

How diverse is England's housing association workforce in 2026?



Results from NHF analysis

September 2026

About us

About the National Housing Federation

The National Housing Federation (NHF) is the voice of England's housing associations.

Our housing association members provide homes for around six million people, and are driven by a social purpose: providing good quality housing that people can afford.

We support our members to deliver that social purpose, with ambitious work that leads to positive change.

About this research

This research was commissioned and carried out in March 2026 by an internal Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) group within the NHF, in collaboration with our national EDI steering group which is made up of housing association executives and board members.

The following report forms the third iteration of our work into how diverse the housing association workforce is, following on from research in 2023 and 2021. It aims to build a comprehensive picture of who works in social housing and how representative the workforce is of the communities where there are social homes. It offers conclusions, next steps and recommendations to improve equality, diversity and inclusion.

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Foreword

Foreword from Kate Henderson, Chief Executive at the NHF

For the third time in five years, the NHF has worked with housing associations across our membership to hold a mirror up to the sector's workforce. We collect the EDI data presented in these reports to establish the extent to which the sector's boards, executive teams and overall workforce are representative of its residents and communities.

Why is this research so important?

Housing associations share a strong social purpose, and a drive to deliver the best possible outcomes for their residents and communities. Of course, the NHF and our members are taking a range of actions to ensure that residents' voices are heard and acted on by their landlords. But EDI has a vital role to play: an organisation that is representative of its community is best placed to make the right decisions for that community.

Over recent years, communities have been impacted by rising division and tensions, including a rise in racist rhetoric. Social housing is rooted in addressing injustice and inequalities. We do not tolerate racism or discrimination and are driven by our strong social values to improve equality, diversity, and inclusion – this has to start from within our own organisations.

I want to thank our members who submitted EDI data on their boards, executive teams and overall workforce. We acknowledge that this exercise takes time and resources to complete, so by taking part organisations are demonstrating that they see the value of the findings. I'm particularly pleased to see that more smaller housing associations – those with less than 200 homes, and greater pressure on their resources – have taken part in the data collection this time.

What the 2026 data shows us

From the very start of the sector's EDI data collection journey, we have been clear that to achieve our goal of the sector being representative – at all levels – of its communities, a long-term commitment to change would be essential. More than 130,000 people work in the housing association sector, and improving the diversity of such a large group of people takes time.

So what does this year's data tell us about where we are making progress, and where we must continue to focus our efforts?

- **Disability representation has increased**, particularly at leadership level, but the sector is still not representative across any groups.
- **Representation of women has increased across all workforce groups**, although leadership teams are still not representative.
- **Ethnic diversity on boards has increased and is mostly representative**, however there has been no progress on executive teams. Executive teams are marginally less ethnically diverse than in 2023, with Black communities particularly underrepresented.

The data shows us exactly where we need to act. The NHF is committed to playing our part, and the next steps in this report set out how we will support our members to take action.

As representation across the workforce has increased, so too has the opportunity we have to improve representation at leadership levels, and reap the benefits that would bring to organisations and residents. We have an increasingly diverse pool of talent to draw from. We must reflect on, and tackle, the barriers to people from underrepresented groups progressing to leadership roles in our sector.

Looking to the future

We must protect the progress we have seen so far as well as striving to achieve further change. The recommendations in this report reflect this, setting out the value of ongoing data collection and inclusive workplace cultures, and as well as providing guidance on inclusive recruitment practices – among other practical steps organisations can take.

As the sector's trade body, the NHF is in this for the long haul. We will continue to engage with our members on EDI in housing, to understand how we can best support their commitment to driving change that is essential to our social purpose.

Executive summary

This report explores how diverse and representative the housing association workforce is in 2026. It draws on diversity data from 185 organisations, representing 79% of the homes owned by housing associations in England. With this information, we have been able to compare the characteristics of the population where housing association homes are located with the characteristics of the housing association workforce. By drawing this comparison, we can see how representative the social housing sector is – and what work needs to be done to better represent residents and improve diversity.

The sector has collected more diversity data than ever before

Housing associations in England are committed to finding out more about the people within their workforces, demonstrated by an increase in the sector's collection of staff diversity data since our research in 2023.

We have identified a decrease in data gaps across most characteristics since 2023 and acknowledge that significant steps have been taken by the social housing sector to proactively identify the lived experiences and diversity of its workforce. In particular, we have seen large drops in the data gaps with regard to caring responsibilities, sexual orientation and religion, alongside sustained decreases in the gaps for socioeconomic background. We also saw a reduction in 'prefer not to say' responses for gender identity, indicating a greater willingness to disclose this information.

An increase in complete data may suggest that staff feel more comfortable sharing information about their identity. This would be an indication of a positive workplace culture, though this should be considered alongside other measures of inclusion and employee experience when reflecting on workplace culture.

Our research shows that housing associations **are missing at least**

90% of workforce data on **socioeconomic background.**

We know very little about the socioeconomic background and caring responsibilities of people in our sector

Despite an increase in proactive data collection and response to our EDI data collection, our sector does not know the complete picture of its workforce in 2026.

As it stands, we do not know the socioeconomic background of people that work within social housing – our research shows that housing associations are missing at least 90% of this data. Similarly, we do not fully understand the caring responsibilities people have within our sector – with at least 80% of the workforce data on this is missing. However, more housing associations are now collecting this data compared to previous data collections.

Knowing the socioeconomic background of the housing association workforce, and the responsibilities and pressures people face outside of work, would help us understand how well the sector supports social mobility and socioeconomic diversity. This is particularly important given the sector's role in providing homes for people on lower incomes and for people that may need support at home.



When asked about their characteristics, people working in social housing are still least likely to disclose their sexuality or religion

Sexual orientation and religion are still the characteristics staff are least likely to disclose about themselves. In fact, 6.7% of the workforce chose 'prefer not to say' when asked about their sexual orientation, and the same percentage for religion. This has marginally increased since the last data collection in 2023 when 6.0% of the workforce chose 'prefer not to say' for sexual orientation and 6.4% for religion."

Choosing 'prefer not to say' could mean someone is not ready to provide that information to a workplace, they may not feel it is relevant or they might not feel comfortable to do so. Without asking, it can be difficult to know why there is reluctance to disclose these characteristics.



Representation of protected characteristics

The 2026 snapshot of the sector's EDI data shows that housing associations have made progress in the right direction, and highlights where organisations should focus efforts to achieve further progress. By workforce group, the research shows that:

- On the whole, there is good representation of people with protected characteristics within the workforce compared to local populations. Disabled people are still underrepresented, but there has been much improvement since 2023.
- Executives are more likely to be White, male and older compared to the workforce. While there are more disabled executives compared to 2023, executive teams are less ethnically diverse, with particularly poor representation of Black communities.
- Boards are more likely to be male and older compared to the workforce. However, boards are more diverse than they were in 2023, with more ethnic diversity and more women and Disabled people represented.

It's clear that the work being done by housing associations organisation-wide to increase inclusivity and diversity is felt by, and reflected in, the workforce. But this commitment to inclusion and diversity, for equality within our workplaces, must come from – and be reflected at – the top.

The championing of these values from chief executives, chairs and board members shapes the culture of an organisation. Inclusive leaders deliver inclusive organisations, to the benefit of staff wellbeing and performance, improved business decisions and better outcomes for resident communities.

The conclusions of this report show where we can feel positive about progress, and highlight exactly where we must focus on creating further improvements.

Recommendations and next steps

This report recommends that housing associations:

1. Use data to shape action

This recommendation includes reviewing organisational data, creating action plans and reviewing recruitment processes. It also covers sharing EDI data and plans with staff, and creating inclusive workplaces.

2. Draw on NHF resources and expert organisations

This recommendation includes signing up to the NHF's new inclusive leadership challenge and making use of other NHF resources, networks, and newsletters. It also suggests signing up to become a Disability Confident employer and signing the Social Housing Anti-Racism Pledge (SHARP).

3. Continue to collect data, and hear from those with lived experience

This recommendation includes engaging with staff on organisational diversity and inclusion, and with residents on equity within service delivery. It also covers the importance of continuing to collect and review EDI data, underpinned by clear communication with staff.

This report also sets out next steps for the NHF, which we are fully committed to delivering on. We will use the data to shape a programme of work and to connect our members with the right experts – and each other. We will also continue our work on making best use of data, now and into the future.

The full recommendations for housing associations, and next steps for the NHF, can be found later in this report.



Introduction

Background

In 2020, the NHF worked with members and the Housing Diversity Network (HDN) to conduct and publish our insight review of housing association staff in England, which set out the powerful moral case for greater EDI within organisations, alongside the strong business case: diverse workforces benefit organisational performance and improve outcomes for residents.

Since then, the NHF published two snapshots of EDI data collected by housing association members across the sector, in order to compare the diversity of the sector's workforce to its communities. This report is the third snapshot of its kind.

Without accurate, up-to-date data, the sector cannot identify where change is needed, or measure progress on the journey towards being representative of its communities. Data highlights the key challenges to tackle, and drives change: for example, the introduction of reporting requirements led to a 1.6 percentage-point narrowing of the gender pay gap at affected employers.

The 2026 data collection has given us a better understanding of how representative the sector is of our communities at this point in time. This report sets out everything we have learned, identifies key areas where further progress is required, shares recommendations for housing associations and sets out the next steps the NHF is taking to support the sector.

Data highlights

the key challenges
to tackle, and drives change.

About the tool

The NHF's EDI data tool allows housing associations in England to compare the diversity of their workforces to their communities, based on characteristics of the population where their homes are located.

The Excel-based tool allows housing associations to compare their workforce characteristics to the population, executive to staff, and board to staff for all nine protected characteristics as well as socioeconomic background. The tool also enables housing associations to input resident data to compare the characteristics of their residents with their workforce or the population where their homes are located.

Data on the characteristics of the population is drawn primarily from the Census 2021, where possible, or other ONS data. Data on the number of homes a housing association owns and manages in each local authority is then used to calculate the characteristics of the population by home location. Further information on the data used in the EDI data tool is in Appendix A.



Language and terminology

We published our [suggested questions resource](#) in 2024 setting out the questions that would be reflected in the 2026 EDI data tool, as well as explanations on why we suggest those questions and how housing associations could use the data they collect.

The language used to refer to ethnicity within this report reflects the categories used to collect the data within the NHF EDI data tool, which align with Census 2021 data.

The report presents the findings on ethnicity representation using the five high-level ethnic groups, however, our EDI data tool also collects data on the 19 detailed ethnic groups used within the Census. It is important for housing associations to collect data using the detailed categories, as there may be differences in experiences and outcomes for people with different ethnicities within the same high-level group.

For the purposes of this report, we have used 'Disabled' as an umbrella term for someone who is Disabled or someone living with a long-term physical or mental health condition. While we recognise that there are differences in opinion regarding the use of a capital D for the word Disabled, we are using this to demonstrate our alignment with the social model of disability, which describes people as being Disabled by barriers in society rather than their impairment or difference.

By gender we are referring to someone's innate sense of their gender, which is not constrained to the binary male/man and female/woman categories and includes others such as non-binary. In previous EDI data tool collections, we asked about sex at birth or on a Gender Recognition Certificate. We changed the question to be more inclusive and better reflect people's current experience of their workplace, the existence of gender inequality and barriers to progression. The question change affects comparability with data collected in 2021 and 2023, however, the impact is likely to be minimal due to the small proportion of people whose gender identity is different to their sex at birth. For further information see the [Appendix](#).

By gender identity, we are referring to whether someone's gender is different or the same as their sex registered at birth. We use the term "trans" to describe all people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth, [as defined by Stonewall](#).

The phrasing of questions and categories within the EDI data tool is primarily consistent with recommendations from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Government Statistical Service (GSS) harmonised standards, where available at the time of writing. This also aligns with Census 2021 to ensure we can compare against the most accurate and up-to-date population data.

GSS harmonised standards on sex and gender are still being developed. So while in 2025 the UK Supreme Court ruled that the definition of sex in the Equality Act (2010) refers to someone's sex assigned at birth, regardless of whether that person has transitioned, in this report when we talk about gender and representation of women, we are inclusive of people who have transitioned.

We recognise that there's much more nuance to people's identities than the terms we have used within the report and encourage housing associations to complement the collection of EDI data with staff engagement to improve their understanding of people's experiences of equality and create an inclusive environment for their staff.

You can find further information about the language and data used within this report in the [Appendix](#).

Who submitted data?

We received EDI data from 185 organisations, representing 78% of homes owned by housing associations in England and 79% of NHF members' homes. Table 1 provides a breakdown of responses by region and as a proportion of NHF member stock.

Table 1: Housing associations that submitted their data by region, as a proportion of NHF membership

Region	Number of submissions	As percentage of NHF members' stock in region
East Midlands	8	52%
East of England	17	57%
London	30	84%
North East	13	99%
North West	34	69%
South East	22	78%
South West	18	82%
West Midlands	20	77%
Yorkshire & Humber	23	98%
England	185	79%

We encourage housing associations, regardless of their size, to collect their EDI data and use our EDI data tool to explore how representative their workforce is of their communities. Table 2 shows the range of different sized organisations who submitted their data. We are pleased that more smaller housing associations, those with less than 200 homes, have taken part in the data collection this time.

Table 2: Housing associations that submitted their data by size of organisation

Size band (units of stock)	Number of responses
<200	25
200-999	28
1,000-1,999	15
2,000-9,999	58
10,000-19,999	26
20,000-49,999	22
50k+	11
Total	185

We received EDI data from
185 organisations,
 representing **79%**
 of homes owned
 by NHF members



Findings

Gaps in the data

This section explores the gaps in the data we have received from housing associations and how this has changed since the previous two data collections in 2021 and 2023. The tool distinguishes between ‘prefer not to say’, where people have chosen not to share personal data, ‘don’t collect’, where data on a characteristic is not collected by the organisation, and ‘don’t know’, where the data is collected by the organisation but is missing for some colleagues. Within this report we have presented the ‘don’t collect’ and ‘don’t know’ categories combined.

As in previous years, **the largest gaps in our data are still around socioeconomic background (parental occupation at 14, attendance at an independent school, and eligibility for free school meals)**. We are missing over 90% of this data on all these characteristics for the workforce and over 80% of this data on executives and board members, as shown in Table 3. We are missing more than three quarters of data on socioeconomic background due to organisations not collecting it. However, within those organisations who do ask it, most colleagues are willing to provide it, with the proportion choosing ‘prefer not to say’ between 0.7%-1.3% and fewer than in 2023, as shown in Table 4 and Figure 3 in the section on Inclusion.

Knowing the socioeconomic background of our sector’s workforce helps us to understand how well the sector supports social mobility and socioeconomic diversity, which is particularly important given our role in providing homes for people on lower incomes. The questions included within our collection are recommended by the Social Mobility Commission based on their accuracy, clarity and accessibility.¹

We have a similar data gap for detailed disability, which captures the extent to which disability limits colleagues’ day-to-day activities. While we have much more complete data on whether or not colleagues have a disability, we do not know the extent to which disability impacts day-to-day activities for 94% of the sector’s workforce, 83% of executive positions and 80% of board members. This data is useful to assess the extent to which policies and processes within the workplace are creating or removing barriers for people with a range of disabilities and long-term health conditions. This information also tells us whether someone is disabled as defined by the Equality Act, as it must be ‘substantial’, meaning there has to be an impact on day-to-day activities.² Some organisations told us that they collect more detail about the type of disability someone has, helping them to create an accessible working environment and policies that meet a range of needs.

We have seen an increasing number of organisations collect data on caring responsibilities (dependent children and provision of informal care), although we still have over 80% of the data missing for the workforce and at least 70% missing for executive and board members. Without this data, employers cannot fully understand the effectiveness of flexible-working policies and if they are creating an inclusive workplace, with opportunities for progression for people with caring responsibilities.

The next largest gap is for gender identity. We do not have data on gender identity for 48% of board members, 42% of executives, 57% of the workforce and 83% of residents. This is not only to do with organisations choosing not to collect data on gender identity, around three quarters of organisations collect this data, but many are missing data for some of their workforce, either because they haven’t collected it from all staff or some staff have not provided it.

1. Social Mobility Commission (May 2021) Simplifying how employers measure socioeconomic background.

2. [Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 - GOV.UK](#)

Table 3: Proportion of workforce, executive, board and residents where we do not have data for a characteristic

Characteristic	Board (n=2062)	Executive (n=1145)	Workforce (n=130360)	Resident (n=2707217)
Age	8%	1%	1%	7%
Gender	6%	2%	4%	7%
Gender identity	48%	42%	57%	83%
Marital status	49%	28%	39%	74%
Ethnicity (headline)	22%	5%	10%	27%
Ethnicity (detailed)	30%	20%	29%	32%
Religion	36%	18%	18%	50%
Disability (Y/N)	32%	22%	22%	48%
Disability (detailed)	80%	83%	94%	97%
Have dependent children	72%	70%	83%	96%
Provide informal care	73%	71%	82%	99.6%
Sexual orientation	34%	14%	17%	53%
Parental occupation	83%	83%	92%	99.5%
Attendance at independent school	81%	85%	91%	99.5%
Free school meals	82%	86%	92%	99.6%

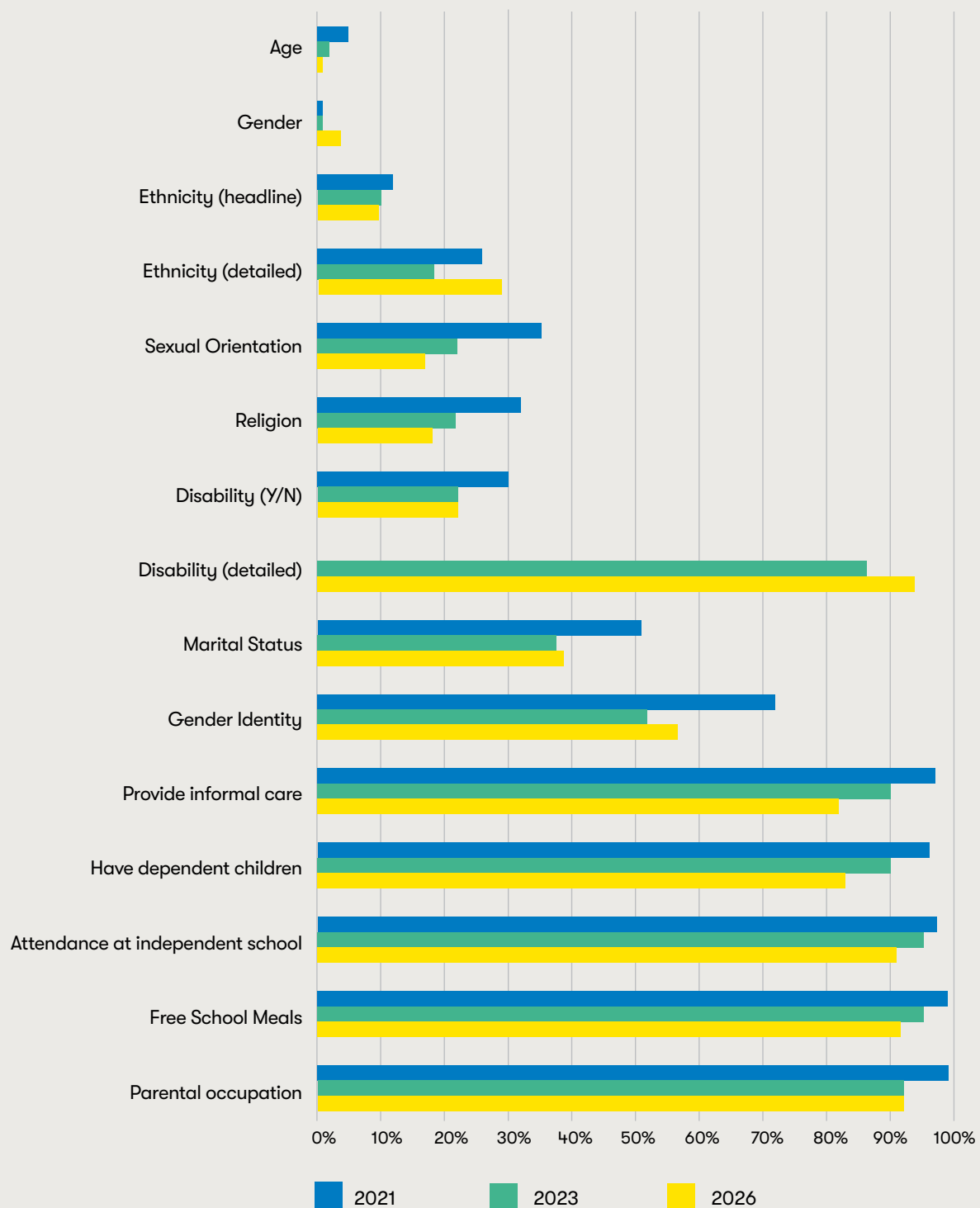
This does not include where we did not receive any data on any of the characteristics from a housing association for that workforce group.

Figure 1 compares the proportion of the workforce where we do not have the data for each characteristic in 2021, 2023 and 2026. The chart shows that the gaps in our data have fallen, to varying degrees, across two thirds of characteristics.

This is notable for socioeconomic characteristics and caring responsibilities, where more housing associations are starting to collect this information about their staff. For example, in 2023, we only had 10% of data on whether members of the workforce provide informal care, we now have data on 18% of the workforce (the gap reduced from 90% to 82%). We also have more data on sexual orientation and religion, with the data gaps decreasing by 5 and 4 percentage points respectively. We now know the sexual orientation of 83% of the workforce and the religion of 82% of the workforce.

In contrast, we have seen data gaps increase for gender identity, detailed disability and detailed ethnicity. We know the gender identity of 5 percentage points less of our workforce compared to 2023 (the gap increased from 52% to 57%). This is still a significant improvement on 2021, when we were missing 72% of the gender identity data of our workforce. The data gap for detailed disability information has increased by 8 percentage points (from 86% to 94%), and the data gap for detailed ethnicity has increased by 11 percentage points (from 18% in 2023 to 29%). Feedback from NHF members suggests some may be collecting more detailed data on disability but using categories different to those within the EDI data tool.

Figure 1: Proportion of workforce where we do not have data for a characteristic – 2021 to 2026



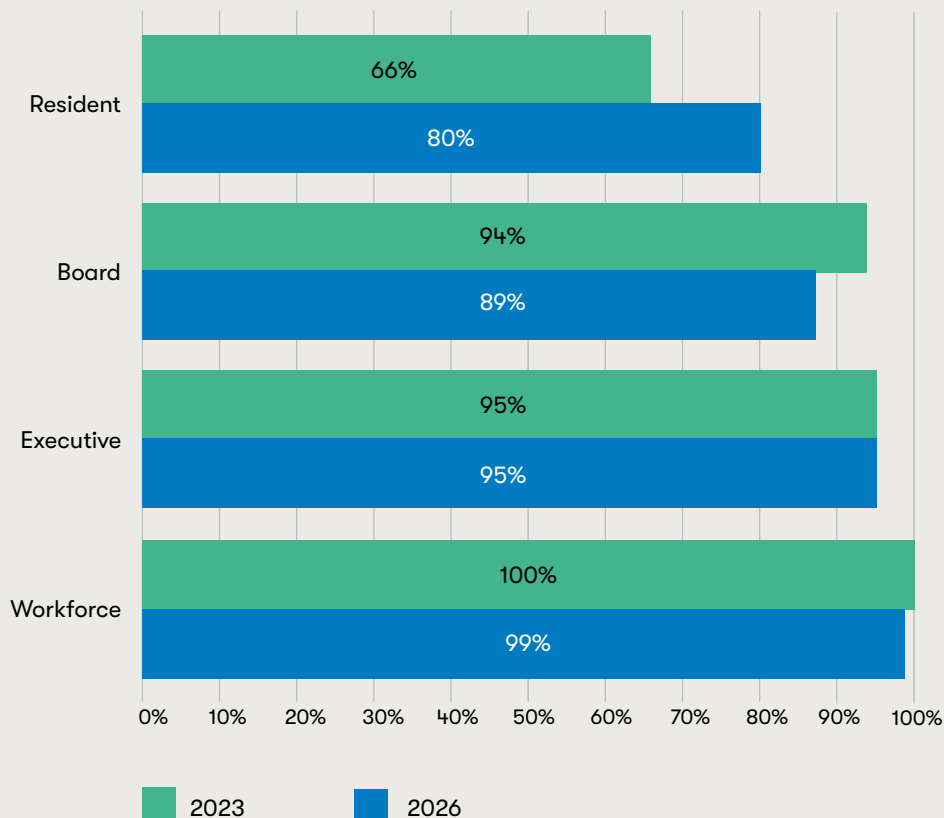
NB: We did not collect data on disability (detailed) in 2021. Question wording for questions on gender and gender identity have changed, see Appendix.

Data gaps by group

The majority of housing associations submitted data on all three workforce groups and on residents. Figure 2 shows that the proportion of housing associations submitting data on their residents has increased from 66% to 80%. This has enabled us to use more resident data within our analysis; to understand how representative the workforce is of housing association residents as well as those who live in the areas where our homes are located.

For the first time, not all organisations submitted data on their workforce. Both organisations who did not provide workforce data, provided data on their boards. Although, overall, we have received fewer submissions with board data compared to 2023.

Figure 2: Proportion of responding organisations who provided data on each group



Inclusion

As in previous years, the characteristics that people were least likely to disclose were religion and sexual orientation – 6.7% of the workforce responded ‘prefer not to say’ when asked about their religion and 6.7% chose not to disclose their sexual orientation. Table 4 shows the proportion of people within each workforce group who chose not to disclose each of the characteristics.

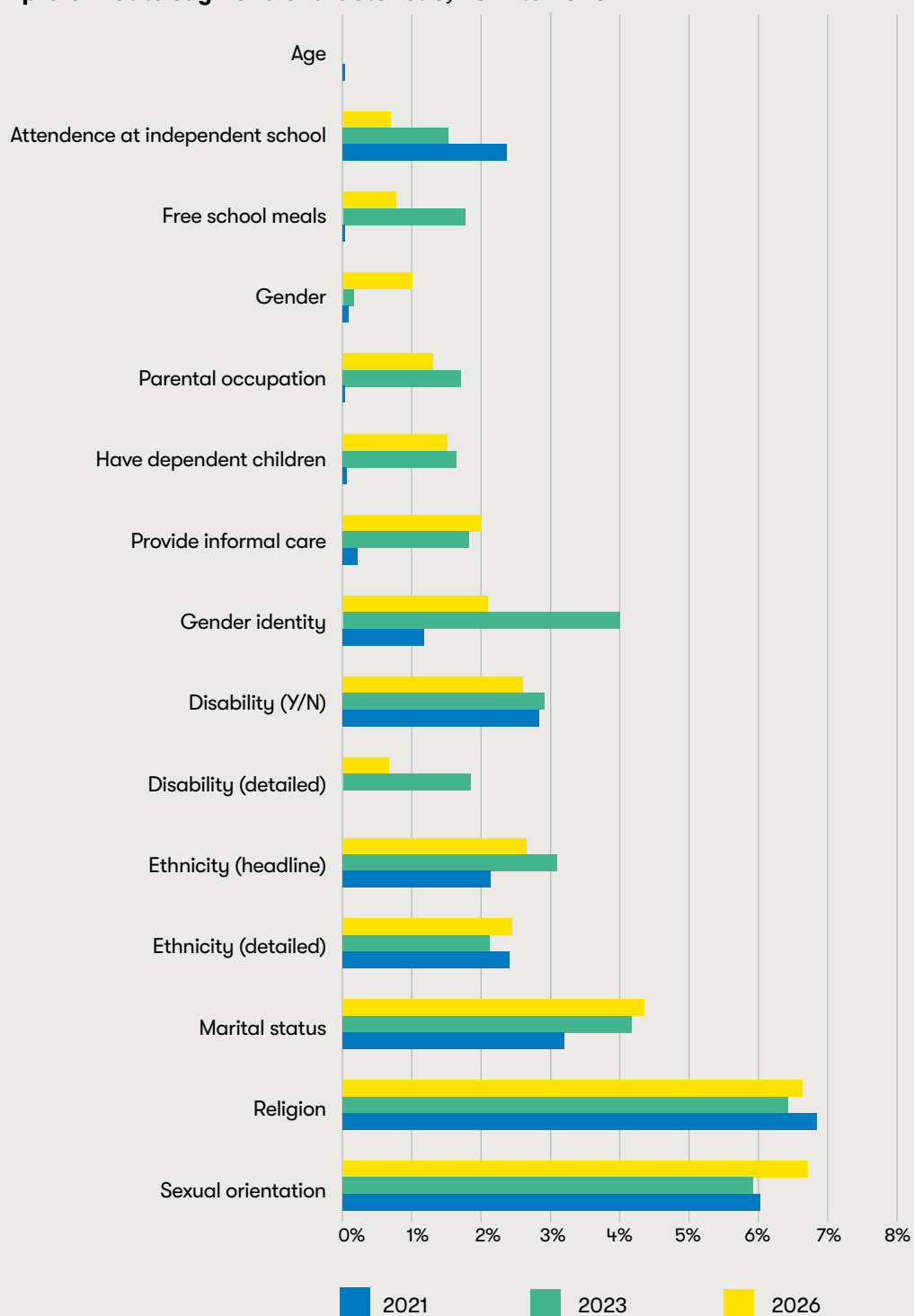
Table 4: Proportion of workforce, executive, board and residents (including don't know responses) who selected 'prefer not to say' for a characteristic

Prefer not to say	Board (n=2062)	Executive (n=1145)	Workforce (n=130360)
Age	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%
Gender	0.6%	0.3%	1.0%
Gender identity	1.0%	1.7%	2.1%
Marital status	3.7%	2.2%	4.4%
Ethnicity (headline)	2.1%	1.0%	2.7%
Ethnicity (detailed)	2.3%	0.8%	2.5%
Religion	5.3%	4.5%	6.7%
Disability (Y/N)	1.9%	0.9%	2.6%
Disability (detailed)	0.8%	0.2%	0.7%
Have dependent children	1.7%	0.5%	1.5%
Provide informal care	2.4%	0.4%	2.0%
Sexual orientation	4.8%	3.8%	6.7%
Parental occupation	0.8%	0.6%	1.3%
Attendance at independent school	1.3%	0.3%	0.7%
Free school meals	1.3%	0.5%	0.8%

There could be a variety of reasons why people have chosen not to disclose this information about themselves, ranging from concerns around the security of this data to uncertainty about how this information may be used by their employer, which could indicate that they do not feel their workplace is inclusive enough.

Figure 3 shows that the proportion of people who preferred not to disclose the data is largely consistent year on year. The biggest change is that there were almost 2 percentage points fewer members of the workforce who did not want to disclose their gender identity compared to 2023. We also have more complete data on socioeconomic background, with fewer members of the workforce choosing prefer not to say for those characteristics (parental occupation, attendance at independent school and free school meals).

Figure 3: Proportion of workforce (including don't know responses) who selected 'prefer not to say' for a characteristic, 2021 to 2026



NB: We did not collect data on disability (detailed) in 2021. Question wording for questions on gender and gender identity have changed, see Appendix.

Representation by characteristic

Summary

Overall, compared to 2023, there is mixed progress. Disabled people are better represented across all workforce groups, particularly at leadership level. This has been a key area of sector focus following the 2023 report. Ethnic diversity at leadership level has also been a key area of focus, and while boards are even more diverse than they were in 2023, executive teams are less diverse, with fewer executives from Asian and Black communities.

By workforce group:

- On the whole, there is good representation of people with protected characteristics within the workforce compared to communities. Disabled people are still underrepresented, but there has been much improvement since 2023.
- Executives are more likely to be White, male and older compared to the workforce. While there are more disabled executives compared to 2023, executive teams are less ethnically diverse, with particularly poor representation of Black communities.
- Boards are more likely to be male and older compared to the workforce. However, boards are more diverse than they were in 2023, with more ethnic diversity and more women and Disabled people represented.



Ethnicity

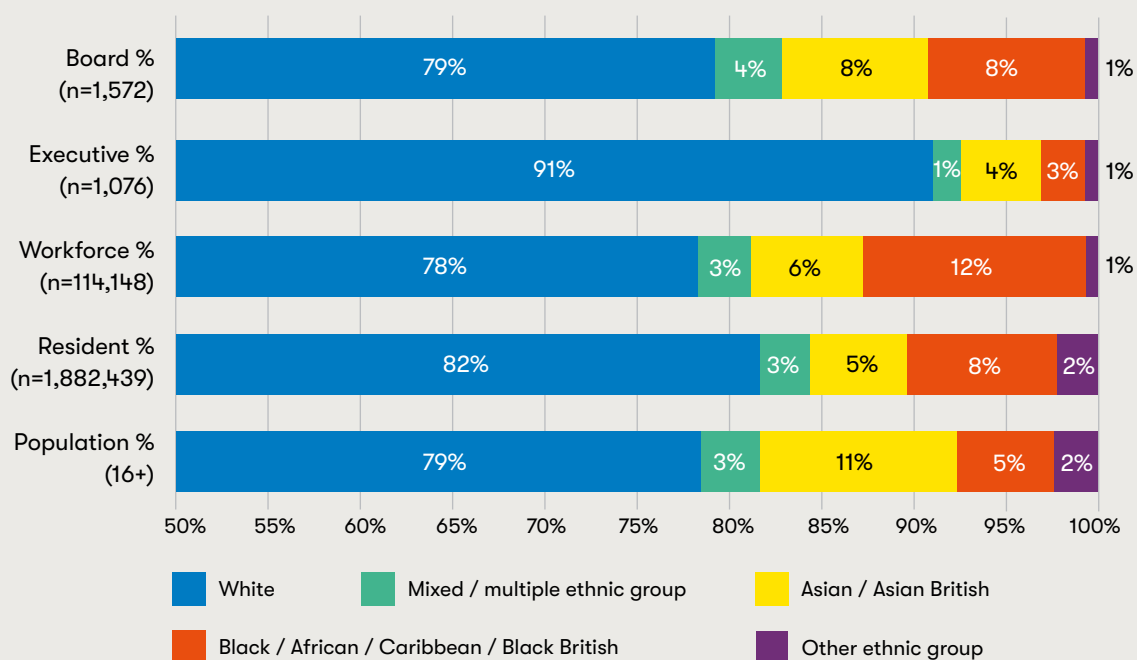
As we have found in previous years, **the housing association workforce is ethnically diverse and broadly representative of the communities we serve**. As shown in Figure 4, 12% of the workforce are from a Black/African/Caribbean/Black British ethnic group, compared to 8% of residents. There are similar proportions of Asian/Asian British people and people of mixed or multiple ethnicities within the workforce compared to residents.

Boards are more ethnically diverse than they were in 2023, with the proportion of Black board members increasing from 6% to 8%. While this is lower than the workforce, it is reflective of the proportion of residents who are Black/African/Caribbean/Black British.

However, **housing association executive teams are no more diverse than they were in 2023**. Figure 5 shows that still only 3% of executives are Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, compared to 12% of the workforce. The proportion of White executives has risen from 90% to 91%. This remains a key area for the sector to work on.

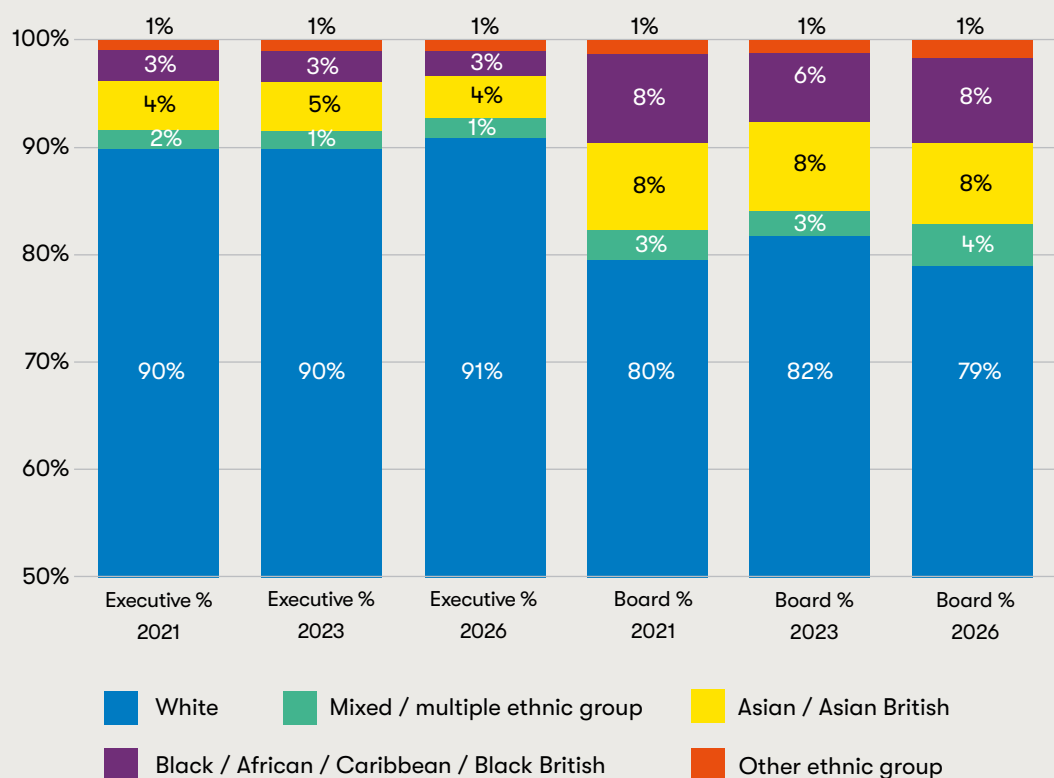


Figure 4: Ethnicity (headline totals) by group, excluding prefer not to say and don't know responses



NB: Chart starts at 50%

Figure 5: Ethnicity (headline totals) of executive and board, excluding prefer not to say and don't know responses, 2021 to 2026



NB: Chart starts at 50%³

3. The proportion of executives who are Asian/Asian British and Mixed/multiple ethnicity was misrepresented within the 2023 report. This graph reflects the correct figures

Disability

While Disabled people are still underrepresented across all workforce groups, the proportion of Disabled people in the sector has increased, particularly at executive and board leadership level. Figures 6 and 7 show that 15% of housing association executive teams and boards have a disability or long-term health condition, compared to only 6% of executives and 10% of boards in 2023. The proportion of the workforce with a disability has also increased from 9% to 12%, however, this is still far lower than 23% of the population and 28% of residents.

Given that disability prevalence is higher amongst social housing residents than in the population, representation of disability in our workforce and at leadership level, where decisions are made that affect residents, is really important. We need to build on this momentum and continue to increase representation of Disabled people in the sector, as well as the visibility of leaders with disabilities and long-term health conditions.

Figure 6: Disability (Yes/No question) by group, excluding prefer not to say and don't know responses

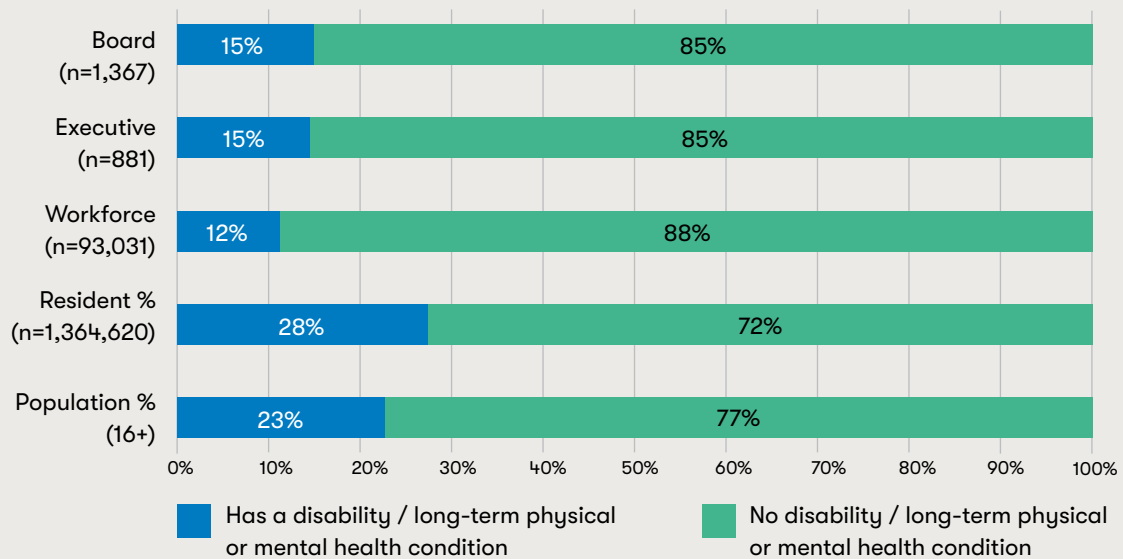
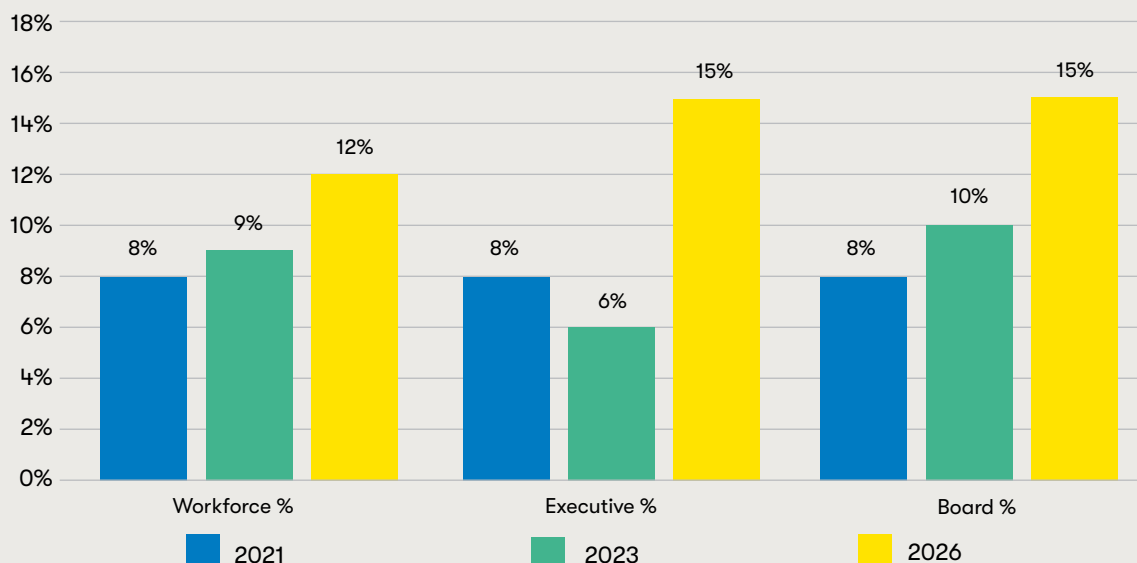


Figure 7: Proportion of each group with a disability or long-term health condition, excluding prefer not to say and don't know responses, 2021 to 2026



Gemma Brennan, Organisational Development Business Partner, Golden Lane Housing:

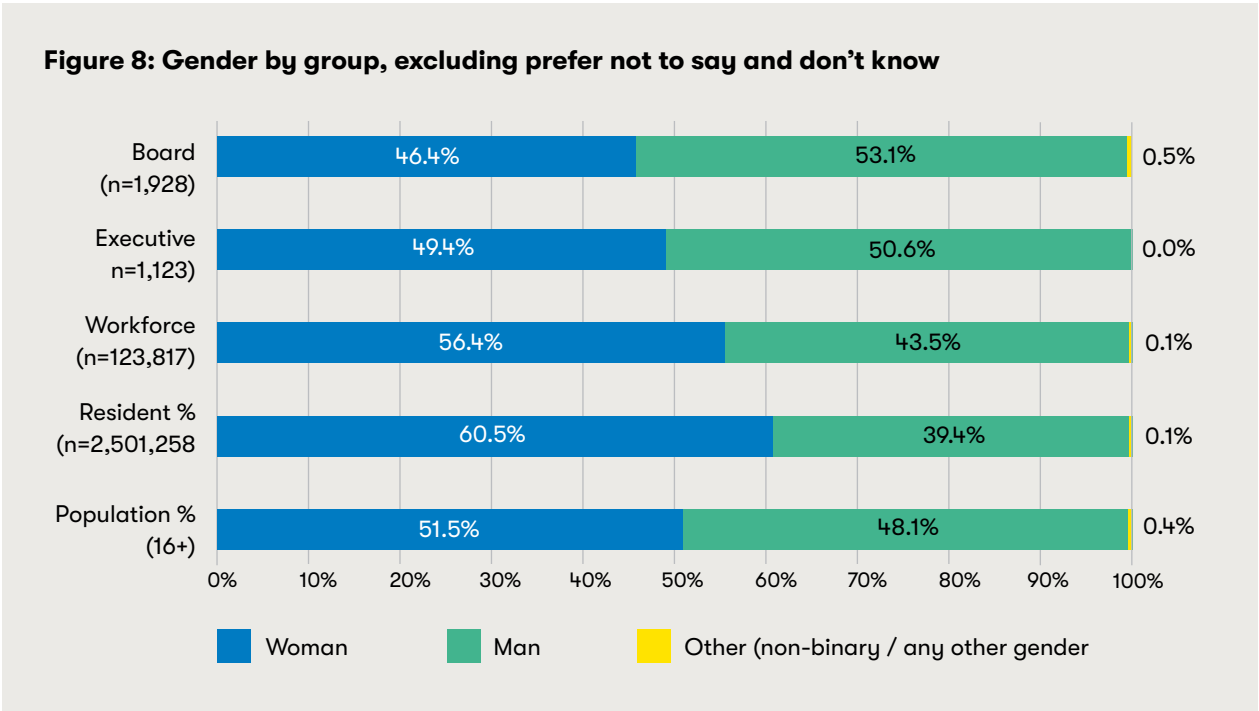
“At Golden Lane Housing, we have increased tenant involvement in staff learning by co-creating training with tenants and embedding lived experience at the heart of the 'Knowing our Tenants' programme. Hearing directly from tenants has been a powerful way to engage colleagues, deepen understanding of learning disability and autism, and ensure that the way we learn, work and deliver services is informed by the voices of the people we support.”

Rick Smith, Head of IT Systems and Data, Fairhive Housing:

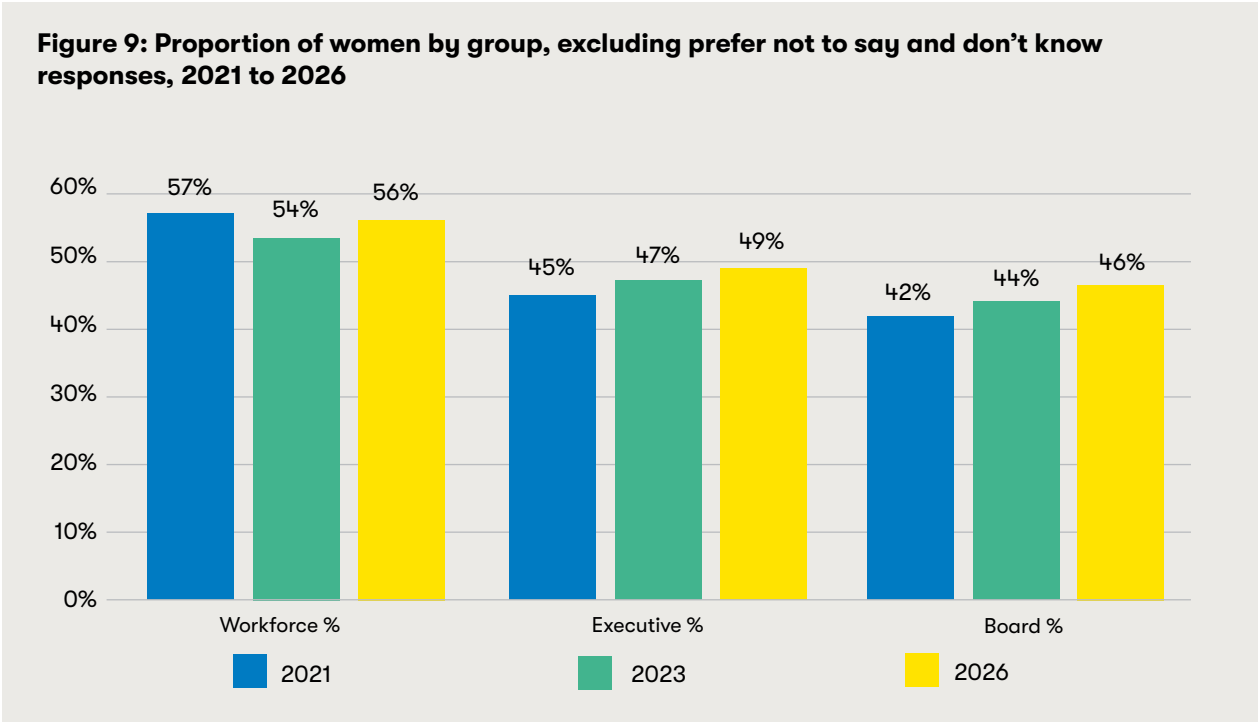
“As someone with autism, I've seen first-hand the difference an inclusive workplace can make. Disability representation isn't just about meeting targets or reporting data – it's about understanding where barriers exist and creating an environment where people can be themselves and thrive. Good EDI data helps organisations make better decisions, create more opportunities and build a workforce that reflects the communities they serve. The result is a stronger organisation, with a wider range of experiences, perspectives and ideas.”

Gender

There are more women within the housing association workforce compared to the population, reflecting the higher proportion of women living in social housing. Figure 8 shows that 56.4% of the workforce are women compared to 60.5% of residents.

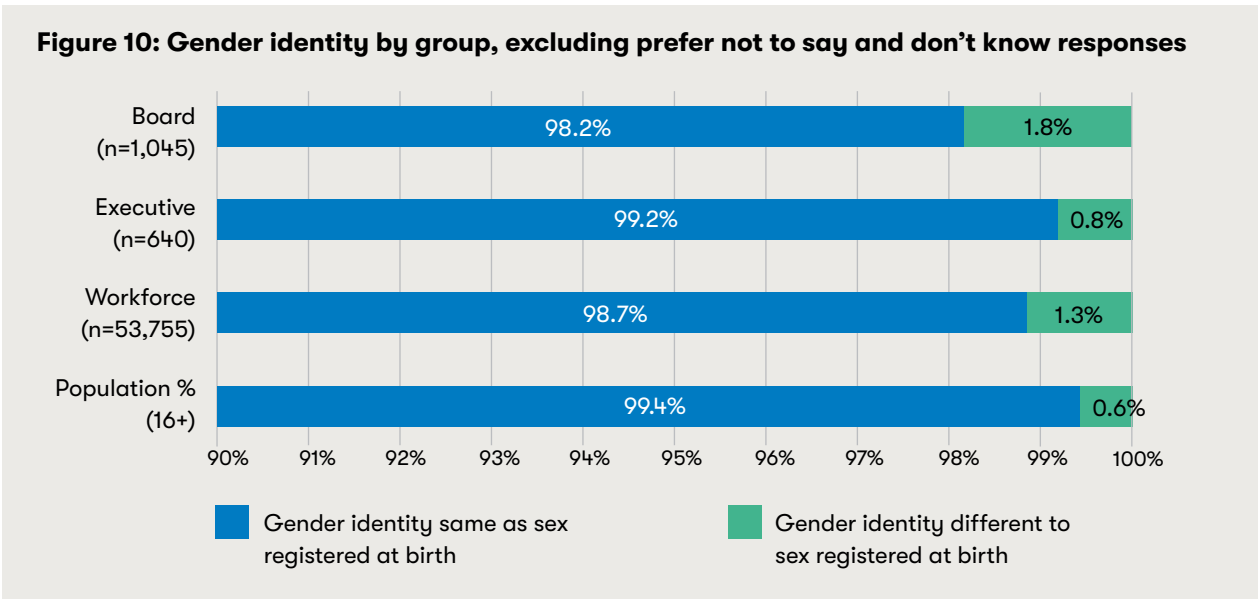


This representation of women is not reflected within the sector’s leadership, particularly on boards. However, the proportion of women is higher than in previous years. Figure 9 shows that 49% of housing association executives are women, while in 2023 47% of executives were female. Similarly, 46% of housing association board members are now women, compared to 44% who were female in 2023. While it is possible the change in question wording within the EDI data tool may account for some change in responses, given the small proportion of people who identify as a different gender to their sex at birth (see next section), this is unlikely to account for all of the increased representation.



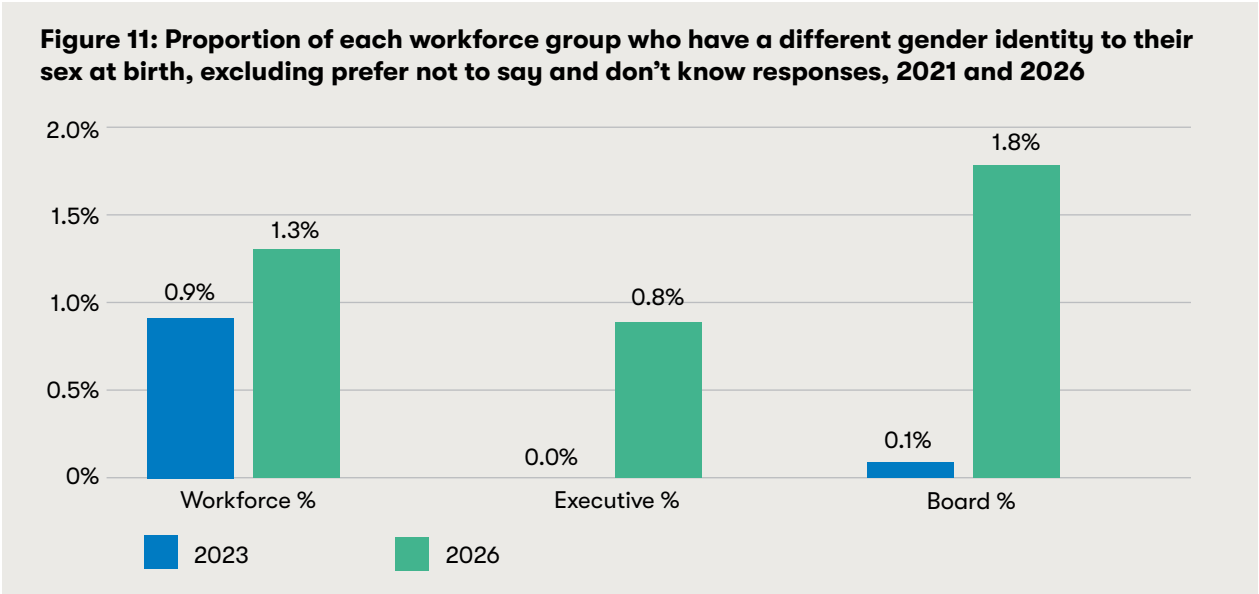
Gender identity

The data we have on gender identity is limited, as we are missing 57% of this data on the sector’s workforce and more than 40% of data on the sector’s leaders. However, **the data we have collected shows that there is now good representation of trans people within the workforce, executive and on boards compared to the population.**⁴ Figure 10 shows that 1.3% of the workforce report that their gender identity is different to their sex at birth. The proportion of the workforce who chose not to disclose their gender identity has also decreased from 4% to only 2%.



4. We are missing over 80% of data on gender identity for customers so have not compared with customers.

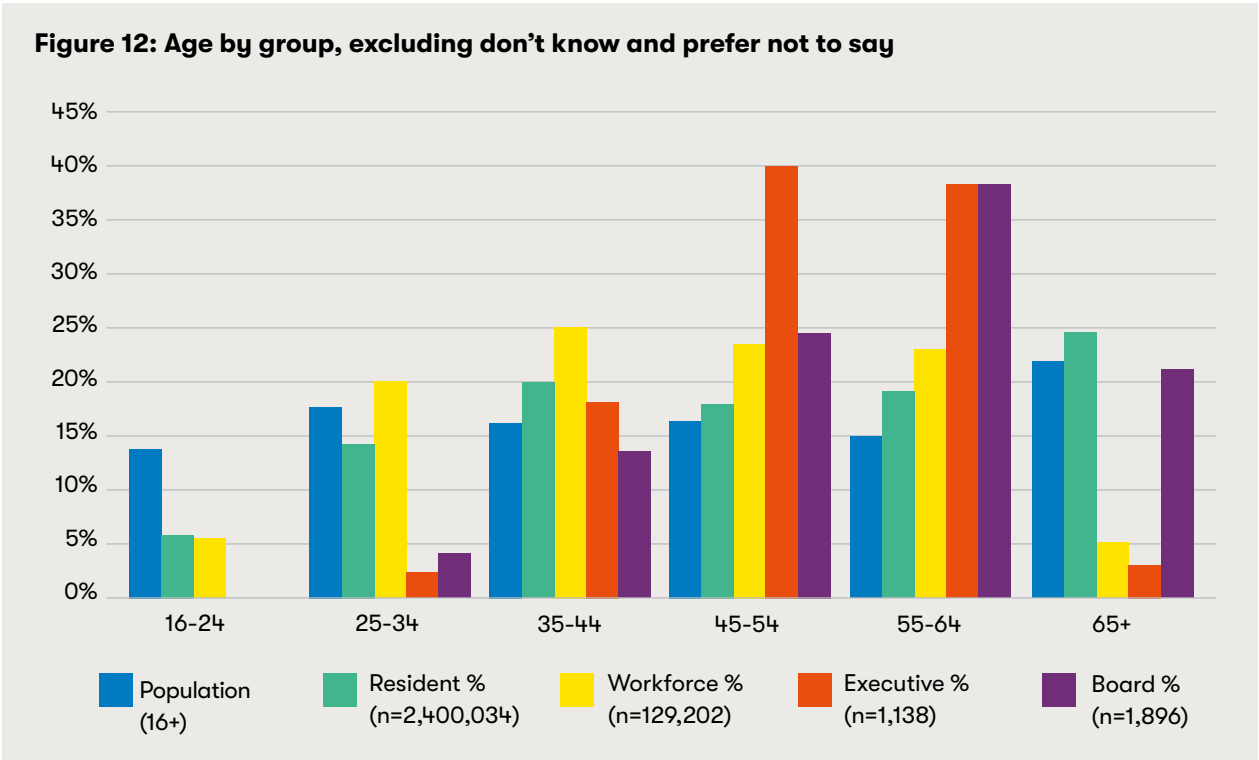
Figure 11 shows that, at leadership level, the proportion of executives who identify as a different gender to their sex at birth has increased from none in 2023 to 0.8%, while on boards representation has increased from 0.1% to 1.8%.



Age

The housing association workforce is **broadly representative of the working-age population and their residents**, with the majority aged between 25 and 64 and evenly spread across these ages.

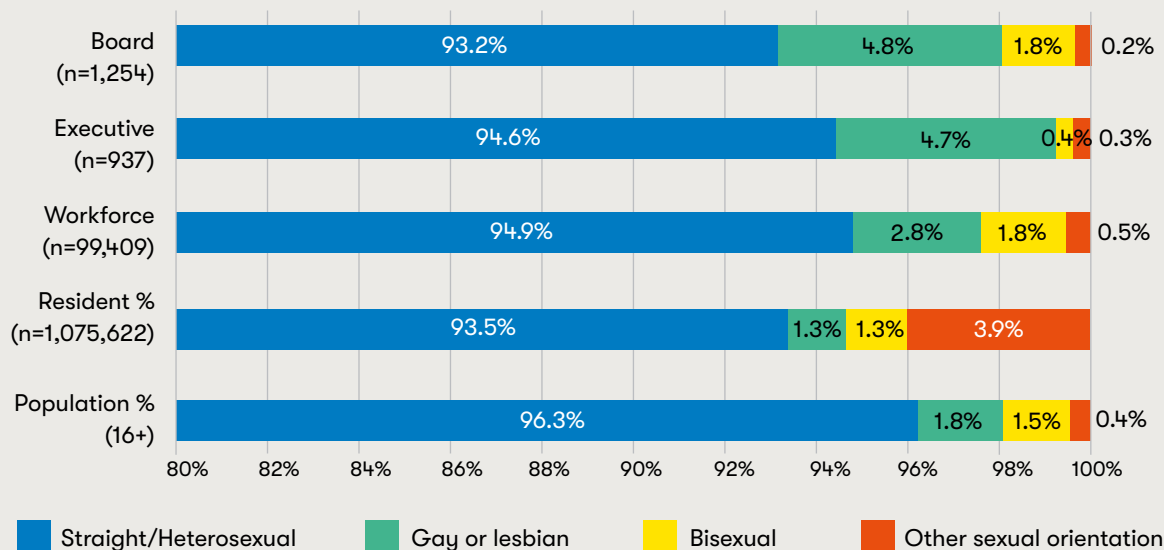
Housing association executives and board members tend to be older. Figure 12 shows that most are between the ages of 45 and 64: 77% of executives and 62% of board members are in these age categories. While the age of board members has changed very little since 2023, there has been a move towards older executives in the sector with fewer under the age of 45 (20% compared to 29% in 2023) and more aged 55 to 64 (38% compared to 30% in 2023). Having a wide range of ages represented at leadership level, including younger board members, ensures a different experiences and perspectives are considered when making key strategic decisions for the organisation.



Sexual orientation

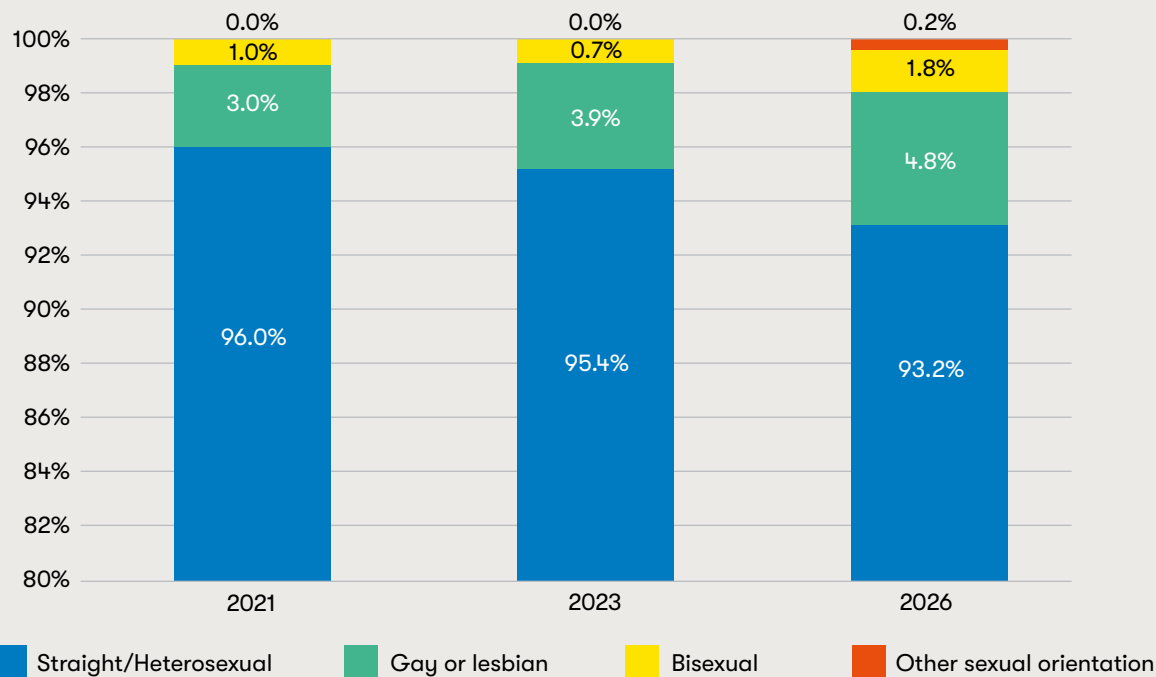
Across all workforce groups, there is good representation of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or another sexual orientation other than heterosexual, particularly on boards and, to an extent, on executive teams. Figure 13 shows that 4.7% of executives and 4.8% of boards are gay or lesbian, compared to 2.8% of the workforce. And figure 14 shows that, compared to 2023, **boards are now more diverse in terms of sexual orientation**, with greater representation of people who are gay, lesbian and bisexual.

Figure 13: Sexual orientation by group, excluding don't know and prefer not to say



NB: Chart starts at 80%

Figure 14: Sexual orientation of board members, excluding don't know and prefer not to say, 2021 to 2026



NB: Chart starts at 80%

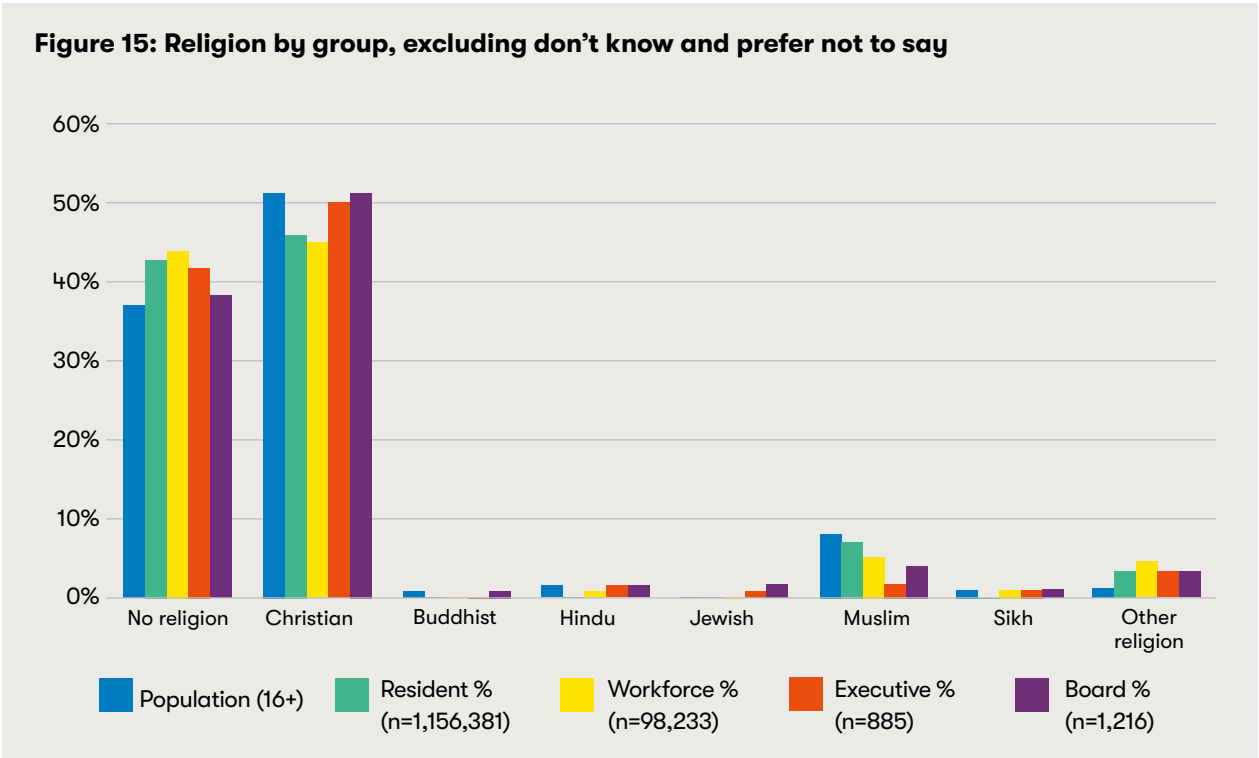
Housing association leaders are also more comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation – 4% of executive and 5% of board members chose ‘prefer not to say’ when asked about their sexual orientation, compared to 7% of the workforce. This may account, at least partially, for the fact that fewer members of the workforce have disclosed that they are gay or lesbian. As mentioned in the section on Inclusion, there has not been much progress in reducing non-disclosure rates for sexual orientation across any of the workforce groups.

Stonewall Housing:

“For over 40 years, Stonewall Housing has been supporting LGBTQ+ people to access safe places to live where they can be themselves. As the delivery partner for HouseProud’s LGBTQ+ Housing Pledge scheme, and through our offer of training and consultancy, we work in partnership with organisations across the housing sector to reflect on and improve their approach to equity, diversity and inclusion – particularly, LGBTQ+ inclusion. Having a robust and inclusive approach to EDI data collection is a huge part of this. Meaningful data can only be gathered when people trust that it will be handled sensitively and used to drive positive change. Many LGBTQ+ staff and residents still have concerns about confidentiality and discrimination, particularly in today’s climate. Collecting EDI data requires work, commitment and action to invest in building inclusive, supportive workplace and service cultures where everyone is safe to be themselves.”

Religion

There is **good representation of the religions of housing association residents’ within the workforce**. Figure 15 shows that housing association executives and board members are more likely to be Christian (50% and 51% respectively) compared to the workforce (45%) and are less likely to be Muslim. In particular, **Muslims are poorly represented on executive teams** with 2% reporting that they are Muslim compared to 5% of the workforce and 8% of the population where housing association homes are located.



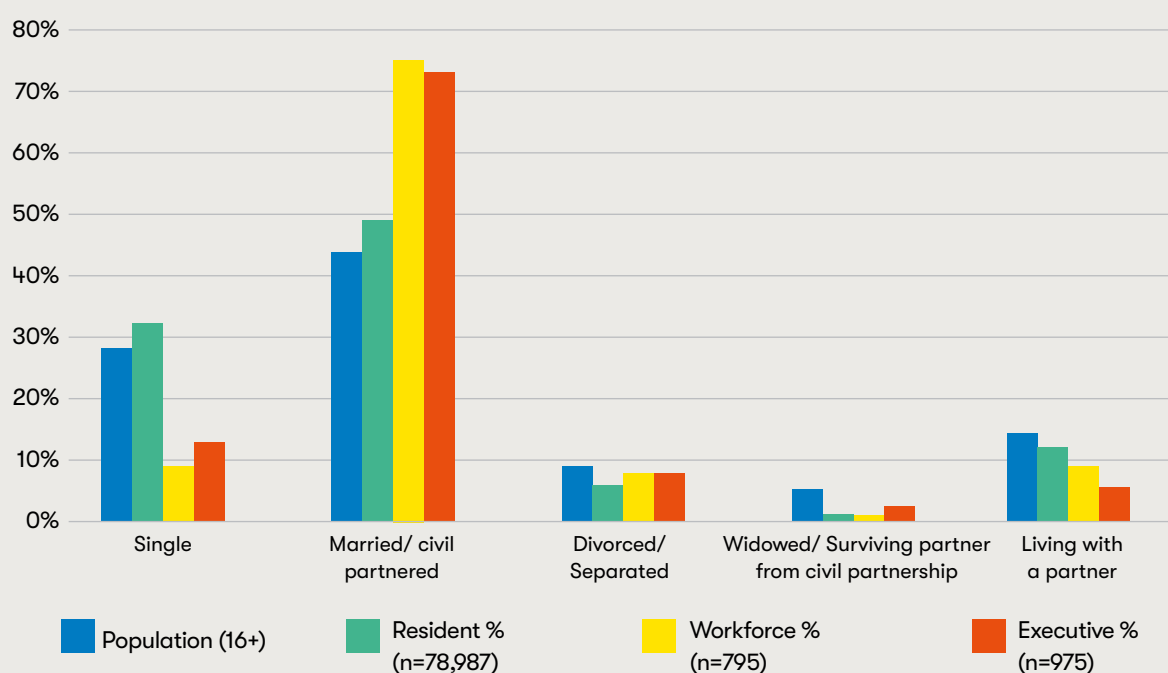
Compared to previous data collections, the proportion of all workforce groups as well as residents who report that they have no religion has continued to decrease. While it is possible this follows a broader, national trend, the population data we have compared against is from the 2021 Census, which is the same data source used in our 2023 data collection.

Marital and civil partnership status

As we found in our previous data collections, Figure 16 shows that **the housing association workforce quite closely resembles the population in terms of marital and civil partnership status**. Although across all workforce groups, fewer people are widowed or the surviving partner of a civil partnership compared to the population.

Executives and board members are more likely to be married or civil partnered. At least 70% of both groups are married, compared to 49% of the workforce and 44% of the population where we have homes. These findings also reflect those we found in 2023. We have not been able to compare this with residents as we are still missing 74% of resident data on marital and civil partnership status.

Figure 16: Marital and civil partnership status by group, excluding don't know and prefer not to say



Caring responsibilities

While we have more complete data compared to 2023, we are still missing over 80% of workforce data on caring responsibilities and over 70% of this data on executives and board members. This is a key area where, as a sector, we need to increase our understanding of the workforce, given the impact caring responsibilities can have on people's experience of work and that this is a characteristic with protections against discrimination under the Equality Act. Collecting this data is an important first step to ensure employers are considering the needs of people with caring responsibilities and providing an inclusive workforce with equal opportunities for learning, development and progression.

However, the data we have, as shown in Figures 17 and 18, tells us that **there is good representation of people with caring responsibilities, both dependent children and informal care, across all workforce groups**.

Housing association executives are more likely to have dependent children and to be providers of informal care, compared to the workforce, board members and the population where we have homes. These findings are similar to the findings from the 2023 data collection.

Figure 17: Responsible for dependent children by group, excluding don't know and prefer not to say

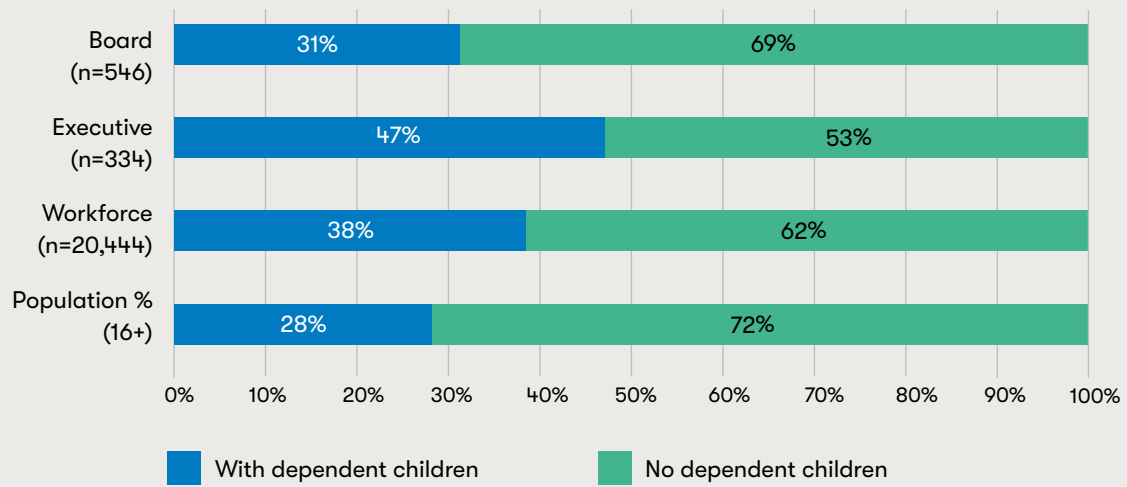
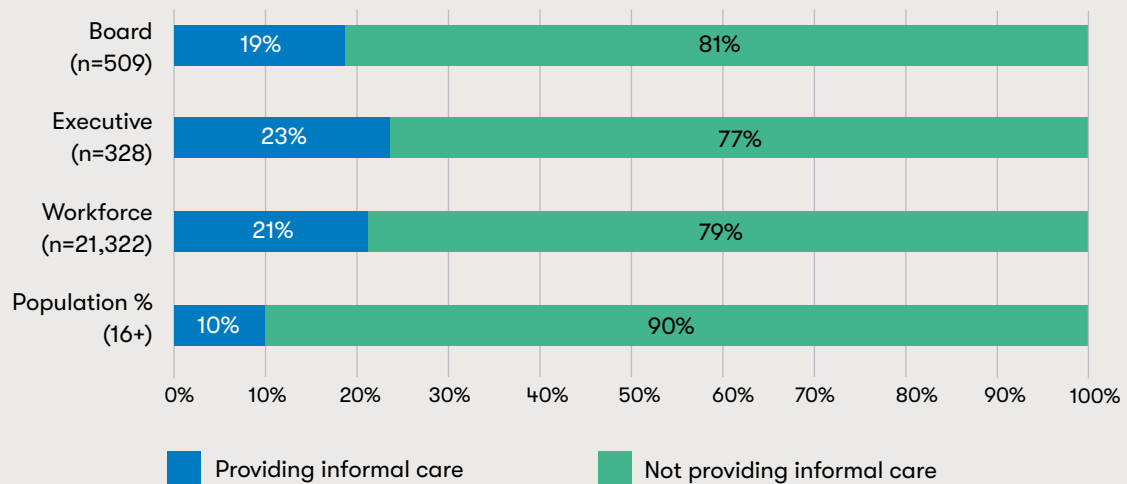


Figure 18: Provision of informal care by group, excluding don't know and prefer not to say



Socioeconomic background

We are still missing over 90% of workforce data and over 80% of executive and board data on each of the questions on socioeconomic background, which means we cannot draw firm conclusions about the how well the sector addresses social mobility and provides opportunities for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Given the sector’s role in addressing social inequality, **this is a crucial gap in knowledge**. The data we have suggests that the workforce is representative of the population in terms of socioeconomic background, but there is more that needs to be done to ensure better representation of lower socioeconomic backgrounds on housing association boards.

Looking at parental occupation, the data suggests there is good representation of people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds at a workforce level, but **at leadership level, those from a professional / higher socioeconomic background are overrepresented**.

The data indicates that **board members are most likely to have attended an independent school**. While executives are more likely to say they attended a state school, this is because there is a higher proportion of the workforce who attended school outside of the UK. The proportion who attended an independent school is similar.

Board members are also least likely to have been on free school meals, while executives and the workforce are broadly representative of the population.

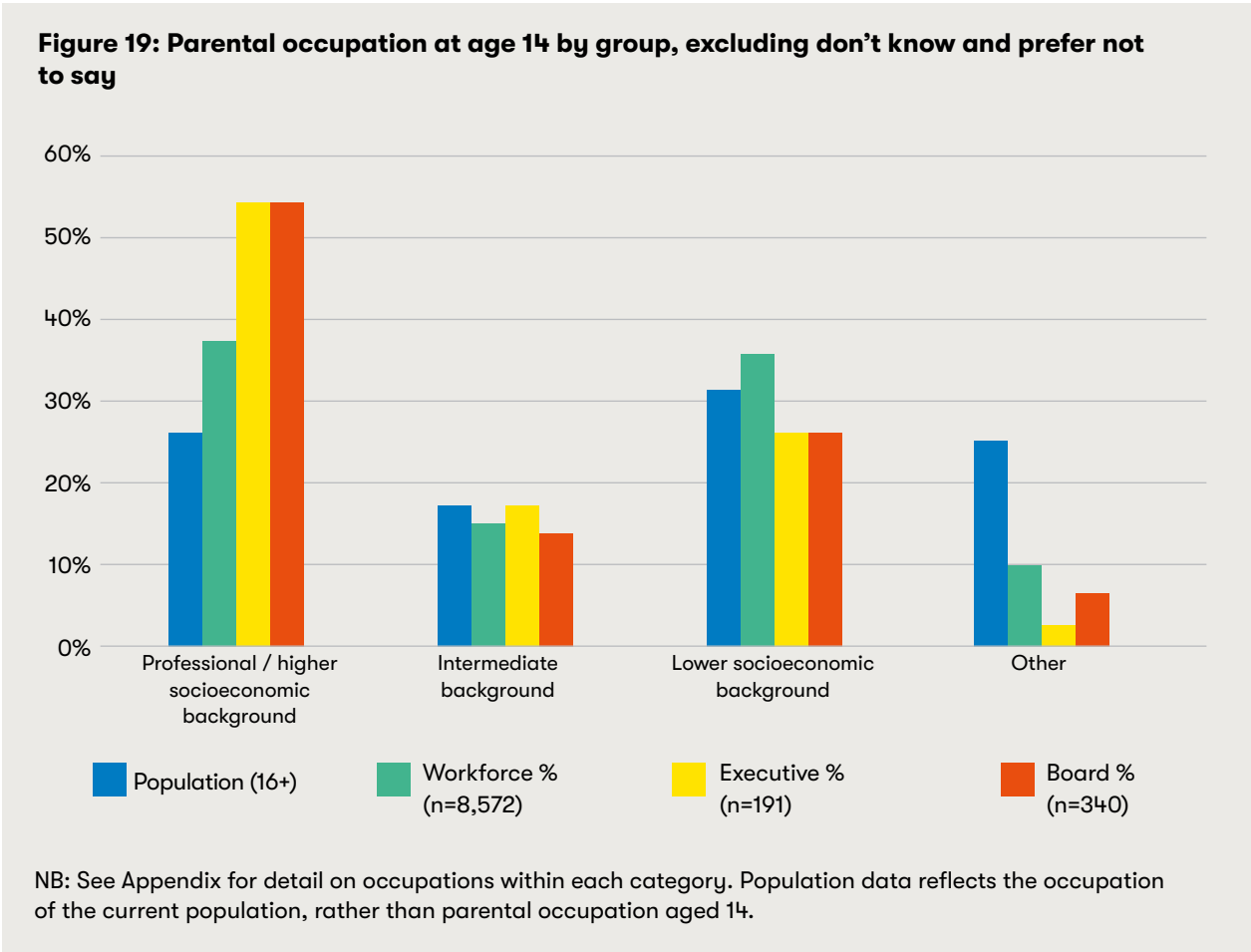
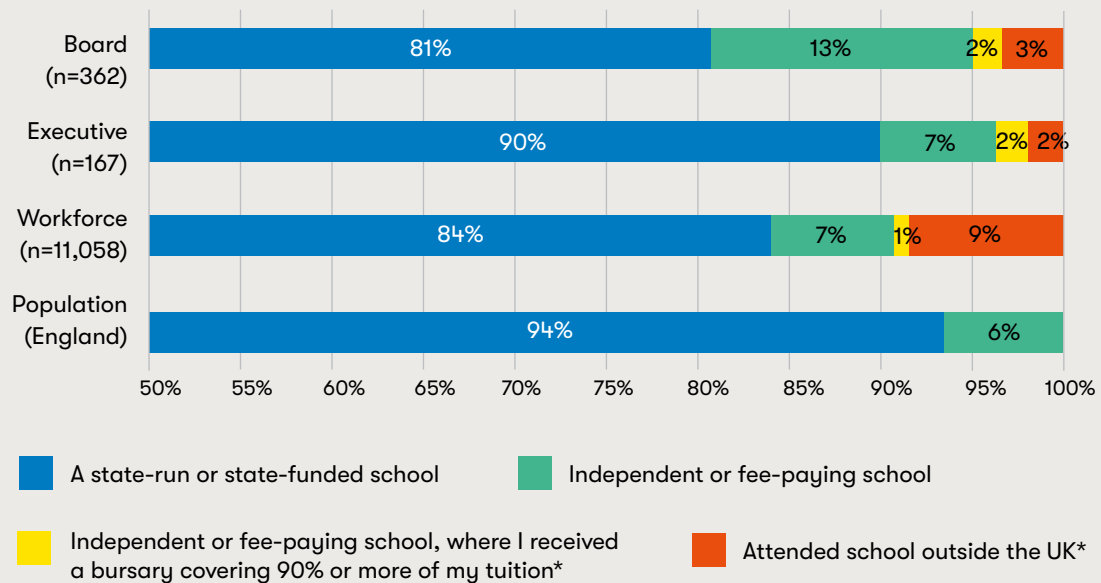
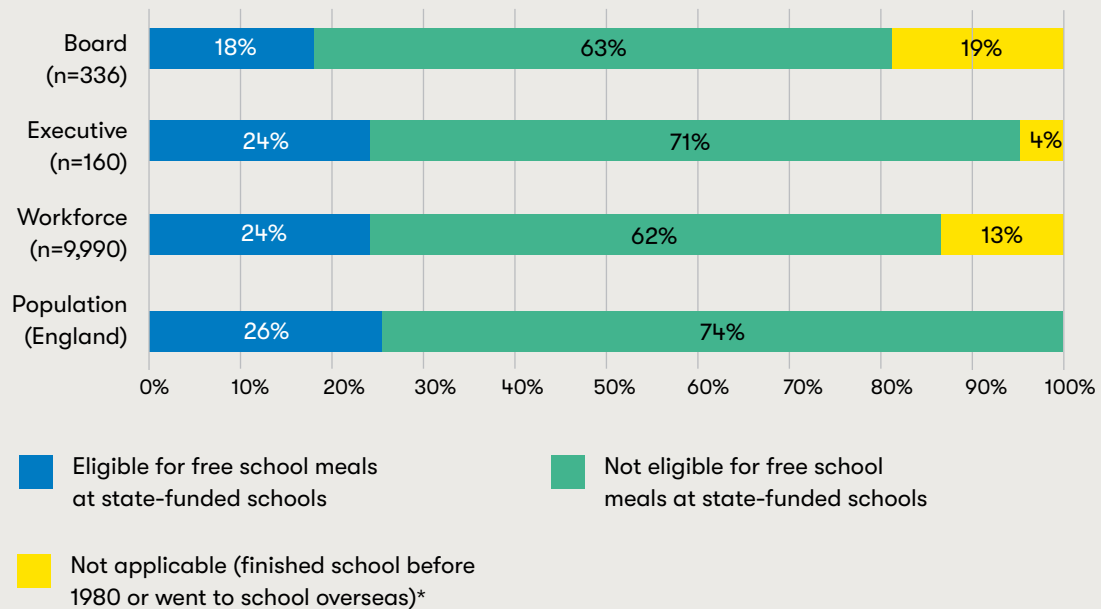


Figure 20: Attendance at independent school by group, excluding don't know and prefer not to say



NB: Chart starts at 50%. No population data on whether bursary was received or attended a school outside of the UK.

Figure 21: Free school meal eligibility by group, excluding don't know and prefer not to say



NB: No population data on not applicable.

Educational inequality in the UK is likely to have a part to play in poorer representation of executives and board members from a working-class background.⁵

As well as this there is little data to see how this representation compares to other industries. However, housing associations are well placed to ensure there are routes to leadership within the sector that address educational inequality and provide opportunities for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to develop the skills and experience they need and bring their unique experience and skillset to the boardroom.

Marianne Elliott, Strategic Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Business Partner, Incommunities:

“As someone who grew up in social housing, I was proud to contribute to the inclusion of optional questions on social housing experience within the 2026 NHF EDI Data Tool. I know first-hand how lived experience can shape perspectives and strengthen understanding.

“For Incommunities, the tool has been an important part of our EDI journey, giving us better insight into the communities we serve and helping us use evidence to turn good intentions into meaningful action. The more organisations that take part, the stronger the collective picture we can build across the sector.”

Greater Manchester Housing Partnership:

“Greater Manchester Housing Partnership members have pledged that by 2034, 20% of their workforce will be made up of people from social rented households.”



5. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2026) Education and poverty. www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-statistics/education

Conclusion

Through our third national EDI data collection, we have seen a clear and growing commitment across the housing association sector to understanding the diversity and representativeness of its workforce and leadership. More organisations than ever have participated, providing their data to make this the most comprehensive dataset to date and showing they recognise that meaningful progress begins with robust evidence.

The findings show some positive signs of progress. For the first time since this research began, representation of Disabled people has increased across both the workforce and leadership teams. This reflects the sustained focus placed on this issue following our 2021 and 2023 reports, which showed a significant underrepresentation of Disabled people across all workforce groups. This underrepresentation still exists and there is still much progress to be made, but the challenge now is to sustain this momentum by continuing to build inclusive cultures and workplaces where Disabled people can succeed and thrive.

Representation of women has continued to increase across all groups. At a workforce level, representation of women is higher than for the general population, though lower than for social housing residents, which population has a higher proportion of women. At executive and board level, women are

underrepresented compared to both the general population and social housing residents. Increasing the representation of women across all workforce groups, but particularly within leadership, must remain a key focus for organisations.

The data tells us that housing association boards are now more diverse, with greater representation of women, Disabled people and different sexual orientations, as well as greater ethnic diversity. However, this progress is not yet reflected consistently at executive level. In particular, ethnic diversity among executive teams has declined since 2023, with Black communities hugely underrepresented. Addressing this must be a top priority for the sector.

We would like to thank every housing association that contributed data to this report. Their participation has enabled us to track how diversity and representation across the sector have changed since 2021 and 2023, providing a clearer picture of both progress and persistent challenges. The findings highlight where positive change is taking place and where greater action is needed. Our recommendations set out the next steps towards building a housing sector that is genuinely diverse, inclusive and representative of the communities it serves.



Recommendations and next steps

Recommendations for housing associations

1. Use data to shape action

- Review your own [EDI data collection](#) results to identify areas of underrepresentation within your workforce and leadership. Set targets and create action plans to increase representation and inclusion for those characteristics where you currently have the lowest representation or least diversity.
- Share your results, alongside your targets and action plans, with your staff. You could also circulate this report to provide the wider context and recommendations for housing associations. Demonstrate how you are using your data to improve diversity and inclusion, how you will respond to this report's recommendations, and how this will impact staff.
- Review recruitment processes to ensure they are not creating barriers for underrepresented groups. Read the new [NHF Inclusive Recruitment Guide](#) to improve the inclusivity of your recruitment process at board level.
- Ensure you are creating inclusive workplaces that support Disabled people and people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to thrive, with opportunities for development and progression.

2. Draw on NHF resources and expert organisations

- Sign up to the NHF's new [inclusive leadership challenge](#), and use the resources provided to create a plan to improve diversity and inclusion and champion equality – as an example, these resources can help shape the action you take on recruitment.
- Seek advice and guidance from experts. Make use of the NHF's resources on [Disability Confident best practice for housing associations](#), become a [Disability Confident employer](#), and sign up to the [Social Housing Anti-Racism Pledge \(SHARP\)](#).

- Join NHF EDI networks to hear from out of sector experts, discuss challenges and share ideas, learning and best practice with sector colleagues. Our [Chief Executive EDI network](#) gives sector leaders an opportunity to explore their crucial role in shifting workplace culture to become more inclusive. Our [EDI Network for Professionals](#) is for member housing association staff who have some responsibility or interest in EDI to learn from one another and identify opportunities to collaborate.
- Sign up to receive the NHF's [EDI newsletter](#) for updates on our programme of work, blogs and case studies of best practice.

3. Continue to collect the data, but go beyond this and hear from those with lived experience, including residents

- Go beyond the data to hear directly from those with lived experience. Speak to staff through the creation of staff forums, for example, and seek their feedback on actions taken to address diversity and inclusion.
- Speak to residents with diverse characteristics too, to learn how to improve equity in the delivery of your services. Representation plays an important role in ensuring services meet the diverse needs of residents, but it will not lead to this by itself, it is also important to hear directly from residents.
- Continue to collect data and improve data collection processes, using the [NHF EDI data collection tool](#) as a guide. Aim to decrease gaps in the data and improve disclosure rates by communicating and demonstrating how you have used the data they provided before to make improvements.
- Share feedback and learning with the NHF so we know how best to support members in this. Please speak to your External Affairs Manager or email eam@housing.org.uk.

Next steps for the NHF

1. Use the findings to shape our EDI programme of work and support the sector to improve representation

- Work with our member steering group to reflect on the findings and shape our programme of work, focusing on the two key areas of underrepresentation: disability and ethnicity. Using the resources we currently have and our convening powers to drive improvement – e.g. webinars, events, networks and communications

2. Connect members with each other and with experts, through networks and events

- Keep the conversation going with opportunities for members to have open and honest conversations and hear from experts about how to improve disability representation and ethnic diversity at leadership level.
- Promote best practice and learning, through case studies, blogs, our networks and events, including our annual EDI in Housing Conference for EDI leads.
- Identify organisations who can provide expertise and guidance to NHF members on improving ethnic diversity and disability representation.

3. Publish more detailed analysis of results

- Publish regional breakdowns of the data for housing associations to review and act on regionally.

4. Prepare for a future data collection

- Continue to review the questions within the data tool to ensure that they are inclusive, gather the data we need and ensure consistency across the sector. Work with members to promote those questions.
- Lead a further sector-wide data collection in five years' time.



Appendix

About the data

We made every effort to ensure that each organisation's EDI data is comparable. This includes sharing the questions that would be reflected in the tool in our September 2024 resource '[Monitoring workforce diversity: what to ask and how to use the data you collect](#)'. However, there are some points to note in terms of the data and analysis presented:

- We did not ask organisations to submit their data at a certain date. This means that the data represents different time points for different organisations.
- Where there are data gaps, some of these are due to categories in the tool not matching categories in information collected by housing associations.
- For some organisations, social housing is one part of a larger business, which might include (non-residential) support and care or non-social housing. Where possible, organisations separated staff responsible for housing from wider employee data.



Characteristics

Gender

The 2026 EDI data tool asks about gender, defined as someone's innate sense of their gender, which is not constrained to the binary male/man and female/woman categories and includes others such as non-binary. This is different to the previous EDI data tool collections, where we asked about sex at birth or on a Gender Recognition Certificate. We changed this within the suggested questions we published in our 2024 'Monitoring workforce diversity' resource as this better reflects people's current experience of their workplace and therefore tells us what we need to know about the existence of gender inequality and barriers to progression.

GSS harmonised standards on sex and gender are still being developed. So, while, in 2025 the UK Supreme Court ruled that the definition of sex in the Equality Act (2010) refers to someone's sex assigned at birth, regardless of whether that person has transitioned, in this report when we talk about gender and representation of women, we are inclusive of people who have transitioned. Our data shows fewer than 2% of the workforce and board members and 1% of executives report a different gender identity to their sex assigned at birth. So, while the revised question affects comparability with data collected in 2021 and 2023 where we asked about sex at birth, we expect the impact on results to be minimal.

We provided space for respondents to inform us if the data they provided reflected a different question to the one suggested. We did not receive information to suggest this was the case for any respondents, although one respondent informed us that they used their data on gender identity to calculate the responses for this question.

Population data on gender is calculated using Census 2021 data on sex and gender identity.

Gender identity

We simplified the question on gender identity for the 2026 EDI data tool to focus solely on whether someone might be protected against gender reassignment discrimination by the [Equality Act 2010](#). The question asks whether the person's gender identity is different to the one they were assigned at birth, yes or no. While the response options align with the response options from the previous data collection, the small changes in the question wording may account for some of the difference in responses.

Ethnicity

Headline ethnicity, calculated from grouping more detailed ethnicity categories, provides a more complete picture on ethnicity of workforce, executives and boards than detailed ethnicity. Many housing associations who provided a headline breakdown of ethnic groups could not provide a more detailed picture. Therefore, we have not presented detailed ethnicity data in this report, though it is available in the accompanying data tool showing the national picture.

Socioeconomic background – parental occupation at age 14

The question included within the tool reflects one of the three recommended by the Social Mobility Commission and is the best way to assess someone's socio-economic background.⁶ There were 8 response options, as well as prefer not to say and don't know, included within the tool and our suggested questions. These all relate to a three-code classification, which we have used to report the results of this question. The responses map to the codes as follows:

- Modern professional and traditional professional occupations such as: teacher, nurse, physiotherapist, social worker, musician, police officer (sergeant or above), software designer, accountant, solicitor, medical practitioner, scientist, civil or mechanical engineer (code = professional background).

- Senior, middle or junior managers or administrators such as: finance manager, chief executive, large business owner, office manager, retail manager, bank manager, restaurant manager, warehouse manager (code = professional background).
- Clerical and intermediate occupations such as: secretary, personal assistant, call centre agent, clerical worker, nursery nurse (code = intermediate background).
- Technical and craft occupations such as: motor mechanic, plumber, printer, electrician, gardener, train driver (code = lower socio-economic background).
- Routine, semi-routine manual and service occupations such as: postal worker, machine operative, security guard, caretaker, farm worker, catering assistant, sales assistant, HGV driver, cleaner, porter, packer, labourer, waiter or waitress, bar staff (code = lower socio-economic background).
- Long-term unemployed (claimed Jobseeker's Allowance or earlier unemployment benefit for more than a year) (code = lower socio-economic background).
- Small business owners who employed less than 25 people such as: corner shop owners, small plumbing companies, retail shop owner, single restaurant or cafe owner, taxi owner, garage owner (code = intermediate).
- Other such as: retired, this question does not apply to me, I don't know (code = other).

With the exception of the 'other' category, which we decided to retain in our reporting, this coding follows that recommended by the Social Mobility Commission.

For further information about the question wording within the tool, please refer to our resource: [National Housing Federation - Monitoring workforce diversity: what to ask and how to use the data you collect](#).

6. [Simplifying how employers measure socio-economic background: An accompanying report to new guidance - GOV.UK](#)

Workforce groups

Workforce

Workforce figures are for all staff, including executives. The EDI data tool also calculates staff numbers, excluding executives, to compare the characteristics of executives and boards with the characteristics of staff. The national figures for staff are available in the accompanying EDI data tool on the website.

Executive

Although we did not provide a strict definition of ‘executive’, we provided guidance which suggested that executives should include the executive management team who take decisions for the organisation. They will likely hold responsibilities for setting the strategic direction and overseeing management of resources to ensure the organisational objectives are met. We would expect this to include chief executives, managing directors and senior leaders. However, the exact roles that are included may differ between organisations of different sizes and structures.

Board

We asked housing associations to include all members of their board, including any executive directors who sit on the board. This means that some people will be captured in the executive and board figures. We expect that some organisations have included all their committees within the board figures as for 10 organisations the board total included 20 or more people.

Resident

While we suggested that resident data should include any tenant on the tenancy contract, to be flexible to alternative reporting systems, we accepted other definitions such as the lead tenant or any person living in the household. There are several terms which can be used to refer to people who live in social housing, including “customers”, “tenants” and “residents”. While the EDI data tool collects data on the characteristics of members’ customers, we have used the term “residents” within this report to refer to the same group of people.

Population data

We have used Census 2021 data for population data on all characteristics apart from socio-economic background – attendance at independent school and free school meal eligibility. We also used Census 2021 for most characteristics in 2023. This means that, where we have used Census data, the population data in the 2026 tool is the same as in the 2023 tool, so any changes in the data do not reflect an increase or decrease in the proportion of the population with that characteristic, but more likely a change in local authority boundaries or another methodological reason. For this reason, we have not included population data in any analysis of trends.

Population data on attendance at independent school and free school meal eligibility is from Department for Education, Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, England, 2024/25. Data is at a national level (for England) only.

