

CIH East Midlands –Leaders Breakfast Briefing:

“Closing the skills Gap, are we at the Cliff Edge?”

Relieved.., excited..., enthused... switched on and even provocative this is just how some of the delegates felt on arriving at CIH East Midland’s inaugural event for 2018.

Billed as the Annual Leaders Breakfast event, delegates across the region, from a wide range of Local Authorities, Registered Providers and recruitment and training agencies came together to debate the current state of the housing profession and to set out key objectives for developing professionals for the future.

Dan Short (Managing Director, Greenacre Recruitment) addressed delegates and highlighted how the sector has changed in the backdrop of ‘post Grenfell’ with increasing focus on compliance, fire risk and health & safety. Dan spoke about his experiences with local authorities in the London Borough’s and how some of them saw the need to react quickly to ‘Grenfell’ by bringing forward planned work programmes and encountering difficulties with attracting people with specialist trade and knowledge in compliance; such as cladding surveyors and fire risk assessors. Dan also highlighted another key concern faced by small registered providers; by having single person dependency, there was a risk of losing key skills and knowledge in the event individuals left to work elsewhere. Organisations needed to attract people with the right skills, develop people in the right areas and have succession plans in place for the long term.

Sarah Troman (Director of Communities, Mansfield District Council) talked about the reality facing Mansfield District Council. Being a relatively stable organisation with low staff turnover – this had its benefits for the Council but also presented challenges. Whilst staff had a wealth of knowledge and experience, they feel more comfortable with existing practices and processes, rather than looking to make changes. This could impact on efficiencies and the Council’s ability to cope with challenges brought by the recent budget cuts, the

changing data protection regime, homelessness reduction act and the roll out of universal credit. There were also internal challenges for the Council to consider around its digital communications plan for customers and staff and moving towards more self-serve processes. Sarah commented on the future of her organisation and identified key skills that would be required in the delivery of housing services. Staff would require key communication skills, being able to demonstrate resilience especially due to changing customer expectations, being able to problem solve and have digital skills. Sarah concluded by giving an insight into how Mansfield District Council were preparing for the future by setting up an apprenticeship programme to promote housing as a career, encouraging job swaps for internal staff to share knowledge, experience and good practice and supporting staff through their continuous professional development.

Adam Clark (CIH Member of the Future Advisory Group) recognised the sector was at a 'cliff edge' and contributed by talking about the future of the sector. Adam talked about how automation and artificial intelligence are shaping the sector and there was a need for the sector to look at the future of work and how things would be done. Adam identified the need to attract young talented people into the profession by making the sector appealing, creating a career of choice and promoting the values of housing. Adam ended his talk by giving an outline of how organisations could bridge the skills gap by giving staff exposure to broaden their skills and experiences in governance, risk management and leadership.

The final talk came from Alison Inman (CIH President) and like Adam earlier she also recognised that the sector had come to its 'cliff edge'. Work needed to be done to ensure the sector could develop and retain skilled staff and be ready for the future. Alison asked delegates to think around how skills, knowledge and qualifications in housing were valued. There was a need to get staff to sample the wider sector and understand both the local authority and registered provider, work environments. There was also a need to encourage the development of managers and heads of services to executive level as part of succession planning. On the frontline, Alison pointed to the importance of empowering people to use their judgement to help foster relationships with individuals and communities.

The event ended with a lively discussion amongst the speakers and delegates. There was clear recognition around the issues that had been brought up. Some of the key discussion points centred around: specialist roles resulting in loss of knowledge, impact of remote working on communication especially with new staff, the future role of customer service advisors, developing leaders for the future and the inherent differences between local authorities and registered providers with their strategic aims.

It will be interesting to see how this debate translates into addressing the skills gap in housing within the region as the sector poises itself away from the 'cliff edge'.

Mo Kadri is the Communications Lead and board member of the CIH East Midlands Region and Income Manager at Waterloo Housing Group.