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How to develop an inclusive culture with effective leadership in the social housing sector

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MEET DOUGLAS SILVERSTONE

Douglas Silverstone is the Director of Technology at Southern Housing. His journey from corporate finance into social housing reflected a shift toward purpose-led leadership. He began his career at Deutsche Bank but soon realised he needed to do work that made a real difference.

That desire led him into the charity sector, where he joined Citizens Advice during the rollout of the Disability Discrimination Act. There, he helped develop early accessibility standards, seeing first-hand how technology could change lives. This experience shaped his belief that tech should serve people, not just drive profit.

Douglas later worked across charities, government, and housing. He found social housing to be the ideal blend of structure and social impact after taking his first role at Thames Valley Housing as a Project Manager leading on the implementation of a new CRM. This exposure allowed him to combine technical leadership with meaningful outcomes.

His leadership style was grounded in values. He focused on building teams that cared about their work and the people they served. For Douglas, success wasn’t just about results. It was about how those results affected real lives.

He is also a strong advocate for inclusion and diversity. Douglas believed diverse teams were more adaptable and innovative. He led by example, promoting internal progression and creating a culture where everyone felt valued.

His transition from banking to housing showed how leaders from corporate backgrounds could bring fresh thinking to purpose-driven sectors. Douglas’s story highlighted the importance of empathy, clarity, and mission in shaping strong, inclusive teams in the housing sector.

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Visions for Effective Leadership in 'Tech for Good'

In social housing, tech for good meant using technology to improve the lives of residents and support staff more effectively. Leadership in this space had to be values driven, focusing on real world outcomes like quicker repairs, better access to services, and improved tenant experiences.

For residents, it meant systems that were clear, accessible, and responsive to their needs. For employees, it was about understanding the purpose behind the technology and seeing how their work supported people, even if they were not on the frontline.

Effective leaders bridged the gap between tech teams and service delivery, creating a culture of collaboration, purpose, and impact. When technology was built around people, not just processes, it became a powerful tool for social change.

Tackling the disconnect between Tech teams and Service Delivery

Technology was integral to the entire organisation but often felt disconnected from front-line services. To bridge this gap, regular meetings were held that included leaders from various departments. These sessions promoted better understanding, helped tech teams see how their work supported others, and allowed non-tech leaders to appreciate the value and skills within tech.

Because salaries in social housing tech were generally lower than in the private sector, motivation came from purpose and culture rather than pay. Creating an inclusive and supportive environment where team members felt valued and inspired was vital. Leadership adapted to different working styles and needs to ensure everyone could contribute effectively and feel connected to the organisation's mission.

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Challenges in Leadership Style that you faced?

In social housing, promoting autonomy and creativity within tech teams was essential to develop innovative solutions that improved resident services. However, this approach could sometimes lead team members off course, requiring careful course correction without discouraging their initiative.

Leadership challenges often arose from the clash between different management styles within the sector. While tech teams thrived on a values driven, problem-solving mindset, other departments such as operational or front-line teams used more transactional and task-focused leadership. For example, housing officers might have prioritised completing specific calls or visits each day, while tech teams focused on longer term innovation and system improvements.

Navigating these differences required balancing the need for structure with flexibility. Leaders often acted as buffers, protecting tech teams from conflicting demands and helping them prioritise the most urgent and valuable work. This support helped maintain focus and morale, ensuring tech innovations continued to serve the complex needs of residents effectively.

What were your proudest or 'most successful' moments as a leader in the tech for good world

When I thought about the moments I was most proud of in my career, they almost always came back to people. One story that really stood out was about Amy, who was our Director of Data. I actually recruited her back when she was a Data Quality Analyst at Thames Valley Housing. Even then, she was brilliant, sharp, driven, full of potential. Over the years, she just kept growing. We built some incredible things together, and watching her thrive in her role at Southern Housing was genuinely one of the highlights of my journey. She was the one who flagged my current role to me in the first place!

Another thing I paid close attention to was turnover. In tech, the average turnover rate hovered around 27%. Mine? It was 2%. When it ticked up to 3%, I was honest, I was gutted. From a recruitment perspective, I knew how rare that was. But beyond the numbers, it spoke volumes about the culture we had built and how people felt about staying.

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I also got a huge sense of satisfaction from seeing people grow internally. Our Cybersecurity Manager had started out as the Service Desk Manager. The Service Desk Manager had been a Service Desk Analyst. We made space for people to progress, to evolve, to stretch themselves. That kind of self-sustaining culture? It didn't happen by accident. It was one of the things I was proudest of.

Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion

I'd always been involved in accessibility and inclusion, it actually started during my time at Citizens Advice. But one of the biggest wake-up calls came later, when I began digging into the gender pay gap in the housing sector.

What really struck me was that even in organisations with well-structured pay frameworks, the gap still existed. Why? Because men still dominated the higher-paid tech and development roles. Meanwhile, operational roles which often paid less were mostly held by women.

That realisation hit hard. Once I saw it clearly, how could I not act?
Gender equity had always been something I felt particularly passionate about. But it didn't stop there, intersectionality mattered too. I led our neurodiversity group because I believed leadership wasn't about representation; it was about making space visible. I wasn't a woman, but I was a well-paid man who saw the problem and I made it a priority to listen, learn, and take action.

At Southern Housing, we were sitting at around 28–30% women in tech slightly above the industry average of 25%. It wasn't good enough, but it was better than most. A lot of that progress came from recruiting internally and hiring for potential and cultural fit, rather than focusing solely on technical skill. That naturally opened the door to a more diverse range of candidates.

And the truth was, diversity in tech went far beyond gender. It was about different thinking styles, backgrounds, and approaches. That could be challenging. Some team members loved to brainstorm out loud, while others were quiet but consistently came up with gold-standard ideas. The real leadership challenge? Learning how to bring all of that together in a way that worked

Because inclusion wasn't just a nice-to-have it was the future of good tech.

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Diversity as a Driver of Success

Diversity brought resilience and agility, especially in high-pressure moments. During a cybersecurity incident, for example, we didn't just need technical know-how. We needed fast thinkers, deep specialists, clear communicators, and strategic problem-solvers. The kind of team that could respond, adapt, and recover together.

It was never just about technical skills anymore. It became about understanding the why behind everything we did. Why write that SQL query? Why choose that AI tool? Who were we building for? What impact would it have?

When organisations hired only for hard skills, people who could tick all the right boxes they survived. But they didn't grow. They didn't innovate. What gave us that edge was diversity of thought, experience, and perspective. That's what truly moved things forward here at Southern Housing.

Emotional Capital and Corporate Work, how we channelled our energy for a purposeful difference

"Using all of one's emotional capital to make the banks as rich as possible" – This quote of yours stuck with me and I wanted to share it in this blog.

I loved that phrase. It captured a moment many of us reached in our careers. Once your basic needs were met your mortgage, bills, security you started asking, "What am I actually doing with my energy?"

That was where purpose came in. Many people who'd had success in the corporate world wanted to put their skills to better use. They were capable, experienced, and ready to make a difference – but the transition could be hard. Letting go of KPIs, metrics, and ROI thinking didn't happen overnight.

Still, once they got there, they brought so much value. And it was incredibly rewarding to help people make that shift, no matter what stage in their career they might have been at.

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Does Social Housing have a capacity for change?

While the intent was absolutely there, the sector was under enormous pressure. Every day brought new challenges: growing repair backlogs, critical safety issues, and a relentless demand to build more homes, faster and better. These weren't small problems they were systemic, urgent, and often competed for limited time, resources, and attention.

What I saw happening was a slow but significant shift. We became laser-focused on serving only those in the greatest need. That focus was understandable even necessary in many cases. But it also meant narrowing our vision. We were constantly reacting to crisis after crisis, rather than shaping a broader, more hopeful future.

And yet, I couldn't help but imagine something different. What if everyone had access to secure, affordable housing not just those in emergency situations? What would our communities have looked like if housing wasn't a source of stress or instability, but a foundation for opportunity and wellbeing? Why wouldn't we have wanted that kind of world?

The reality was that the housing sector had so much potential to lead to be bold, progressive, and innovative. But the pace and pressure of day to day operations often made it nearly impossible to step back, zoom out, and rethink the system. Firefighting became the default mode, and in that environment, innovation was the first thing to fall off the list.

I still continued to believe that we could do more. But it started with creating space: space to reflect, to challenge the status quo, and to ask bigger questions. That was where real change began.

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Building a More Inclusive Sector

It started with openness with creating spaces where people could bring their full selves to work. I'd seen time and again how confidence and inclusion weren't just nice ideas; they actively fuelled performance. When people felt seen and valued, they contributed more, collaborated better, and drove stronger outcomes.

But I'd always believed it needed to go further than that.

We served over 100,000 tenants a huge and diverse community. And I often found myself asking: Did we reflect that diversity in our workforce? Were we truly listening to our residents, learning from them, tapping into their skills and experiences? If I was honest, I wasn't sure we were. And I believed we were missing out in a big way.

Too often, social housing operated with the mindset of "we're doing good," and while the intent was usually there, it could become a barrier. We sometimes forgot that the people we served weren't just recipients of support they were talented, skilled, resourceful individuals in their own right.

There was a huge amount of untapped potential within our communities. And I believed we needed to find more intentional ways to bring that potential into our organisations not just as tenants with lived experience, but as colleagues, collaborators, and leaders.

That shift in thinking could have changed everything for our teams, our culture, and ultimately, the impact we had.

It is worth noting that at Southern Housing our residents are encouraged to get involved and hold us to account. We've more than 100 residents within our formal governance structure and 4 resident board members, as well as many other residents supporting us to shape the day to day delivery of our services. For example, residents worked with us to design and develop our newly launched Online Account, our digital customer portal earlier this year.

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Conclusion

Douglas' journey is a fantastic reminder that leadership grounded in purpose, inclusion, and people first thinking has the power to reshape entire sectors. From his beginnings in corporate finance to championing tech for good in social housing, Douglas showed how empathy, clarity, and a commitment to equity can turn technology into a force for meaningful impact. He demonstrated that real innovation happens not just through systems or tools, but through culture by building diverse teams, nurturing internal growth, and challenging outdated norms. While the housing sector faces immense pressure, Douglas's story offers a hopeful vision: one where space is made for reflection, where community voices are truly heard, and where leadership is measured not only by outcomes, but by the lives changed along the way.

Thanks to Douglas for his time and great insight into How to develop an inclusive culture with effective leadership in the social housing sector.

If you, or your organisation would like to discuss developing Inclusive and diverse culture further, please do get in touch and we can organise a conversation with Douglas.

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