

Susan Coulson:

Director of People



Big changes are ahead in social housing following the introduction of the 2016 Housing and Planning Act. We caught up with Home Group's People Director Susan Coulson to discuss the impact of new policies and how the organisation has subsequently redesigned its delivery model to ensure customers would not be negatively impacted. Susan also discusses Home Group's employee engagement and talent acquisition strategies and shares her thoughts on what she thinks the sector will look like in 2020.



ABOUT SUSAN COULSON

With a career spent initially in operational roles in banking, fixed and mobile telecommunications Susan moved to HRD around 17 years ago and until 2008 worked in the private sector. In 2008 Susan joined Home Group and has led the HRD function to a position of credibility and high performance supported by a strong and energetic team who work closely with the business. A fantastic foundation has been laid in HRD with self-service strategy and systems implemented, new reward approach, award winning learning and development, an accredited approach to equality and diversity, colleague engagement as a priority and an exciting culture programme.

WHAT ARE THE 'PAY TO STAY?' AND 'RIGHT-TO-BUY' POLICIES?

Pay to stay (formally known as 'HIST' – High Income Social Tenants) for social housing tenants is a new policy being introduced as part of the Housing and Planning Act. In effect, this states that households who earn over a certain level (£31,000 outside London and £40,000 in London) should pay more rent than those on lower income levels. Local authorities will be required to implement this policy, whereas for housing associations, it is optional. Right to Buy is being introduced to housing association properties as part of the Housing and Planning Act. This will entitle tenants who meet certain criteria to buy their home at a discount. Local authority tenants, as well as secure tenants whose properties have been transferred to housing associations from councils, have had the Right to Buy since the early 1980s. Like HIST, for housing associations, it is a voluntary approach.





HOW WILL THESE CHANGES IMPACT HOME GROUP?

We support the principle that those who earn more should pay more, recognising that it could be a route towards either moving into a private sector market rent property or ownership, thus freeing up an affordable rent property for those in greater need. With regards to Right to Buy, most of the housing association sector is implementing it, and we've already had interest from several customers. Home Group will make Right to Buy available to as many customers as possible who fit the criteria as set by Government. We feel comfortable embracing the policy, as we polled our customers a year ago, and found that 87% would like to buy their own home. We want to encourage them to realise their aspirations. Right to Buy should be cost neutral as Government have committed to compensating housing associations for the discount, although the details of this have yet to be confirmed.

HOW HAS HOME GROUP SUCCEEDED IN MAINTAINING HIGH LEVELS OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WHILE ADJUSTING TO THESE DEVELOPMENTS?

In preparation for the changes ahead, there was a 'root and branch' review during which our customers were consulted and had a say on how they wanted services delivered. This informed the development of our recent Customer Service Organisational Design Project (CSOD) where we realigned the organisational model - changing the skills mix and supporting a 'digital first' approach through the contact centre - to ensure that the customer experience would not be negatively impacted. The result is that our services are enhanced through longer opening hours, a robust repairs and maintenance service and a more seamless approach to service delivery through increased use of technology. Repairs have proven to be the single most influential element in customer

service delivery and we have made improvements in repairs reporting, appointment and job scheduling, customer contact and communications, contract management and standardisation of property components such as boilers.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES?

At Home Group, any actions taken following the impact of internal or external forces are done so with the involvement of colleagues. We have employee forums which include Union and non-Union representation, as well as various other communication channels used to consult and involve our people. This ensures that they all play a part in shaping how Home Group responds. Regarding the government changes, the colleague consultations we undertook highlighted a number of things Home Group should stop doing, do less of or keep the same. The key thing here is that there was overwhelming support from employees and HR given to the maintenance of learning and development (L&D) budgets. Consequently, knowledge management and customer service training have been areas of significant investment, and colleagues continue to report improvements in the availability of information and their confidence in dealing with all types of enquiries as a result.

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HOW HAVE THE VALUES OF HOME GROUP HELPED TO FACILITATE A CHANGE MIND SET AND BEHAVIOURS ACROSS THE ORGANISATION?

Home Group began a major cultural program in 2012 called 'Living Our Values.' The impact of this process is that our values - Caring, Accountable, Energised, Commercial - are embedded across the organisation. They act as a foundation, a common language everyone understands, and provide Home Group with a strong platform from which to move forward with the government changes. For example, Home Group is always looking to provide value for money and a key part of the Customer Service Organisational Design programme was to reduce costs and increase efficiency. This did mean a reduction in headcount impacting frontline roles. 'Commercial' was used to explain this, linked with the external challenges facing our (and other) organisations. Engaging with and involving employees in change consultations is linked to 'Caring' and making sure everyone understood the change and their role in supporting change was aligned with 'Accountability.' Because these values are reinforced at Home Group our people know, very quickly, what we're trying to achieve and why. There is also a strong social purpose and a strong sense of ownership about how actions can impact customers and a pride in making sure services aren't impacted.

WHAT ROLE HAS TECHNOLOGY PLAYED IN THE CHANGE PROCESS?

There has been a major focus on technology at Home Group with the aim of giving our people better tools to do their jobs and provide a better service to customers. 'Digital First' is one of our strategic principles and we're also implementing Oracle (enterprise resource planning software). So far, back office improvements

have been completed across HR, L&D and Payroll. In the Autumn, Finance and Procurement will also be upgraded. We're basically enhancing our channels, how we work with customers and how we operate as an organisation offering a great service, customer satisfaction and value for money.

WHAT WERE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF YOUR TALENT ATTRACTION STRATEGY FOLLOWING A RECENT RECRUITMENT FREEZE?

At the core of our strategy was making Home Group an attractive employer to people from a variety of different industries. We developed tailored advertising solutions and created a planned, focused and targeted approach, building on our values to establish Home Group as an employer of choice and great place to work. This has a positive impact on the CSOD project, where we had a fantastic response for vacancies within our contact centre. Home Group has a great brand and reputation and people want to be part of that.

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WHAT ABOUT TALENT MANAGEMENT? WHAT INITIATIVES DID YOU INTRODUCE TO HELP EMPLOYEES' STEP-UP AND TRY NEW SKILLS TO SUPPORT THE BUSINESS?

This happened at various levels. Part of the process was, again, reinforcing our culture. We had value ambassadors who acted as change agents to help facilitate the culture programme. Another aspect was reviewing our L&D propositions and developing 'Learning Pathways' designed to assist people to get to the 'next level' in their area. Effective communication was important as well as the role of managers stepping up and leading and supporting change. Although these are HR initiatives, everyone is accountable for ensuring success. All new ways of working are designed for the business by the business. Our refusal to not cut investment in people development has certainly paid off.

WHAT LEARNINGS HAVE YOU TAKEN FROM THIS PERIOD OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE?

Change is becoming more complex and multifaceted, so we've had to evolve how we manage the process recognising the mobilisation, transition and transformation phases of change require different approaches. Our framework has become more mature and has included, for example, creating tool kits for operational, project and programme managers. This all helped win 'hearts and minds' and make the process a success.

DO YOU ANTICIPATE THE GOVERNMENT WILL CHANGE ITS APPROACH AND GIVE WELL-RUN HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS GREATER FLEXIBILITY TO MEET HOUSE BUILDING TARGETS?

We hope that the sector will prove it is embracing the new home ownership agenda and that it has the capacity and desire to deliver on housing supply targets. A greater deal of flexibility on tenure type being pushed through government funding programmes and issues around local planning requirements would be welcome. However, we generally feel positive about our capacity to deliver new properties, and are developing exciting new products to fill gaps in the market, e.g. our own '[flexi rent](#)' product. There are also many opportunities emerging through, for example, the devolution

agenda, where freedoms and flexibilities on a variety of areas including housing are being sought from Government.

HOW MUCH COLLABORATION TAKES PLACES IN THE SECTOR?

We are involved in a lot of networks, e.g. Northern Housing Consortium, NHF. Our CEO Mark Henderson chairs Homes for the North and co-chairs a government efficiency network focused on developing new ways of benchmarking efficiency in the sector. Most business departments are involved in networking arrangements and practice sharing groups either within or outside the sector.

DOES HOME GROUP HAVE A POST-BREXIT PLAN?

Like everyone else, we aren't sure what is going to happen once Article 50 is triggered, but we're doing our best to monitor what's happening and anticipate how it would impact upon us. So far, despite the uncertain environment we're operating in, we feel confident about delivering on our current development plans.

WHAT OTHER CHALLENGES LIE AHEAD FOR HOME GROUP?

We await the regulations for the Housing and Planning Act which will provide us with more details of what changes we need to make in some areas. I think this could present both opportunities and challenges to be managed. In addition, we wait to see what the new Government's Industrial Strategy will mean for housing and construction as a sector. Home Group is also a big player in the social care market, and there are challenges ahead in relation to changes to the way that supported housing is being funded (to reduce the Housing Benefit bill). We have worked closely with Government to manage the potential impact of these changes and feel that we have influenced this significantly, but the sector must find a way to respond effectively to remain viable. The fact is that we have an ageing population, and public spend is declining. This challenge for all of us is going to get tougher over time.

WHAT DOES THE SOCIAL HOUSING SECTOR LOOK LIKE IN 2020?

I like to be positive, and looking on the bright side, I'll characterise it as: a bigger supply of housing of a variety of tenures (realistically this will mainly be related to ownership); housing associations will be increasingly innovative in the way they communicate with customers and deliver services, through utilising new technology; and more people will be able to find the sort of home that they want to live in. It's difficult to anticipate, and it's likely that there will be a continued trend towards mergers and acquisitions, so the shape and the size of the housing sector will change. I view this as a good thing – change will refresh and renew organisations to make them more commercial and customer focused. We also believe Home Group and the sector in general will continue to work with brilliant people who want to make a difference.