Recruitment

In the fold

Getting new recruits into housing is only the start. Then you’ve got to persuade them to stay. Peter Jeffery and Lisa Burns unveil the first findings of a major new study on staff retention in the housing sector—and reveal what makes people leave.

Remember how you felt when you got your first job in housing? Depressed, overawed or just pretty chuffed? It’s the latter you’re not alone. New research by MORI has shown that people joining the housing sector are generally pleased with their choice. A total of 100 new entrants took part in an in-depth survey to gauge their initial impressions of the sector, their longer-term career aspirations and whether they would stay within the sector. Half of those interviewed were new to housing, with the other half new to their organisation. When they were asked what were their initial impressions of their new job, 99 per cent said they were very or fairly positive. Perhaps surprisingly, given anecdotal evidence that the sector has been criticised in the past for over-selling jobs in a desperate attempt to recruit, 91 per cent stated that their expectations had in fact been met a great deal or a fair amount, rising to 96 per cent for those new to housing.

These initial results come from a major research project analysing retention strategies in the housing sector. The project is co-managed by Anglia Housing Group and Northern Counties Housing Association and seeks to build on earlier work carried out in 2001. The earlier research—To have and to hold—was led by Genesis Housing Group, and was funded by the Housing Corporation and supported by the National Housing Federation. It sought to blow away some of the mystique around recruitment within the housing sector. The report indicated that the housing sector had a low, in some cases non-existent, profile in terms of job choice. The project findings enabled HR professionals to challenge some of the preconceived notions about who is attracted to the sector and what are the most appropriate means of getting them to join. However, the research had concentrated on recruitment and what became apparent was that retention (the ‘To hold’ bit) required further investigation.

This new research has attracted £60,000 of Housing Corporation Innovation in Good Practice Grant and further financial support from both Anglia and Northern Counties. The project is also being jointly supported by the NHF and the Chartered Institute of Housing.

The rationale is clear. As the NHF’s director of corporate services Jane Greenoak puts it, there is much work going on to raise the sector’s profile, particularly through Housing’s Better Future—but there is little point in attracting people to the sector if they don’t stay.

The research has focused on nine case study registered social landlords of varying sizes across the country. The project breaks down into several elements:

- Firstly, in-depth interviews with human resources directors exploring a number of key retention themes, particularly the difficulties in the labour market with respect to retaining staff, the consequences of those difficulties and initiatives they have adopted to encourage staff to stay.
- Secondly, a self-completion questionnaire survey of current employees within those organisations. More than 1,000 staff responded to the survey explaining why they joined the sector, what their experience has been and what their future career intentions are.
- Thirdly, the case study organisations have provided details of newcomers and recent leavers to their organisations. In both cases, telephone interviews have been undertaken with these individuals. In the case of new entrants the interviewers explored why these people joined a particular organisation and/or the sector, whether their expectations have been met and how, if at all, induction has been carried out within the organisation.
- Leavers have been asked to point to the ‘moment of truth’ when they decided to leave, and the factors that led them to make that decision.

The research has been carried out during July and August by MORI on behalf of the project group. Analysis on the first two sections is still being undertaken and will form the basis of a future article. But the initial data on new entrants and leavers already provides a number of positive findings.

When the new entrants were asked what attracted them overall to the sector, the top four responses were:

1. Working for an organisation that serves the public
2. Interesting work
3. Career development opportunities
4. Able to make the best use of my skills and abilities

This confirms previous research that the sector’s strongest selling point is that it can provide meaningful work. When they were asked how they would like their career to develop over the next two to three years, more than two thirds of new entrants indicated they wished to stay with their current employer (93 per cent were hoping for promotion within the organisation, 81 per cent saw themselves in the same job and 12 per cent were hoping for a sideways move). This is useful information in manpower planning plans.

Three-quarters of new entrants who were also new to housing said, if asked by a friend, they would recommend
the sector as a place to work and 91 per cent said they would recommend the individual housing association where they were employed. Given this evidence of a feel-good factor it appears that once the sector has been ‘discovered’ many new entrants’ initial response is positive.

However, before we jump to the conclusion that there is no problem with retention, there were some indicators that managers would be wise to note.

Respondents were asked ‘What, if anything, do you dislike about your job?’. While one-third said ‘nothing’, one-fifth of respondents cited ‘the feeling of pressure or stress’, (the figure higher amongst those who had previously worked in housing). When they were asked ‘What, if anything, do you dislike about the organisation?’, more than half said ‘nothing’. However, 12 per cent stated ‘internal politics/bureaucracy’ (the figure here was higher amongst those new to housing). The next highest response was ‘lack of resources to do my job’, again higher amongst those new to housing.

What makes staff move on?

The picture begins to darken as one turns to top-line findings relating to the people who have left the case study organisations. Fifty individuals were questioned about why they had chosen to leave their RSL. Critically, the data indicates the need for careful induction of anyone new to both the organisation and the sector. Of the leavers, nearly one quarter (24 per cent), said that their desire to leave was formed within the first six months and 42 per cent within the first year. (We know from the new entrants, that although 93 per cent stated their organisation had a corporate induction, only 65 per cent said their organisation had role or job specific induction).

Respondents were asked whether their reasons for leaving were mainly due to positive ‘pull’ factors or negative ‘push’ factors or a combination of both. A total of 58 per cent cited negative push factors, 22 per cent a combination of both and 20 per cent mentioned pull factors.

The main reasons given for leaving were career opportunity (18 per cent), salary (18 per cent) and lack of support from their manager (16 per cent). Interestingly, although these were described in terms of push rather than pull factors, the defining moment that persuaded most people to leave was a better offer elsewhere. The implication is that if some of the concerns of staff are addressed as they surface, and Fifty-eight per cent said that they left their jobs for negative ‘push’ reasons
before the individual has the time or inclination to look elsewhere, they might stay.

Of the leavers, only 56 per cent said they had been offered an opportunity for an exit interview or questionnaire. Of those that had completed such an interview or questionnaire, two-thirds had found it useful in helping them communicate their reasons for leaving. Perhaps most tellingly, of those who had left their association, fewer than half (48 per cent) said, if asked by a friend, they would recommend it as a place to work. Three-quarters of leavers said they would recommend the housing sector generally.

It is early days in terms of the research – the full findings are due to be published in November and will draw together the different elements of the study. The initial indications are that the sector is relatively good at attracting new talent, particularly from the private sector into mainstream housing. The major impetus for this is that people want to work in jobs that have a meaningful purpose.

However, what appears at this stage is that although the sector is getting better at attracting talent, it is less than successful at retaining it. There is a stark contrast between those who are new to the sector who are genuinely enthusiastic and wish to recommend the sector and their individual housing associations, to those that have left, who on the whole appear to be a little disillusioned. It could be claimed that this is perhaps inevitable.

Housing is having to fight for its position in a tight labour market where considerably fewer people are out of work. This means it is harder to replace leavers. In this context RSLs need to understand the psychology of what people want in a job and tailor their retention strategies accordingly.

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The full findings of the retention project will be published in November. They will also feed into a CIH good practice guide on recruitment and retention of staff, due for publication in spring 2004.

Thirty-nine per cent said that they would stay with their current employer for the next two to three years in the hope of being promoted or given more responsibility.