

Seeing potential

Leeds City Council Step into Care



This series of case studies profiles how locally-based programmes can support people from non-traditional backgrounds into the care profession, from the perspectives of the programme operators, local care employers, and the candidates themselves.

These four case studies profile Leeds City Council's Step into Care Programme, which helped Devon Watson and the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board become an ideal match. In this case study we hear from Shahida Mahmood, Organisational and Workforce Development Business Partner for Leeds City Council (LCC), about how the Step into Care programme supports social care employers recruit.

Shahida Mahmood

Shahida says that she is acutely aware that: "On any given day there are around 800 to 900 vacancies in the social care sector in Leeds". That's why LCC and the We Care team, led by Shahida, set up the We Care Academy. They worked closely with Job Centre Plus and Leeds City College to create a new programme called Step into Care. Shahida says: "Our aim is to remove barriers of entry for the social care sector and help people with the right values, behaviours and attitudes join the workforce."



Prior to kicking off Step into Care, Shahida said she and her team felt there was more to be done to make the social care workforce reflective of the people they supported. A number of key underrepresented demographics were identified, including those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, males, younger people, people with long term health disabilities and conditions, and people that lived in the most deprived areas. They found that these groups weren't engaging with or coming to work in the care sector, and LCC saw both a need and an opportunity to support these people into care roles.



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The factors which presented barriers included a misunderstanding of the sector and roles within it, complicated application forms, or the inability to find or be placed in jobs near their home. Additionally, there was a pattern of high turnover among new starters in the sector. Sometimes, employer-candidate relationships would break down during the first few weeks of a new role meaning that the role became vacant again or candidates would simply realise the requirements of the job and that it was not the right role for them.

LCC developed Step into Care to reach out to individuals in their own communities through the Job Centre network, local community centres and other forms of local engagement, and help the right candidates find and sustain employment opportunities. Shahida said that they found it particularly helpful to attend community centres and local events. By meeting people in their own communities, where they are most comfortable, LCC was able to identify potential candidates who might not normally have come across the programme.

Devon's step into care

Devon attended the information and assessment day for the Step into Care programme, which is carried out as part of the application process. Shahida said: "He immediately stood out at the information session", and the Step into Care team could tell he was: "exactly the type of person that would relish the opportunities presented by the programme".

Like the other candidates, Devon went through the full Step into Care process, including the information session, 'Question of Care' profile, Maths and English assessments and a case-study based interview, where he was confronted with a set of circumstances similar to the kind he would encounter whilst delivering care on the job. "He passed them all with flying colours," said Shahida. "You could tell he was a kind and caring person."

Devon had been unemployed for several years but had been caring for his mum, which gave him a good foundation of skills, and he had carried out voluntary work with local organisations. The Step into Care team worked hard to find a placement for Devon which was on a direct bus route, ensuring he had a way to get to and from work. "This is a fundamental part of the programme," said Shahida, "as it can be challenging for new recruits to continue in a role that's really difficult for them to get to."

Devon was placed with placed with Leeds Jewish Welfare Board, specifically in their care home, which was home to 40 adults. Like with the information and assessment day, Shahida said: "The immediate feedback was that Devon was fantastic. He immediately built great relationships with the people he supported and colleagues, and at the end of placement he was interviewed and secured a permanent role."



"Devon is a real asset to the sector and the community he serves."

Devon is now an ambassador for the programme, and he has spoken about his experiences. He tells people, "if I can do this, you can too," providing a real-life example of someone who made the journey from long term unemployment to a successful and rewarding career in care. Shahida says: "He is a real asset to the sector and the community he serves."

Course practicalities

Candidates in the Step into Care programme join the course by attending an information event, instead of going through an application form or cover letter-based process. "Many people experience difficulties and anxieties in applying for roles the traditional way," said Shahida. However, by removing this element it can significantly increase engagement and success rates. "People can attend this event either from direct referrals, self-referrals or from the Job Centre Plus," Shahida explained.

At this information event, when COVID restrictions are not in place, 'I Care...' ambassadors help explain what working in the sector is like, both in terms of its rewards and challenges. The 'I Care...' scheme sees actual care workers act as ambassadors promoting understanding of social care work and inspiring others to join the profession in schools, local communities, colleges and job centres. Shahida says everyone finds hearing from ambassadors helpful because it means candidates have a clear understanding of what to expect, reducing the likelihood they will drop

out of the programme. “Candidates can choose to sign up for the Step into Care programme at the information event, at which time they are supported to carry out the necessary training.” The next part of the process is a two-week programme, including a week at Leeds City College and a week-long work placement with a guaranteed interview at the end.

Even during the pandemic, the Step into Care programme has helped providers recruit people with the right values and qualities for the care sector in Leeds. A full risk assessment to make recruitment and training tasks as safe as possible, and moving part of the information and assessment day tasks online, helped enable the programme to continue doing this. The team transitioned to a timeline of weekly recruitment to ensure staffing levels remain safe across the city, supporting care home residents discharged from hospital at a critical time. Working with the Job Centre Plus and Leeds City College, they identified groups of people at risk of redundancy who could be supported while transitioning into new employment. Adapting the scheme to the ‘new normal’ resulted in nearly 200 new recruits being supported into the care sector in Leeds since the beginning of the pandemic.

Engaging with employers

LCC takes care to understand the needs of employers, including what they look for in staff, as well as understanding their normal recruitment processes. Shahida says: “Each organisation’s needs are different, from administration, to the required role and values-based competencies they look for, so this is something our teams are able to account for.” Building the recruitment process around values and behaviours, through the ‘[Question of Care](#)’ profile, case-study based interview and values-based discussions, offers a good picture of the individual and more importantly, stops a lack of experience or not having the ‘right’ criteria on paper from being a barrier to joining the care sector. Shahida adds: “It does give us a really good picture, not just a person saying, ‘I can do this. I can do that. I live by these values.’ We actually look at them demonstrating in practice during the placement and college week.”

LCC also takes care of the whole process of recruitment, including what can be a more difficult referencing process. Shahida outlined that many people who have trouble entering the workforce often lack references, and, not wanting this to derail a great candidate, they find ways of working with candidates to overcome this barrier. For example, she said, where a previous employer reference is not possible, LCC helps to find references they can use. “These can either come from other roles, such as volunteer work, or they are secured through character checks.”

During this process, LCC has built up lots of links in the community. Shahida says: “Many organisations use the programme to fill vacancies.” LCC believes the programme is so successful because they provide “the right support to the candidate and the right support to the employer”. In fact, they support employers with candidate interview and assessment, which helps prevent candidates who are not right for the care sector from coming into contact with employers and can help save on employers’ recruitment costs. They even carry out DBS and other employment checks. Together, this helps remove the stress and administration that both the individual and organisation can experience. The programme also helps the candidate and their new employer form a strong and effective relationship, particularly during those crucial first few weeks of employment. External support, including mentoring, help with administrative work and advice from other impartial professionals in the care sector, has resulted in a higher retention rate and an excellent experience for both parties.

Top tips for launching a similar programme



It's important to go into this process with an open mind in terms of the candidates that you seek and accept.

People experience many different circumstances, but they can deliver a high level of care if they are given the right opportunities and support.



Strong relationships with employers are vital. Take the time to know their needs and to work hard to fulfil them. This not only builds trust with employers, but it helps give each candidate the best chance of succeeding.



A thorough recruitment process that includes multiple different checks will help identify appropriate and successful applicants. Previous employment references are only one part of this process, and not having them should not be a barrier to a candidate that excels in the other checks and assessments.



Establish partnerships with local stakeholders, such as Job Centre Plus, learning providers or other community support organisations, as they definitely help increase your chances of success.

Contact

For more information contact Shahida Mahmood, Organisational and Workforce Development Business Partner on shahida.mahmood@leeds.gov.uk or Jane Brown, Organisational and Workforce Development Advisor on jane.1.brown@leeds.gov.uk.