

HOUSING DIVERSITY NETWORK

INTERIM EVALUATION OF BOARD DIVERSITY PROGRAMME - JANUARY 2020

‘Having internal commitment and HDN’s expertise is the perfect balance’

HEADLINES

This interim evaluation report details the first year of the Advancing and Harnessing Board Diversity programme coordinated by the Housing Diversity Network (HDN) for two housing associations – Progress Housing Group and Together Housing Group.

The key findings are that, in general, the first year of the programme has been a success. This is the view of participating organisations and the cohort of potential board members who were selected for the programme. Boards have been introduced to potential new members (and in three cases recruited members from the cohort of eleven), and prospective board members have strengthened their knowledge and expertise and are in a better position to apply for vacancies in future, some gaining positions on charitable trusts, to support their continued development.

In particular the following processes were positive in the programme:

- A meaningful new pathway and enabler for board diversity;
- The new opportunity to trial a different form for recruitment without bias, including the advertising, information provision and selection processes;
- Follow-up support to the cohort once appointed including one-to-one meetings, meeting as a group in their organisation and collectively, regular exposure to others board members and to other boards;
- Board shadowing, observation, stock tours, joining Board awaydays and training sessions and attendance arrangements so potential board members are able to reflect on meetings.

One anecdotal positive outcome (unexpected by some) was that existing boards were now showing a new energy and challenge in ensuring that their equality, diversity and inclusion objectives were taken forward.

The arrangements for external mentoring have bedded in from summer and it is too early to say how these will help the cohort. Relationships are being built with some early success in supporting the trainees to question strategically and to support them in their application processes for Board or Charity positions

THE PROGRAMME

Diversity on boards has increasingly gained prominence in the corporate world. The case for board diversity in the not-for-profit housing sector has similarly gained momentum and the business case for diversity is now irrefutable. HDN's own analysis has shown that although need for change has been acknowledged it has generally not acted on, and any shifts in board composition have not been at the pace required. There has been progress on gender but limited movement on ethnicity, disability and age. This programme sought to bring a diversity of ideas, perspective and ways of thinking to the board environment.

The programme was developed by HDN to address issues surrounding the lack of board diversity. It was very much designed as a vehicle for achieving lasting change, drawing on leading diversity practice, and making an impact at board level.

At its heart the programme offers support across four key stages:

1. Preparation with the existing board and organisation for a more diverse board;
2. Searching for and selection of diverse board members (particularly in terms of ethnicity and age/younger members);
3. Inducting and mentoring these potential board members;
4. Retaining and ensuring good contribution of such new members.

It is instructive to note that the programme is not a quick fix. It is designed to recruit and develop a cohort (or pipeline) of board members for the future. No one is guaranteed a position. The programme is perhaps best described as a succession plan for the board and people will be recruited into a talent pool of potential board and committee members, as well as developing diverse board members to be 'board-ready' for other housing and charitable boards.

Participating organisations commit to developing board and committee diversity and invest in one of more of the following:

- Training for the board to lead to equalities and inclusion and the contribution of those with diverse skills and experience
- Coaching for the Chair or Executive to oversee this programme;
- Recruiting and nominating from their community and organisation to be part of a ‘talent pool’;
- Participating in a programme of training and consultancy support – with resources and tools for the existing board and executives to enable the development of board diversity, including understanding the business case for board diversity;
- Developing inclusive recruitment practices;
- Developing an inclusive approach to potential board member support;
- Collaboration with HDN and other organisations in the cohort to develop and share best practice.

Potential board members are also provided with a talent development programme via a number of HDN programmes. Foremost of these is participation in HDN’s acclaimed Board Excellence Programme. This programme (which is for new and existing board members) allows participants to receive a package of additional support via key speaker workshops (for example NHF, NFALMOS, Regulator of Social Housing), 360-degree assessments, personality questionnaires for influencing, shadowing opportunities at Board level, mock interviews and support to challenge and grow in confidence as a Board Member, or Chair. Participants benefit from networking opportunities with current board members, mentors, course participants and executives and industry specialists involved in delivery of this established programme.

KEY CHALLENGES

This programme is designed to provide a route into board membership for a more diverse range of people, with the aim that boards more accurately reflected their local communities, improve equality and diversity awareness at Board level and provide leadership opportunities for a wider range of people. The programme is shaped for each participating organisation, following an analysis of the gaps they wished to fill and an analysis of their vacancies, future corporate plan and succession plans.

There are a number of key challenges that have been identified in the programme:

- Keeping momentum going through the two- to three-year support plan;

- Tailoring support to those who are at different levels of their development
- The make-up of the cohort addressed some lack of diversity areas but there were still gaps;
- Timing has been an issue, in respect of some of the training not following on sequentially in terms of the programme;
- There is a need for more detailed conversations with potential board members in twelve months' time to evaluate how the post-appointment support has worked;
- The programme requires close project management to ensure that the processes are aligned and momentum is maintained so that potential board members are fully engaged.

There is however overwhelming support for the programme even at this early stage. The pilot project has helped develop an approach which has achieved significant outcomes.

HDN is keen to roll out the programme with an offer to other housing organisations to address the lack of board diversity.

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THE PROGRAMME?

The outcomes of this evaluation will be of interest to all concerned with governance in the housing sector. This includes housing associations, chairs and board members, the regulator and the representative bodies (such as the Chartered Institute of Housing, National Housing Federation and the National Federation of ALMOs). It will also be of interest to those who wish to become board members in future, and those outside the housing sector who may wish to apply the lessons learned in this programme to their own area.

The programme helped attract applicants from certain backgrounds, with ethnicity and gender being addressed better than others. There is some thinking to do with organisations on how other areas such as disability and people from LGBT backgrounds are attracted to boards.

NOTES

HDN is a training, consultancy and research social enterprise, established in 2003, providing services to the civil society, state and private sectors throughout the UK; it has a concentrated presence in the North of England.

HDN believes that through its work covering all aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion that it has a crucial role to play in ensuring that housing organisations reflect the communities that they serve. This includes staffing establishments, seniority in decision-making and governance.

Progress Housing Group owns and manages over 10,000 homes and delivers housing related services to communities mainly in Lancashire with supported living services nationwide.

Together Housing Group is one of the largest housing associations in the North of England, managing over 36,000 homes across Yorkshire and Lancashire. In addition to providing quality homes to rent, the Group builds and manage homes for sale through the Shared Ownership scheme, as well as providing sheltered accommodation and extra care schemes.

Together Housing Group is one of the largest housing associations in the North of

For more details on the Board Diversity Programme and benefits for your organisation visit

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