

Tackling the Social Housing Talent Gap

What is the sector doing to get
more people excited about
social housing careers?



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Foreword



Julie Lorraine
Strategic Director
Mobyssoft

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The social housing sector faces a skills deficit like never before

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Social housing providers face challenges on all fronts, from pressure to improve stock condition and provide enhanced services to residents, to delivering enough new affordable homes to meet exponentially increasing demand.

But perhaps the sector's most pervasive obstacle is also the one that appears to get the least airtime, in the mainstream media at least – the battle for talent.

I'm sure most social housing leaders would agree that people, with the experience and passion they bring to the table, are a housing provider's greatest asset. Yet the sector faces a skills deficit like never before, with demand for talent increasing at every level from entry level positions to senior leadership roles. An ageing workforce, waning interest from school leavers to pursue careers in housing, and a huge breadth of required expertise compared to many other key sectors, are all key factors preventing the sector from adequately filling roles.

Like so many things, a lot of social housing's great challenges are just as much people problems as they are financial, reputational, or political ones.

How can social housing providers engage a more diverse workforce, meet evolving employee expectations around flexible work and career opportunities, and inspire a new generation of talent? Answering these questions is now mission critical for a sector on the front line of an affordability crisis that is pushing more and more families into needing housing support.

To that end, Mobyssoft has commissioned an independent survey* of 100 c-suite social housing decision makers and convened a roundtable of people management leaders and advisors from across the sector.

The following report summarises the findings of our research – highlighting the skills that are most in demand, how housing associations are evolving their employer proposition – and the key insights offered by our panel of experts.

I hope you find the following summary of our discussion as interesting and informative as it was to take part in.

*A survey of 100 social housing c-suite executives was carried out on behalf of Mobyssoft by research agency Censuswide. Field work took place between the 19th and 24th April 2023.



How big is the talent gap?

Social housing providers are **in the spotlight**.

But, with most eyes on the competing challenges of building new homes and improving conditions of existing stock and overall experiences for customers, it's perhaps easy for external commentators to overlook the competition for talent as another key battleground for the sector.

Not so for registered providers (RPs) themselves. Our research found that they are keenly aware of the talent gap in their sector.

More than three quarters (77%) said that recruiting is currently a challenge for their organisation, with two thirds (65%) agreeing that it's more of a challenge than two years ago, when many pandemic restrictions were still in place. Over half (55%) said it has worsened again in the last year.

Sue Ashby is group head of resourcing and reward at Sanctuary, which provides housing and care for more than a quarter of a million people.

She said: "During the pandemic, things stabilised in some ways because people were less likely to move jobs.

"Now, we must rerun recruitment adverts quite regularly. Trying to get yourselves known as a brand in this sector is one thing, but we are competing against employers like supermarkets and other industries that maybe have more flexibility about how much of their costs they can pass on to their customers."

Anthony Lewis, director of recruitment firm Tile Hill agreed the situation was challenging but there might be opportunity for the sector going forward.

“Recruitment is not necessarily an easy thing for the housing sector to solve unless it can suddenly start paying more” commented Mr Lewis.

“Housing providers are competing against the public and private sectors, and I think typically people see the private sector as a more glamorous place to be.

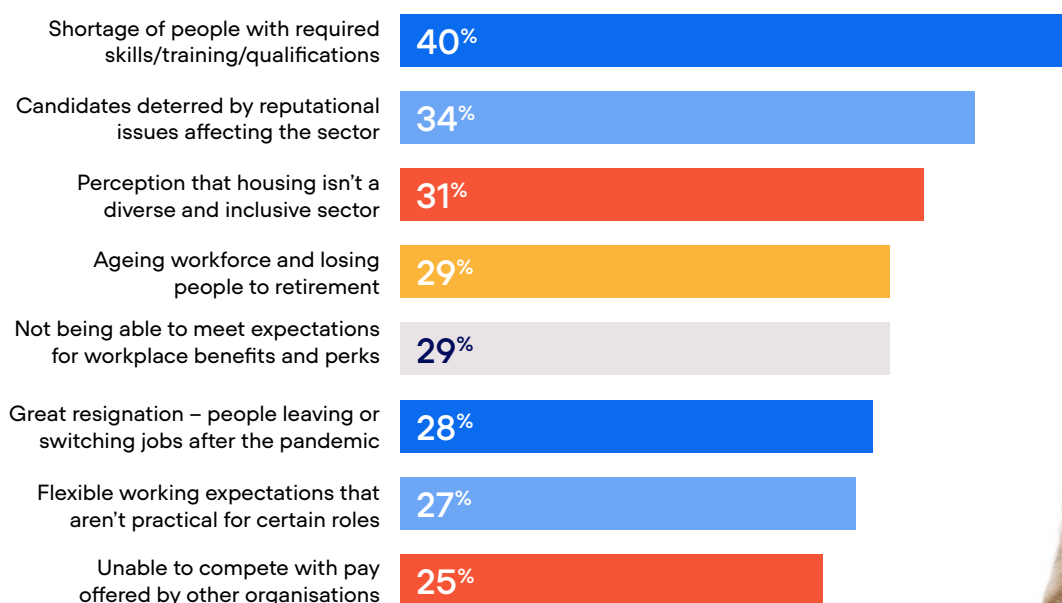
“But if the current economic environment persists, there will be a real desire among job hunters to find security, but there is also a connection and excitement to deliver social impact that working for registered providers can offer, so there are some things that will swing back in the sector’s favour.”

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The biggest barriers to recruitment and retention



Where are the biggest gaps?

Social housing providers need an incredibly **diverse range of skills**, from IT and marketing professionals, to care workers and tradespeople.

As the ambitions of the sector ramp up – more than two thirds (67%) of housing associations say they will build more homes this year than they did pre-pandemic – filling key roles will be crucial to meeting strategic objectives.

Development managers were cited as the most in-demand role by 36% of survey respondents. A position, as Anthony Lewis pointed out, for which the private sector is currently doing a better job of attracting and retaining, despite the size and scale of the development programmes on offer in registered providers.

Nathan Jack is business growth manager at Manchester Athena, a group of 15 housing providers which works to improve employment opportunities across the city region.

He said: “I’ve been involved in the sector for 10 years and recruiting development managers has always been a challenge. We need to change how we recruit for those roles. I don’t think there is currently an apprenticeship for that job, for example.

“Social housing development managers require a unique skill set and the sector can be a trailblazer in developing and training more of them.”

While there are clearly recruitment challenges across the board, delegates at our round table were quick to flag surveyors and tradespeople as a particular pinch point, due largely to an increase in complaints about damp and mould.

The tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak because of exposure to mould in his Rochdale home has heightened awareness and anxiety among social housing tenants. It has also damaged the sector's reputation, which in turn has created challenges for recruitment.

Sian Evans, partner and housing lead at national law firm Weightmans, said: "We've probably seen a thousand percent increase in claims against housing associations and local authorities.

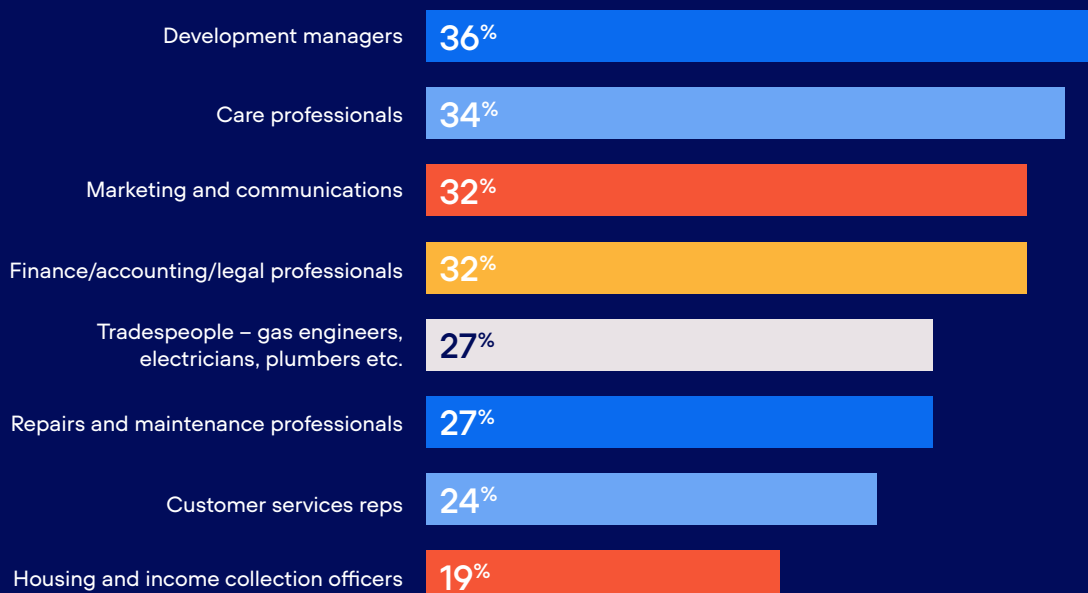
"My clients tell me it's been extremely difficult to recruit internal surveyors to go out and inspect properties, as well as in-house repair teams and contractors, something which has massive ramifications."

Julie Lorraine, strategic director at Mobyssoft, added: "The sector's reputation is an issue at the moment. Some roles at some organisations are maybe seen as a bit of a poisoned chalice because something has gone wrong there in the past.

"Reputational damage is disheartening for all the teams that work incredibly hard to make a difference and I think the sector could be bolder in how it counters the current narrative, shouting louder about its successes and achievements."

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Skills in demand



How are HAs tackling recruitment?

Panellists at our round table saw numerous opportunities for the sector to **evolve its approach to recruitment** and better access the skills needed to future-proof the affordable housing pipeline.

There are more than 8 million economically inactive people aged 16-64 in the UK, who could be tempted back into the world of work. As Julie Lorraine pointed out, this could present an opportunity for housing providers recruiting roles like surveyors and tradespeople.

She said: "A lot of those roles were occupied by ageing workers who chose to exit the profession during the pandemic, and we haven't been able to attract younger people to replace them."

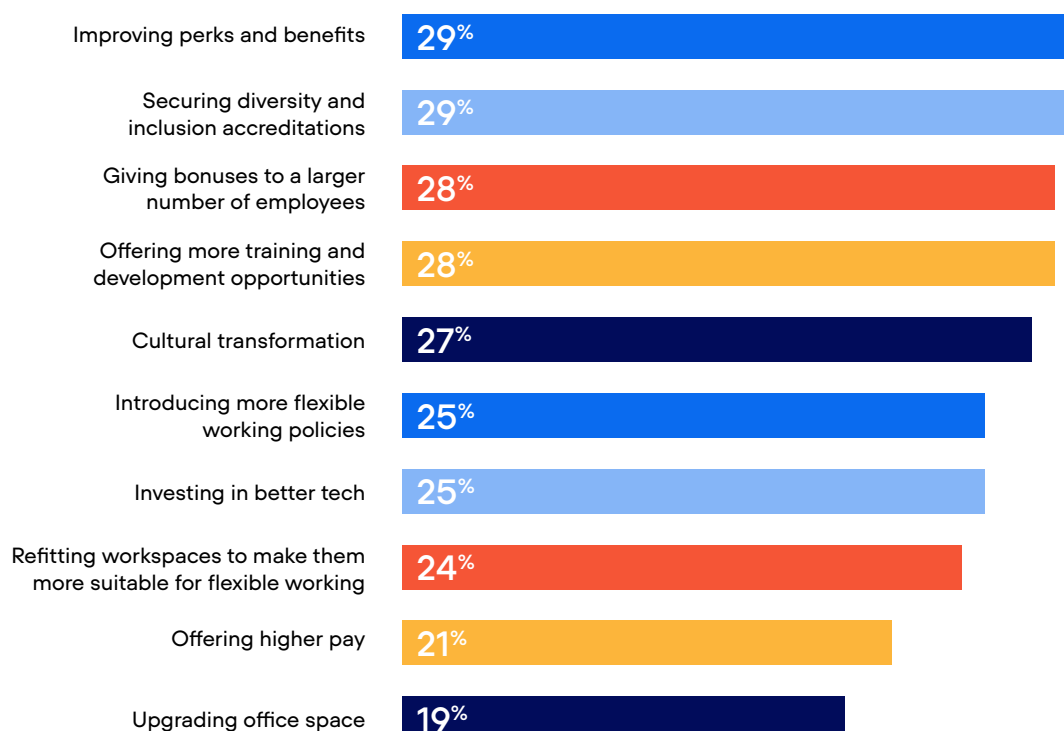
"I know there's a big effort to promote trade careers now, but for a long time, government education policy wasn't focused on vocational training, so I wonder whether the untapped resource out there, at least in the short term, is older people with the required skills to train new entrants. People who we could tempt back. Key to achieving this will be offering flexibility to attract people who, in many cases, have become fatigued with established ways of working."



Offering flexibility is key to attracting people who are fatigued with established ways of working



Top retention tactics





Social housing providers appear to understand that bold steps are required to bridge the talent gap. Strikingly, many seem set on becoming trailblazers for radical flexibility initiatives as, no doubt, they anticipate having to compete with increasing regularity with other sectors for the people they need. For example, more than two thirds (68%) either plan to or already have introduced 4-day weeks.

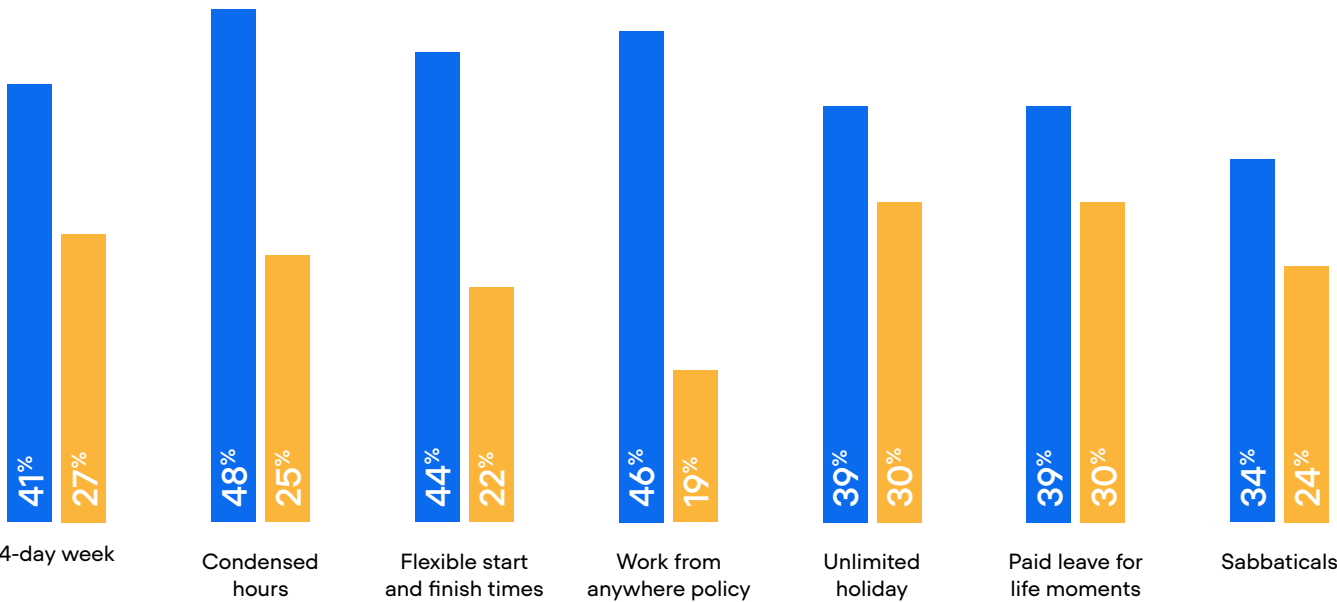
Manchester Athena’s Nathan Jack raised another innovative solution to the skills shortage where more flexible working arrangements can enable organisations to share skills. Explaining how this collaborative approach to the skills issue was paying dividends for his organisation, Mr Jack said:

“We’re setting up an apprenticeship agency that we share between our members. When we employ an individual to be trained up as a surveyor, for example, it means the cost and the work can be spread out among participating members.”

Many social housing providers don’t currently feel they can prioritise investment in people due to conflicting demands on their budgets. A third (34%) said they are considering reducing headcount to manage costs and ringfence capital for growth, while less than a quarter (23%) said upskilling employees was one of their top-three investment priorities.

New ways of working

■ Introducing
■ Already introduced



Anthony Lewis highlighted this as a major area of concern, lauding the benefits of upskilling and internal promotion over recruitment.

He said: “The cost of recruiting a new person, whether that’s because you need a different skill set or because you’re just replacing the person that’s left, can be expensive.

“If you invest that time and money into learning and development instead, you will probably find you increase retention and productivity. But I think there’s been underinvestment in that area over a long time because of the pressure on budgets.

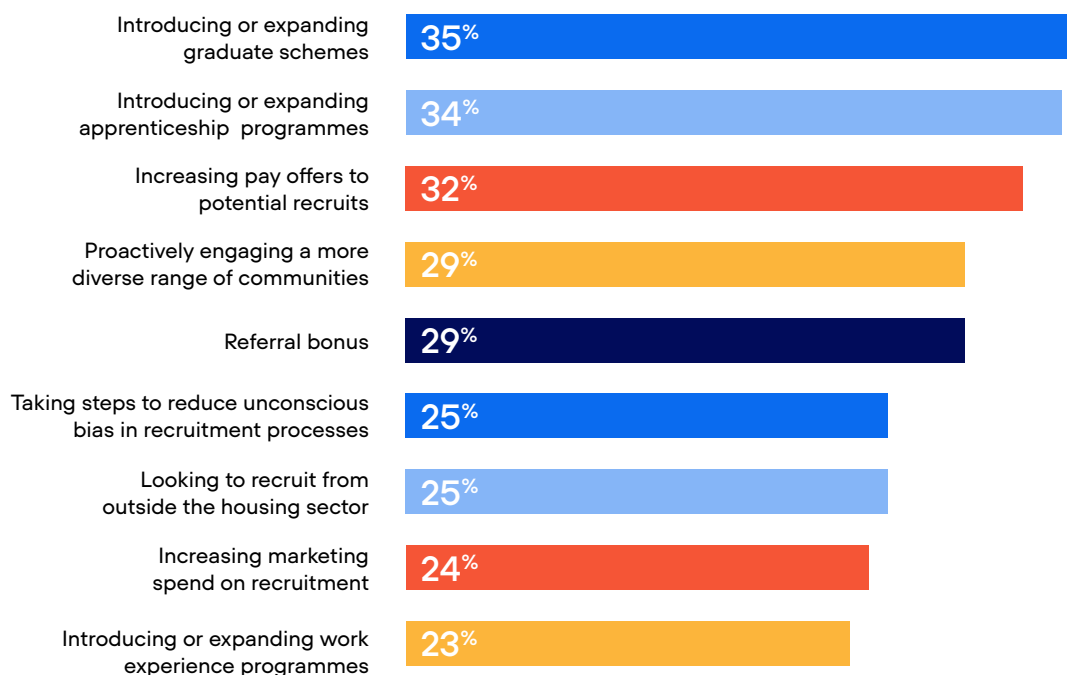
“One of the main motivators, particularly for younger generations, is access to learning and development opportunities, and many of them would actually forgo some salary if they can see their career is developing.”

Where RPs do seem to be investing time and focus is in broadening the pool that they recruit from. There was a keen understanding among survey respondents of the need to attract a larger and more diverse group of people into social housing careers.

More than a third (35%) of social housing providers are introducing or expanding graduate schemes, while a similar proportion (34%) are improving their apprenticeships offering. Proactively engaging people from more diverse backgrounds was also one of the more commonly cited measures, with 29% of our sample of housing leaders saying this was a priority for them.

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Top recruitment tactics



Conclusion: No silver bullet



Paul Evans
CEO
Mobyssoft

It seems clear that there is **no single solution** to the social housing sector's skills gap.

Rather, there are a diverse range of strategies that hold great promise, from targeting the economically inactive, to upskilling, more flexible working, and job sharing.

There are opportunities for providers to collaborate and for the sector to speak up about the impactful services we deliver, day in, day out.

In my experience, the social housing sector has always sought to champion diversity and inclusion. After all, the services it provides support people from a multitude of different social and cultural backgrounds.

But we can do more to reach out to a diverse pool of candidates that better reflects our communities and be more creative about how we attract and retain young people.

It's a big ask, but the one thing that stands out to me about the people working in social housing is that they are resilient and committed to delivering for their residents.

Despite well publicised issues, the sector is still fizzing with ideas and inspiration. There is a focus on the future, and on safeguarding the affordable housing pipeline for the long term. Within this, there is most certainly an understanding that developing people and unearthing tomorrow's leaders is mission critical. As I hope our research shows, social housing's current leaders are becoming increasingly creative, ambitious and diverse in the tactics they are deploying to identify, engage and mould those who will take on the mantle.

I'll leave the last word to housing recruitment specialist Anthony Lewis, who is positive there is light at the end of the tunnel.

"The more that organisations focus on inclusion, learning and development and exciting younger generations about the impacts and purpose of the housing sector, the better.

"The housing sector is an incredible place to work, and we need to tell the world."

Special thanks to our panellists

Sanctuary

Sue Ashby, group head of resourcing and reward, Sanctuary

Weightmans

Sian Evans, partner and housing lead, Weightmans

Athena

Nathan Jack, business growth manager, Manchester Athena

TILE HILL

Anthony Lewis, director, Tile Hill

mobysoft
HOUSING INTELLIGENCE

Julie Lorraine, strategic director, Mobyssoft

A photograph of two women, one Black and one white, both smiling and looking at a laptop screen. The Black woman is on the left, wearing a grey top and a brown strap over her shoulder. The white woman is on the right, wearing a light pink shirt and glasses. They are in an office setting with a red desk and a black chair visible. The background is white with blue geometric shapes on the sides.

mobysoft

Mobysoft is a market-leading technology partner, an expert in predictive analytics, and steeped in the world of social housing.

The tech innovator helps social landlords to optimise rent-collection and improve repairs quality and sustainability to the benefit of all involved.

Mobysoft's award-winning data intelligence solutions are currently used by over 170 UK housing organisations.