



Seeing the world differently

Tamsin Stirling reflects on current debates on board diversity

I HAD THE PLEASURE OF chairing a workshop at the Tai conference during which Amanda Oliver, operations manager at Dewis, talked about the findings of her PhD research on women's participation in housing association boards in Wales. Amanda summarised her findings in the article *Beyond the Boys Club* in the last issue of WHQ so I won't repeat them here. However, a number of things struck me from the discussion about increasing board diversity, not only during the workshop, but also more general debate across the sector during the last year or so.

I don't hear many, if any, people saying that greater diversity on boards is a bad thing in and of itself.

However, the debate can quickly morph into *'but we've got to make sure that people have got the right skills'*. It is interesting to think about what lies behind that statement.

What are the 'right' skills? Technical skills and knowledge or softer skills such as influencing or negotiation? Independence of thought? Ability to challenge constructively?

Then there is the issue of who is seen as possessing those skills. I must admit I get very irritated with any suggestion that women (or people from minority groups) do not have the necessary skills to make very good, if not excellent, board members. Whilst women are still under-represented in senior management positions across all sectors in Wales, there are many highly skilled and knowledgeable women, for example, running their own businesses. Recent initiatives by Chwarae Teg, Tai Pawb and other organisations have helped housing associations to access previously largely untapped networks to recruit board members.

This focus on skills, while of course

important, can miss out what I think is one of the most crucial aspects of diversity. Diversity of world view – and having tenants around the board table is an essential component of this – means that different perspectives are brought to debates and decisions, avoiding the phenomenon of groupthink which has been so prevalent in governance failures across the years. Diversity of world view may not make for comfortable board meetings, but it is possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

Then comes the issue of term limits for board members, probably the most controversial element of the Community Housing Cymru (CHC) Code of Governance – albeit that term limits have been in place

for the housing association sector in England and Scotland for

many years. Some of the people who say that they are supportive of increasing diversity on boards are opposed to term limits. And some people don't see much wrong with how things are and are vehemently opposed to term limits. If there is little

turnover of board members, the pace at which diversity can be increased will be slow. Term limits, if applied rigidly, are a fairly crude mechanism. But the way they are being implemented in Wales is pragmatic, with the regulator looking for board succession plans which demonstrate how associations will apply the term limits over coming years.

Early stages

Our thinking on diversity in governance is still largely at an early stage, focusing on how we get a more diverse group of people around board tables. Amanda's research looked at what happens once people get into the boardroom, for example, how meetings are planned, managed and chaired to enable participation and diversity of thought to be

expressed (or not). Some organisations are giving these issues serious consideration and I think it is likely that some interesting innovation in governance will emerge.

More diverse boards across Wales will be fairer, will better accord with equalities legislation, will definitely mean better decision making, but at the bottom line, will simply mean better governance. The review of housing governance published in 2013 found that boards and governance need a step-change to respond to a changed and tougher operating environment. And when it launched its Code of Governance, CHC set its stall high with a stated ambition to be recognised as the best governed sector in Wales. Increasing the diversity of boards is an integral, and important, part of this.

Real and meaningful diversity on boards is a matter of hearts and minds. If achieving greater diversity on housing association boards and the boards of other organisations becomes a matter of compliance – something to be done because the Welsh Government (or other regulator) wants to see it happen – then we will have lost an opportunity. An opportunity to reality check to see if we have got complacent about governance in our organisations – good governance needs constant attention. An opportunity to reassess what skills, knowledge and behaviours we want around our board tables and to reassess interactions between board members and those who report to, and attend, board meetings to ensure constructive challenge is welcomed, real debates happen, and board members are enabled to be strategic. And, importantly, to acknowledge diversity in governance as what the evidence clearly demonstrates it is – a matter of good governance.

My thanks go to Gayna Jones and Alison Inman for providing me with constructive challenge on governance matters. Tamsin Stirling can be contacted at tamsin.stirling@dial.pipex.com and is on Twitter @TamsinStirling1