

# Discussion:

## Board members driving the quality and diversity agenda

### Introduction



**Mushtaq Khan**, Chief Executive of Housing Diversity Network

Mushtaq Khan, Chief Executive of Housing Diversity Network, gave a talk on the role of boards driving the equality and diversity agenda. He also discussed the recent survey that the Housing Diversity Network (HDN) had conducted with board members around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policy.

### Questions

**Q: What are the warning signs for you that boards are treating EDI as a problem and not as a journey and what are the best boards doing?**

Mushtaq gave the example of a board that had a task and finish group for EDI and his view was that this is not the correct way to think about this area.

EDI needs to be integrated into long term corporate planning. This needs to look forward and identify areas for improvement with measurable outcomes. A good indicator is that boards are having conversations around EDI at least on an annual basis and that there is an action plan that is in place and being monitored.

Mushtaq was worried that momentum around EDI was stalling with some boards. This was because they were spurred into action by events like the Black Lives Matter protests or the pandemic highlighting inequalities a few years ago but that, over time, these initiatives have stalled. But the recently published Better Social Housing Review highlighting disadvantaged outcomes by ethnicity has given him hope that we will move in the right direction.

Mushtaq was also concerned that there was a trend within organisations that generally the EDI policy and strategy is led by one person. There is then a trend that, when that one person leaves, the initiatives don't continue. There needs to be an inclusion of these strategies into corporate planning to ensure they are embedded in an organisation's processes.

**Q: In your talk you mentioned the Chair leading on an EDI strategy, what works best in your experience and how do you think these strategies are best owned?**

Mushtaq's view was that this was dependent on the organisation but HDN prefers to see Chairs taking the lead. If that is not possible, HDN likes to see Board Champions. Some organisations like for the Chief Executive or a Diversity Lead to get involved. It is less about who brings EDI to the board and more that it is a continuing discussion informed by data and measurable outcomes.

**Q: When we talk about viewing EDI as a journey, what are some milestones you think housing associations should be aiming for?**

Mushtaq explained that boards should be focussing on tenant satisfaction measures as there is clear evidence that ethnicity and race are the defining factors in whether someone is satisfied with their housing. Taking steps to collect data in order to monitor satisfaction by ethnicity and taking steps to improve this is

crucial. On the employee level, we can see that the make-up of the frontline staff of housing associations does predominantly match the areas they serve but this is not the case as we move to management and leadership levels. We should see initiatives to improve these numbers and around board diversity and succession planning. Mushtaq gave the example of board trainee schemes that HDN are involved in which get individuals onto boards faster than they usually would just via career progression.

Mushtaq drew on his own experience as his route into housing was a Graduate Trainee scheme. He explained that, whilst HDN was seeing these schemes come back, many organisations do not have those from minority ethnic backgrounds coming in and even less have them in a managerial fast track program. This is something that HDN are collaborating with housing associations to put in place. These schemes are an example of good practice and they improve the make up of the workforce in comparison to the communities they work in.

**Q: What do you think about the NHF's Chair's challenge?**

Mushtaq thinks that this a good initiative; he is a fan of anything that puts the onus on Chairs to move EDI forward. By placing EDI at the centre of board activity, it demonstrates commitment and provides the chance to collaborate with other housing associations. Mushtaq explained that the last time he was in contact with the NHF, only 60 organisations had signed up and he was hoping that more would follow.

**Q: What can a board member who feels underwhelmed by what their RP is doing on EDI do to exercise their leverage and begin this conversation?**

Mushtaq suggested that the first thing to do is ask "what is our plan of action and what are our drivers of change". You need to be thinking about what the housing association can do to address the issues identified by the RSH in the rapidly changing communities that we serve. This can be done at away day sessions, corporate planning, querying the data on tenant satisfaction. Whilst there is no compulsion to monitor the data in this way (i.e. by ethnicity), this is an obvious approach given the data on the connection between ethnicity and housing satisfaction.

Mushtaq concluded by saying that board members are at their best when they challenge the system and

that this is the best way to have a valuable contribution.

*“I wanted to explore the position of Diversity Champions on boards. I find that the Chair still needs to drive the conversation, or the Champion becomes a lone voice. The frameworks and ownership should be there first and then the Diversity Champion can come in.”*

Mushtaq agreed with this sentiment and that it is vital for the Chair still to be involved in any approach. His view was that a Diversity Champion can give a good link to things that are happening in the organisation that the Chair might not be able to get involved in. This can be things like attending a working group to feedback so that the board is having the same conversations as the wider organisation. Mushtaq also emphasised that the Board Champion needs to be supported, this involves giving them training and explaining the expectations and how their role fits into the governance framework.

**Q: Should we be more deliberate when we talk about how the system disadvantages people?**

Mushtaq’s view was that some people get defensive when their organisation is challenged as being racist, despite a lot of data suggesting this is the case for housing associations. There needs to be a focus on policies and procedure that lend themselves to being discriminatory. Some research around areas like repairs and maintenance suggests that it is the system that is the issue.

Mushtaq concluded by saying that not enough people in the housing sector are discussing the challenges in the system and how disadvantaged some groups are by housing.

**Q: When you talk about collaboration, have you seen any organisations that have collaborated well and have achieved success?**

Mushtaq gave the following examples that HDN had been involved in:

1. Greater Manchester housing providers collaborate on a lot of matters as they have a working group with 28 organisations. They have developed a monitoring and training program to get minorities into leadership roles and run quarterly update sessions.
2. There is a working group in Kent that comes together to discuss how they are responding to regional challenges.
3. In the North-East there is a graduate recruitment scheme, and a number of organisations are collaborating on board trainee programs.

One of the benefits of these collaborative programs is that they are not just reliant on one person within one organisation to push these forward and take ownership.

The remainder of the notes for this session will be made available shortly.

A special thanks to our partners:

