

# CASE STUDY



## BARRHEAD HOUSING ASSOCIATION

*“Investors in People has been great for the organisation, staff and customers, helping all tremendously. It involved hard work but it has been very worthwhile to us, and would be too for any other business.”*

**Shirley Robison, Director**

### BACKGROUND

**Size:** 18 employees

**Sector:** Housing Association

**Location:** Scotland

**Status:** Most recently recognised in 2009

### THE ORGANISATION

Barrhead Housing Association is based in East Renfrewshire and provides quality and affordable rented housing. The Association was initially set up as a registered social landlord in 1986, with the aim of improving the housing stock in the centre of Barrhead. The Association now owns 868 flats and houses mainly in Barrhead, Neilston and Thornliebank, while also providing a full factoring service for an extra 170 owners. In 2004 the organisation became a registered not for profit charity and currently employees 18 staff and has a £3 million annual budget.

Barrhead Housing Association experienced a turbulent time between 2001 and 2005 with the organisation working very much on a day-to-day basis and without a proper business plan which meant it had a very reactionary approach to business issues. As a result, communication within the business was poor and there was little clarification of people's roles, which led to uncertainty and disengagement amongst employees.



- **staff absence has fallen from 4.7% in 2005 to just 0.7% for the first seven months of 2009**
- **94% of employees agreed with the statement: “my manager actively supports my training & development**
- **Rent arrears have reduced dramatically from £180,000 in 2006 to just under £90,000 by the end of 2009, and are continuing to fall.**

Staff absence had also become an issue, and was running at between 5-6% per annum. The level of rent arrears was also high and was a cause for some concern amongst both the Association's Management Committee and the regulator.

Since 2005 the fortunes of the Association have been transformed following the appointment of a new senior management team. The new team worked very hard over a three year period to update the organisation's policies, procedures and working practices and to set out a clear strategic direction for the future. The principles of Investors in People were, according to the Association, integral to the success of this change programme.

## EXPERIENCE WITH INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

Shirley Robison, the Director of Barrhead Housing Association, was familiar with the benefits of the Investors in People Standard from her work with a previous employer and was enthusiastic for the Association to reap similar benefits. Soon after she and the new management team joined the organisation in 2005 they began considering working with Investors in People. The new management team were transforming the business, changing its culture for the better and they were keen to move the organisation to a position where it could gain external recognition such as that provided by Investors in People.

In 2008 the organisation registered with Investors in People Scotland and in the same year made it a business plan objective to achieve The Standard. The organisation chose to work with an Investors in People Adviser, who supported them by breaking The Standard down into manageable parts, helping them focus their attention on each element. IIP Interactive, the free online business improvement tool offered by Investors in People was also found to be very helpful. This diagnostic part of the tool highlighted areas for improvement and the free information and resources offered best practice examples and guidance on how to improve in these areas.

Barrhead Housing Association formally gained recognition as an Investor in People in May 2009. Commenting on the assessment process itself, Shirley states, "The entire staff really enjoyed the assessment process as it gave them an opportunity to show the progress we had made over recent years. Actually achieving The Standard created a real buzz around the office for quite some time afterwards."

## MOTIVATIONS FOR USING INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

According to Shirley Robison, Barrhead Housing Association was motivated to use the Investors in People Standard for the following reasons:

- Managers believed that great progress had been made by the Association over the previous three years in changing its culture and

they were keen to have this progress independently validated;

- Investors in People was seen as a tool which could both measure the effectiveness of existing HR processes and procedures as well as challenge the organisation to do even better;
- Achieving Investors in People would provide the Association with external recognition for the progress it had made over the previous few years in turning around the organisation. It was hoped that this would be seen as a positive sign by tenants, the regulator and other stakeholders;
- By opening themselves up to external assessment the organisation also hoped to find out whether policies and processes were being consistently applied right across the organisation;
- The assessment report would help the organisation identify both aspects of particularly good practice as well as future development areas; and,
- The Association believed that being formally recognised as an Investor in People organisation would help attract high-quality new employees. The Investors in People brand remains strong and would therefore send out positive messages to both current and potential employees that people were at the heart of the organisation.

## BENEFITS OF USING INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

By working with Investors in People, Shirley Robison believes that Barrhead Housing Association has benefited in a number of important ways, including:

- By working with the principles of Investors in People the culture of the organisation has been revolutionised. Employees now understand what the organisation is seeking to achieve and how they can play their part in delivering these goals. As evidence of this cultural shift the recent employee survey found that 83% of staff now report enjoying working for the Association and 100% state that they understand how their role impacts upon the performance of the organisation;
- A more engaged workforce has also led to the dramatic reduction in short term staff absence, which has fallen from 4.7% in 2005 to just 0.7% for the first seven months of 2009;
- The Association now has the full range of policies and procedures in place to effectively support employees and has evidence that they

are being consistently applied across the organisation;

- The rate of staff turnover has improved dramatically over recent years, with last year only one member of staff leaving the organisation to take up a promoted post for another housing association;
- Channels of communication are now much clearer than before. A programme of team meetings has been developed, which provides a two-way communication process for all employees. The chair of meetings rotates and enables anyone to contribute to the agenda. Communication between departments has also improved through the breakdown of barriers. Teams now understand what each other do and how they can work more effectively together;
- The organisation's approach to employee development has radically improved, with the organisation now keen to proactively support the development of skills amongst its workforce. Training expenditure and activity are also now clearly linked to the business needs, in a way that was not always the case. Evidence of the organisation's positive approach to training comes from the most recent employee survey which found that 94% of employees agreed with the statement: "my manager actively supports my training & development";
- Rent arrears have reduced dramatically from £180,000 in 2006 to just under £90,000 by the end of 2009, and are continuing to fall. Included as a business objective of the organisation for the past four years, every employee has had an input into this successful achievement, from the front-line staff at reception to those in the finance department;
- The Association's tenants also seem extremely positive with the services provided by the organisation with over 90% stating they were either satisfied or very satisfied with Barrhead Housing as their landlord in the most recent survey;
- Thanks to improvements in several key business indicators, such as rent arrears and tenant satisfaction, Barrhead Housing Association has been re-categorised as a low engagement organisation by the Scottish Housing Regulator which has meant less frequent inspections;
- Recommendations contained in the post-assessment report have proved very useful to the organisation in redesigning aspects of several different policies, including the organisation's approach to performance management. The organisation has also been

happy to share the findings of the report on its website as evidence of its open and transparent approach to business improvement.

## WHERE NEXT WITH INVESTORS IN PEOPLE?

Barrhead Housing Association has had an extremely positive experience working with Investors in People. The organisation realises, however, that continued development is essential to upholding and furthering its high standards and it is committed to maintaining Investors in People recognition. Commenting on the business's future commitment to the Standard, Shirley states, "the principles behind The Standard are integral to the everyday running of the organisation and are now just a part of what we do." Higher levels within the new Investors in People framework are targeted for progression, starting with the bronze award and to do this continued participation in Investors in People workshops and networking events is expected.

Commenting on what advice she would offer to other businesses thinking of working with The Standard, Shirley states: "Investors in People has been great for the organisation, staff and customers, helping all tremendously. It involved hard work but it has been very worthwhile to us, and would be too for any other business."