Now in its fourth year of operation as an ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation), NCH employs around 1,100 staff, including around 400 craft operatives – transferred from the local authority on 1st April 2005. NCH is responsible for the day-to-day management of 29,000 homes and 1,000 leasehold properties. Neal Hodkinson, Joint Trade Union Works Convenor, UCATT Senior Shop Steward, and Regional Council member, said:

"The total spend in Nottingham will be around £243 million, meaning that more than 200 apprentices will be taken on over the life of the project. It is a great example of what organisations can do to expand the construction workforce through apprenticeships, which are in great demand. NCH recently took on 13 apprentices, but more than 2,000 people requested application forms, over 1,000 returned completed application forms, and 887 applications were acceptable."

Director of Organisational Development, George Pashley explained: "Built into every contract is the requirement that for every £1 million spent, contractors must take on at least one apprentice. This is our response to the national drive to provide greater opportunities for apprenticeship learning and encourage contractors to take more ownership of training and development."

The initiative has not gone unnoticed at a national level. A spokesperson for the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) said: "We commend UCATT, Nottingham City Homes and Nottingham City Council for their commitment and leadership in providing apprenticeship opportunities through their innovative 'one in a million' scheme. This is a great example of what can be done in local areas by using the leverage of procurement to provide work and training opportunities to local people. We would strongly encourage more local authorities, working with local partners such as trade unions to explore how they can create apprenticeship opportunities through their procurement and planning processes."

As well as the apprentices taken on through the One in a Million scheme NCH’s housing maintenance service is also committed to taking on ten apprentices a year. The repairs and maintenance team – which includes two young women – has won the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) National Apprentice of the Year award three times. It currently has 23 apprentices, many of whom come from the local area and from very diverse backgrounds, including young Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), female and disabled workers. More than 60 current employees came through the apprenticeship scheme originally and are now fully qualified operatives.

Learning and Development Officer and Apprentice and Trainee Coordinator, Ian Richardson, says: "NCH does a lot of outreach work with young BME and disabled people, and young women. They have access to employment courses run by Nottingham City Council, local colleges and organisations including schools, Remploy, and Connexions. We let them know what is on offer and give advice on filling in application forms before we advertise the apprenticeships. We are about to advertise ten craft apprenticeships and, for the first time, ten business administration apprenticeships."

Neal Hodkinson explains why NCH apprenticeships are so popular: "The National Agreement sets down reasonable terms and conditions, but NCH have improved on these. There is good support in place, with recognition for trades people involved in mentoring the apprentices and bringing them on, so they do not lose out financially. It means that people are fully protected and the apprentices get the best possible assistance".

---

UCATT reps and Midlands Regional Secretary Steve Murphy have been working on a groundbreaking Code of Practice agreement with Nottingham City Homes (NCH). NCH manages and maintains the city council’s homes. As part of its innovative new apprenticeship scheme, ‘One in a Million’, NCH promises to employ one apprentice for every million pound spent on its huge investment programme across the city. The organisation was recently awarded two stars by the Audit Commission. This helped to access £165 million of Government funding to bring Nottingham’s council homes up to the Decent Homes standard.
Learning and Training

Fifty two trades people had coaching and mentoring training in 2006 and are now due for training again this year. According to Ian, “There is a great willingness to show young people what they do and bring them on. There is a very good, close working relationship between the apprentices and their mentors”.

UCATT is also involved in lifelong learning at NCH. A learning agreement was recently signed and each of the four unions on site now has a union learning representative (ULR), including UCATT ULR Andy Bostock, on the learning committee. George Pashley recognises the important role that union ULRs play in the training and development strategy at NCH: “We have a diverse training programme, but we are currently formulating a single training strategy to help ensure that we identify and meet the training needs of all our staff. This needs to be done from a business and individual point of view to make sure there is fair access to training across the organisation.

“The union ULRs have an important role in helping to fill our current gaps in knowledge. Staff tend not to come forward individually, but they will go to Neil or Andy and they can then represent what 100 or 200 people are saying, which helps us to focus on their training needs. The craft workforce is obviously not office based, but cut and about across the whole city, and their training and development is not straightforward. They may need specialist technical training with varying methods of delivery. We are currently discussing with UCATT the possibility of providing a mobile training facility, such as an E-learning bus with IT equipment, and jointly looking into the funding opportunities available.”

The union ULRs are also crucial to encouraging people to take up the learning and training opportunities on offer. At NCH they are involved in the selection of training providers. Courses already run have included IT courses with a literacy and numeracy focus. These were run on a Friday afternoon on a give-an-hour, take-an-hour basis for craft operatives. Spanish with embedded literacy was also run as a free evening course. Further courses are in the pipeline, with taster sessions planned for Adult Learners Week, which takes place from 9 to 15 May this year. The learning committee is currently discussing the possibility of setting up a learning centre so that courses can be run on site, not only for NCH employees, but also their families and the local community.

Learning and Development Manager Carol Aaron says she also wants to use the week to promote the ULRs. “We are taking a more strategic approach to training and development which ties into the company’s direction over the next 12 months. A lack of skills can be costly to businesses and affect the standard of service delivered, and ULRs can provide crucial support in improving performance as a first point of contact for learning. If an individual has got a lack of confidence about their skills, they sometimes don’t feel confident enough to speak to someone that line manages them, but they know that they can go to someone else in the business for guidance”.

Neal recently provided such a point of contact by talking to staff at a UCATT stall set up during a recent NCH event held at Forest Football Club’s City ground. He spoke to them about the learning and training opportunities on offer and also recruited new members to the union. “We are by no means flying on learning – yet!” says Neal “But we will be. Next on our agenda is encouraging some of the older workers who have left school to go straight into work to return to learning.”