

**Paula Palmer**

Hello and welcome to Stonewater's *On the Air* podcast. I'm your host, Paula, and in this episode, we're exploring the next era of social housing and how we deliver it, turning a clearer direction on standards, safety, and long-term investment into a consistent day-to-day reality for customers. Today, I'm delighted to be joined by Lisa Collen, who is Group Director of Culture and Organisational Design at Bromford Flagship LiveWest housing group. We're going to say BFL from now on. We've also got Natalie Flageul, Executive Director of Customer Experience at Raven Housing Trust, and our very own Clare Mills, Onboarding and Talent Lead here at Stonewater. Thank you for joining us, everyone. Welcome.

**Clare Mills**

Thank you.

**Natalie Flageul**

Hello.

**Lisa Collen**

Thank you.

**Paula Palmer**

To get started, we're going to get you, each of you, to give us a quick introduction, so our listeners know who you are and what you do. Clare, let's have you first.

**Clare Mills**

Lovely. Really glad to be here. Thanks ever so much. I'm Clare Mills, and I'm, as you said, the Onboarding and Talent Lead at Stonewater. I've worked here for just under 3 years, and my role involves working across early careers, onboarding, and colleague talent development. I take a real focus on creating really inclusive, human-centred learning experiences, and I'm really passionate about how we support our colleagues through transitional points throughout their careers, their learning, their engagement, and most importantly, hopefully, their long-term retention.

**Paula Palmer**

Brilliant, sounds like a very interesting role, Clare. Lisa, let's have you next.

**Lisa Collen**

Bromford Flagship LiveWest, or BFL as we are more affectionately known, is the result of a number of mergers. Two of which happened in the last 12 months. My role as Group Director of Culture and Organisational Design enables me to create the culture that we want for BFL, but to do that is also about integrating the three organisations into a new organisation of BFL. I'm responsible in addition to the culture and integration, looking at the engagement of our 5,000-plus colleagues, as well as their wellbeing, how we reward and recognise them, and all the frameworks around their talent management and the colleague experience.

**Paula Palmer**

My goodness, that sounds like an enormous role. 5,000 colleagues, that's really huge. Well done. Lastly, Natalie.

**Natalie Flageul**

Thank you for inviting me here today. I'm Natalie Flageul. I'm the Executive Director of Customer Experience at Raven Housing Trust, which is based in Redhill in Surrey. I've been with the organisation just over 3 years, having spent 28 years in the energy sector, so I'm fairly new to housing. My role here at Raven is about how we turn strategy, regulation, and standards into services that customers can actually feel every day. A big part of what that is, is about making sure we really understand who's behind the door, design those services around risk and need, and build delivery systems that really work consistently, so it's not just a design on paper, but it actually happens in real life.

**Paula Palmer**

Brilliant. I think we're going to tease a bit more of that information out of you as we go through the episode. We've got a brilliant all-female cast today, excelling in our sector, a sector which now has a much clearer direction on safety standards and long-term investment.

Over the last 18 months, the government and regulators have set out their expectations, funding, and parameters to deliver big targets, and with much more customer emphasis on service delivery. Let's get our guests chatting about what we need to do now.

Lisa, from your perspective, why isn't regulation on its own enough to change what customers experience day to day?

## **Lisa Collen**

I saw a quote of \$1 trillion. I don't even know how many zeros that involves. One trillion dollars is spent worldwide in plotting the customer experience, the customer journey, and less than a tenth of that is spent on understanding the colleague experience. I use a very simple equation. If we get the colleague experience correct, then they are going to stay with you for longer. They're going to develop the skills that are needed to deliver a great customer service, and therefore the business results will take care of itself.

Regulation alone will not enable that to happen, and so we've got to focus on the colleagues and what it feels like, what it sounds like, what it looks like to work for your organisation. Give them the best experience, they will then give our customers the best experience, and the business results will speak for themselves.

## **Paula Palmer**

Brilliant answer. I love that. They always say, don't they, a business is nothing without its people, so looking after them, you look after your business overall. Lovely. Natalie, how does that resonate from an operational point of view? Where do things most often break down between policy and delivery?

## **Natalie Flageul**

That really resonates with me. I feel that the people are at the heart of our business. The people closest to the customer, serving the customer, are hugely powerful in that whole overall delivery. I'm trying to remember a quote, but who it was by, it was about inverting that triangle so that the leaders of the organisation serve the people at the frontline, particularly how you think about designing the operating model.

Where things tend to break down is translating that policy into working operating models. We're often clear on the what, but the challenge is consistently delivering that at scale, especially under—and I think most organisations are experiencing this—a high-pressure service demand. How do you stay consistently good when the organisation can be at times under pressure?

Where processes aren't designed around what I would call the real-life customer journeys, how customers experience that, then you get handoffs, you get delays, you get mixed messages and inconsistency, and that's when trust really erodes between the customer and the organisation. That's where our people feel that we've let them down because they're the ones facing into that experience.

I suppose my point here is that customers don't see the policy intent. What they experience is whether we turn up on time and fix things. I suppose that's really where I would come from on that.

### **Paula Palmer**

They don't see the greater overall picture. They just see what was supposed to happen for them to solve their problem or answer their question, don't they? Clare, bringing you in here, what does that gap mean for people actually delivering services?

### **Clare Mills**

Operating in those complex environments does really require a combination of technical skills, emotional intelligence, confidence in that decision-making. The confidence plays a really key role in that, doesn't it, about not having all of the answers but just having the confidence to ask the right questions. Seeking the diverse perspectives of our colleagues and our customers is really important when we're making informed decisions.

There isn't always one single right solution, but it's about having a broad spectrum of people you can call upon. It means staying open to learning and being willing to challenge established ways of working and responding proactively rather than defensively to some of that challenge. In fast-moving and uncertain environments, that success often comes from those who can balance that agility, isn't it, against the competing priorities and the adjusting approaches while staying really grounded.

### **Paula Palmer**

I think we're really getting a feel for how it's the human touch that's really going to make a difference in how we can deliver at large scales and deliver what we're required to. Natalie, how are organisations going to create consistency without services becoming rigid or impersonal?

### **Natalie Flageul**

Consistency for me doesn't necessarily mean, not the best word, but sameness, because customers have their own lived experience, and that's based on their own personal needs, what's priority in their life, and their expectations. These expectations can come from their service experience with other organisations. Constantly having to raise the benchmark in terms of how are we responsive.

We need to really think about designing services around customers, organisational charts, so that people can adapt to individual circumstances. It's like really seeing ourselves as the coach of the game where the rules are really clear, the players go onto the pitch, and they really have to respond to the dynamic situation. Probably, I hope we're going to get onto culture, values, mindset through the conversation, but I think these are the guiding principles of how our people show up.

For me, it's about having those clear frameworks, it's about protecting space for the teams to make the right judgments and decision, being empowered so that they can feel that the organisation is behind them when they're making those choices within a set rules.

The danger is probably, and I call it inside-out rather than outside-in thinking, is building those systems that are tidy for us, but don't leave room to actually listen. It's about getting the right balance with our teams so that the right values mindset are aligned really to that organisational culture. If you snap somebody in half, they live and breathe the organisational culture, then when they go out and deliver, they've got the right decision-making framework to support their colleagues. I think that consistency with the humility and that real human touch is probably where I would see an area of strong focus.

### **Paula Palmer**

Brilliant. Lisa, do you want to come in there and add something to that empowerment conversation?

### **Lisa Collen**

I think we're at a wonderful juncture of working, and it's very, very different. We've now got, for the first time in history, probably 5 generations working at the same time in the same organisation in some industries. I think those people, as Natalie says, they all bring something different. It's the same with our customers. They all want the same but different, if there is such a thing.

I think it's about how we as leaders create an environment where people feel that they have the frameworks in which to make a decision. The best person who can make a decision on what's the right repair is the tradesperson who is in the home, who can see what is wrong, and they need a framework in which tap to use, but not whether they should use a tap or not. If we trust our people to make the right decision, then it means that we're giving a better service, and we are empowering our people to make those decisions. We might have to train them, we might have to give them some skills, but we see the different generations bring different skill sets with them.

I'm generalising, the younger generation are great when it comes to technology and social media and being able to deliver a service very quickly, where maybe the older generation are used to that personal touch, the eye contact, and being able to give great customer service. I'm not saying that the older generations can't do the fast service and great social media and technology, no more than the younger people are not able to deliver a great customer experience and offer great customer service.

Let's amalgamate them and create something great where people feel that they have the frameworks to make the right decision for our customers in what our customers need right then.

### **Paula Palmer**

Lovely answer. I like that about different age groups, and we've got some here who are different generations of the same family. If somebody's obviously loved it here and introduced all their friends and family, that's brilliant. Clare, can you add a bit more on the practical perspective, maybe workforce perspective, what's going to need to be in place for people to feel confident operating in that kind of model?

### **Clare Mills**

Most importantly is that clarity and trust, isn't it? That we've got flexible models. Individuals have to understand what's expected, and that's the key thing for any role, isn't it? And how decisions are made and how their contributions are really valued.

I know in Stonewater, we're particularly keen on individuals feeling they've got that psychological safety. That's really critical. People need to feel safe to try new things and step outside of their job titles, feeling confident to share ideas and just speak up when they don't know something, just feeling that that's okay.

If the culture still penalises mistakes and only rewards traditional career paths, people won't feel confident to leap forward and make that next step. I think we need to look more at investing in capacity and support for individuals, not just expectation.

Access to learning is embedded in real work, and I think we're going to talk about that later, aren't we, about coaching and apprenticeships and how people can really move forward, developing their new skills, having the confidence to grow, and feel equipped to stretch with support.

### **Paula Palmer**

We're going to come back to culture and growing our workforce in a minute, but so let's talk about new people coming into the sector. Clare, you've spoken a lot about widening routes into housing. Why does that matter for long-term delivery?

**Clare Mills**

It's really important for us, isn't it? It really makes a massive difference, doesn't it, really, the diversity of our customer group? It's essential that if we're going to design and deliver services that genuinely meet the needs of our customers, that it would be great for our customers and their backgrounds to be represented.

All those life experiences and circumstances, our workforce really needs to reflect that in the diversity of the individuals that we have. When people can see themselves represented in an organisation, they're much more likely to engage with it because it helps to build that trust and relevance.

**Paula Palmer**

Lovely. Can you tell us about some of the work you've been doing to widen that workforce?

**Clare Mills**

Yeah. Some of the work we've been doing has been really fantastic. We've got a great graduate scheme that we've implemented. We've had graduates for a long time, but this time around, we've done things a little bit differently, and our graduates don't just work within one directorate within the business, they work across five different teams. We're getting to learn from them, they're getting to learn from us.

One of the most important things for us was when we were doing our recruitment, that it was all values-led. We can teach, and we can train skills, but the values that we wanted those individuals to come with, it was really important that we tease that out at interview. We've been working really hard to get the right individuals to come and work for us here at Stonewater and represent our customers.

**Paula Palmer**

Lovely, thanks. Thank you, Clare. Lisa, I'm going to bring you back in now. Do you see that link between diversity of background and quality of decision-making in organisations as well?

**Lisa Collen**

It's a simple response, Paula, yes, I do, most definitely. You asked Clare the question around social media, and I don't think I've seen many people who made an active choice on social media, social housing. I don't see many people who've made an active choice to work in this industry, and I've certainly come from outside it, and I know a lot of people who have as well, but then they've stayed, and it's got a heart to it.

People in finance are very much aligned to what social housing provides. It's got that charitable feel but is run as a business. Even now, when you have the drop-down menus of which industry do you work in, a questionnaire which is unrelated to where you're working, social housing doesn't come up. Yet it's massive, and there's a lot of people who work in social housing.

We don't teach our children career pathways into social housing, and yet if you join it, you tend to stay in it. There is a reason for that, and it's around the opportunities that it presents as a place to work, but also if we're able to create the right environment, then why would you want to work anywhere else? You want to be the best place to work.

The only thing I was going to add is around the values, which we've touched on with Natalie and Clare, and yourself, Paula, have mentioned the values. The values aren't aspirational. They are reflective of what it feels like, of what's important to the organisation. When you're seeking people with similar values, and you're testing that at interview or selection, then it's about having people who will flourish and thrive in your organisation, not somebody who would work against it.

### **Paula Palmer**

Absolutely. I agree with that. Thank you. Natalie, from a service delivery point of view, how important is it that teams bring that varied experience and ways of thinking, as well as the values that we find?

### **Natalie Flageul**

The values is a huge part of that. I think if you can get that right, to Lisa's point and to Clare's, it's hugely powerful and probably quite underestimated. I think it's like almost foundational in the building blocks of making change in an organisation. I think that's certainly something that we've seen as a huge contributor to the success.

Going back to your question about varied experiences and ways of thinking, for me, it's absolutely critical. Because our customers, and I hadn't appreciated this until I'd actually joined Raven and worked in social housing, how complex customers' lives actually are. One size or delivery just doesn't work.

Even down to segmenting customers, I'm not an entirely massive fan of that. I'm there understanding about who are the customers and what are their specific needs rather than seeing them as a group of customers that we do certain things for. I'm more on that personal experience type piece. But teams with different backgrounds and perspectives are so much better at spotting the risks because they come at it from those different points of view, their own lived experiences, and see things differently.

They're asking better questions, and therefore, it's much more comprehensive in terms of how we respond and how that actually works.

Because they are the closest to the customer, and then understand the friction that maybe our ways of working that we've put in place are causing problems, they're creating that culture for people to speak up, to have a voice, to be able to bring their perspectives, to bring their best self to work, which is something we measure we see through our culture surveys, do I feel like I can bring myself to the workplace?

All of these things make it much easier to get close to that diversity of thinking and the voice of the customer. That diversity of thinking helps us move away from a sort of standard processes that work for some, but could really leave some people invisible.

It's really important to create a strong understanding, particularly in my role as exec, on the exec team, is how we get that sort of bottom insight flowing up to the top board and executive.

We've been doing sort of some work with what I call the immersive experience, where we're actually getting some of those day-to-day operational challenges really brought to life with board members at seminars and bringing customers in, just seeing how they think and saying, this is really difficult.

We've got so much funding here, and we're trying to make these decisions here. I think bringing that sort of awareness into that thinking, and then the diversity of thought, really does help, particularly around understanding the operational teams, talking about performance, and ultimately where investment needs to go.

As big a job as it is, it's understanding the frontline, it's about making sure we translate that up to the board table as well.

**Paula Palmer**

Okay, lovely. It's not about stereotyping again into different ages, genders, beliefs, or... What's the word?

**Lisa Collen**

Ethnicity, age, all of the... Even neurodiversity. Yes, and when Natalie was saying different ways of thinking, I only know the world from my perspective, and that's based on my childhood and my growth, and into an adult, and my family environment...

**Natalie Flageul**

Experiences.

**Lisa Collen**

Exactly. That's determined who I am. So I will make decisions based on my values, my personal values, my moral compass. But actually, I'm not always right, and somebody thinking slightly differently or thinking very differently creates an even better outcome. If we pool that, then you're going to get the best results.

**Natalie Flageul**

I'm sorry to jump in there because I just made me think of something. I'm so grateful for the people that I work with because one, they feel comfortable challenging. You know, I've come from a very different sector. I'm now working in a not-for-profit.

That transition and people's comfort and confidence in talking to me about their perspectives, I'm grateful for that challenge as well. That's what if you get the culture right, people feel comfortable speaking up. I'm not saying I came with extreme views.

That's not what I'm talking about here. But I've certainly been on a journey to understand what I didn't know before I came here. That's really helped me level the playing field in terms of the breadth of the various complexities and how people live their lives. It really helps you understand what your job is and what you're here to do.

**Paula Palmer**

Absolutely, and thank you for saving me just then, Lisa. You summed it up really nicely about how, yes, well, you're all of the same opinion that diversity is only adding to what we can offer and deliver.

Moving on to the use of technology, it's moving very quickly across the sector from data-led services to AI, and we've spoken about this on this podcast before about how AI and data should enable but not replace people. What are your thoughts, Lisa? Where do you see the right balance between automation and human judgment?

### **Lisa Collen**

I believe the future of work remains human, and I know that we've talked about, not necessarily on this podcast, but we've heard people say, "Oh, there'll be so many jobs lost, and it will all be AI." If you listen to certain people who are responsible for a lot of the amazing advancements with AI, it's moving faster than any change in our history, really.

I think people's ability to deal with complex matters, especially when they're dealing with matters that are generated by people living in our homes, is going to be key. That ability to understand, to comprehend, to problem-solve.

I think you can have AI and technology that will deal with routine things, the things that you get regularly, and we know that our customers at BFL would like to have a combination of being able to pick the phone up and report a repair, but also report a repair online and have it repaired at a time that suits their lifestyle.

Technology will enable people, more freedom and more time, and different skills to be able to truly understand our customers, the people who live in our homes, and what they want. I'm a huge advocate, as I would imagine most people who know me would be, that the future of work remains human, but technology will, as you say, Paula, enable people to do more.

### **Paula Palmer**

Yes, okay, thank you, Lisa. Natalie, do you want to add to this sort of... We're thinking about tech being used in the wrong way, it might add risk because of incorrect data. So how are leaders going to decide where it genuinely adds value?

### **Natalie Flageul**

There are a few examples, and obviously, leaders of an organisation are constantly looking at how we ride the technology wave and how we stay ahead and use it in a way that enhances business. For me, technology could look like if you're really good at record keeping, how, and then you've got a lot to look at when somebody calls you.

How does technology help summarise where that customer is in that journey, what they've come to us before, what's been fixed, what's outstanding, so the person who's having the conversation actually has all the right insight as quickly as they possibly can, without having to have those big long silences.

It could be as simple as that. In terms of policies and procedures and the regulation and all the strengthening of that, which I'm wholly supportive of, there's only so much a human can hold in their mind.

If we talk about consistency, how do we give them the confidence to invest in their skills in speaking with customers, but knowing that it's grounded in fact-based policies and procedures that they can easily put their hands on, so that they can access it to put it quite simply.

It's about how do we take less emphasis on the person having to remember everything to be able to support them and how they can be speedier. Speedier in the way they get to the information fast, accurately, not trying to hurry up their conversations, that's not what I was suggesting. But it does have to start with the customer's need.

I'm a big advocate of that, and I think technology can absolutely help, but if you automate broken processes, you're just going to make the wrong things go faster. So, you have to be really, really clear what it is that you want to work on and how you're going to use it. Poorly designed systems can really mask customer vulnerability.

I was looking at an example with one of our data scientists the other day, and he was kind of, he'd been to a hackathon. We were looking at the challenge of finding the invisible customer, somebody that we haven't spoken to for a while, and he was bringing in multiple different datasets and factors to say.

"Actually, this one has called us, many a time about many things, and therefore, what might we want the follow-up path to be with them, whereas this one has not been in touch and hasn't had a repair for 700 days, still paying their rent." But is there something we should be doing differently for them?

It was really trying to use data in the right way to be able to get to those different points. There are some real tangible examples there where we can see that. But going to Lisa's point, I'm a big believer in human service, really.

Tech should enhance service quality, support better judgments, definitely not replace people, certainly not mask the risks every day in the way we deliver for customers, but probably really

help us prioritise where our very limited resources are, and what I call, I say, our secret sauce is, our people are the ones that make us different.

Not different in terms of housing, but it is a very different sector to be in, and the people, attention to care, the empathy, the passion, the going above and beyond, it's not unique to where I work. Having networked quite a bit now, it is fairly widespread across housing. It's about how we get people to be in their best place, supported by technology, so that things run more smoothly and more consistently.

### **Paula Palmer**

Fabulous answer. Yes, I think you're right. In everybody I've met across all of these podcasts, the passion and the love of their job and what they do really comes across with everybody. Fantastic. Technology is only one way we're equipping our people for the task at hand.

The other part is developing them and helping them learn what's needed for their role. We also need to retain them and keep their experience within our sector and our organisations. Clare, tell us a bit more about apprenticeships, learning programmes, and how they are supporting both immediate delivery and longer-term capability?

### **Clare Mills**

Yes. For me, apprenticeships is a really key area, so I've been looking at expanding the range of types of apprentices across the organisation to open up career pathways that look at more of a breadth of what we do. So there's a really great range of different apprenticeships that you can undertake now, not just those traditional technical routes that we had previously.

By offering apprenticeships across different functions and levels, we can attract more of a diverse talent pool and really recognise that there are multiple ways for people to build those successful careers.

One of the things I absolutely love about apprenticeships, and I'm currently doing a Level 7 one myself in HR, so I can positively shout out about how great it is, is that the learning is really embedded in the work that you do, that real work that you're doing. It means individual colleagues can develop the skills in context about what they're doing and apply that to what they're learning immediately. It builds that confidence through practical experience.

The learning becomes so much more purposeful and really relevant, supporting the individual development and the organisational capability at the same time. Together, the approach supports

that progression at all career stages. Yes, we've got multiple colleagues across the organisation doing a really wide range of apprenticeships that are fantastic. It's not just that entry-level option that we had previously.

They can really help to enable the reskilling and upskilling of colleagues. People who might want to, not necessarily move up the chain, they might want to move sideways, you know, they might want to diversify in their role. I know Lisa and Natalie have both said about people coming into the industry, and they seem to stay, don't they?

They're really passionate about it. Once they're here, they don't tend to move, they seem to stay. So by linking that learning from an apprenticeship into real roles, it gives us great career progression and, more, roots really into the organisation to build that future-focused workforce.

We can be more adaptive and thrive and grow as a company over time. We also offer a lot of coaching within the organisation, within Stonewater. We do peer-to-peer coaching, and we do reciprocal coaching as well. There's so much available to our colleagues where they can get involved and really broaden their career paths.

### **Paula Palmer**

Thank you, Clare. Lisa, do you want to add something here? Because we know that BFL Group has also been investing heavily in building skills internally. Tell us about that, why, and what you are doing?

### **Lisa Collen**

I think it's really important. It doesn't matter what industry or where you are in your career, colleagues, employees want similar things regardless of where you work and what specialism you have, and development is a key part of that. They also want fair pay and agility, and progression, but development is such a big part of it.

People want to feel that they are developing, whether it's through the apprenticeship programme, through the graduate programmes, whether it's them learning while they're earning, which is a really big initiative, which fits with what Clare was saying around her Level 7, that she's in a job where she's able to put that learning into practice.

What we're seeing, though, is that there is a skill shortage, and it's understanding both what that skill shortage is for you as an organisation, but also, we've had some real difficulties in finding

trainers. For some reason, trainers aren't staying with the colleges and with the different organisations that we use.

Actually, the best people who can teach our young people, for example, a trade job, is somebody who's already doing that trade. It's how we coach them, how we equip them to become trainers, as well as somebody who can go out and mend something that needs mending.

That's just an example of trade and apprenticeships, and while you learn, and the need for people to want development, whether it's upwards, sideways, downwards even, or in a different sector. Join our sector, it's a great place to work.

### **Paula Palmer**

Thank you. Natalie, from your point of view, as customers' needs become more complex, what capabilities should Clare and Lisa add into their teams? What do they need to embed now in organisations to deliver confidence over time?

### **Natalie Flageul**

Obviously, knowing who's behind the door is really important, but if we think about the number of people that are out in the community, whether it's housing officers or trade teams. It's about making sure that we train people on the importance of why information and understanding information is essential to what we do.

Data literacy is an area we've been focusing on to make sure that we capture that insight, so that our people are our eyes and ears, and then we can use those analytical skills to look at how we manage that. But probably I'd go back to something that's close to my heart, which is operational excellence.

One of the things when I first joined the organisation was about being consistently good at the basics, and just so that you're so reliable and trustworthy that we're highly predictable and build that trust in what we do. It didn't particularly get grabbed very quickly about being boringly consistent and good at what we do, because that takes a lot of effort to get those things working really well.

Once we established that doing the basics really well was really important, then it was about, actually, organisations really need a deep understanding of that customer, getting that data quality and governance right, robust record keeping with the knowledge management piece.

With these things coming together, we can then start to identify where there are risks a lot earlier. When those things come together, it's kind of forming that assurance, which actually customers can feel in that service delivery.

We know you, we're doing the right things for you, and we're adjusting our service accordingly. Therefore, it's not just something that's reported upwards in terms of a metric, but it's actually felt across the organisation. That's probably some of the areas that I would suggest kind of really help confidence over time.

**Clare Mills**

Duly noted.

**Paula Palmer**

Well done, Clare. Taking notes, I hope.

**Clare Mills**

Yes, of course, always.

**Paula Palmer**

Okay, Clare, so I think you and Lisa both sort of touched on this a moment ago, but what happens when organisations treat skills and talent as fixed roles rather than something that's fluid?

**Clare Mills**

Yes, it's a real shame when that happens, isn't it? Because they really significantly limit that potential, don't they? If people are only seen through the lens of their current job title, it can mean valuable skills and interests outside of that role remain really hidden or underutilised.

The approach is just too rigid, and teams become really dependent on specific roles rather than adaptable capabilities. That's what we want, isn't it? We want people to use the skills they've got, which makes it really hard to respond quickly to change.

Individuals can get a sense of feeling boxed in with fewer opportunities for them to grow, which can affect their progress. We want to keep people, we want to retain them. Whereas if we recognise the skills are more fluid within the organisation, it can allow us to be much more agile and resilient, can't it?

It encourages cross-collaboration, which is what we have with our graduates when they go. It's amazing to see them start, and whichever team they start with, they're taking those skills with them throughout their journey.

We meet them monthly and have a catch-up with them about what they're doing, how they're using their learnt knowledge and skills, and it's fantastic to hear them say, oh, well, the things I learned when I was in CX, I'm now using that in the development team, I'm now using that in the data team.

So yes, it speaks for itself really, doesn't it? If we give people the opportunity to use the skills they've either developed previously or that they're developing whilst they're with us, it reaps rewards, doesn't it?

### **Lisa Collen**

The only thing that made me think about when Clare was talking was that it was around recruiting, and we often appoint people because they can do the job that we have a vacancy for, but if we look at everyone has potential. Sometimes we want more for individuals than they want for themselves, but actually, if we are keeping an eye on, well, what's the future?

Just because they have great customer service skills, and they're applying for a customer service job, what's limiting them to just stay in that place. It's really important that we develop them, but we also think about the talent management and succession and cross-functional roles, and not just staying within that trajectory.

I spent the time as an MD of a housing association, and when my leader said to me, do you want to go do that? I was like, why not? But then I thought, I don't know much about housing, and I'm a specialist in HR. They said, well, what that role needs right now is for the board to get on board, and also it needs leadership, and you are an expert in leadership and engagement, so 'Why not move you into that role for now?' I had a blast.

I learned a lot, but I can then bring it back to the role that I'm employed to do right now. We would be very naive and very short-sighted if we just kept people in their functional roles.

### **Paula Palmer**

Definitely a benefit to use everybody to their full capability and let them have fun with their careers and try new things out.

## **Natalie Flageul**

Just building on Lisa and Clare's point about skills and transferring them in the organisation. One of the things that I've learned through my career, as you get to know your teams and employees, is to understand what they do outside of work as well. That's been quite revolutionary for me, seeing the talent that sits behind the person that sits behind the organisation.

Whether it's a coach of a football team, and how they bring those skills in and take on a people management role, or somebody that plays in a band who actually is doing videos and editing that might be able to do more engaging content for the employees working alongside the teams.

It's when people show up at the workplace, they've got a whole bunch of skills they come with them. Some, you know, are relevant, some are transferable and certainly building them throughout the organisation. I just think these gifts of energy and passion that join the organisation for the reasons that we all do, most likely, is to look behind what else they can bring as well as what's within the organisation. That's something I've learned over time and wanted to share.

## **Paula Palmer**

Lovely point of view. Yeah, transferable skills and playing to all their strengths, isn't it? That's lovely. Thank you, Natalie. Right, so finally, looking ahead, if the direction of travel is safer, greener, and with more customer-led services shaped by a stronger tenant voice, there are some big choices to make now. Let's get one last thought from all of you on this. Natalie, how should organisations design and measure delivery to focus on a customer's experience rather than regulation?

## **Natalie Flageul**

Well, yes, we do need to be compliant, and I think there's many a metric there for compliance, but one of the things is about how we measure that lived experience, the customer. Where they start with the organisation and where they finish. Quite often we miss those starting points, and it's knowing how to find out that, where to measure it. It can be in any channel, it can be how easy it is to contact the organisation. Because quite often it's about making sure we're not effortful, because nobody gets up every day and thinks, "Oh, I must call my housing association because I want to spend time on the phone," and keep having to call back to chase things.

I think it's about making it super easy to get in touch with, to do what we say we're going to do, and it goes back to that point of being invisibly good. Some of this is about reimagining, evolving the way that we measure. Quite often, we talk about average this, average that, and nobody ever

gets an average experience. They get their own experience. So, what's the range of performances that we're measuring? How consistent is it that we deliver for customers?

Quite often, across the department, or the intention the customer's called about, or their request, it can go through a number of different teams if it's complex. Did the customer get what they need? Did we do what we said we were going to do when we did it? Did it happen as we would expect? Quite often, where we measure sort of point metrics, we don't look at the end-to-end experience.

It's really understanding that customer journey, understanding what is most important to get right, because not always we get everything right. Measure. Measure it, measure it, measure it. Make sure you're tracking where things fall over and making sure someone's got responsibility for keeping it on track. I think I didn't want to get too detailed there, but we do need to look at that end-to-end rather than just the sort of point business metrics and averages. And really, customers judge us on trust. You know, over time with an organisation, you build trust, and when things go wrong, depending on how much sort of equity you've got in the bank of that trust, is whether they're going to give you a chance to put it right in the time.

Really focusing on trust, being reliable, keeping our promises, and it's about how then we feel about the service we deliver and how the customers feel about that. Making sure that we listen properly, acting on what we hear, making sure we design things with them in mind. I know we've recently been through a new target operating model, and actually the most value of that design came from hearing from the "Let me hear you" sessions I held with a third of our colleagues, and from customers telling us where things went wrong.

I think it's about bringing customer and employee into that experience and how we design it. Making sure that it's really embedded in the decisions because the satisfaction is a consequence of good design, it's not the target itself. So, it's really important that we bring those two perspectives in and measure that end-to-end experience and pick the metrics that matter most.

### **Paula Palmer**

Okay, thank you very much. Lisa, from a leadership and culture perspective, what needs building now to support that future?

### **Lisa Collen**

I think leadership is key. We leave a poor leader before we leave the job or an organisation or even a sector. I think if we get our leaders behaving and thinking in the right way and appointed to the right positions and developed and rewarded and recognised and engaged, they will create

the right environment which enables people to grow, to thrive, to be the best that they want for themselves.

Therefore, thinking about the customer and what Natalie was saying about measure the whole end-to-end, measuring something gives us good questions, doesn't necessarily give us good answers. It's having leaders that will trust their people to understand the customer and what the customer wants and what's gone wrong. And let's get it wrong sometimes. When we make mistakes as leaders, let's look in the mirror and not out the window. When things go really, really well, because they do, then that's the time to look out of the window and not in the mirror.

### **Paula Palmer**

Lovely answer. Thank you. Clare, when it comes to people and learning, what should organisations be investing in now?

### **Clare Mills**

I guess it's super simple, isn't it? We need to be embedding that learning in our everyday work. People build skills most effectively when you're learning in a relevant, timely, real situation. That can be through projects, whether that be stretch opportunities, coaching as we've talked about, peer leading. I think it really helps for that learning to stick. Support with confidence and not just that basic knowledge learning. Additionally, I guess we need to invest in inclusive development pathways.

Again, we do a lot of that through Stonewater, meaning creating progression routes and recognising, as we talked about, those transferable skills and hidden skills, ensuring that they're accessible to people at different career stages and looking at people's backgrounds. I think we've all talked about that, about what do people do in their spare time, maybe what are people doing outside of work.

When that development is inclusive, organisations really do unlock a wider potential, for improvement, for engagement and retention. I guess an organisation should be investing in cultures that value curiosity, and adaptability and that wanting people— I know Lisa mentioned about that continuous curious learning.

Like you said, that can be from manager level or below, so supporting that learning, supporting those conversations as a manager, ensuring the psychological safety, and that people do learn beyond their job title. We've talked about that as well today. In a changing environment, that ability

to learn and adapt is one of the most valuable skills that an organisation can have, really, with its people.

### **Paula Palmer**

Okay, thank you. Thank you all for such a thoughtful discussion. It is very clear that the next year of Social Housing will be shaped not just by what the sector has been asked to do, but how we build the capability, culture, and systems to deliver consistently for customers.

Now, I'm very sorry, but I have one last sneaky question for you all. I'm sorry to put you on the spot because it wasn't in your brief. But it's an exciting time to be in housing, so what is the one thing you would say to someone thinking about a career in Social Housing? Lisa?

### **Lisa Collen**

The opportunities that that career will offer you in working for lots of different services, lots of different functions, but also there is a real need for Social Housing from the people who use that service, whether it's long-term or short-term. And you're doing something. Natalie mentioned not-for-profit, but we're profit with a purpose. It's about, a business needs to make money in order to survive, but it's what it does with that money. Do you line the pockets of individuals who already don't need their pockets lined, or do you build more homes? It's a great industry to work in, and the people really care about what they're doing.

### **Paula Palmer**

Thank you, Lisa. What about you, Natalie?

### **Natalie Flageul**

I think having joined after spending 28 years in the energy sector, what I learned very quickly is there's some incredibly talented people in housing that really know how to deliver with not very much, who can mobilise teams and can face into significant challenges, and the care and the passion that comes across and the welcome that you get, it is formidable in terms of what you get back out of a workplace.

Now, you know, I'm fortunate I'm responsible for a reasonable-sized department, but to look at how people learn and grow in that environment, to be able to build their confidence to deliver services that really make a difference. I remember my first week here, hearing some of the stories about, you know, somebody in the home had fallen over, and the team had taken it upon themselves, it was an elderly lady, and they couldn't get an ambulance to her, to build their own

rota so they could sit with her and look after her and talk to her and give her drinks and get her food. Because she couldn't do it for herself. Nobody asked them to do that.

That's what they chose, to be able to do the right thing. I came away so emotional, so blown away, that that was what was already that I was gonna be working with. I just think it's just a place to feel humanly connected. That's probably my thoughts. Apologies for talking too much there, but I was just trying to recall that experience and how it touched me so personally.

### **Paula Palmer**

Oh, no, lovely. I think that's how people have really embedded the correct values in your business then, isn't it? That people would go above and beyond to look after that person in that situation. That's really nice. Clare, lastly, you.

### **Clare Mills**

I'm not sure how I'm going to follow that because Lisa and Natalie have summed it up so well. I know personally, from my own perspective, I hadn't worked in Social Housing before. It wasn't a sector I was used to. I'd worked for Department of Work and Pensions on Welfare to Work programmes, so it was completely different for me. I think I was probably quite naive in thinking about the types of roles that were available for people and the types of career progression that was available.

So, I've been really blown away by that, actually. I feel a bit sad in a sense that I didn't find it earlier on in my career, because I think I could have probably done some other things with it as well. But yeah, I just, I love my role. I think it's fantastic. I'm so lucky with the team I work with in the Learning and Development team. Everybody's just so passionate about giving opportunities to colleagues to enhance their skills and knowledge and give the best service possible to our customers, which is the most important thing.

### **Paula Palmer**

Okay, thank you. As you said, there are such a wealth of opportunities and roles within Social Housing, so whatever your interests, there's bound to be a role for you. Thank you, thank you very much to Lisa, to Natalie, and Clare for joining me, and thank you to all our listeners for listening on the air.