Kier Stoke is a joint venture company formed between Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Kier Building Maintenance to deliver a repairs and maintenance service for the city’s social housing and public buildings. It has been in operation since February 2008 and currently has some 500 ex-local authority employees. It has a £400 million, ten-year contract to look after 20,000 council homes and public buildings including the Town Hall and this could be extended for another five years.

A joint union learning agreement was signed back in November 2008 and Kier Stoke and UCATT work in partnership on learning and training through a joint management and union training committee. The union’s ten shop stewards are also union learning representatives (ULRs) and have undergone their ULR level 1 and 2 training course.

The union has also worked closely with the local Trade Union Education Centre at Stoke on Trent College, signposting workers to training and learning opportunities both inside and outside the workplace. ULRs are trained to identify skills gaps and point people towards appropriate training providers. UCATT Convenor and ULR Martin Hurley says that a particular skill of ULRs at Kier Stoke is breaking down the barriers to learning by finding solutions through networking and research.

“They have successfully identified people with dyslexia and other learning difficulties and helped them to find suitable training courses by liaising with trained career advisors and college professionals,” he says.

As a result of a successful joint bid for £25,000 capital funding to the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands, and the TUC education and skills arm, unionlearn, Kier Stoke and UCATT have set up a new learning centre.

Making a difference

Equipped with fifteen laptops, a desktop computer, an overhead projector, a smart board, a mobile projector and screen and video and camera equipment, the learning centre is facilitating learning opportunities at Kier and seeking to engage with workers, their families and friends in the local community.

Martin explains the difference having the learning centre makes. “We had been restricted as to what we could offer because of lack of space,” he says. “Having an on-site learning centre means there are new and easily accessible learning and training opportunities on offer and the ULRs are working hard to promote them.”

Last year, UCATT ran two learning open days with the help of tutors from Stoke on Trent College. These gave workers the chance to look around the learning centre and see what learning opportunities are on offer. Most of the IT equipment is portable so it will be used both in the learning centre and on other sites and community centres around the city in order to provide maximum access to learning.

Martin believes that this is crucial in the current economic climate. “Like many organisations working in and with the public sector, we are facing redundancies and we really want to promote the learning and training opportunities on offer in the learning centre. In a redundancy situation morale can fall through the floor so it is a good time to encourage people to take up learning opportunities and increase their skills and employability. We are really pushing IT training, from introductory to higher level, and we asked Stoke on Trent College tutors to gauge interest in other subjects at the recruitment event,” he said.

Around 75 people came to the open days and workers signed up to courses in numeracy, literacy and IT. These are currently running from 3pm to 5pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, on a ‘give-an-hour, take-an-hour’ basis; and a third course runs from 5pm to 7pm on a ‘banked hours’ basis. And further learning and training opportunities are in the pipeline. Business
Improvement Manager, Jenny Donkin, says Kier will also be offering on construction skills training in the learning centre. There will be the opportunity to take the health and safety touch-screen-test to gain Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) cards which demonstrate occupational competence and safety awareness.

Jenny said: “Working with UCATT and the ULRs means that we can engage with a broader range of employees who would not necessarily engage with managers. It has helped us to make sure that the learning opportunities are enjoyed by more people and as an organisation we gain from them increasing their skills.”

Kier helps UCATT win apprenticeships award

Working with Kier Stoke on learning and training has helped UCATT to win a Union Learning Fund (ULF) award for apprenticeships and young workers. The union was also highly commended for the work it has done around employer engagement on learning and training.

Kier Stoke business management apprentice Holly Boulton and plumbing apprentice Tom Edge were invited to an audience with comedian Lenny Henry when he presented the 2010 ULF awards at a ceremony at the TUC’s Congress House in London. This followed an invitation to a TUC celebration of Britain’s expanding ranks of apprentices. The Award for Apprenticeships and Young Workers recognises the role UCATT has played in securing employer commitment to apprenticeships and for developing the role of ULRs, who provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) and act as mentors to apprentices.

There are currently 216 craft apprentices across the Kier Group, including 21 at Kier Stoke. Jenny set out Kier’s approach to supporting apprentices: “In terms of the training delivered we think it’s far more than just day release and sending them off to college, or in the case of some of our apprentices off to university, once a week or on block release. We’ve introduced a whole package of training and support in the workplace. So we have a ULR who is completely in touch with what they are doing and will support them.”

Holly confirmed this. “My ULR, Adrian, is in regular contact with the union and myself and provides me with advice and support when needed,” she said. And Tom added: “UCATT makes me feel that I’ve got a voice of my own and if I do come across any problems with whoever I’m working with, I know I’d be able to ring them up and be 100% confident that they will sort it out for me.”

Martin Hurley also sits on the UCATT Kier National Convenor Forum. This provides a platform for UCATT to represent members and co-ordinate activities at both local and national level across the Kier Group. It also aims to standardise ‘best practice’ across the company and provide a forum to progress learning and training issues including apprenticeships.

Staff at Kier Stoke are also benefitting from a partnership initiative involving UCATT, Kier and Wigan & Leigh College. A number of employees have secured Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) Supervisor/Team Leader NVQ L2 qualifications in the last few months.

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