

The Worklife Support Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

Interview with David Blackburn from the Shepherds Bush Housing Group

Can you give a brief summary of the key events/changes at Shepherds Bush Housing Group (SBHG) over the last year?

Shepherds Bush Housing Group (SBHG) recognises that its staff are one of its most important assets. In 2006, the Group made a substantial investment and commitment to Human Resources by undertaking a full review of the HR function and bringing it back in house (it had previously been outsourced for 4 years). This review was completed in January 2007 with a number of recommendations being approved by the board: the creation of the post of Director of HR & Business Support and the restructuring of the team to increase levels of service delivery.

These changes recognised the central strategic importance of Human Resources to delivering key business objectives and affecting cultural change throughout the organisation. At the same time, the Group has implemented a number of major new initiatives stemming from the launch of the Group's Values in December 2006, approval of a new Group Corporate identity in the New Year and the ongoing review of our operational structures. The Group is aiming to deliver a 10% increase in tenant satisfaction over the next 2 years and has set its sights on top quartile performance in London.

We have a new Development Strategy that will see us delivering 300 new homes a year in West London and expanding our horizons into new areas such as Wandsworth, Kingston and Harrow.

Why does SBHG think that it is important to provide an EAP for its employees and their immediate families?

Our mission is to be an employer of choice. It is a universal truth of business that no matter how unique or innovative your products and systems, it is only a matter of time before someone else is doing it as well as or better than you. The only thing our competitors cannot copy - our only truly unique and lasting competitive edge - is our people. We want to build a sense of belonging and reward for our employees and the EAP is a big part of that - by recognising that pay is not the only motivator, and acknowledging the importance of not only tangible but also intangible rewards within the wider context of the work experience.

I want everyone to know that they and their families can access a whole range of services - from counselling through to financial and legal advice - at no cost to them. And the cost to us is far outweighed by the goodwill that it engenders.

We all focus more and more on worklife balance and our EAP demonstrates to our employees that we understand how important their lives outside the office really are. We want to support their emotional, personal and family needs because this, in turn, improves their performance and commitment in the workplace.

How have you made sure that every employee knows about the service - especially those not based in head office?

We have done the conventional things like used posters, distributed leaflets, sent email reminders and advertised the service on our intranet. Going forward, we will be launching our new corporate induction at our Staff Conference in June this year. Individual induction will be based around a corporate-wide induction checklist that will cover the first 6 months of employment. The EAP service will form part of a re-designed Welcome Pack for all employees,

which will also contain the SBHG Interactive Corporate DVD. Our corporate video production will include video production as well as other graphical/ multimedia content such as PowerPoint presentations, demonstrations of how to use our employee intranet and actual footage of employees, residents and managers. The pack will also contain details of our EAP and FAQs about what it provides and we will be providing copies of the pack to all 180 of our existing staff.

The main aims of this initiative are to inform and train our staff; to motivate them and to welcome them - 'to make them feel like they have made the right choice by joining SBHG'.

What are the key messages you have tried to convey to staff?

That there is no 'one size fits all' pattern of worklife balance practices. It is important for employers to offer practices that appeal to all employees and our EAP is a cornerstone of that offering. Our key message is that this is a resource for all of us - something that you can access when, where and how often you like. You can use it for a variety of things, whether offloading about issues that are causing you stress; talking to a counsellor about a recent emotional upset; or seeking legal or financial advice.

In a nutshell, "this is your EAP - use it in the way that works best for you"!

The EAP includes a 'management consultation' element. How important is this resource in supporting and enhancing the development of managers?

In an organisation of our size, the EAP provides an invaluable additional resource to support our line managers in their day-to-day activities. As we have a relatively small HR team, it is great to know that our managers can access first-hand reliable, professional advice on performance-management issues such as sickness absence, capability and disciplinary procedures.

How does this fit in with other training and development/support you have in place for managers?

Our EAP sits alongside the wider Management Development programme that we are currently rolling out across the business. This comprises working with external training providers and resources like Worklife Support, as well as delivering in-house training that we have developed ourselves around our own specific policies.

How have you, as an employer, benefited from providing this service to your staff?

As the Group goes through a period of massive change and development, it is more important than ever to emphasise the support services that we provide. Our EAP has helped us to maintain low turnover and low sickness-absence levels even in some of the most challenging times.

What would you like to achieve over the next year by continuing to participate?

I would like the Group to make better use of the Management Consultation service and for this to be seen as a key element of the support that we provide managers to enable them to do their jobs to the very best of their abilities. I also want to ensure that we continue to re-emphasise the message that this EAP service provides something for everyone.

What would be the one thing you would say to a CEO who is considering implementing an EAP in their organisation?

Put simply, the benefits of the EAP in terms of employee engagement and appreciation cannot be underestimated. It does so much more than you initially might think - so look and see what it offers and realise how much it can do for your business.