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BUILDING DIVERSITY

The property sector needs to improve its reputation for diversity and inclusivity. How big is the issue, and what are the practical steps it must take?

THE PANEL Dr Holly Birkett researcher in workplace inclusivity, Birmingham Business School / Vivienne Clements executive director, HBD
 Karina Connolly senior business development manager, Morgan Sindall Construction / Jilly Cosgrove managing director, Barques
 Simon Farrant head of office, Savills / Hannah Floyd co-owner, Pi SQ and Midlands vice-chair, Women in Property
 Francesca Ghavami senior interior designer, Glenn Howells Architects / Maria Grazia Zedda senior equality, diversity and inclusion manager, HS2
 Chanelle Gray head of diversity & inclusion, Savills / Georgina Hickman land manager, Barratt David Wilson Homes
 Anthony McCourt chief executive, Court Collaboration / Polly Mathews land and planning manager, St Joseph Homes
 Ralph Minott masterplanning and development director, Calthorpe Estates / Kam Saini planning director, Carney Sweeney
 Dr Subashini Suresh expert on diversity in the built environment, University of Wolverhampton

What challenges does the property sector face in becoming more inclusive, and what impact is lack of diversity having?

Chanelle Gray Merit is a myth. The sector has been traditionally tailored by white men from privileged backgrounds, who have been there for 30 or 40 years, determining how senior roles are developed. There are huge demands made on women coming back from maternity leave, particularly in fee-earning roles, to resume long unsociable hours. The sector also still has an

issue with ethnicity, particularly at senior levels.

Ralph Minott In professions like medicine and law I see real diversity, but not in almost any area of property.

Anthony McCourt There is still a big issue with being gay in property. Jilly Cosgrove and I set up Open Land, a LGBT forum for gay and lesbian young professionals. Membership quickly rose to 300, mainly women, most of whom still feel they cannot come out.

Dr Subashini Suresh We need to consider intersectionality: people are not just a gender, an ethnicity or a sexuality, but have a whole range of aspects to their personality. Inclusivity has to be having minority voices heard at board meetings, presentations and business pitches. There is a lot of tick-box thinking: I'm aware of one organisation that states a woman must be on every

interview panel, even if they have no experience of the role being offered.

Francesca Ghavami Unless organisations start thinking about diversity in senior leadership roles, they will be left with massive gaps.

Vivienne Clements Success in property is through networking. That can be a real challenge to young people, particularly women, who struggle to break into a room of 200 men, already gathered in their cohorts, and who don't want to get involved in a rugby-ob-

sessed, drinking, late-evenings culture.

Karina Connolly I recently came off maternity leave, and it does change priorities. That long-hours culture is difficult for parents.

Is there a hard business case for inclusivity?

McCourt Property organisations should not be mandated on diversity targets. This is not a regulated industry, and it's best left that way. Encouraging diversity is best left to the P&L [profit and loss] accounts. Businesses that embrace inclusivity are those, long term, that will succeed as staff will vote with their feet in companies that do not.

Maria Grazia Zedda There is a clear business case for having a diverse workforce: they last longer, are more innovative and more competitive.

What practical steps can the sector take to develop a more diverse workforce?

Minott It has to start with leadership. When I joined Calthorpe 15 years ago, I thought a 300-year-old company would be a stereotyped white middle-class organisation. However, 30 per cent of its staff

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Francesca Ghavami
 Glenn Howells Architects

were non-white and 90 per cent were state educated. It was driven by leadership, in my case a traditional Yorkshireman who understood the importance of diversity.
Simon Farrant The old ways of recruiting people are not the way forward. Increasingly we are less interested in whether you did a couple of weeks' work at Knight Frank or Prologis over the summer than community work you have done. We assume that graduates already have the grades we need. What is more important to us is showing character.

Clements If we are to attract a new cohort of talent, we need new ways of networking that don't involve drinks and rugby, and do it as an industry.

McCourt The sector is changing, but it's changing because we offer choices – not by banning drinking, but by opening up other avenues that allow new ways of networking.

Grazia Zedda It's understandable how, at the end of a long day, we like to go to the pub as a team, but managers have to be mindful that there are some who can't make it out for a drink. Managers have to be aware of other ways of making them feel included.

Hannah Floyd We've run coffee and lunchtime meetings as ways of networking so people who do the school runs have an opportunity to interact.

Ghavami Companies have a huge responsibility to put

women in front of clients, so their voices and perspectives are heard. There is still a tendency to defer to the male voices in the room, when we should be making it clear 'this woman is leading this project'. The more women's voices are heard in meetings, the more they are accepted. It's not positive discrimination, more positive promotion.

McCourt More businesses need to take on a leadership role. So many say 'I wish Birmingham would do something we could get on board with'. Why wait? We just went ahead and set up some mentoring with Birmingham City University, many of whom come from deprived areas. Soon you find another ten, 20 businesses come along and do the same thing.

How important are role models?

Suresh One of the biggest contributions anyone can make in encouraging inclusivity is by being a role model, making younger people aware of the full breadth of what's available in property and that they can be part of it. I'm from an inner city area and proud of it. I wanted to be a bit different, not become a doctor or a lawyer like many others, and my parents were supportive as long as they were

ADVICE



Kam Saini



Hannah Floyd



Maria Grazia Zedda



Jilly Cosgrove



Polly Mathews

sure I could make a living. That is where we have a real challenge, convincing parents that being a master planner or a surveyor is a route out of poverty.

Ghavam I work in architecture, which has seen the number of women rise from 8 per cent in 1999 to 30 per cent now, which means other women have more role models they can aspire to.

Clements I know of at least three women who entered the profession, partly because they saw me at boardroom level.

Grazia Zedda It needs to be more than appointing people to senior positions: if we are to recruit a more diverse workforce people need to see themselves represented at mid-range levels they can relate to. However, people from minorities do not want to be seen as special cases who need special help. They want to see themselves as having risen through their own merits, not through quotas.

How does the sector attract more young people from marginalised and minority communities?

Gray Presently, property is not something a 14-year-old from a depressed area would normally consider as an option. A lot of

good work is being done in bringing in graduates from a wider base and engaging with schools from a wider socio-economic background. This is needed because we want to see more young people consider careers in property rather than the usual aspirations to become doctors or lawyers.

Dr Holly Birkett Transparency of information is important when people make career decisions. Careers are more than just wages – candidates want to know about flexible working, a company's ethical stance, its diversity.

Minott We've had a really good response in school engagement. Our head of ESG [environmental, social and governance] has become a governor at the local state school. She made a presentation on her job in front of 100 girls. She told them 'this was my first salary... this is what I earn now working in property'. That changed a lot of minds.

Connolly We jointly commissioned research to discover perceptions of the property sector. We found there was a lack of understanding of roles available, and widespread fear that if someone joined in a set role, and found they did not like it, they'd be trapped. Now we work with our fellow report commissioners – Gleeds and HBD – getting recruits to spend six months at each, learning different roles, so they have 18 months in the industry before they made specific career decisions.

Clements One of the best ways of encouraging diversity is by making people aware of the huge range of opportunities available, from architects to surveyors. Unlike say, law, property is not one type of job, it covers a huge range of disciplines between which people can move.

Georgina Hickman That's been my experience. We've tried to create an environment where people can move between roles. So you can join as a construction person, in sales or as a surveyor, and change roles. It is

a help when explaining to parents about the opportunities.

Birkett Recruitment seems to be handled in a competitive way: we need employers working together to create a bigger pool of diverse talent they can share.

Gray There is a degree of co-operation between businesses. Savills has a charter with other companies that we recruit graduates at the same time, and don't offer more money, so we don't poach from each other. We also move recruits around the business so they get various experiences.

Clements If every professional put in just three hours a year on outreach it would make a huge difference with diversity.

Connolly The industry is poor in communicating roles on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Instead, it still puts jobs on LinkedIn or message boards.

Polly Mathews The industry is behind in using social media. Young people don't look at LinkedIn – which I only joined because I was told at university that I had to – they prefer quirky videos and posts.

Clements In Sheffield we created a 'See It, Be It' library – 20-second clips of people doing their jobs and spread across social media. ■