



NED Network briefing

27th September 2021

Set up by [HACT](#) and [PlaceShapers](#), with the support of [Anthony Collins Solicitors](#) and [Badenoch + Clark](#)

What do we as Board members need to think about in response to ITV's 'Surviving Squalor' investigation?

A discussion led by Rachel Honey-Jones, Vice-chair of Merthyr Valley Homes

This session explored how Board Members might respond to the recent ITV documentary 'Surviving Squalor', a TV investigation into the condition of housing stock across the UK. Attendees heard from Rachel Honey-Jones, Vice-chair of Merthyr Valley Homes (MVH), Head of Community Regeneration at Newydd Housing Association and HACT Trustee.

Rachel opened the discussion by highlighting some of the key themes to think about as Board Members:

- Within the documentary, a gentleman noted that every time he complained, he was listened to but then "things got stuck". Where, as an organisation, are things getting stuck? Board Members should have mechanisms in place to alert them to the trends of repairs and complaints and enable a better understanding of what happens on different estates.
- What do Board Members think of their tenants? An 'us and them' mentality will not be successful in creating a trusting organisation for tenants to come to the Board and say that they are not happy with the service they have been provided with or the help they have received.
- An example of how tenant engagement can be used at Board level: Newydd has a scrutiny group with its own budget, independent choice of where to focus and reports directly to the Board. For the last 11 years, every single recommendation the group has made has been accepted and acted upon.
- What kind of culture are organisations creating and do the executive management team know what this culture is? Is it a blame focused organisation? If so, employees will not admit to service failures and there will be no honesty and no learning from failure. Or is it all about the bottom line? If so, it is a risk that services are fit for purpose. Let's have regular conversations as to why things are going wrong. It is also sometimes as simple as challenging some language used; switching from 'unit' to 'home' and 'service user' to 'tenant'.
- Mould and damp issues can be looked at from a safeguarding perspective. If staff members, at any level, have a gut feeling that something is not right on a visit, who can they approach to report it? Every contact must count to assess the state of the home.



NED Network briefing

27th September 2021

- How often do Board Members actually review their housing stock condition? What percentage of their homes have recently had stock condition surveys? The day after the ITV documentary, each Welsh Housing Association received contact from Welsh government regulator requesting confirmation from each HA of each disrepair claim they were dealing with, what position it was currently in and how much the HA had provided in compensation. What does this say to us? Should organisations be lobbying for an independent regulator who can frequently have these conversations?

Rachel outlined four key discussion questions for the breakout rooms. Below are some of the central themes that were discussed across the groups and shared on return to the main meeting.

1. What questions should we as board members be asking in response to the issues raised?

- Boards are frequently told more about what organisations are doing rather than what they are not doing. It is key for Board Members to identify where this is happening and what information they are not being told. Have the confidence to challenge the Board report so it is not “all about the positives”. Ask what are the lessons learned and how can we go forward.
- Discussion around the legislation on the Fitness for Human Habitation. How do Board Members know that their homes are fit for human habitation? This is something that should be put on the table for a Board to be able to answer.

2. How do we get the assurances we need that what we are being told is actually true?

- As Board Members, you cannot understand the condition of your homes by just looking at facts and figures, you must be willing to go and visit. It is a useful idea to go and visit recently void properties, not properties which have been recently renovated. This will show you the standard of properties when people leave them. It is important not to just visit the openings of the new-build development sites as that is not representative of an organisation’s properties.
- When a Board wants to verify financial statements, they obtain an independent financial review, so if they are looking for verification of tenant experience, they should seek an independent partner who can help facilitate that feedback in the same way. An example was given that some Boards have regular closed sessions with tenants which are facilitated by external partners.
- Technology should be utilised as there is much wider data available to help with analysis and inform strategy. It is not necessarily about whether properties have damp or mould, but what organisations do about it in response to this and how this can be prevented in the first place.



NED Network briefing

27th September 2021

- Question whether we ask at Board level for patterns and analysis for all complaints and tenant feedback so that it can be reviewed based on geography, employment, status, gender and race. This helps a Board to understand how all tenants are affected, specifically some sections of tenants. There is a racial element to this because statistically, the BME population are more adversely affected by disrepair matters, typically living in the worst housing areas.

3. What is our culture? How do we find out what our culture really is?

- Actively participate in any opportunities to meet tenants. This is a way of picking up the culture and building trust with tenants as you can have informal conversations around planned formal meetings. An example was given that Board Members could have live Q&A's or discussions with tenants at the beginning of a Board meeting.
- It was noted that in the Clarion case featured in the documentary, staff members knew of the conditions of the properties. It must be asked, what is going wrong with an organisation's culture if staff members are aware of this level of disrepair, but tenant voices are not being heard? There was discussion as to whether staff are not reporting issues because they are consistently told there is no budget or money for these repairs. It is key to empower staff members of all levels to take responsibility and report back any issues or concerns that they may identify at any type of home visit. Should organisations have an amnesty for these cases?
- If an organisation really wishes to challenge their culture, they may need to change their business plan. For example, if the key priority is development of new homes, it may be that this needs to change to focus on current tenants and the quality of homes that they already own.

4. What do we think of tenants ourselves? What does our board/organisation think of tenants? What does that tell us?

- Board Members do not have sufficient input with tenants – “they are two separate organisations within the same organisation”. It is essential to open up the board to residents as it has been proven that having tenants on a Board provides a better organisation because it always relates things back to the tenant.



NED Network briefing

27th September 2021

- It was noted that sometimes there are strategic policies in place, with organisations intending to regenerate these areas or homes, but financial commitments stop this work being undertaken. Boards will be aware that there will be 'trade-offs', but they must review and talk about the things that they are deciding not to do in that trade-off, assessing the impact that that decision will have. It is also vital to communicate these 'trade-offs' back to the tenant and ask them "What can we do in the interim to help you in this situation?".
- A Board will have business cases presented to them where they are told they must do X in order to enable funds to do Y. The question was posed whether organisations review these business cases and follow up. An example was Nottingham Community HA where they have a mechanism in place where these are reviewed and this works well for them.

Rachel provided some final thoughts that it is key for organisations not to rest on their laurels and recognise that this is an issue that will be ongoing. Board Members need to make sure that they look at the bottom line, recognise that things are going wrong and look at how budgets may be allocated to fix them. Regeneration and building of new homes are not a reason to stop doing this essential repair work.

Things will have gone wrong, but it is how organisations respond that is key.

Peter Hubbard and Amber Sutton
Anthony Collins Solicitors LLP

Next meeting

What part can board members play in challenging and addressing stigmatization of social housing tenants?

Dr. Mercy Denedo, Assistant Professor of Accounting at Durham University Business School, and Dr. Amanze Ejiogu, FCCA, Associate Professor of Accounting at the University of Leicester will be joining us to highlight key findings and recommendations of their research project looking at challenging stigmatization of social housing tenants.

Our next meeting will take place on Monday 11th October 2021, 4.00-5.00 pm

Book your free place here: <https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZwpfu2tpzkrHtbWruJHbYM6wuKgoviA6EbU>