



Seeing is believing: someone like you

Ten case studies capturing the
many routes to board membership



Introduction

Boards with diverse voices and experience are better boards. Independent research has proved this is the case, yet the UK housing sector still has some way to go before true representation of the nine protected characteristics is realised at governance and executive level.

In 2019 we at ema consultancy held an event to discuss the barriers to women seeking to become board members – the first step even before selection. The lack of visibility of ‘people like them’ and a need for more sharing of how women applied and secured a board role were two actions we identified.

So, building on our initial report, this document captures ten inspiring stories of women in a number of commercial and public sector non-executive roles. We chose women as our first focus, but that in no way should detract from the equal importance of better representation across all characteristics.

Its production is just one of the nine pledges ema consultancy has made; investing our time for free to help improve sector equality.

We hope it inspires you to make an application. And if you’d like to speak about someone featured or have an informal chat with our expert team how and whether you should apply for a board member vacancy, we are happy to help. Just email me at anne.elliott@emaconsultancy.org.uk

The message from all those featured is clear; don’t create barriers that aren’t there. If you don’t ask you don’t get and yes, it is absolutely worth it.

A huge personal thank you to everyone who gave up their time to contribute to this important document.

Anne Elliott
Managing Director, ema consultancy



Kath Coughlin



Kath Coughlin is a qualified accountant and has worked in a variety of educational establishments and now manages a number of diverse functions including Estates, Human Resources and IT as well as Finance in Grŵp Llandrillo Menai. Kath's role has included managing a number of major capital projects and the merger of three colleges to form the Grŵp.

Kath joined the Creating Enterprise board in July 2017. Creating Enterprise is an award-winning building and maintenance social enterprise based in North Wales which is part of Cartrefi Conwy. She then became a member of the Cartrefi Conwy Board in 2019. Kath enjoys her role and like the rest of the Board wants to ensure the best housing provision possible is provided for Cartrefi Conwy tenants.

Well, during my first meeting I felt I was neither use nor ornament, but you have to get over that and ask questions! I was interested in becoming a board member as I wanted to do something worth while and to know I was – in some small way – making a difference. Education and housing have such a power to improve lives, or to make them worse if there's bad governance and things aren't run well – and that attracted me to Cartrefi Conwy.

I initially thought board membership was something you did when you retired! But when a former colleague resigned from his chair role, he suggested that I consider applying as they were keen for someone with financial knowledge. So I did. I was on the subsidiary board first which gave me the confidence to take up a post on the main board. It was a useful development route. I found people really helpful and keen to explain new things. I think it's important new board members know that it's ok to ask questions and request report writers time before meetings if needed. I still do that now to get any naïve questions out of the way and to ensure the executive know the focus of my queries. It then means I can focus the time in the meeting on the 'why' rather than the detail.

One of the main barriers I faced in applying was simply knowing how to do so and what roles were available. It's something I know others have asked me about, and knowing who to talk to is key. I think women can sometimes be less confident in their abilities or misjudge the likelihood of being successful, but there's a real need for more diverse voices.

I would definitely encourage others to apply for board positions. I think it's helpful before you do so to understand the difference between a board role and an executive role. We recently interviewed for new board members, and that was one thing we were looking for amongst the candidates. You also need to be a critical friend, and getting your head around that and removing your 'executive' hat in your day job takes some getting used to.

A board role could absorb 100% of your energy and time if you let it. It's a great responsibility but also something I get a real kick out of and something which is very worthwhile.

Mary Daunt



Mary is an experienced executive and non-executive director following 25 years in partnership as a real estate lawyer heading up teams at law firms including Eversheds and Andersen Legal.

Mary's character lends itself well to making complex things simple, problem solving and decisive action. She is currently putting all to good use, not only at Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby but also as a board director of both Futures Housing Group and The Complete Works Limited, the latter being an independent school incorporated as a charity and based in East London that enables young people in difficult circumstances to engage in education.

Previous roles have included non-executive director and vice-chair of Birmingham Women's NHS Foundation Trust, chief executive of Birmingham Forward and consultant at Squire Patton Boggs LLP.

Mary grew up with a sister with spina bifida and has a daughter who is both visually impaired and has learning and behavioural difficulties. She is absolutely passionate about furthering the cause of those with a disability and ensuring there are equal opportunities for all whether in sport or everyday life.

It's important to recognise that a non-executive role is very different from applying for an executive role. It is more **'nose in, hands out'**

Notwithstanding 17 years of sitting on various boards, I still recall the initial early days and the internal dialogue of **'what on earth am I doing here?'**

Translating entire conversations of acronyms was one unexpected challenge, something which occurs with every new sector I enter it seems! I may have a background in real estate, but I've held board roles in the NHS and local government and still hold roles in a sporting environment for Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby and in an education charity in London which enables young people in difficult situations to engage in education.

The first board role I had was as an Independent Shadow Board member of Birmingham City Wide Trust in 2002 which proposed the largest public sector housing stock transfer in Europe. I was a partner in a law firm and I was approached to see

if I would be interested in the role. I found myself sitting amongst a large group of people including politicians and councillors. I was terrified.

I had decided to apply as I think it really important to widen your network. It is very easy to work within a very narrow environment within the professional work place and I've never been one to be afraid to step outside of my comfort zone.

You need to really think what it is you can offer the organisation you are applying for. I always think it worth finding the **'hook'** that interests you in the organisation. You need to personalise your covering letter, answer how you meet the person specification with specific examples from your career. Don't send out your proforma CV and covering letter. It takes time and effort to submit an application. Also, phone up and ask to speak to the Chair or someone already on the Board. You may think you fit the person specification perfectly and then not even get an acknowledgement - as has happened to me. You can't take it personally.

“ I’ve never been one to be afraid to step outside of my comfort zone. ”

I'd also recommend would-be board members tell everyone they meet that they want a non-executive role. One of my roles came from a colleague who became aware of an opportunity and had heard I was looking. Your CV needs to be very different from the one you use for an executive career. Don't assume you know everything. Even if you have had a successful executive career there may be areas where you feel you need more knowledge. If you feel you lack any such knowledge then attend courses to improve yourself.

I would absolutely recommend joining a board to others; as long as you have the time. Look through old CVs/appraisals and remind yourself of all that you have done in your career. You will

have probably forgotten many of the committees/groups that you would have been a part of. You will have learnt many skills over the years so don't restrict yourself to thinking you can only contribute on the subject matter of your career. But don't take on a role if you don't have the time to read the papers and attend the meetings. It is always worth finding out if you will be required to sit on a sub-committee and the dates of Board meetings in advance.

The culture of a board is now accepted as an essential component of good governance, so speak to people about the board and how it is viewed.



Dawn Edwards



Managing Director of Challenge Consulting and Vice-President (rising to President in November 2019) of East Midlands Chamber (Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire), Dawn Edwards is a multi-award-winning Entrepreneur in the Nottinghamshire area, including Woman Achiever of the Year (2003) and Entrepreneur of the Year (2010), and was honoured by being listed as one of Nottinghamshire's Top 100 Women of Influence in 2012.

Dawn leads the team at Challenge Consulting, offering business training programmes to a prestigious client base which includes many household names. The company is the largest centre for ILM (Institute of Leadership and Management Qualifications) in the East Midlands and offers business support and advice as well as Executive Coaching.

With a background in financial services, and roles within various large organisations, including Scottish Life and Scottish and Newcastle, redundancy in 1996 drove her to start up her own training company. As a single parent with two young children, a mortgage and little more than tenacity and determination, she decided to call the business "Challenge". Within a very short period of time, the gamble paid off, with the business doubling turnover year on year. In 2007, she acquired a failing Children's Day Nursery (due to close), and turned this around, selling it as a thriving, business with a "Good" Ofsted rating to new owners in 2014.

With qualifications including a Master of Business Administration, Dawn is a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership and Management and a Member of the Chartered Management Institute.


In November 2019 she will become President of the East Midlands Chamber (Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire), representing the interests of over 4,300 member businesses.

I first joined the Chamber Board seven years ago. I had been a member of the Chamber since setting up in 1996 and they had helped and supported me as the business grew. I became more involved with various departments, particularly business training, and in helping out at Enterprising Women events. One of the current Board members mentioned to me that they were looking for Board members with a Learning and Development background, this prompted me to start talking to a couple of the Board members at an event and I applied.

Having started businesses from scratch, I felt I could contribute and understand the issues which some member organisations might experience, and also help out with driving

forward the Skills agenda which I am passionate about. The East Midlands is in my blood and the opportunity to help drive investment and support other businesses through the reach that the Chamber has was irresistible. But I still felt overwhelmed at my first meeting – the Chamber was historically seen as quite traditional, so I was a little wary, particularly as a female since the Board was generally made up of men with just two other women. I needn't have been however as everyone was very welcoming and although the learning curve was a steep one, the other Board members were supportive and I soon found my feet.

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The opportunity to steer an organisation as a Board member is different from working day to day, since you have the benefit of seeing things from an outside perspective. It provides an opportunity for you to explore skills sets you perhaps haven't yet discovered, by working alongside others with incredible talent and flair for their own field of expertise. Knowing you are helping to shape and contribute to the local economy (even in a small way) is enormous. It's also fun and you make some great friends and contacts along the way.

Whatever your background or experience, someone somewhere will benefit, so apply to a Board to share it, you never know what impact you can make until you try!





Michelle Hallmark



Formerly a journalist with local, regional and national experience, Michelle has worked with more than 100 providers on media, copywriting, communications strategy, crisis management and marketing projects.

She's worked in housing for 15 years' plus, despite only being allegedly 21, and is a former housing board member, and is a current trustee of a housing charity.

With qualifications including a first-class BA Hons Journalism, the National Council for the Training of Journalists diploma and the Chartered Institute of PR advanced diploma, Michelle supports the business and product development of Creative Bridge as well as clients' communication needs. Creative Bridge is a marketing communications agency which specialises in blending social and commercial objectives to help organisations achieve their potential.

Alongside tearing her hair out at PTA last-minute requests for Children in Need dress-up as something random days, Michelle is currently studying towards an MSC in Behavioural Change. Partly with the intent to support housing organisations manage welfare reform and digital channel shift, but also to stop her husband daily leaving his shoes outside of the designated shoe cupboard.

Board papers check, highlighters check, breast pump check. If you have a two-year old and a newborn, then my advice on whether to become a board member is no. For the organisation's sanity and your own. Otherwise, read on and then apply!

My path to board membership started when I was 29. I'd presented to numerous boards in my day job (both clients and our own) so had a handle on what it entailed and why it mattered. I was initially post interview put on to a committee and then as a co-optee to the main board. But, on reflection, perhaps it was a classic case of trying to prove that you could indeed do everything and then not achieving any of it all that well. The lack of maternity leave policy for board members had me feeling somewhat obliged to attend (although, of course I didn't have to) and I hit the glass ceiling so hard as a result that it took another three years and an alternative division into qualifications for me to consider that I might actually have something to offer.

For two years now I've sat on Key Unlocking Futures board. In short, we (love using we!) exist to improve people's lives. Charity funding streams mean how you do that can often change, but ultimately around 1,000 people who need support to achieve their potential and enjoy their life, home, family and community do so thanks to the charity. The chance to play a tiny role in that is amazing.

Also amazing is the chance to volunteer alongside lots of talented and passionate people who also want to make a measurable difference to the lives of others. For someone who isn't known for coming backwards, I think my family, friends, clients and colleagues wouldn't have recognised the Michelle at the first board meetings. Overcoming the sense of doubt that my opinion was equally as valid took some time to do, and learning how to express myself in a different type of environment as a result has had massive cross-over to other areas of my life. Not least as I've also

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ended up doing an MSC in Behaviour Change in part to better understand the path to change we support people on. That’s the ‘downside’ of boards, you’ll be sucked in and giving more time before you know it!

It’s still not always easy balancing evening meetings with parenting life. Especially when school like to spring ‘wear the colours of an unknown country flag day’ on you with less than Amazon-Prime notice, but having board papers now on an ipad has made everything immeasurably easier. Washing machines, the Pill, electronic board papers....anything that creates time for men or women to achieve more is something I’m grateful for. Although I won’t pretend that the kids are in anyway motivated by my role; **“are boards supposed to be boring?”** wasn’t exactly the response I wanted having told them of my interview success.

So, in short, please seek out something you are passionate about and see if you can use your time and skills to help. Boards need people who care and who are prepared to put their learning from life and work experience to good use. But if all of those people come from the same places the resulting echo chamber is a missed opportunity for us all. Your ability to solve problems, digest complex information, articulate why something matters and you care about the end result. In addition, your work background specialism is a pretty great thing to offer an organisation. And, in my case, it honestly gives me a reason not to be involved in the PTA and the chance to eat food in good company without anyone stealing it from my plate. Which is thanks enough.

There’s something really special when a group of people with diverse opinions and insight come together and intelligently debate decisions that have the power to change someone else’s life for the better. Who wouldn’t want to be part of that?



5 Grainne Heselwood



Grainne was born and brought up in Manchester, and later moved to Cheshire as part of the City's council house overspill estate exodus during the slum clearance programmes. She has worked in housing for more than 30 years and has also previously run a training consultancy business. She is Chair of Salix Housing and also a trained psychotherapist with her own practice.

I took up my role as Chair of Salix in March 2015. Having not been on a board for a number of years I was not actively looking to join a board. In particular, I was not considering applying for the role of Chair of a board. Despite my background and experience, I did not consider myself suitably qualified for the role. It took someone I knew and had worked with to encourage me to apply – and they were clear about the fact no other women had applied!

Even then I gave scant consideration and assumed I was there **“to make up the numbers.”** Due to this thought process I never felt anxious about the application process or interview, and so relaxed and gave a pretty good performance. Mainly I remember being very clear about my vision of the role and the governance and board changes required to move from being an ALMO to a housing association board. At the time I thought I might have been too clear, but the clarity proved to be a strength.

At my first meeting, despite having done hundreds of board appraisals and governance reviews, I felt very scared. I had never chaired a board meeting before and felt under pressure. I sensed that expectations were high due to my background and I didn't want to let anybody down. I actually shook as I held the papers! Due to my personality I was able to joke about it, and when I did inevitably make a mistake, used humour to deflect it. I was incredibly well prepared and had lots of notes.

Before applying I went to meet with the new CEO, and this was a very positive experience as we shared similar views about the place and goals of the newly emerging housing association. Face to face discussions and dialogue before the interview are key and should happen more often. It is a useful tool in breaking down barriers caused by entrenched assumptions and previous poor experiences.

“It's one of the best and most rewarding things I've done. I've loved every minute of it.”

Despite my entirely positive experience in my role as Chair I would still hesitate to put myself forward for another board role. For me the image of the **“not good enough”** female is still very powerful. I always tend to assume that there is someone better than me who can do the role. This is an almost exclusive female response, as very few men would allow such thoughts to stop then applying. To overcome it I needed, and would probably still need, a big push from someone else to apply, and that face to face communication. I suspect I’m not alone in this.

That said, I would definitely encourage others to apply to get on a board. It’s one of the best and most rewarding things I’ve done. I’ve loved every minute and will miss it when I step down next year. In my encouragement to others I would offer practical help and coaching as I know it helps. There are many people out there who could be great board members, but just need the right support to get there.

My advice to interviewees would be:

- Know what your priority goals are for the board and governance
- Spell out the changes, and why they are needed clearly
- Have a clear vision of the future and where you want to end up
- Be true to yourself and express your views and ideas clearly
- Don’t try to second guess what you think they want; it just gets confusing and will never work if you get the role.





Archana Makol



Chief Counsel BT and Accent Board member

Archana leads an award-winning team of more than 60 with an annual legal case volume of 20,000. The main areas of expertise are personal injury/health and safety law, network damage and vehicle claims. She has also been involved in a number of transformational projects across business units.

The success of Archana and her team led to the setup of a separate BT owned business, BT Law Ltd, which Archana is managing director of. BT Law provides legal services to other likeminded businesses, and was regarded as an innovation in legal practice. Archana is also BT Law's compliance officer for legal practice. The role is one of personal accountability and is formally approved by the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

As well as being a main group board member, Archana chairs Accent Housing's Audit and Risk Committee.

My path to board membership started partly because I was seeking personal development but also because I knew my experience in liability and risk could be of value to another organisation. I have worked in legal in-house teams for more than 20 years and also have had some exposure to business in my role setting up BT Law. This had given me financial literacy, adding to my experience of legal compliance and risk.

I was lucky in that BT was actively encouraging people to consider non-executive roles and that they were prepared to support the time to do so. A male member of our senior team had been offered a number of such positions and took the decision to flip some of the opportunities to some of the women he thought could apply. That he thought I could do it reinforced my opinion that I had something to offer. It sometimes takes someone else's encouragement to allow you to recognise you can do something. Part of me didn't think I had the calibre needed, but that someone else did think I did, made me make that first move.

Despite my experience, I did find the interview process and first meetings scary. I was nervous and as it was a new sector I did feel out of my comfort zone. Everyone helped me get up to

speed, and although it was a steep learning curve, it's definitely been worthwhile.

For someone considering applying, I'd said you need to be really clear about what you have to offer. I was also transparent about what I saw as my weaker areas. If you are going to invest your time, know why and what value you will bring to the table. Consider what it is you excel at that they need, and what support you need in place to help you pick up skills in other areas. You also need to be transparent with your employer about the time commitment you'll need to do the board role alongside your existing job.

I think people should also remember that it's not just about skills, but a broader attitude. I felt nervous that – although I could read a balance sheet and knew the language of EBITDA and the like, I wasn't an FD for example. But everyone around the table looks through a different lens; and that's really important. It's that different focus that makes board effective.

You have to consider that there's a range of people that make up a good board dynamic, and the skills matrix in place across the board means you don't have to have all the skills and be all of the people. It's about not feeling bad that someone else raises

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a good point in a board meeting that you hadn't considered, but seeing it as a collective and valuing their contribution in their area of expertise. It's about also knowing there is no such thing as a dumb question, and being prepared to challenge appropriately.

I really would recommend it to someone else. It's a real investment in your career. I find it enjoyable and appropriately challenging and have learnt a huge amount. It's not about a chore, it's a chance to do something that feels morally good and which you get a lot out of and get to put a lot into.

I've learnt more about good business practice being on Accent's board than I have on any course I've been on. I feel more comfortable offering constructive feedback in all of my roles as a result and have more confidence. It does require time and commitment, of course, but I've made immense personal and professional gains.

I find being a board member energising. People at work can tell when I've had a board meeting as I return full of ideas and insights into what I've offered up and what I've learned. As a board team we are suitably serious about the decisions and on all the things that really matter, but we also have a sense of enjoyment, camaraderie and mutual support. You gain a real support network and the satisfaction of making a difference. Why would you rule yourself out of that opportunity?





Katie Moore



Katie is head of strategy, assurance and performance at Citizen and also vice chair of Spring Housing.

I was 29 when I first joined a board. I went for a full member post and, although that went to someone more experienced, I was offered a co-optee role. This became a full role after a year, and I later went onto join Spring Housing in December 2015. For this role I was approached directly and invited to apply.

I was keen to join a board as I knew I wanted to expand my professional experience. I like to ensure I add value to the things I do, and I felt some of the work I was doing in my paid employment would be a benefit to the boards/ organisations I joined.

One thing I think could make a difference to the diversity of boards is putting a greater emphasis on behaviours as well as experience.

You might not be a trained accountant, but nor should every person around a board. I had a personal determination to succeed and can be pretty tenacious, but even I felt nervous and inexperienced at my first meeting!

In a way I also found having an unpaid role helpful. Not because it was less important or because I could put less in, but somehow it freed me to contribute freely and fully. I was there because I wanted to be, not because I had to fulfil a paid obligation. Paid board roles, and those with long tenures, reinforce in people's mind what a traditional board member should look like. More flexible and informal governance routes offer something else and so attract a different type of person.

“I like to ensure I add value to the things I do, and I felt some of the work I was doing in my paid employment would be a benefit to the organisations I joined.”

The main barrier I faced was simply a lack of experience. At the time I applied I probably only had four to five years' experience in housing, so by comparison I didn't come with a 25-year track record like some candidates. I had a few knock backs due to my 'lack of experience' which I felt was an age-related barrier. Importantly, I didn't put any barriers up myself, I just kept trying!

Others should put in an application. It's great experience and the worst that can happen is

that they say no! That happened to me in some instances due to my age, but it gave me other options which led to better opportunities. You need to be clear why you want to do it in the first place though, as that's the best way to approach the interview and role. Do it because you want to, because you want to make a genuine difference and have a purpose and connection with the organisation you are applying to.

Danielle Oum



Danielle was appointed Chair of whg in February 2019. She has a professional background in the learning and skills and regeneration sectors and has held senior roles in organisations such as Black Country Consortium, Groundwork UK and the Learning and Skills Council.

In parallel to her professional career, Danielle has also held a number of non-executive roles, including within the housing sector at Optima-Family, WM Group and Wrekin Housing Trust.

Alongside her continued interest in housing, Danielle has held non-executive roles in the NHS. She is Chair of Healthwatch Birmingham and Chair of Audit for Healthwatch England. She has previously held non-executive/Chair roles at Dudley Primary Care Trust and Dudley and Walsall Mental Health Trust. In 2016, she was asked to become the Chair at Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust, to help turnaround this poorly performing Trust.

Danielle holds an MA in Equal Opportunities from Birmingham City University and a BA in Humanities from University of Greenwich.

It was a sense of wanting to give back that first attracted me to seek a board role. After an enjoyable career in fine art publishing and a focus on profit in a high-end market, I switched to voluntary and public sector work. I had been involved in community regeneration, specifically employment and skills and by 2007 I felt that to improve the effectiveness of strategic approaches to address economic exclusion I needed to understand housing and health. So, I sought and obtained board positions in both sectors.

That decision led me firstly to join Path West Midlands as a Board member in 2007. Unfortunately, it was no longer financially viable and so my first experience as a board member was closing an organisation down. I later joined Family Housing in Birmingham, latterly part of the WM Group, recently rebranded as Citizen.

In common with others I suspect, I over-prepared for my first ever board meeting. I probably could have recited the board papers off by heart!

The main barrier I faced when considering a board role was not knowing that such roles existed. I lacked the social networks that would have let me know about opportunities. As soon as I heard about board roles I applied, and kept on applying, getting feedback and refining my application until I secured the roles I wanted. My advice to potential future board members would be to do similar – keep applying. I think it's also important to be clear on why you want a board role and how your skills and experience will be of benefit. Seek and listen to feedback.

Boards need a range of skills and experiences, and all the evidence shows that diverse boards perform better, avoiding group-think. For that reason, I really would recommend you apply. As a member of a board you set the tone and direction of the organisation, as well as monitoring evidence that it is on the right track and course correcting when necessary. Within a customer-focused, people-centred sector such as housing, the sense of purpose is palpable and the feeling of making a difference is very rewarding.



Lesley Roberts



Lesley is a Partner at Allsop specialising in Build to Rent and a well-known specialist in the residential investment market. Prior to joining Allsop, Lesley was a Director at Pinnacle Group. With 14+ years of UK PRS experience, her expertise incorporates all facets of large-scale residential portfolio performance including product suitability, design, lettings, management, operations and strategic asset management.

She has contributed to thought leadership through both the British Property Federation (BPF) and Urban Land Institute (ULI), having toured the US studying their multi-family model and been heavily involved with the second edition of the ULI's 'Build to Rent Guide', and more recently appointed as the President of the UKAA – the specialist industry body for BtR.

Lesley is Chair of Soho Housing Association, an active member of Women in Property and supporter of Real Estate Balance.

I would describe my path to board membership as unplanned, driven by curiosity and evolutionary. My career had primarily been in the private residential sector and I'd reached a stage where I knew an awful lot about investment property, but not the other side of the coin. I was curious about the social housing sector and wanted to know more. As part of that process I started to attend conferences, taking the opportunity to seek out people working within affordable housing.

Around that time I spotted an advert on the Women in Property website, for a board member position at Soho. I have a passion for Soho and was driven by a recognition of the role of social housing in preserving the unique diversity of the area. Peel back the layers and beyond the tourist level, there is a very, very strong community in Soho with workers who provide vital services. The opportunity to make a difference and contribute to keeping this iconic place as a colourful, vibrant community really appealed.


I felt with my commercial acumen that I might have something to offer so applied. I was absolutely overjoyed to be successful. I'd also secured a new paid role at the same time, but the board appointment felt more of an achievement!

It was a steep learning curve, but my experience of sitting on internal boards within my main role definitely helped. Social housing has a very different way of doing things, and an entirely new set of structured regulation compared to my other hats. I was blown away by the support and calibre of people also on the board. At times I did feel like a fraud and as if I might be found out, as other board members all had immense skills, knowledge and fresh ways of seeing things. In time I found where and how my skills were best applied and that it was definitely ok not to know everything; in fact not knowing everything and asking the obvious is sometimes at the heart of being a board member!

After I'd been in the post for a few years, the incredible chair, Keith, needed to step down. He and the treasurer approached me and asked me to be pro tem chair. At first I thought 'Oh God, I can't do that', but their belief in me and the support of other board members gave me the confidence to take on the temporary role.

I then went through a formal, independent recruitment process to become the permanent chair. This was really helpful for two reasons.

“Authenticity is important to me, and so finding my way of doing things was key.”



The first as it made me really think and hone why I wanted to lead the board, my vision and what it would look like with me at the helm, and secondly it was an endorsement that I was the best person for the role. It stopped me thinking that perhaps I was chosen just because I was in sight and I was convenient. I'd earned it.

I did have a bit of a wake-up call during my first meetings as chair. The former chair was – and indeed still is – excellent. So I thought ‘oh, I’ll do it just as Keith did it’. But I soon realised I wasn’t Keith and walking into his shoes wasn’t going to work. Authenticity is important to me, and so finding my way of doing things was key. I realised that my skills lie in creating a collaborative, but challenging space. I am good at corralling the skills of the exceptionally high-calibre board members and steering them to the best decision after a healthy debate. I often describe our board as a Ferrari engine in a Mini!

A key challenge I face is lack of time. You can’t do everything and have to make a considered decision about what you are not going to do. As chair I find you need to offer four times as

much time compared to being a board member. You really have to invest in relationships with the CEO, Executive and with each board member, support them and discover their individual areas of specialism. I could not manage without administrative support in both my paid role and also within the housing association. It’s vital for me.

I may have to put a lot of time in, but I get a lot back. There is significant learning I can then apply into my full time executive role and the two really complement each other. I’ve met so many great people within the social housing sector and it has opened up many opportunities, including for my own professional development.

As a board we collectively get to preserve something that is individually dear to us all which is also part of London’s wider social purpose. You really can’t help but care immensely. It feels good to give something back and to be involved in something which is part of a bigger picture and achieves good things for people. You shouldn’t underestimate the commitment and time needed; the effort is rewarded and the journey has been incredibly satisfying.



Jo Tilley



Jo started her career in housing management and now leads HR, governance, learning and development, health and safety, quality, compliance, co-regulation, communications, and new business as part of her executive director role. Jo is a member of the Chartered Institute of Housing, Chair of the National Housing Federation's Midlands Governance Special Interest Group and a Trustee for Age UK Warwickshire.

She recently spoke at the NHF governance conference on the importance of board diversity and has been shortlisted for a Women in Social Housing award this year in recognition of her role in supporting women onto boards. Her work has seen emh increase (compared to 2016) women board membership from 27% to 50%, BAME board membership from 17% to 25% and representation of those under 40 from 0% to 17% in the same period.

My housing career started in 1986, when I beat more than 100 graduates to join North Warwickshire Borough Council as a housing trainee. On qualifying, I gained employment as a housing officer and subsequently research manager with national housing providers, before moving to emh group in 2004.

I first started to think about increasing diversity when emh group advertised for a new chair and just one woman applied from 29 candidates. As a group we subsequently set a business plan target for 50% of board members to be female and appointed a board diversity champion.

My research showed that women were less likely to apply for board positions unless they met all person specification attributes, owing to low self-confidence and a greater tendency for compliance with rules. So I, supported by others, created the 'Women on Boards' initiative to address the balance. Potential female board members were given guidance to make their application stand out, and maximise impact at interview. They observed board meetings, and met a leading female chair and CEO role model. This programme led to a board appointment and helped another participant secure employment.

Since 2016, women board members at emh have increased from 27% to 50%; and black and minority ethnic board membership has increased by eight per cent over the same period. Women also account for 57.5% of the Group's leaders' forum.

I first identified potential challenges facing women in leadership when appointed at 28 to a senior management role. Whilst the senior team was diverse, the executive team was exclusively male. When someone told me I was "not director material", I saw this situation as a development opportunity. Alongside my day job, I completed an MBA while bringing up my young daughter. Gaining an MBA with distinction helped me defy predictions and secure my first executive position. This led to the confidence to later apply for non-exec roles.

Effective boards need the right people around the table – that means the optimal mix of skills, experience, age and background. My own experience as a trustee of a local charity has taught me that if you want to make a difference and give something back, whilst contributing to your own personal development, then board membership is definitely an option you should consider.

As for whether boards should change to encourage more diverse candidates, I couldn't agree more. Whether that's extending recruitment lead-in times; developing a candidate pipeline; adding softer skills to person specifications; using more accessible language; adding positive imagery of women; and promoting development opportunities to help candidates build expertise and fulfil their potential; I've a host of evidence to prove it works. Not only for individuals but for the boards themselves and for the people the board serves.