

Social Audit case study: Highland Home Carers

HIGHLAND Home Carers is to produce annual 'social accounts' after the success of a project funded by Co-operative Development Scotland.

The Inverness-based homecare provider, which is owned by its 160 employees, is already working on its third annual social audit.

The process involves interviewing service users and their families, employees and funders to help measure the company's wider social, economic and environmental performance.

CDS introduced a number of co-operative businesses to social accounting in 2008 as part of an initiative with the Social Audit Network, which helps companies throughout the UK prepare social accounts and have them independently audited.

"The first benefit was that it has enabled us to have a much better independent perspective of our service and how we might improve things," explains Stephen Pennington, Managing Director of Highland Home Carers.

"In the first year, there was a fair amount of feedback that our communication systems weren't as good as they might be. We made some changes in our structures to try and tackle that, and it appears as if we're now getting it right. We're subject to regulation by the Care Commission, and in their most recent report, they have graded us at 'Level 6 Excellent' on our quality assurance systems and processes, which involve service users, carers, staff and stakeholders to assess the quality of service we provide. This is what we do in our social accounting."

Topics covered in the company's social accounts include quality of service provision, performance against corporate objectives and mission statement, staff training, treatment at work, communication and views of employee ownership. Interviews, focus groups and questionnaires were used to gather responses. For example, 97% of service users said they were comfortable and confident with Highland Home Carers' staff, while 68% of employees believed the company met its objective of being a fair or good employer either well or very well.

The Social Audit Network recommends producing social accounts at least every two years, but Highland Home Carers is committed to producing them every year because the information produced is so valuable.

"It has definitely given us an edge with customers who purchase our services," Stephen Pennington says. "If that helps us get an excellent rating from the Care Commission, it is bound to influence people."

Sarah Deas, CDS Chief Executive, said: "There is clear evidence to suggest that social accounting can help co-operative and employee-owned businesses build long-term relationships with customers and stakeholders by demonstrating their wider impact on society. We are delighted that this has been the experience of Highland Home Carers and we will continue to promote this approach where appropriate."