

HR director of the year

Winner

Fiona Deal,

executive director of people and culture, Network Homes

When Deal arrived at Network Homes in 2015, the housing association had just emerged from unsuccessful merger negotiations. It was in the middle of fundamental changes to its organisational structure, with the aim of collapsing a complex federal group of companies into a single operating organisation. This was inevitably a tough and painful process for staff. Motivation and morale needed considerable improvement and operational performance was average.

Luckily for the association, Deal already had considerable experience of turning around the fortunes of such entities at times of crisis. Her previous position was at AmicusHorizon (now Optivo), which went from a failing organisation in regulatory supervision in 2008, to the best performer among peer housing associations in London and the Southeast in 2012.

"It's amazing to see that Fiona still has the remarkable passion and energy to do it all again at Network," said one former colleague, voting for Deal to win. "She provided structure and inspiration to enable every member of staff across the organisation to be their very best. And, by the way, she is the most approachable, friendly and compassionate person you could imagine."

Deal was, then, the ideal person to lead a radical restructure at Network Homes. Changes made include innovative leadership training and talent management programmes ROCKSTAR and HARTbeat; behaviour-, values- and practical-based ACE sessions; customer service mindset and language training; and a Giving Something Back CSR initiative.

Deal has encouraged colleagues to have difficult and courageous conversations and pushed them out of their comfort zones, reports chief executive Helen Evans. "I've personally held a tarantula spider, dressed up at Christmas, taken on volunteering challenges and worked to be more visible



and available – all in the name of role-modelling our culture and leading from the front," she commented in her submission for Deal to win this award.

She added: "Fiona and I are 'chalk and cheese', but I've personally valued her determination, passion and constructive challenge. Network Homes would not have achieved such a successful transformation without her abundant skills and drive, and I'm very grateful for everything she's achieved to make us a great organisation."

Comments made by the many others who voted for Deal strongly back this up. "Fiona has made a significant change for the better at Network Homes, she has helped to bring the company into the 21st century and it's now a company that I am proud to be a part of," commented one employee.

"Fiona has led a step-change in the approach to HR management in the organisation, having achieved a *Sunday Times* top 100 place for the organisation as well as a two-star rating in the Best Companies survey," commented the organisation's executive director of finance. "She challenges the notion that HR is an obstacle to overcome."

A significant number of votes were made by former colleagues. "I worked with Fiona

many years ago and it was a pleasure to be part of her team. She is an amazing leader and has so much energy in making things happen in the people and culture space of organisations," commented one.

"A wonderful role model and someone to learn from. Fiona has a wonderful way of getting to know her team members too and understanding how to get the best from them and enabling them to get the best for their careers too."

Deal is certainly, then, someone who leaves a lasting impression. We can't wait to see what she achieves next.

Shortlisted

Jon Dawson, Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park London & One Hyde Park Residences

Alastair Gill, people partner, giffgaff

Kim Healey, people director, Everton Football Club

Valerie Hughes-D'Aeth, chief HR officer, BBC

Simon Linares, HR director, Direct Line Group

Pam Parkes, director of organisational development and people, Essex County Council

Sue Shutter, pro-vice-chancellor and HR director, Regent's University London

Kerry Smith, director of people and organisational development, British Heart Foundation

Jane Storm, chief people officer, Connect Group