good joint working has been where we have attended events with Careers Wales and the Jobcentre.

- *Why do young people decide to be apprentices? What factors influence their decision?*

A lot of those applying to Bron Afon have either experienced trades through family life or through work experience placements and have chosen this particular route. Others we believe pursue this option because of labels attached to them, by schools/careers advisors as "not academic/likes working with their hands", default into apprenticeships.

In the past we identified a pattern of fathers and sons working in the same trade and at times it was family pressure that led to this choice. To prevent any nepotism or unfair advantage we now require that all applicants for our programme have to come through Careers Wales and Torfaen Training and can not come through personal recommendation.

- *are apprenticeships an attractive option for young people of all abilities or are apprenticeships seen as a second best option compared with higher education? Are attitudes changing and if yes, what are the reasons for this?*

In our opinion they are still seen as second best but there is some evidence of this changing. Apprenticeships were in the past seen as second best or as an effective option for young people labelled as “not academic/practical”. Changes to the qualifications routes e.g. diplomas we believe may make them a more attractive route for all. However the higher qualification could also mean that it becomes harder for those who are less academic. We have had some individual’s struggle to complete more academic programmes run by some colleges.

One solution could be for colleges to be more flexible in how they run the programme offering qualifications routes so not an either or programme but instead if you achieve to this level you get an NVQ and then you can progress on to complete the diploma. Clearly this would need a significant change in the frameworks and funding.

- *are apprenticeships fully understood by those who have most influence on the choices of young people for example parents/carers, careers teachers in schools, teachers generally? Is there too much complexity and choice of programme?*

From our experience most influencers do not have a full understanding of apprenticeship schemes and often fail to explain to the individual the impact of what it is going to be like working a full week whilst studying at college. Plus we find that they also don’t consider the requirements of adhering to contracts of employment and the roles and responsibilities of the apprentice when signing these contracts. We have to undertake a considerable amount of work supporting young people and their parents in understanding about the rights and responsibilities of employees.

Hence our earlier recommendation around improving employer, careers Wales and school links could potentially benefit all. In addition, we have found that work placements are invaluable in helping the individual’s to gain a much better understanding of the options open to them and the reality of the working environment.

- *Education and training, including apprenticeships are devolved matters, but employment law is not. Do young people have sufficient rights and access to apprenticeship training? If not, how could the situation be improved?*

It is worth noting that supporting apprentices can be a costly venture for employers, the average cost of employing apprentices in Bron Afon is £1560 in year 1, £6116.94 in year 2 and £14258 in year 3. This is because as previously explained in year two we have to factor in the minimum wage, NI, Insurance and automatic enrolment into pension.

In addition we have found there are hidden staff costs as we have to spend considerable amounts of time providing work based mentoring and support to

individual's who often struggle making the adjustment from being in school to being in work.

Employment law changes do mean that once individuals are employed which is now level 2 and 3 apprentices then they do secure employment rights and as explained earlier with these rights come increased costs and risks for employers.

Changes this year to the dismissal legislation means that individual's now have to work two years instead of one before they can make an unfair dismissal claim. This could potentially have a negative impact on how employers will deliberately manage the employment relationship to limit their liabilities, by finishing people before this two year deadline. However, alternatively this could mean that one of the benefits of this change of law is that people are kept on for longer beyond one year. Clearly understanding the impact of employment legislation is difficult however one possible way of being more objectively would be to get training providers to measure the typical duration of the apprenticeship contracts this year compared to last year to see if any new patterns emerge.

At Bron Afon we adopt an approach of treating apprentices the same as any employee and always try to follow best employment practice in terms of dealing with any work based issues. For us it is crucial that this is a real employment experience and that whilst we provide work based support we do still expect apprentices to fully experience and learn about the true nature of the employment relationship. It could be that a requirements is made to those who secure funding for apprenticeships programmes that they too have to demonstrate that they apply there standard employment practices and do not cut corners when dealing with employment issues with apprentices.

We have found that union membership is quite high with our trade apprentices and actively promote this as we believe that this has had a positive impact on them being able to protect there employment rights by securing experienced independent support when they have difficulties at work.

Concluding statement

For Bron Afon we believe our success rate shows that with perseverance you can get results and in general despite some of the problems we have highlighted we firmly believe that an apprenticeship programme managed well and funded smartly is a really great way to help individual's and young people to secure qualifications and employment.

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