FIFTY FAMILIES
EXPLODING THE MYTHS ABOUT THE UNEMPLOYED
There’s a large body of research that shows being out of work for six months or longer is associated with lower well-being among the long-term unemployed, their families and their communities.

Apart from the loss of income, the long-term unemployed tend to be in poorer health and have children with worse academic performance than similar people who are lucky enough to work.

Communities with a higher share of long-term unemployed workers also tend to have higher rates of crime and violence.

As a social housing provider it’s in our interest to help people find work. We would much rather invest money into new housing projects knowing they are going to be successful communities, rather than impacted by unemployment and deprivation with the prospect of becoming the future sink estates.

The government takes a macro view on unemployment. We’re in a unique position as a social housing provider because we’re able to get to know the needs of our residents at a micro level.

This allows us to take a long-term view and provide structured, tailored support that meets the individual’s needs. This creates a loop that contributes to the success of local communities, making them healthy and vibrant.

Our training and employment programme is a secret weapon. Within the context of the wider work we do, training and employment is a relatively small component. But its impact is very significant. It makes a huge difference to our residents’ lives.

It also helps destroy the myth of the ‘feckless poor’. It’s easy to demonise and stereotype the marginalised. But in our experience those who do find themselves on the edges of society don’t fit the common stereotypes.

No one consciously chooses to live in poverty. No one wants to live on the breadline. No one wants to struggle every day with the basics of life. We aim to ensure that our residents don’t have to.

John Baldwin
Director of Housing, Thames Valley Housing
AN OVERVIEW

Thames Valley Housing Training and Employment

Training and employment for residents is central to Thames Valley Housing’s (TVH) Communities Strategy.

We are in a unique position to help residents find work because we can invest the time and commitment that many residents require before they step into employment.

The process is dictated by the needs of residents. These needs can be complex and often invisible at first e.g. tackling a lack of confidence which can arise from long-term unemployment. But sometimes the reasons run deeper and can range from looking after young children to underlying psychological issues.

By adopting an approach that takes into account these factors, we provide a wide-ranging supportive role. Sometimes it may be as simple as helping somebody to put together a CV and cover letter, other times it may require helping to get a resident into the workplace with tailored training or a stint of voluntary work.

It also includes creating awareness about just what opportunities are available. Today’s world of work can be complex and bewildering and often opportunities appear hidden because people are simply not aware of what is available.

Our role is wider than the Department of Work and Pension’s executive agency, Job Centre Plus, and is essentially predicated on building relationships with residents. This approach works. Residents are not intimidated and understand that we are working in their best interests.

We use our supply chain to create employment opportunities. We have approximately 60 partners on our books, ranging from TVH contractors who take on residents in apprenticeship schemes to organisations such as Heathrow Academy which provide a wide range of employment opportunities at the nearby airport.

The partnerships also extend to local Job Centres, EU funded training and employment companies, and UK government-funded outfits. Some of these partners are tuned into the needs of the long-term unemployed and as such can provide the insightful support some residents need.

In summary, TVH attempts to address the root problems of unemployment with a view to the long term goal, which is to not only support people into work but also inject economic health into local communities.

“This approach works. Residents are not intimidated and understand that we are working in their best interests”
In late 2013, TVH carried out a survey among 50 families who had been helped into work over the preceding 12 months.

With any programme like this our measure of success was not how many people gained jobs but how many were in sustained long-term employment.

We didn’t just consider the objective evidence, we also attempted to gauge the more subjective and often overlooked measures such as improvements in health and self esteem.

Of the 50 families surveyed, 75.5 percent are still in employment 12 months later with more than half starting their employment since March 2013. This augurs well and reveals that once a position of employment is gained it is generally sustained.

Interestingly, there’s an almost equal 50/50 split between those in full-time work and those in part-time work. This reflects the fact that many TVH residents have family commitments such as young children to look after.

This should also be viewed as a positive given that opportunities for part-time work, which dovetails with a parent’s desire to look after their children, tend to be severely limited.

The majority of residents (78.1 percent) also expressed satisfaction with their salaries. 80.6 percent said they enjoyed their work, irrespective of whether it is part-time or full-time.

This is an important point. It’s well known that long-term unemployment can have a deleterious effect on confidence and a gradual erosion of self esteem.

In practical terms this often translates into poor interview technique, and an unwillingness to draft CVs and application forms. It’s often considered pointless and creates a sense of futility which can seep into other areas of life.
In fact, many TVH residents openly expressed these sentiments when initially approached about seeking work or training.

It’s not too surprising then that almost half of residents (46.9 percent) said their health had improved as a result of finding employment while 73.3 percent said their quality of life had notably improved. A further 60 percent said their social life had also improved. This in turn puts less pressure on hard pressed primary health care services and mental health teams and represents a real cost saving to the public purse.

Again, these are important points and reveal how employment actually helps people across a range of factors. These benefits also impact on the wider family and communities.

Of the 25% who were no longer in employment it’s interesting to note that 80% said they were trying to find other work.

We didn’t attempt to establish the reasons why residents were no longer in work, but based on our experience, the reasons range from short term contracts that have ended, to employers reducing their staff because of economic uncertainty.

However, it’s encouraging to note that from this group the support provided by TVH has provided a foundation for them to seek further opportunities.

“Of the 25% who were no longer in employment it’s interesting to note that 80% said they were trying to find other work”

Financial impact on rent arrears

Unemployment can and does cause financial difficulties. It’s not unusual to see the poor demonised as people point to the amounts of money coming out of the public purse as a reason to cut benefits even further.

However the reality, as opposed to the rhetoric, is vastly different. Whilst the overall benefits bill is high, people are only just surviving on incredibly low incomes and often have to rely on food banks or make choices about whether to ‘heat or eat’. People often get by through cutting back in other areas, which inevitably means arrears and debts stack up. And as a social housing provider we often bear the brunt of this, as unpaid rent becomes commonplace.

However, our training and employment work with 50 families had a dramatic impact. While rent arrears as a whole dropped only a few percentage points over the 12 month period, the arrears for the 50 families plunged by an eye-opening 43.48% over the same period.

“As a social housing provider we often bear the brunt of this, as unpaid rent becomes commonplace”
EXPLODING THE MYTHS ABOUT THE UNEMPLOYED

£566,000
The average earned by 50 families we supported into employment

81.3% of residents better off financially as a result of getting into employment. This:
› benefits their families
› contributes to the local economy
› delivers taxes thereby boosting the national economy

75.5% of residents sustained employment for more than 6 months

73% reported improved quality of life as a result of getting into work

Over 60% of residents reported:
› raised aspirations
› increased happiness
› increased motivation
› improved family morale

Over 60% reported improved social lives as result

47% of residents reported health improvement as a result of getting back to work, saving the NHS money
DRIVING THE PROJECT

Emildah Chabata
Residents’ Training and Employment Manager

Emildah handles the day-to-day management of the training and employment programme, establishing and developing partnerships with employers and training organisations. She feels the immediate value of residents being in employment is their ability to pay their rent, thereby meeting one of TVH’s fundamental objectives. The longer-term benefits are healthier communities and individuals who are putting something into society and who gain a greater sense of worth and value.

“You’ve got to look beyond the headlines. Some people have been out of work for a long time and their confidence is shattered. They’ve lost belief in themselves. We build relationships to help people overcome these hurdles.”

David Walker
Residents’ Training and Employment Officer

To TVH residents David Walker is the face of its training and employment programme. As a frontline worker, charged with bringing the programme to the attention of residents, he adopts many roles; mentor, advocate confidante, employment advisor, counsellor, coordinator, and friend.

His approach is personal and one-to-one, designed to assess the individual needs of each resident and encourage, support and sometimes cajole them into taking a direction that will benefit them.

“It’s a demanding role but one that is rewarding. Residents’ needs vary widely. We have some people who haven’t worked in years and you have to hold their hands and there are others who just need pointing in the right direction, who just need a little nudge and encouragement.”
CASE STUDIES

The following seven ‘case studies’ are representative of residents who have engaged with the TVH training and employment programme. They also took part in the Fifty Families survey. The issues they raise and the solutions are fairly typical of the challenges residents overcome and how TVH helps them into work.

LOUISE
From bipolar personality disorder to care worker

Louise lives just off the Bath Road, a busy arterial route close to Heathrow Airport, lined with hotels well known for hosting glitzy, impossibly expensive weddings. This couldn’t be further from Louise’s world.

As a sufferer of bipolar personality disorder, for a long time Louise carried on a struggle that simply wasn’t visible to others but one which makes doing even the simplest of daily routines arduous and sometimes impossible. And as a young mother, the difficulties she experienced were compounded even further.

Given this, even the idea of finding a job seemed like an alien concept from another world. Unsurprisingly she had never worked before. For a long time Louise’s condition was undiagnosed. However, thanks to astute perception and a non-judgmental approach, Louise was eventually pointed in the direction of professional help.

This has been the starting point for Louise on a road to a life of normality. Her engagement with TVH she freely admits is a “massive stepping stone” in this direction.

“"The housing association has really supported me. They made me aware of the back to work scheme and gave me the confidence to believe that I could step out into life.”

As well as providing what was essentially a mentoring and confidence boosting service, TVH also made Louise aware that the things she had already done were proof of her ability to step into the world of work. For example, she had been involved at her children’s school doing presentations to the schoolkids, engaging and sustaining their interest in offbeat topics such as snakes.

By helping her understand that these were great examples of how she could participate in wider society, TVH hooked Louise up with Pinnacle People, one of its training and employment partners.

This led to Louise discovering a range of possibilities open to her. She eventually decided on providing care for elderly people in their homes.

With young children at home, Louise is limited in the hours she can work each day. Pinnacle People took this into account and helped find her flexible employment.

Louise is now set to step into the world of work for the first time ever. She’s excited and is already seeing it as an opportunity that could lead to other things and greater responsibilities.

Louise said: “I’m stepping up now. I’m not only excited for myself but I’m also setting a good example to the children. My self esteem has grown and it’s a great opportunity to further myself. Thames Valley Housing and Pinnacle People have been incredibly supportive and I’m not sure that I could have reached this point without them.”

“The housing association has really supported me”
Training leads to pole position

Like many parents with young children Samantha understood only too well that the opportunities for employment are severely limited when constrained to between the hours of nine and three.

When consistent efforts to find work end up hitting a brick wall, a sense of pointlessness can develop. Samantha was in this position. However, one day she was talking to a neighbour who had joined the TVH Job Club. Her neighbour was attending regularly, getting help with her CV and making use of the training and job search opportunities available.

Given the constraints on her time Samantha was encouraged to explore the training options. As a result, she embarked on a training course in painting and decorating and another for tiling.

“It was only two days a week, but it was brilliant. I really enjoyed doing it and got a lot out of it,” said Samantha. Apart from learning useful practical skills Samantha was also helped to gain a Construction Skills Certificate Scheme card, a requirement for self-employed people working in the construction industry.

The Job Club also helped Samantha bolster her confidence as well as helping her find a short-term position in a dental surgery. She admits that her confidence was at low ebb because she had been out of the job market for a long time.

“David helped me with my CV, cover letters and mock interviews. At first it was difficult but he persisted and before long I felt quite confident in a job interview,” she added. This was borne out when she went for the job interview at the dental surgery. “It was amazing, I actually got the job.”

Unfortunately, the position didn’t last beyond several months as the dental practice was facing its own economic pressures. But Samantha feels the experience is a valuable string in her bow: “Thames Valley Housing have been amazing. They never gave up on me and always supported me. I’ve gained more experience and I’m now a lot more confident about looking for work.”

The training provided by Thames Valley Housing has also opened up new avenues for her: “I’m still limited by the time I have because I have young children but I now have new opportunities and skills and this is helping me to explore new possibilities that weren’t there before.”

“Thames Valley Housing have been amazing. They never gave up on me and always supported me”
Touch down at Heathrow Airport

Sheron was already familiar with the world of work with extensive experience in hair dressing and child care. But she’d been out of work a long time attending to the needs of a growing family.

One day, there was a knock on the door; it was David Walker from Thames Valley Housing, canvassing tenants about their interest in employment and training opportunities.

It was the right time for Sheron: “I wanted to get back into work but I’d been out of the work environment for such a long time that my confidence was low.”

Sheron had an idea that she would like to do something within business administration. Consequently, through TVH, she became involved in volunteer work two days a week. “I thought this was a good approach because it eased me back into the world of work, rather than jumping in at the deep end.”

The voluntary work was arranged by TVH and after a number of months she felt like she was ready to take on a permanent position. TVH has a wide number of partners one of which is the Heathrow Academy.

TVH put forward Sheron for a customer service role with a management company at the airport responsible for embarking and disembarking Aer Lingus passengers. She was accepted and following two weeks of training, she was fitted out with a uniform and started her new job.

“What Thames Valley Housing are doing is brilliant. They are involved at a real community level which is not something you’d expect from a housing association. They’ve supported and guided me through the whole process as well as actually giving me the opportunities.”

Sheron has now worked at the airport for some time and is happy in her role. And the job is not without some entertaining distractions when she’s booking in well known music stars and boy bands. “It’s interesting and rewarding and I’m a lot better off financially. TVH are even looking at how they can support my son in finding work.”
Michael
First holiday in 15 years

For a long time Michael has suffered from depression and anxiety. These 'invisible' conditions can be severely debilitating, critically affecting self image and also undermining attempts to carve out a normal life.

Chronic depression and anxiety often lead to panic attacks and an on-going sense of 'what's the point?' which filters into all areas of life. For the sufferer it's often easier to handle these conditions by retreating into a narrow life of isolation.

The effect is to severely limit life's opportunities, essentially putting a lid on potential, and locking the person into a cycle of poverty.

This is borne out by Michael's experience in which he was effectively out of work for close to 10 years. He did have a spell of employment in a security role but this was short lived. When David Walker met Michael, he understood that the cycle could be broken by helping Michael into work.

However, with a lengthy record of unemployment, the local Job Centre was less than helpful. Michael felt their aim was simply to get him off their books and there was little understanding as to his underlying problems. This further discouraged Michael who was often pushed in the direction of unsuitable training.

David stepped in and took the time to understand Michael's needs. He nudged Michael in the right direction by signing him up for training appropriate to his abilities and interests and helping with his CV.

It became obvious that Michael would benefit from work that was close to home. Once he thought Michael was in a position to take on work, David contacted Cleanscapes, the cleaning company that has a contract to take care of the building where Michael lived. Cleanscapes responded positively and offered Michael a part time position as a caretaker in the block of flats where he lived.

“I'd been out of work for such a long time but I'm so glad I'm not signing on any more. Thames Valley Housing really sorted things out for me especially with the Job Centre. They really helped me a great deal and without them nothing much would have changed. In fact, I've been able to have my first holiday in 15 years,” said Michael.

David's work on behalf of Michael extended to liaising with the Job Centre to ensure that his benefits would cover the period up until he received his salary. He also helped Michael get a passport, an ID requirement stipulated by Cleanscapes.

Today Michael is a £1,000 better off each month, a huge step up from his benefit payments. David has also introduced Michael to personal budget training to help him manage his money and also remains in close contact with him, speaking to him on an almost daily basis to continue offering support and encouragement.

“Thames Valley Housing really sorted things out for me especially with the Job Centre”
AMY

All systems go

Like many teenagers, Amy was essentially ejected from the education system with little sense of what she wanted to do, the options available and no guidance on career paths. As she was young, it was inevitable that she’d lean towards the direction her friends were taking which led to a short spell at college.

This didn’t last long, and she found herself kicking her heels until David knocked on her door offering training and employment opportunities. “It was a surprise for me. I didn’t think housing associations did this sort of thing.”

After engaging with the TVH Job Club, David pointed her in the direction of training, which Amy admitted she was initially reluctant to take up.

As David built up a relationship with Amy, she began to focus on childcare training which eventually led to an apprenticeship with a childcare training company, a salary close to £200 a month and NVQ qualifications.

Since then Amy hasn’t looked back. She’s found something she really enjoys doing and a clear career path in front of her. She said: “The support from TVH and David has been absolutely brilliant. More housing associations should be like this. There’s been a huge turn around in my life.”

From David’s perspective a measure of success is that he rarely hears from Amy any more. He said: “She’s on her way now which is great. We do speak occasionally so I can make sure that’s she’s doing well, but she clearly is. All she needed was a bit of support and direction and you can see how she is now benefiting.”

“It was a surprise for me. I didn’t think housing associations did this sort of thing”
Care and attention makes all the difference

Patricia’s circumstances were representative of many TVH residents. As a single parent she’d focused on bringing up her children. But following her son’s graduation from university and her daughter becoming old enough to not require constant attention, she decided the time was right to find work.

“I was on the Job Centre’s books and there was huge pressure from them to get me into work. I wanted to work but the things they were offering were inappropriate times and would have left me in a worse position,” she said.

Patricia responded to a flyer from TVH offering training and employment and she went along to the TVH Job Club. Her fares were paid and she was allowed to explore a number of options including voluntary work.

She added: “When you’re on benefits even bus fares can cause problems. TVH paid my fares which made it much easier for me. And the Job Club was much better than the Job Centre. The Job Club is much more supportive with more options available.

“When you don’t work people think you’re lazy, but it’s not as simple as that especially when you have children to look after. Thames Valley understands this.”

Patricia was eased back into the workplace with a stint of voluntary work at the National Housing Federation. Following several months of getting used to the work environment again, Patricia began training as a teaching assistant to care for people with a range of conditions.

“My experience of the Job Centre is that if you take up training they label you as work shy. But training as a teaching assistant for people with special needs is something I really wanted to do. Rather than judge me Thames Valley Housing supported me in moving in this direction,” adds Patricia.

This has been an important stepping stone for Patricia. She is now stepping into full-time work and is looking beyond her current role to bigger and better things.

She admits that her financial position didn’t immediately improve but it was more important for her to be a productive member of society. But that said, TVH is also helping her with work and child tax credits to ensure she is in a stronger financial position.

“Rather than judge me Thames Valley Housing supported me in moving in this direction”
An eye opener

Some residents require persistent, focused and determined attention. Khalid was one of them.

Khalid had dropped out of school and, in his own words, there was a sense of aimlessness to his life. He slept late and hung out with friends, just getting by. It wasn’t that he lacked ambition he just didn’t know where to focus his attention.

When Khalid responded to TVH’s training and employment programme, David Walker sensed someone who had the desire but would require steering, support and the opportunity to try out different things before he could carve out an employment path.

“I had no idea what I wanted to do but David helped focus me and steer me in the right direction,” he said. Khalid was shown what options were available and how he could pursue these opportunities. This process of exploration led Khalid to narrow down his choices.

One of the significant steps was when he took part in some construction courses provided by TVH contractors. He enjoyed these and was helped to gain a Construction Skills Certificate Scheme card enabling him to work in construction.

David stayed close to him helping him identify and register with work agencies. As a result, Khalid took a number of short term construction positions which gave him a taste for work.

However, the experience also taught him something else. He explains: “By just talking to some of the guys I was working with I realized that I don’t have all the time in the world. I finally understood that I needed some kind of qualifications and expertise if I wanted to get ahead.”

Khalid is now being positioned by TVH to take up an apprenticeship: “Thames Valley Housing has helped me open my eyes and now that I have working experience I feel more stable and focused. I’m just looking forward to getting qualifications and being able to earn a good salary. It’s far better than what I was previously doing just drifting through the days.”

“Now that I have working experience I feel more stable and focused”
THE ROAD AHEAD

At one level it’s relatively easy to measure the success of the training and employment programme. Some residents find employment while others go into training, vastly improving their employment prospects and providing a foundation for a more rewarding career.

At another level, and one which is often invisible, the programme helps residents address some of the issues that have kept them out of work. Some residents struggle with long-term issues while others have lost confidence after being out of work for a long time.

It’s cheap and easy to portray people on benefits as being scroungers but the reality is radically different. Only a tiny minority want to live on benefits. The fact is many people get stuck in a benefit trap which they feel they can’t get out of. By offering them a step up it creates a sense of aspiration. This also has a positive effect on the family and children.

Simply, by offering support and tailoring that support to take into account individual needs, residents genuinely feel that someone is on their side. This can have a profound effect on attitudes and willingness, and it helps lift people out of the benefits trap.

That said, TVH is an organisation with commercial imperatives which support its social purpose. As such we can see the financial impact of this investment in reduced rent arrears which in turn underpins our business and enables us to build more homes and help more people into employment. It really is win win.

“TVH is an organisation with commercial imperatives which support its social purpose”