City of Lincoln Council

Some groups of workers, such as those working nights and lone workers, can get overlooked when it comes to learning and training. But UCATT union learning representative (ULR) Kevin Clarke has helped to ensure that this is not the case at City of Lincoln Council, where night workers like cleaners, and those working alone, such as caretakers and car park attendants, are all included in the authority’s training programme. And Kevin has also made sure that the authority’s apprentices are well looked after.

UCATT Regional Council member and senior shop steward Kevin became a ULR at the local authority some four years ago, after a successful grievance hearing ruled against his manager’s decision “to turn down point blank” his request to attend a ULR course. Kevin attended the course, and has never looked back, being presented with a Skills for Life Advocate award by unionlearn in 2007.

On being presented with the award he said: “I really wanted to reach the sections of the workforce who had been overlooked for training through no fault of their own, such as part-time and shift-workers, who tended to under-value themselves as a result. I also wanted to encourage the families of people who worked at the authority to take part, to increase the overall awareness of learning not only in the working environment but also outside work.”

Taking on a coordinating role for union learning at the council, which employs around 800 people, he has helped to negotiate the learning agreement, with the support of UCATT Midlands Regional Officer Mike Nelson, and to set up a learning committee, with equal representation from each of the four unions with members in the local authority – Unison, GMB and Unite also sit on the committee.

There is now a corporate learning centre with three rooms including a computer suite, and UCATT has been at the forefront of organising joint union Learning Days, which take place each year and are held in different locations around the authority in order to give as many employees as possible the chance to see what training opportunities are on offer. The Learning Day held at the City Maintenance Services (CMS) depot in September 2007 was attended by 280 people, including local MP Gillian Merron.

Sally Des Forges, Training Coordinator for Maintenance and Investment set out the authority’s training strategy: “The City of Lincoln Council recognises that people are its most valuable resource and has a corporate training strategy that is committed to continuous development. It is a large, diverse organisation where everyone needs to understand their specific role and have an environment in which they can perform to the maximum of their potential. The ambition of the Council is to ensure that all employees have core skills that equate to a level 1-2.”

And Kevin explained the union’s learning strategy: “UCATT’s strategy in Lincoln is the same as that set out in a government White Paper on learning and training: Everyone should be trained up to level 2 no matter what they do. And we put that strategy into practice, making sure for example, that part-time, women cleaners working nights at the Town Hall are not left out of the training programme. They have all now done NVQ level 1 and 2 courses in cleaning and maintenance, and we are now getting caretakers on level 2 courses.”

One of the cleaners to benefit from the training at Lincoln, UCATT member Jo Bentley, became a ULR herself and now promotes the numeracy, literacy and IT training courses to other cleaners working at night; and car park attendants are another group of lone workers who have not fallen below the radar at Lincoln, with 22 currently enrolled on training supported by the national skills service, Train to Gain.

Sally explained that working in partnership with the unions has progressed several significant issues for the authority, particularly in City Maintenance Services (CMS).

For example, the Craft Development Scheme gives the whole craft workforce the...
opportunity to up-skill, and local authority employees are now equipped with Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards. In addition, those working for contractors like Kier, which is installing kitchens in the local authority’s homes as part of the Decent Homes programme, are also equipped with CSCS cards. The local authority gives its support by providing work-based recorder training and revision materials for the CSCS Touch-Screen-Test.

The scheme was set up in the construction industry to improve quality and reduce accidents and according to Sally: “The unions have been pivotal in the move to equip the workforce with CSCS cards”. Kevin pointed out that as well as being good for health and safety, the touchscreen test can also give construction workers an introduction to using IT.

In addition, craft apprentices have been re-introduced for the first time in a number of years which has boosted morale and, the authority hope, will enhance the future workforce. Although it currently has only three, as Kevin said, “It’s three more than last year or the year before that!”

For UCATT, the apprenticeships were an important element of negotiations over the CDS, which followed the union’s successful campaign to retain Lincoln’s housing stock. The unions are involved in the selection and interview process, and have been involved in negotiating their terms and conditions, with respect to their induction, health and safety, training, monitoring and appraisal. They are “full employees” of the council, enjoying the same benefits as other groups of workers, and paid in accordance with the local government “Red Book” conditions.

Team leaders act as role models and mentors for the apprentices and ensure that they have good on-the-job training and that development opportunities are on offer. When they are placed with tradespeople, pay levels reflect this mentoring role.

Kevin believes that taking on these three apprentices shows a commitment by the authority to look seriously at bringing back craft apprentices and that it is thinking about the future. “It shows the authority is committed to the future, committed to the area, and that it has staying power”, he says. With an ageing workforce, the apprentices are vital in helping to ensure that construction skills are passed on and retained within the local authority’s workforce. For example, one apprentice is a flat felt roofer and will eventually take over from the last remaining roofer with this skill in the Council. As union learning coordinator, Kevin has been recognised as one of the main driving forces behind learning at Lincoln. “He is tenacious in his ambitions to make the City Council a learning organisation. He has pushed, through the learning committee, for Skills for Life awareness and training to be embedded in the authority and for NVQs for the cleaning staff”, said Sally.

And according to Mary Alys, regional manager unionlearn with the Midlands TUC: “Kev Clarke is a dedicated and committed union learning rep who has been central to the expansion of the Skills for Life agenda at the City of Lincoln Council. He has enabled Council employees, including part-time cleaners to experience the benefits of learning and to spread that enthusiasm to their families.”

Sally believes that ULRs like Kevin play a really important role in encouraging learning. “ULRs provide a momentum that is sometimes missing, and push and promote issues that can get forgotten, providing a voice for people to air issues that they are sometimes unsure of speaking to their line managers about,” she said.

Next on Kevin’s list is getting the authority to sign the Skills Pledge, which would confirm the authority’s commitment to train the entire workforce up to level 2, and would release extra funding for learning. And as Gordon Brown is a fellow Skills for Life Advocate he said: “I would like to meet up with him and find out what he is doing to promote learning and training!”

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