

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

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Abilities in facilities, Sewell Facilities Management

In a bold social enterprise, Sewell Facilities Management joined forces with the Humber branch of national charity Mencap to create paid employment and training opportunities for people with learning disabilities – Abilities in Facilities.

Since the partnership began in 2017, about 30 people nominated by the charity have directly benefited – with four gaining paid cleaning jobs in offices and schools across Hull, while others have undertaken work experience opportunities or learning interview techniques to help them progress into work elsewhere.

The people involved in the project have autism, mild and moderate learning disability and mild learning differences. Sewell's staff underwent specific training to help them progress and feel supported in their roles as they looked to secure opportunities in the world of work. Mencap gathered information on the progress of each young person involved in the scheme, building up charts detailing their self-assessment – how they felt before and after their training.

The company's personnel have also taken part in a local feasibility study and supported Mencap in dispelling myths about working with people with a learning disability and raising awareness at events for young people and employers.

Best practice learning points:

- The learning is a two-way street; Sewell Facilities Management staff who worked on the project with Mencap now have a far better understanding of people who have a learning disability and their needs.
- Opening opportunities to a largely untapped future workforce while enhancing the training and experience of personnel through the additional training and experiences they have completed.
- The methods adopted can help the wider FM sector to better identify an individual's needs and better tailor communication and support accordingly.
- By dispelling employers, managers and colleagues' negative attitudes or low expectations of those with learning disabilities, it paves the way for a more inclusive environment in which people of all abilities and backgrounds can work as a team.

- An increased understanding of unfair treatment, discrimination and bullying and harassment in the workplace.

Starting position

Nationally, just 5.7 per cent of people with a learning disability are in paid work – and the Yorkshire and Humber region has below UK average employment rates.

The Royal Mencap Society's team in the Humber area is based at Freetown Court, one of Sewell's investment buildings in Hull. The link-up for the Abilities in Facilities project occurred when a member of Sewell FM's team responsible for cleaning the communal areas of the charity's offices left the business, giving rise to the partnership.

Mencap's locality manager Kerrie White offered the company an insight into what the charity does and how it supports people with a learning disability. It immediately became clear that the parties' vision and values were aligned.

Mencap's backing includes supporting people in the workplace and teaching them life skills to enable them to maintain good employment practice – travelling to and from work, punctuality, uniform and presentation.

Action taken

Staff at Sewell FM have enhanced their own understanding by completing a training course and experience session to immerse themselves in what life is like for someone who has autism. This involved them wearing special glasses and headphones and gloves to restrict hand movements and watching a video while carrying out everyday tasks. The loud noises, distraction, quick changes and general impact on their senses approximated the perceptions of someone who has autism.

Support required by these people involves easy-to-read and pictorial information, mentoring, help with time management and site awareness as well as travel training to help them get to and from work.

Staff took the time to get to know the Mencap-nominated employees and are able to prepare for the fact that some do struggle with change and are particularly aware of how any changes at work can affect them.

As well as broadening its staff knowledge and training, Sewell FM took on a female employee to embark on the part-time cleaning role at Freetown Court, giving her interview experience and training to complete the job to her full potential.

Three more paid cleaning appointments followed at schools in Hull.

When another part of Freetown Court had to be cleared it opened up work experience opportunities for more young people, overseen by Sewell FM's Tom Farrow and Craig Hancock.

Final position...

The objective was to provide paid work posts for people supported by Mencap, offering stability and structure through permanent roles while boosting their confidence, skills development – and sense of inclusion.

Those young people trained and employed by Sewell FM have experienced enhanced self-esteem, and as a result of ‘buddy/mentor’ training, have even felt confident enough to join colleagues for gatherings outside of work, which has helped to bolster their friendships and social skills.

The long-term aim of the scheme is to grow the initiative to employ people from Mencap in every Sewell Facilities Management cleaning team. The company has almost a dozen teams in the Yorkshire region and is continuing to grow in the education, commercial, and health sectors.

Individuals nominated by Mencap are also being given the chance to gain further work experience at the new £9 million Jean Bishop Integrated Care Centre being built by Sewell in Hull to gain valuable skills as part of the cleaning team in the initial stages of the building’s operation.

Evidence obtained in feedback from clients has been proof of how current employees and those who have completed work experience through Mencap have flourished in confidence and self-esteem as a result of the partnership, taking great care in their roles and wearing their uniforms with pride in an all-embracing environment. It has also reinforced Sewell FM’s reputation as a *Sunday Times* Best 100 Company to Work For.

Mencap’s Kerrie White said: “Coming together with Sewell Facilities Management has been crucial for us in terms of showcasing what a really good, inclusive employer is, and to show just what people with a learning disability and/or difference are capable of.

“We hope our partnership with Sewell will inspire other employers to recognise the benefits of employing people with a learning disability and encourage them to take on people with a learning disability when recruiting.”

Sewell FM has a five-year plan to have supported or employed 200 Mencap-nominated people by 2022, building on the 35 in 2018, to 45 in 2020, and 50 by 2021. It also pledges to share the knowledge it has accumulated and promote it wherever it works.

The Judges said...

Abilities in Facilities submitted an inspirational entry which scored highly across all criteria. Through their initiative ‘Abilities in Facilities’, Sewell Facilities Management has created paid employment and training opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities. In conjunction with Mencap, they have helped individuals to grow in confidence and self-esteem, providing a foundation for these individuals to improve their earning capacity and to feel more included in society.