



**HOUSING  
TODAY**

**THE HOUSING GOOD  
EMPLOYMENT REPORT:  
HOW TO BUILD A SKILLED, INCLUSIVE  
AND SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE**





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# Methodology

The research project undertaken to produce this report explored existing and emerging solutions that housing organisations are using to improve diversity and inclusion within their teams and address current and future skills shortages. It focused on practical actions rather than policy or market challenges, aiming to surface and share effective strategies.

A cross-section of large and medium-sized organisations was approached to ensure variation in scale, workforce size and geographic reach, with each nominating a relevant leader to contribute. Twelve HR and EDI leaders - seven of them from housing associations and five from housebuilders - participated.

Participants first completed an introductory survey to provide organisational context and initial insights, before joining one of three virtual focus groups and an interview held in the final week of January 2025 by Emma Maier, director

at independent research organisation Ask Why.

Discussions were semi-structured, beginning with organisational priorities before focusing on practical examples of inclusion and skills initiatives. The format of the focus groups was conversational, encouraging peer learning and knowledge exchange.

Sessions were transcribed and coded to identify key themes.

This approach was designed to allow for both depth and breadth of insights while capturing real-world, actionable solutions directly from industry professionals.

Participants cannot be assumed to have endorsed the final findings.

**Acknowledgments**

We thank the members of the research panel for their time, involvement and expertise:

■ Tom Arey, director of PfP Thrive, Places

for People

■ Carrie Dunn, head of HR, Taylor Wimpey

■ Andy George, group head of talent management, Barratt Redrow

■ Hannah Gibson, head of organisational effectiveness, Sovereign Network Group

■ Catherine Hawkett, group future skills manager, Berkeley Group

■ Alexandra Hopkins, assistant director - people, Paradigm Housing Group

■ Elaine Johnson, director of people, Great Places Housing Group

■ Catrin Jones, chief people officer, Clarion Housing Group

■ Sam Knight, group HR director, MJ Gleeson

■ Ruth Onions, HR business partner, WHG

■ Jenni Salkeld, diversity and wellbeing business partner, Home Group

■ Gemma Webb, group head of diversity and inclusion, Barratt Redrow



# Executive summary

The housebuilding and social housing sectors face significant challenges in recruitment, skills development and workplace inclusion. With an ageing workforce, persistent skills shortages and the need to improve diversity, organisations are rethinking traditional hiring, training and workplace culture strategies to build a stronger, more inclusive industry.

At the heart of this research is the question of how to build a more inclusive, diverse and sustainable workforce in housebuilding and social housing. The study explores recruitment innovations, the development of existing and new skills, and long-term inclusion strategies being used to widen access to careers, improve retention and create fairer workplaces.

The urgency of this work was brought into sharp relief during the project's second focus group, which coincided with the news that US president Donald Trump had issued executive orders to roll back equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) efforts across the federal government. Participants saw this as a stark reminder of both the fragility of progress and the ease with which inclusion measures can be dismantled. This moment underscored the fundamental challenge: how to level the playing field without alienating majority groups or triggering resistance from those with structural advantages.

The findings of this research show that truly inclusive workplaces do not emerge from diversity initiatives alone. They require sustained cultural change, leadership commitment and practical interventions that go beyond policy statements to reshape how organisations recruit, develop and retain talent.

Across three key areas – innovating in recruitment, building skills and careers, and sustaining inclusive workplaces – this report highlights the strategies that organisations are adopting in order to address workforce shortages, expand opportunity and foster cultures where all employees can thrive.

While progress has been made, the discussions made clear that inclusion is not self-sustaining. Without continued effort, organisations risk stagnation or even regression. The Trump administration's move is a powerful reminder that even well-established EDI efforts can be reversed. The challenge, therefore, is not just embedding inclusive practices but ensuring they are resilient to changing political, economic and social pressures.

This report offers insights and recommendations for organisations seeking to advance inclusion and skills development, in ways that are practical, sustainable and beneficial to both employees and business performance.



The study explores recruitment innovations, the development of existing and new skills, and long-term inclusion strategies being used to widen access to careers, improve retention and create fairer workplaces

## Innovating in recruitment now

Recruitment strategies must evolve to attract a broader, more diverse workforce. Employers are expanding hiring criteria, engaging untapped talent pools and shifting to skills-based selection.

Schools outreach programmes are challenging outdated perceptions of careers in housebuilding, while flexible eligibility requirements – such as removing degree prerequisites and valuing lived experience – are widening access to jobs. Housing providers are pioneering recruitment from social housing communities, while age-friendly employment strategies are helping retain experienced workers.

Innovative selection methods, such as CV-free applications and digital role assessments, are improving fairness and accessibility. Meanwhile, purpose-driven storytelling and social media outreach are making careers more relatable and attractive to younger job seekers.

## Building skills and careers for the future

Sustaining a skilled workforce requires investment in apprenticeships, career pathways and leadership development. Employers are accelerating training through partnerships and in-house initiatives such as Places for People's PFP Thrive, which tailors apprenticeships to industry needs.

Many trade apprentices naturally transition to self-employment. While housebuilders embrace this as a success, ensuring a well-trained subcontractor network, housing associations focus on retaining apprentices through strong employment packages.

Faced with skills shortages, organisations are upskilling existing workers – particularly in green skills – rather than relying solely on external hires. Leadership pipelines are also being strengthened through structured career pathways, internal mobility targets and investment in training programmes designed to support diverse talent into management roles.

## Sustaining inclusive workplaces

Beyond recruitment and training, inclusion must be embedded in workplace culture. Organisations are working to ensure that inclusion benefits everyone, recognising that if the majority see diversity efforts as being for “others” then engagement and buy-in will be limited.

Leadership is critical to driving inclusion, with structured behavioural competencies and training ensuring that managers at all levels understand their role in fostering inclusive workplaces. Practical changes – such as ensuring site facilities accommodate all employees – are also essential.

Inclusion groups, employee storytelling initiatives and lived experience training are helping organisations move beyond policies to create meaningful dialogue and peer support. Data-driven strategies allow companies to measure progress and tailor interventions, while sector-wide collaboration is fostering knowledge-sharing and systemic change.

## Conclusion

The future of the industry depends on its ability to attract, develop and retain a diverse and skilled workforce. By embracing new recruitment strategies, investing in skills development and embedding inclusive workplace cultures, employers are ensuring the sector remains competitive, sustainable and reflective of the communities it serves. Through innovation, collaboration and a commitment to continuous improvement, housebuilders and housing associations are reshaping the industry.



# Chapter 1: Innovating in recruitment now

## **Changing hiring practices, expanding talent pools and rethinking how people enter the sector**

Effective recruitment is essential for improving workforce diversity and addressing current and future skills gaps, particularly in the context of an ageing workforce. Expanding hiring strategies can help build a more inclusive talent pool while ensuring a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers to meet evolving industry demands. In practice, this requires identifying untapped talent pipelines and re-evaluating longstanding approaches to hiring and selection.

For larger, nationally operational organisations, widening recruitment beyond specific sites and enabling remote or regional hub-based working can help access a broader pool of candidates.

Some employers are also adopting an approach known as the Rooney rule, which typically involves committing to interview at least one candidate from an under-represented group in order to promote diversity in hiring. Practices such as including role profiles in job adverts, implementing guaranteed interview schemes for under-represented groups and anonymising shortlisting are increasingly becoming standard. Panel members shared further innovative approaches to enhance workforce diversity and recruitment effectiveness.

## **Beyond the trades – attracting students at all levels**

Housebuilding has long been associated primarily with trade roles, meaning school outreach efforts have traditionally focused on students not planning to attend university – significantly narrowing the talent pipeline. Barratt Redrow's nationwide schools outreach programme seeks to challenge this perception by engaging directly with students, parents and teachers to showcase the full breadth of careers in housebuilding, from planning and design to leadership and project management. The initiative broadens awareness and encourages talent from all backgrounds to consider careers in the sector.

The programme partners with over 1,200 schools and colleges across the UK, combining in-person and virtual engagement. Unlike traditional outreach, it ensures all students are included, whether they are considering apprenticeships, further education or professional careers. Run in partnership with the School Outreach Company and the Home Builders Federation (HBF), each of Barratt Redrow's 29 divisions works closely with four schools, with a particular focus on those with high proportions of pupils eligible for free

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By moving beyond rigid qualification criteria, housebuilders are expanding access to careers, diversifying the workforce and ensuring that skilled, capable candidates are not overlooked

school meals (a measure of deprivation). Barratt Redrow delivers ambassadorial outreach through school visits, career fairs and parent evenings, supported by the School Outreach Company, which provides resources, videos and curriculum materials to help shape understanding of industry opportunities among students, parents and teachers.

Now in its third year, the programme has reached 17,000 students in person and over 400,000 virtually, with ambitions to engage one million. The key aim is reaching out to places, and people, that the sector has not reached before. In doing so, it has also contributed to increasing apprenticeship applications from under-represented groups, which have grown from 5% to 38% at Barratt Redrow, suggesting that busting industry myths can help attract a more diverse future workforce.

## **Becoming an age-friendly employer**

Inclusion strategies must address workers at all stages of their careers, not just early talent. While many organisations focus on attracting apprentices and graduates, there is growing recognition of the value that older workers bring to the workplace. Over the past 12 to 18 months Paradigm Housing Group's assistant director for people, Alexandra Hopkins, has made age inclusivity a priority at Paradigm. Working with Rest Less, an organisation that supports older workers, it has gained Age-friendly Employer accreditation.

A key focus has been helping individuals aged over 50 return to work, particularly those who have taken a career break or want more flexible working options. By actively recruiting older workers into administrative, customer service and part-time roles, Paradigm has opened new entry routes for experienced professionals, while also benefiting from the skills, knowledge and stability they bring.

This approach has also helped existing employees navigate flexible retirement, allowing them to gradually reduce hours, transition into different roles or make reasonable adjustments, rather than moving abruptly from full-time work to full retirement. Normalising these conversations helps employees to feel more confident exploring phased retirement options, making workforce planning more sustainable.

The initiative has also had a positive effect on recruitment, as employees actively encourage friends and contacts who assumed they were too old to apply for roles. As Hopkins noted, organisations often discuss the challenges of an ageing workforce, but in practice older employees remain a valuable and often overlooked talent pool. With an age range spanning 21 to 77, her organisation is proving that inclusion must extend across all generations, not just entry-level talent.

## **Rethinking eligibility requirements**

Employers are increasingly recognising that skills, behaviours and aspirations often matter more than a candidate's academic background. To avoid unnecessarily narrowing the talent pipeline, Barratt Redrow has re-evaluated how it defines eligibility for roles, shifting towards hiring for potential rather than predefined credentials and opening up new career pathways.

Andy George, the group head of talent management at Barratt Redrow, highlighted that his company has removed the requirement for built environment degrees in its graduate programmes, instead considering candidates from a broad range of disciplines – including fashion and art – on the basis that technical skills can be taught on the job. This shift has reshaped perceptions of candidate suitability, encouraging a wider and more diverse applicant pool.

This more flexible approach extends beyond graduates. Barratt Redrow's Armed Forces Programme has become a key talent pipeline for site management roles, despite initial hesitation from construction directors who struggled to map military qualifications onto industry standards. Over time, as the programme gained traction, attitudes shifted – and today ex-service members are highly valued within the company for their





Graduates on Barratt  
Redrow's Aspire programme

leadership, discipline and adaptability.

By rethinking eligibility requirements and moving beyond rigid qualification criteria, housebuilders are expanding access to careers, diversifying the workforce and ensuring that skilled, capable candidates are not overlooked simply because they do not fit traditional hiring norms.

### Recruiting from social housing communities

Among social housing providers, there is growing recognition that lived experience in social housing is a valuable skill - one that enhances service delivery and opens up a largely untapped talent pipeline. In Manchester, the 25-member Greater Manchester Housing Providers group has pledged that by 2034, 20% of its workforce will come from social renting households - a commitment known as the 20% Movement. Elaine Johnson, director of people at Great Places Housing Group, highlighted how this shift reflects an acknowledgment that personal experience of social housing provides unique

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Proactively recruiting from social housing communities could help providers to expand their talent pipeline while creating meaningful career pathways for individuals with first-hand sector experience

insight, empathy and understanding, making it as valuable as traditional technical skills.

By broadening eligibility criteria, housing providers are reaching candidates who may not have previously considered careers in the sector, creating a more diverse and representative workforce. Some providers have trialled targeted recruitment initiatives to engage social housing tenants directly. Ruth Onions, HR business partner at WHG, described an initiative led by her housing association after staff noticed a number of female tenants showing an interest in DIY. The programme introduced participants to basic DIY and trade skills, empowering them to complete home maintenance tasks independently. This enthusiasm led to five apprenticeships being ring-fenced, but for several participants the transition to employment proved challenging. The key lesson was the need for stronger pre-employment support to ensure candidates were fully prepared for the workplace.

Catrin Jones, chief people officer at Clarion Housing Group, reinforced this point, highlighting the role of Clarion Futures, the association's dedicated charity focused on helping social housing tenants become work-ready. Successful initiatives, she noted, start by building foundational skills and confidence before progressing to formal employment opportunities.

While employing tenants is not a quick fix and requires careful planning and investment, removing barriers to employment and proactively recruiting from social housing communities could help housing providers to expand their talent pipeline while creating meaningful career pathways for individuals with first-hand experience of the sector.

### Digital role assessments replace CVs

Traditional CV-based recruitment can disadvantage young job seekers, particularly apprentices who may have limited work experience to showcase. Recognising this challenge, Catherine Hawtett, group future skills manager at Berkeley Group, introduced a CV-free approach for apprentice recruitment, later expanding it to graduate roles. Instead of relying on CVs, candidates now complete interactive digital role assessments via the Thrive Map platform, which provides a realistic preview of a day in the life of a Berkeley trainee.

The assessment is fully bespoke, embedding role-specific tasks, images and scenarios to engage candidates while evaluating their skills and suitability. Tasks include spotting differences in floor plans to assess attention to detail and listening to a voicemail from a manager to determine the next course of action. Unlike generic numerical or verbal reasoning tests, this approach allows candidates to learn about the role and the company while being assessed. Feedback from the participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with many appreciating





Places for People's Thrive Academy - whose main site is in Derby, with additional hubs all round the UK - provides practical as well as classroom-based learning for apprentices and others

the insight into the role before progressing further in the application process. Thrive Map also supports self-selection, allowing applicants to withdraw their application mid-assessment if they feel that the role is not the right fit. While long-term retention data is still being gathered, early indications suggest that higher apprenticeships have seen the greatest benefit from this approach.

To further reduce bias and improve fairness, Berkeley has also implemented anonymised scoring and structured interviews with set questions and evaluation criteria. This has helped eliminate informal referrals, ensuring that all applicants progress based solely on merit. The approach appears to be increasing diversity, particularly in graduate recruitment, with more female candidates progressing and a noticeable shift in demographic representation.

By removing reliance on CVs, incorporating immersive digital assessments and anonymising selection processes, Berkeley is widening access to opportunities, ensuring that recruitment is fair, skills-based and better aligned with role requirements.

### Bringing roles to life for job seekers

Effective recruitment is not just about listing job roles - it is about telling compelling stories that connect with job seekers on an emotional level. Employers are increasingly using authentic narratives, personal testimonials and social media storytelling to showcase careers in a way that resonates with young people and prospective hires.

To reach younger audiences, employers must meet them where they are - on digital platforms. Catherine Hawkett of Berkeley Group recognised that traditional job descriptions fail to engage Gen Z candidates, who are far more likely to consume content through social media than through job boards. In response, Berkeley launched a TikTok recruitment campaign, run by apprenticeship influencer Holly Hobbs, featuring bite-sized videos explaining what roles involve, the expected pay and benefits, and

likely career progression. The campaign was a success, with 10% of applications coming directly from TikTok engagement.

Storytelling is also playing a key role in embedding organisational values and attracting talent. Catrin Jones highlighted how Clarion Housing Group has incorporated employee narratives into its recruitment and culture-building efforts. Through roadshows and video testimonials, employees share their personal experiences - why they love their jobs, how they support each other and the impact they make.

"It's so much more compelling to hear it from the people doing the job than for us to simply say, 'It's a great job.' Hearing their stories - how they feel like family, how they make a difference - has really helped in our recruitment campaigns," she explained.

Beyond making roles more attractive, honest storytelling helps manage expectations. In a competitive job market, purpose-driven storytelling is also becoming essential - especially when recruiting for roles that compete with high-paying private sector jobs. Clarion, having adopted Microsoft's Evergreen platform, found itself competing for sought-after developers who could command top salaries elsewhere. "We've had to try to really sell ourselves as not just that you come and do some development work, but this is our purpose," explained Catrin Jones. "This is how we impact people's lives on a daily basis. And you can be part of really making that a success. I think what we're seeing is the new generation is looking for meaning and purpose in their jobs, which is really helping us."

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## Chapter 2: Building skills and careers for the future

### **Upskilling, apprenticeships and creating clear progression pathways**

Ensuring a skilled, future-ready workforce requires investment in training, apprenticeships and clear career progression pathways. As industries evolve, employers must focus on upskilling existing staff, attracting new talent through apprenticeships, and creating structured career routes that enable employees to develop and advance. By prioritising these efforts, organisations can build a resilient workforce, improve retention and future-proof their industries.

### **Delivering faster, more bespoke training**

A lack of suitable, flexible training provision is making it difficult to equip workers with the skills that they need - both now and in the future. In response, employers are finding innovative ways to accelerate apprenticeships, partner with training providers and create their own in-house solutions.

Andy George highlighted how apprenticeship scheme reforms enabled Barratt Redrow to deliver faster apprenticeships, with bricklaying and carpentry programmes now delivered in 14 months through block weeks rather than day release. However, smaller employers struggle to find education partners - as noted by Hannah Gibson, head of organisational effectiveness at Sovereign Network Group, and Sam Knight, group HR director at MJ Gleeson - particularly in regions where apprentices must travel long distances to access training. Andy George agreed that in some locations, certain training was not viable for providers.

To overcome these challenges, Tom Arey, director of PfP Thrive at Places for People, described launching PfP Thrive, the organisation's own training provider offering apprenticeships, short courses and leadership training for the whole sector. The initiative tackles skills shortages by ensuring a future workforce, helps future-proof qualifications to keep pace with industry changes and improves training quality by making courses more housing-specific. This includes integrating customer service skills and training apprentices to spot issues such as damp and mould - elements often missing from traditional construction-heavy curriculums.

PfP Thrive also embeds diversity-focused recruitment. Before advertising roles publicly, apprentice positions are first offered to eight organisations supporting under-represented groups, including youth employment initiatives and disability inclusion programmes. If these

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organisations cannot fill the roles, they are then advertised more widely.

Additionally, PfP Thrive is trialling social value contracts, requiring contractors to route apprenticeships through its programme or, where this is not feasible, sponsor social housing tenants through a nine-week employability and plumbing training scheme. This approach creates direct pathways into employment while supporting industry-wide efforts to fill critical skills gaps.

By taking a more tailored and proactive approach to training and recruitment, organisations are ensuring the right skills are developed while expanding opportunities for diverse and under-represented talent.

### **Retain talent or grow the supply chain?**

Many trade apprentices transition to self-employment as they gain experience - a common path in sectors like construction, where joiners, electricians and other tradespeople often move away from direct employment. While housing associations focus on retaining apprentices as







long-term employees, housebuilders see apprentices joining the supply chain as a success, ensuring a steady stream of skilled workers trained to their standards.

MJ Gleeson's Sam Knight noted that around 50% of apprentices progress into further education or promotions, while many others enter the wider subcontractor network. Barratt Redrow's Andy George highlighted that 80% of apprentices stay within the subcontractor network, with 70% continuing to work on housebuilders' sites. This movement is expected and actively supported through training on self-employment and business management, helping apprentices navigate the realities of running their own trades business.

Beyond technical skills, apprentices carry



While housing associations cannot always compete on pay, they focus on enhancing employment terms to appeal to apprentices looking for stability and long-term benefits

forward company culture and values into the supply chain. Barratt Redrow's Gemma Webb explained that former apprentices who become subcontractors already understand expectations around professionalism, customer service and teamwork, creating a virtuous circle where companies benefit from having well-trained, culturally aligned subcontractors.

In contrast, housing associations prioritise long-term retention to sustain a directly employed workforce. Places for People's Tom Arey and Clarion's Catrin Jones stressed the importance of offering career security, pensions and flexible working to make direct employment more attractive. While housing associations cannot always compete on pay, they focus on enhancing employment terms and conditions





to appeal to apprentices looking for stability and long-term benefits.

For some organisations, local connections naturally drive retention. WHG's Ruth Onions noted her association has little difficulty keeping apprentices, as many have family ties within the company and expect to stay long term. However, this stability can also limit diversity of thought and skills development, requiring active efforts to broaden recruitment and training approaches.

### Grow your own talent – upskilling instead of hiring

Faced with skills shortages and the challenge of improving diversity at mid and senior levels, many organisations are prioritising internal development over external hiring. By investing in structured career pathways and leadership development, employers can retain talent, build critical skills and create clear progression routes – ensuring that the diversity seen in frontline roles is carried through to senior levels.

Jenni Salkeld, diversity and wellbeing business partner at Home Group, highlighted the use of career conversations to enable employees to explore lateral and upward moves within the organisation. Similarly, Great Places Housing Group's Elaine Johnson described how contact centres serve as a strong internal talent pipeline, as employees gain broad business knowledge that prepares them for advancement into other roles. Panel members noted that such lateral movement can help break down organisational barriers and promote understanding.

Some organisations have taken this further by introducing formal targets. Places for People's Tom Arey described Flight Path, a structured framework with eight different leadership programmes, designed to push employees through different levels of management. By committing to 80% internal mobility for management roles, the organisation aims to improve diversity at senior levels by ensuring that the diverse frontline workforce has opportunities to progress. Over the past two years, internal management mobility has increased from 42% to 60%, with a target of 80% by 2028. Tracking how diversity changes at different levels will provide insight into whether additional interventions are needed to remove barriers to progression.

Beyond leadership pathways, some employers are mapping apprenticeship routes to create clear progression pathways. Barratt Redrow's Andy George described how apprenticeships have been connected from level 2 through to level 7, ensuring that those who enter the organisation at entry level can see a long-term career path ahead. This structure enables employees to move across disciplines, allowing, for example, a bricklayer labourer to progress into a commercial role and eventually become a commercial manager.

Meanwhile, with retrofit expertise in high demand but short supply, some organisations



Faced with skills shortages and the challenge of improving diversity at mid and senior levels, many organisations are prioritising internal development over external hiring

have struggled to find suitably skilled staff. However, Tom Arey highlighted a more sustainable approach – reskilling existing tradespeople instead of creating a separate workforce. By integrating retrofit training into existing roles, organisations can fill skills gaps more efficiently while providing career development opportunities for their workforce.

### Reverse mentorship: learning from employees

Reverse mentoring is emerging as a powerful tool for fostering leadership learning, inclusion and cultural awareness within organisations. By pairing senior leaders with employees from diverse backgrounds, these programmes help bridge knowledge gaps and create more informed, inclusive leadership teams.

Tom Arey described how Places for People implemented Mentor Exchange, a platform that functions like a matching system. Executives identify areas where they want to expand their understanding – whether on ethnicity, socioeconomic background or other lived experiences – and are connected with employees who can offer first-hand perspectives.

Carrie Dunn, the head of HR at Taylor Wimpey, highlighted the importance of clearly communicating the benefits. An earlier scheme failed to gain traction, with executives unclear of the value. To address this, the programme was integrated into the organisation's talent management strategy to provide a structured opportunity for senior leaders to engage directly

with employees identified as rising stars. This gave the programme a clearer purpose, making it more attractive to executives and elevating its status internally. Demand increased significantly, leading to two cohorts being run in a single year.

The programme also delivered unexpected outcomes, including an increase in ethnic-minority job applicants, who had heard about the initiative and viewed it as a sign of genuine organisational commitment to diversity. One challenge arose when some junior employees from ethnic-minority backgrounds reported having largely positive workplace experiences, making it difficult to engage in discussions about systemic challenges. To address this, the programme introduced broader discussions on societal issues, ensuring meaningful conversations while avoiding overly personal or individualised narratives.

### Supporting individuals from under-represented groups

In organisations where women and ethnic minority employees are under-represented, targeted support programmes can help build confidence, strengthen networks and improve retention. These initiatives are not designed purely for career progression but rather to help individuals navigate workplace cultures where they may be in the minority, creating a greater sense of belonging and professional support.

Gemma Webb described how Barratt Redrow runs self-nominated support programmes for women and for ethnic-minority employees. These focus on helping participants build networks, navigate workplace culture and develop confidence. Given the matrixed structure of the organisation, some employees may find themselves as the only representative of their background in a team, office or site, making these networks particularly valuable. While not designed as promotion pathways, they have led to 50% higher retention rates and have helped uncover hidden skills within the workforce, empowering participants to take greater control of their careers.

Meanwhile, at Great Places, the Sharon Hayes empowerment programme (SHe), created in memory of a former director of technical services who was passionate about supporting women in tech, focuses on women in male-dominated fields, such as construction, tech and asset management. It seeks to provide skills and support needed to progress into leadership roles. Participants complete a level 2 leadership qualification and receive mentorship from senior female leaders over a 12-week programme, which culminates in a graduation ceremony. Beyond technical skills, the programme has been particularly impactful in boosting self-esteem, confidence and professional awareness, helping women to recognise and leverage their existing strengths.



## Chapter 3: Sustaining inclusive workplaces

### **Culture change, leadership buy-in and long-term inclusion strategies**

Creating an inclusive workplace is not a one-time initiative but an ongoing commitment that requires cultural change, leadership buy-in and long-term strategies to embed inclusion at every level. While recruitment and development programmes can bring diverse talent into an organisation, true inclusion is sustained by shifting workplace culture, ensuring leadership accountability and embedding inclusive practices into everyday decision-making. As Barratt Redrow's Gemma Webb expressed: "There is no point having diversity if you don't have an inclusive culture, because you're going to end up with a revolving door - a fantastic talent that you won't keep."

### **Developing behavioural competencies**

Strong leadership is essential to sustaining an inclusive, high-performing workplace, yet many organisations have lacked clear expectations for what good leadership looks like. To address this, organisations are now defining leadership behaviours, embedding them into competency frameworks and rolling out structured training to ensure that managers at all levels understand their role in shaping workplace culture.

Catrin Jones described how Clarion is building a new set of leadership competencies and behaviour metrics as part of its change programme. These will ensure that leaders are not only effective in driving performance but also act as mentors, coaches and inclusive managers. By assessing leadership behaviours during appointments, the organisation aims to reskill existing leaders where possible, rather than displacing them, while ensuring that those in management roles are equipped to motivate people, foster inclusion and achieve results.

Tom Arey outlined a comprehensive leadership training initiative at Places for People, which has focused on re-educating every manager, at every level, over the past few years. This effort has been structured around four core leadership pillars, applicable across all levels of management - from executives to frontline supervisors. One key pillar, called "creating an inclusive workforce", includes mandatory learning modules that define the leadership behaviours required to build an inclusive, high-performing culture.

While implementing structured leadership training at scale is neither cheap nor easy, organisations are recognising that without strong leadership, wider culture change efforts will fail. By ensuring that leaders are trained, evaluated and held accountable for inclusive

and effective management, these initiatives set clear expectations for leadership behaviour, supporting long-term organisational success.

### **Is everyone welcome on site?**

A truly inclusive workplace requires more than just policies - it means ensuring that the physical environment is set up for everyone to feel comfortable, safe and valued. This necessitates addressing basic but essential factors such as facilities, uniforms and workplace design, to ensure that all employees have what they need to do their jobs effectively.

Catrin Jones highlighted how organisations often overlook fundamental needs when striving for inclusion. For example, many sites have lacked accessible female toilets or appropriate uniforms for women, making it harder for female employees to feel fully integrated into the workforce. Without addressing these practical barriers, inclusion efforts risk feeling superficial or performative.

Other workplace adjustments can make a significant difference in supporting a diverse workforce. Simple provisions like faith and wellbeing rooms - which can be used for prayer, taking medication or managing health conditions - help create an environment where employees feel respected and accommodated.

### **An inclusive approach to inclusion**

It is important to communicate that inclusion is for all. If the majority see inclusion as something for "them" rather than "us", it can lead to disengagement, resistance or fear of losing status. True inclusion ensures that everyone understands their role in creating a more inclusive workplace.

To address this, Gemma Webb highlighted efforts to build allyship and psychological safety, helping employees feel comfortable discussing diversity. By framing inclusion as a shared goal - not just for under-represented groups - Barratt Redrow encourages open dialogue and greater engagement. This includes exploring intersectionality, the idea that each individual has a number of different identities simultaneously, and encouraging a focus on unique individuals and what they share.

"Those in the majority tend not to wander around thinking about what makes them different," explained Webb. "So actually you have to open it up and say this is genuinely something that applies to everybody. We want everybody to be valued for all of the things that make them unique; and using some of those examples like diversity of thought, background experience, family situation allows people to start connecting to this in a way that makes them willing to come and have conversations and learn and experience. We do a lot of work around allyship: come and understand the stuff that you may not have experience of, because nobody's expected to know everything. Having that interaction, understanding and conversation is how we will create a truly inclusive place."

Elaine Johnson described how Great Places identified cultural intelligence gaps among line managers, which were creating unintentional barriers. In response, it launched training initiatives to help managers understand different perspectives, adapt their leadership styles and recognise workplace challenges they might not have experienced first-hand. Paradigm's Alexandra Hopkins focused on encouraging inclusive language, ensuring that employees feel confident discussing diversity in a way that is authentic and constructive. Well-meaning individuals may say things like, "I treat everyone the same," but as Johnson pointed out, true inclusion means acknowledging and addressing differences to create a level playing field, rather than ignoring them.

"One of the things I think is really great about Home Group is we've been really leaning into actually how we all represent diversity," explained Jenny Salkeld. "Everyone's got their own story, and it's how we come together, understand each other's separate stories and build an even better one together."

### **Harnessing lived experience**

A truly inclusive workplace listens as much as it speaks. Encouraging employees to share their lived experiences helps build understanding, create stronger connections and foster an open,

“ True inclusion is sustained by shifting workplace culture, ensuring leadership accountability and embedding inclusive practices into everyday decision-making





supportive culture. Jenni Salkeld described the Life programme at Home Group, where employees and customers share personal experiences - such as living with a disability or managing a hidden condition - through live discussions and recorded videos. This growing “human library” allows colleagues to learn directly from real stories, making inclusion more tangible than traditional training.

Alexandra Hopkins highlighted how employee storytelling organically builds peer support. A blog by a contact centre worker about being diagnosed with lupus unexpectedly sparked connections and organic support networks, proving that psychological safety enables real inclusion. While formal networks may be a next step, genuine conversations are already happening naturally.

Elaine Johnson shared how members of the Greater Manchester Housing Providers partnership are paying care-experienced young people to develop and deliver staff training on the challenges faced by care-leavers, ensuring that housing services are more responsive and supportive.

By embracing lived experience, organisations are making inclusion real and relevant, ensuring it is not just a policy, but part of everyday workplace culture.

“ Many sites have lacked accessible female toilets or appropriate uniforms for women... Without addressing these practical barriers, inclusion efforts risk feeling superficial or performative

### Safe spaces and employee-led support

Inclusion groups provide structured spaces for employees to share experiences, offer peer support and shape organisational change. However, organisations are increasingly shifting towards more flexible, intersectional approaches, ensuring that groups support employees without becoming exclusive or fragmented.

Sam Knight explained how MJ Gleeson is establishing inclusion groups, allowing employees to determine the areas of focus and priority. Rather than setting up numerous identity-based groups - which could be resource-intensive and risk excluding some voices - they are taking a broader, employee-led approach, allowing the group to evolve organically.

Jenni Salkeld described how colleague diversity networks act as both a voice for employees and a source of peer support. One example is Home Group’s multicultural network, which functions as a safe, closed group for employees with lived experience of racial or cultural bias, alongside a separate allies group that collaborates with them. This structure allows employees to share experiences without fear, while also engaging allies in broader inclusion efforts.

Beyond peer support, these networks also play a practical role in workplace issues. Employees facing difficult conversations or formal processes



A module being run at Barratt Redrow's female support programme, Catalyst



can seek guidance from trained peers who understand company policies on performance management, grievances and bias reporting.

By equipping employees with knowledge and support, these networks help colleagues navigate challenges effectively, ensuring that concerns about bias are addressed appropriately while also clarifying when formal escalation is necessary.

### Using data to track inclusion and diversity

Data is essential for moving beyond broad commitments to tangible action, allowing organisations to track progress, identify gaps and tailor interventions where they are most needed. Instead of chasing frameworks, organisations are focusing on what their own data reveals about equity and inclusion needs.

Gemma Webb and Sam Knight reinforced the importance of granular workforce data. Barratt Redrow reports quarterly on gender, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ representation, age and social mobility. This allows it to monitor change at every level and division, ensuring that inclusion efforts are genuinely shifting the dial rather than just ticking boxes. At MJ Gleeson, real-time data analysis enables targeted interventions. Sam Knight explained how data allows the company to pinpoint gaps at specific job levels. If representation drops above senior management, it can tailor recruitment efforts, such as launching graduate programmes targeting more diverse talent pools.

Measuring social mobility has also become a focus. After noticing many senior leaders had risen from entry-level roles, Gemma Webb's team at Barratt Redrow included key social mobility indicators in their workforce survey. The findings confirmed that their organisation had a strong record of career progression regardless of background - contrasting with FTSE 100 firms overall, where on average only 34% of CEOs attended state schools compared with 93% of the general population. This reinforced the importance of actively tracking socioeconomic diversity alongside other inclusion metrics.

Jenni Salkeld emphasised that data is more than just numbers - it is also the stories employees share. The key is to step back and ask where equity and inclusion are needed most, then focus resources on those areas rather than blindly chasing external benchmarks.

### Sector-wide collaboration

While industries often compete for talent, collaboration within housebuilding and social housing is proving increasingly important in tackling shared challenges. Rather than working in isolation, organisations are coming together to exchange best practices, improve sector branding and address barriers to career progression.

Gemma Webb highlighted how housebuilders, through the Home Builders Federation (HBF), are actively sharing solutions - from recruitment

*The Spotlight programme supports Barratt Redrow colleagues from ethnic-minority backgrounds in navigating the organisation successfully*



“

The key is to step back and ask where equity and inclusion are needed most, then focus resources on those areas rather than blindly chasing external benchmarks

strategies to inclusion initiatives - to drive industry-wide progress. Unlike other sectors where competition dominates, the focus here is on collective problem-solving to benefit the entire workforce.

Andy George stressed the importance of how the sector presents itself, not just as individual companies but as an industry with attractive career prospects. A more collaborative approach to branding and outreach could help change perceptions and attract more diverse talent.

In social housing, collaboration is also driving systemic change. Elaine Johnson described how Greater Manchester Housing Providers, a coalition of 25 housing associations, has partnered with the University of Manchester to research barriers to career progression for ethnically diverse employees. Early findings highlight a stark lack of representation at senior levels. Many employees also lack professional role models, both internally and in their personal lives.

By working together, sharing data and tackling sector-wide barriers, housebuilders and housing associations are ensuring that inclusion efforts extend beyond individual organisations, creating long-term structural change across the industry.





## Recommendations

# HOUSING TODAY

### 1. Plan for inclusion end-to-end - from hiring to workplace culture

Diversity in recruitment alone is not enough. Organisations must ensure that once diverse talent has been brought in, they are set up to succeed. This means tackling practical barriers - such as workplace facilities, flexible working and leadership behaviours - so that inclusion is embedded into the culture, not just the hiring process.

### 2. Inclusion is for everyone - avoiding us-versus-them narratives

Inclusion must engage the entire workforce, not just under-represented groups. If majority groups see inclusion as something happening to them rather than with them, it risks resistance

and disengagement. Framing inclusion as a collective effort - focused on diversity of thought, experience and opportunity - helps to create genuine buy-in and avoids the perception of exclusion or competition.

### 3. Make inclusion tangible by addressing workplace realities

Inclusion is about more than workplace culture - it is about whether employees feel welcome and equipped to succeed. This includes practical adjustments such as providing accessible toilets and appropriate uniforms, ensuring flexible working options and fostering environments where employees can openly discuss their needs and experiences.

### 4. Focus on untapped talent pools and alternative entry routes

To address skills shortages and improve workforce diversity, organisations should rethink eligibility criteria and hiring processes. Expanding outreach to schools, recruiting from social housing communities, engaging older

workers and removing unnecessary degree requirements can bring in new talent and reduce hiring barriers.

### 5. Use data to drive change, not just to report progress

Collecting and analysing workforce data should go beyond compliance to actively inform strategy. Tracking representation at different career levels, measuring retention rates and gathering qualitative insights from employees will help identify where interventions are needed and which initiatives are having real impact.

### 6. Strengthen sector-wide collaboration for lasting impact

No organisation operates in isolation. By working together - whether through sharing best practices, aligning recruitment branding or jointly tackling industry-wide barriers - housebuilders and housing providers can collectively drive progress, making inclusion more sustainable and resilient to political and economic shifts.





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