

HR Excellence *Gold* award

Winner

Network Homes

A lot has changed at Network Homes over the past four years.

Back in 2015, the charitable housing association was facing a whole host of challenges. It had just emerged from a failed merger and was in the midst of difficult changes to its organisational structure.

Understandably, this had created a disengaged workforce (with 'dire' employee survey results), a demotivated HR function and, more worryingly, this was reflected in customer satisfaction scores.

Today the organisation is almost unrecognisable, with the metrics to back it up. Employee engagement, customer satisfaction, staff sickness, turnover, productivity... all have been transformed, and the organisation now sits on *The Sunday Times*' 100 Best Companies to Work For list.

So it figures that Network Homes has swept the board at the HR Excellence Awards, taking home Best HR team, Best learning and development strategy, Outstanding employee engagement strategy, HR director of the year, as well as this prestigious Gold award.

Executive director of people and culture Fiona Deal can be credited with spearheading much of the change since joining Network Homes and being handed the unenviable task of 'build[ing] a great organisation'.

After all, it takes a bold leader to take on such a big challenge at a troubled organisation, and this has been recognised in the high number of votes Deal received



for the HR director of the year award. One employee casting their vote commented: "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."

But before any L&D or employee engagement strategy can be realised HR must of course first get its own house in order. That is exactly what happened at Network Homes, with a reinvention of HR as the people and culture team. A sign of the impact of this is that the department was voted 'team of the year' in the 2017-18 internal company awards. And it can now proudly add Best HR team to the list.

Now fit for purpose, the HR function has been able to embed an L&D strategy that unlocks the right skills and confidence, and ensures employees feel valued and appreciated by their manager. This took the form of a strategy with a range of 'stops', with staff given HART passports (HART standing for hungry, accountable, respectful and together) to keep a record of their learning at each destination. Bitesize learning and the introduction of a leadership development programme have

also been key.

Simultaneous to this has been a 10-step employee engagement journey: showing commitment from the top, setting clear values and behaviours, asking 'how to be brilliant?', investing in cultural excellence, turning managers into ROCKSTARS, investing in learning and

development, promoting health and wellbeing, developing talent, holding staff conferences and giving something back.

But as with many a transformation, it hasn't been a smooth journey. The Grenfell Tower tragedy in the Summer of 2017 impacted the entire social housing sector – Network Homes more than others given that some of its tower blocks were clad in the same flammable material and built by the same contractor as Grenfell. The association went into crisis management mode and needed to urgently divert resources into fire safety and remedial building works. This naturally included the redirecting of funds away from HR.

But Deal and the team's resourcefulness at this time was widely praised by judges, with one especially championing the fact that "during the programme they had to stop and refocus money into other things and downsize, but they still kept the morale going and maintained engagement".

It has certainly been a busy few years at Network Homes, in which HR has truly demonstrated what excellence is all about. We couldn't be happier to honour Deal and her team with this year's Gold award.