

Building better boards

7 July 2020

Virtual pack

We were delighted to host our first CIH Building better boards event with over 200 people in attendance throughout the day. This is our new offer to boards to help drive best practice, knowledge sharing and promote professionalism that drives assurance and innovation across the sector.

This is the first of many quarterly board member forums as well as a wide range of other member benefits. You get this all for free as a member. You can find out more about our new board membership offer [here](#).

Board members present

Over 230 board members, governance professionals and executive directors from across the social housing sector.

CIH colleagues present

Gavin Smart, chief executive
Gavin.smart@cih.org

Rebecca Clarke, head of membership
Rebecca.clarke@cih.org

Jill Allcoat, regional manager
(South West, West Midlands and East Midlands)
Jill.allcoat@cih.org

Tara Devine, regional manager
(London, South East and East)
Tara.devine@cih.org

Laura Fordyce, acting regional manager
(North West, North East, Yorkshire and Humberside) Laura.fordyce@cih.org

Our speakers

Fiona MacGregor, CEO,
regulator for social housing

Mark Brown, CEO, Dolphin Index

Richard Blakeway, chief housing
ombudsman

Ebele Akojie, non-executive director

Emma Foxall, deputy housing ombudsman

Sarah Thomas, COO, Catalyst Housing Group

Dawn Foster-Smith, group growth & assurance
director, Aster Group

Sharron Webster, partner, Trowers LLP

1. Panel debate: building better boards panel

i. What are the things we might have seen go wrong during the pandemic and what can they tell us about how we need to think differently about governance moving forwards?

1. Richard: Too strong to say it has gone wrong, but we have seen a decline in complaints coming through to the regulator, which is starting to go back up now. Things that stood out were around ASB, but this is more about

issues being exacerbated by spending more time in the home. Something that was noticeable was an increase in data reporting and organisations doing a lot more reporting. Getting the right management information is important. What will the impact be given the reduction in repairs and the challenge this poses moving forwards? Have boards discovered things they didn't know before?

2. Sharron: We need to use what has happened as a learning tool to shape how boards might respond to a crisis? They need to focus on what went wrong and what they can improve on. Are organisations capable of dealing with crisis management in the way that they want to?
3. Ebele: Data is essential. Organisations need to know that this is spot on. Learning points for lots of people is 'how agile is the information and how accurate it is'? There has been a focus on improving technology and the behaviours that support the technology to ensure accuracy.
4. Fiona: There are very few examples of things going wrong or for any length of time. There were levels of confusion on how to understand and implement the guidance and how this links into individual tenant needs that can be quite nuanced. There have been lots of questions from organisations on what to do. There needs to be an acceptance that things will go wrong and that is OK as long as you can demonstrate that these things have been considered properly. There has been an increased sharing of learning through the sector that we haven't always seen before. How do you protect your staff as well as your tenants through this time? How much information does the board need? Data has to be able to tell us something that is useful so that boards do not overreact to the smallest changes?
5. Mark: The big push is to get boards to be more creative without ending up on the front page of the Daily Mail. Boards

need to be more miserable; we need them to be hugely imaginative about what could happen that could take us by surprise. We need creativity being entrepreneurial but also on the right hand with governance. We need to do pre-mortems as well as post-mortems, stop the unthinkable happening by thinking through how the unthinkable might unfold.

ii. Tenant engagement and tenant empowerment - should the power of the regulator be strengthened? How can tenants be at the heart of governance?

1. Fiona: There could be a white paper at some point before the end of the year that could strengthen the regulator power around consumer regulation. The good boards do not need to wait for regulation in this space as we are seeing good progress on this. Increased regulation should be the backstop for organisations who do not want to engage with tenants, which is quite unimaginable.
2. Ebele: This should be a given no matter what position you approach it from. Good engagement means the right services are being provided and tenants are receiving them in an efficient manner.
3. Richard: Complaints will happen, and things will go wrong but it is how we listen and learn from this. Having a dialogue with residents is so important, but also it is how you demonstrate this. Regulatory aspect is downstream when something has gone chronically wrong; upstream it is about the work the Ombudsman does. How do we become a more open and transparent organisation for tenants? There has been a surge in this during the pandemic, so we must reflect on the why but also the how? What are the best methods to engage and how do we share the best practice around this?
4. Mark: The challenge of customer centricity plagues organisations... most organisations have this as their top

value. Some people would talk about organisations having a parent and child relationship where there is a lack of trust. You can do lots with data, but we need to also think about whether we do really love the customer, and do we have trust? Is there a growth mindset with tenants? Do we recognise that there are nearly always underlying issues where this doesn't always work as it should? We should always have deep concern about how the customer is.

5. Sharron: The tenant involvement piece has been stripped back too far and a lot of residents would argue that this hasn't been replaced by something that is as meaningful as it used to be. We can all do this irrespective of what regulation might come out of government.

2. Putting people's voices at the heart of governance

Richard Blakeway, chief housing ombudsman

Emma Foxall, deputy housing ombudsman

Sarah Thomas, COO at Catalyst Housing Group

- The Housing Ombudsman launched their new complaint handling code
- Boards should consider how they look at complaints, how regularly and how they can use this to inform bigger decisions on services. This will help as part of boards getting assurance on complaints
- Complaints should not just be seen as operational, but also strategic – what trends are we spotting? How do we use the intelligence to learn from complaints and prevent things from escalating further and being reputationally damaging?
- The Housing Ombudsman will be strengthening their relationship with the Regulator for Social Housing being able to make referrals when necessary
- All changes from the Housing Ombudsman link in to their corporate plan – they want better engagement with providers at all levels

- Tenant engagement is key, and we should all learn the lessons from the pandemic
- All comes back to culture and it is the board that sets this – vital that they play a key role in looking at complaints and associated reports

3. The new business as usual: what does this mean for good governance?

Fiona MacGregor, CEO, regulator for social housing

Sharron Webster, partner, Trowers LLP

Dawn Fowler-Stevens, group growth and assurance director, Aster Group

- Reflections from the Regulator:
 - o The sector moved swiftly to make governance more agile and the response has been good overall
 - o The Regulator's main concerns are over short-term viability and service delivery, keeping people safe in their homes, long term viability is also important, and organisations should be re-evaluating their business plans
 - o Organisations need to provide clear rationale behind decisions they are taking around things like development plans, increased spend, staff wellbeing etc. – everyone should be able to articulate this clearly
 - o Boards should also take time to reflect on their approach to crisis management and whether they have the right levels of resilience in place
 - o Boards should also consider the ongoing rise in the expectations of tenants around the services they receive
- The lawyer's perspective
 - o Great guide on how to conduct virtual meetings from ICSA
 - o Benefits of new working arrangements mean that governance can be more agile, quicker decision making, shorter more focused meetings

- o Also, a good time to think about the make up of your board – can keeping some virtual arrangements long term open up your talent pool to a more diverse range of candidates
- o However, we do need to be mindful that decisions are still properly considered and debated around the board table
- o We should also consider how we can build trust and accept that the ‘new world’ may not be for everyone and we should work with colleagues to support them and not make sweeping assumptions
- The provider’s perspective
 - o We should ask ourselves what the role of governance is? There is time to reflect now, so we should use it
 - o Boards shouldn’t just be focused on failure and the things that could go wrong
 - o Decisions can be taken more frequently meaning the entire leadership team needs to work differently and step up to the challenge
- o Boards should use their heads, their hearts and their hands to make decisions (considering information properly to make informed decisions, remembering always the purpose of what we do and our tenants, being agile and enabling the organisation to do the right thing)

4. Boards cannot live by governance alone

Mark Brown, CEO, Dolphin Index

- The biggest question we have to ask ourselves: Is the operating system we have fit to drive a successful housing organisation?
- Scottish experiment on getting housing associations to be the number one place to work by 2024 focuses on these principles:
 - o Crazy about work
 - o Creative, but still controlled

- o Can-do, can-learn, can-balance attitude
- o Caring
- o Conscious
- It is important to create a balance between the ‘right hand’ of governance and the ‘left hand’ of creativity. This will help to ensure that we can create trusting organisations with safe spaces to be brave in change.

Resources from Mark Brown

- [The dinosaur strain](#)
- [Better lives, better organisations, better world](#)
- [Total innovation management](#)
- [8 shades of the ‘F’ word](#)
- [It’s no better to safe than sorry](#)
- [Can-do customers project](#)
- [Housing sector now the UK’s preferred employer](#)

5. AOB

We would like to thank you all again for attending the event. Please remember that this event is the first of many designed to support board members and governance professionals across the sector. Please look out for the next sessions which are detailed below.

All board member forums will be £50 +VAT for non-members to attend, members can attend for free. To find out more about becoming a member* please contact rebecca.clarke@cih.org

**Receive £50 off your membership by becoming a member today*

Next quarterly board member forums:

Wednesday 30 September 2020, 9am-11am:
‘Championing diversity and ensuring equality’

Wednesday 9 December: **‘Putting tenants at the heart of good governance’**