

Chairs' Challenge

A commitment by housing association boards to improve equality, diversity and inclusion.



Introduction

What is the Chairs' challenge?

As Chairs' we're told that creating an inclusive board is part of our role. We are told this in governance reviews, in our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies and at conferences. We're told that inclusion is led by the tone from the top and who is at the top if not the chair? And yet, it can be challenging to work out how we can be leaders in creating inclusive spaces, to know what actions we can take and the extent to which we can challenge the way things are done. By now, we know to focus on hearing everyone's voices and on a good day many of us can achieve that, but what else is in our direct control?

Alongside our comprehensive work supporting the sector to become more equal, diverse and inclusive, in 2021 the NHF began to define our role in supporting housing association boards on their journeys to become more diverse and inclusive.

We wanted this work to be action focused, and together with a group of 20 board members have been through an extensive process to identify and prioritise common issues that must be addressed in order for boards to become more diverse and inclusive.

Identifying three key problems, the group members developed practical responses to each one.

We know that this work alone won't solve the incredibly complicated, systemic and cultural challenges that exist in creating an equal, diverse and inclusive sector. But we are confident that as part of our wider work on EDI, these outputs could have a significant impact in supporting housing association boards to become more diverse, inclusive and equal.

One problem the group identified was that often there is no inspirational EDI vision for a board. The Chairs' Challenge has been developed in response to this. Our insights showed that many boards don't have a clear understanding of their role in setting the right culture and behaviours for equality and diversity to thrive. We want to support chairs to work with their boards to create their own vision and roadmaps to success.

Our insights also showed us that it is crucial for chairs to show leadership with EDI – even where they have another board member assigned to be the lead. It is the chair who has the power to maintain momentum and set expectations for behaviour and culture.

The Chairs' Challenge is a public commitment made by a board chair to begin – or further develop – a journey to improve their own culture, creating an inclusive environment for all board members. By adding their name to a publicly available list on our website, they are stating that they will create a vision for their board to become more equal, diverse and inclusive, and that they will make active steps towards fulfilling their vision.

By embarking on this challenge, chairs will be encouraged to use a data-first approach and will have access to a suite of resources to support them on their journey, including the NHF EDI data tool, adaptable templates, case studies of best practice, and guidelines for how to run a session with board members to co-create a vision. To support board members and governance teams to fulfil this vision we have also developed an Inclusive Recruitment Toolkit and a report detailing learnings for how to run an associate board member programme to create a dynamic and inclusive succession plan.

The Chairs' Challenge will not have an end date, and should be self-monitored through annual reporting, using the NHF EDI data tool to assess how representative your board is of the communities where your housing association has homes. Chairs are encouraged to hold themselves to account for driving a culture of inclusivity inviting annual appraisals of their progress.

The following notes accompany a set of slides (**Building inclusion and belonging in the boardroom**) for you, as chair, (perhaps with assistance if you prefer) to lead a workshop with your board to discuss how inclusive you perceive yourselves to be right now and how you might be even more inclusive in the future.

The workshop will focus on action, not detail, and therefore is likely to be different from training you have had in previous years. To ensure that that you and your board have a strong starting point in understanding EDI requirements in law, the slides are accompanied by a briefing sheet which you can share with your board in advance. This should help board members understand their legal responsibilities, particularly if it's a while since they completed the relevant training.

The workshop session has been designed to be flexible, to allow you to take account of your board and housing association's needs. It should allow you to set broad or specific goals, to acknowledge work already undertaken and to stretch yourselves as far as is practical.



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Planning your workshop

We recommend setting aside at least one and a half hours to allow plenty of time for discussion. We expect that as chair, you will introduce the session and add your own reflections on why this is so important near the beginning.

You then have the option to hand over to someone else to facilitate the rest of the discussion. There are pros and cons to facilitating the discussion yourself: it may be easier to participate in the discussion if you are not facilitating, but may be easier to push and challenge your board more as chair if you do.

You know your board best and also whether there is a reasonable alternative to be a facilitator. Your decision should give the best chance of a really productive and action-oriented conversation.

It's your choice as to whether or not the executive take part in the conversation too although we recommend that you have a joint conversation at some point so you can create an action plan to which you can all hold yourselves accountable.



Notes for facilitator

Slide 1 – title slide

Building inclusion and belonging in the boardroom

NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

Slide 2 - Chair's introduction

This is your opportunity to set out why you have personally signed up to the Chairs' Challenge and to outline your vision for inclusion in the organisation.

Questions you might want to ask yourself in advance and then with your colleagues:

- What's the best way for us to create space for conversations about EDI, and to ensure we're in the right mindset?
- What does inclusion means to you?

Chair's introduction

NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

- Does the board feel too comfortable, is there complacency, does the board have a sense of investment in inclusion? Or is this exercise about stretching beyond what you are currently achieving in EDI, and further considerations to take you to the next level?

- What do you see as the board's role and purpose in inclusion? How does it link to the wider work you are doing as an organisation? What are the challenges and opportunities that have already arisen?

Emphasising the strong link between resident voice at the heart of everything you do and the role that inclusion plays would be very useful here.

It may also be worthwhile gathering information about the current actions and statistics of your organisation that you can share – maybe successes or things you would like to challenge. The NHF EDI data tool results will be helpful for this if your organisation completed it in 2020 – it shows how representative your organisation is of the communities where you have homes, and breaks it down by boards, executive and staff. This exercise is being repeated by

the NHF in 2023 so it's possible your organisation will have recent data to share with you.

When considering representation, be clear not to conflate diversity with inclusion (see definitions on the slides) i.e. representation is crucial in bringing together diverse voices who represent your residents, but the focus goes beyond seeking out a diverse group of people to be around the table – it's imperative to create a culture of belonging so that each person thrives.



Part 1

Creating a shared understanding of what inclusion and belonging mean in this context.

— Explanation of slides 3 – 16

The first part of the workshop is not training, but sets up the group for the second part of the workshop – setting out why these topics are important, some key principles and definitions and introducing some common language the group will find useful. Depending how much time you have, or how much work you've done on this in the past, you could move through these quite quickly, using the talking points below for each slide.

Or, using the suggested questions, you could discuss each of these elements in more detail with your board, taking time to ensure you are all starting from a common understanding of the issues to be discussed. As you go through you can ask 'where could we benefit from remembering this as a board'?

The next six slides can either be used one at a time as you talk about each element or you can go straight to slide 8 and talk about it altogether.

Below are some facts you can mention about each element: you could share which one is most powerful for you. Ask your colleagues what makes this important to them – not everyone will have an answer, but many will and you can then use the information to frame any statements you make as a board about EDI. If you're feeling brave you could maybe ask anyone who is not convinced what they would need to see to be convinced.

Slide 3 – 8: Why are we talking about this?

Why do anything about equality, diversity and inclusion?

An organisation's viability and growth can be inhibited by social exclusion and poor productivity. Workers are increasingly looking to their employers to uphold and champion these social standards and as such the image and standing of an organisation is increasingly based on such issues and is fundamental to retaining staff and protecting your reputation with wider stakeholders.

Organisations which navigate their EDI commitments positively and empower their employees have access to the best talent, deliver fair outcomes and enjoy enhanced productivity, innovation, reputation and business results, some of which is the innovation dividend i.e. the additional benefit from the offering of, and listening to, a wide range of ideas when innovating.

Research shows the business value. Here are a few highlights:

- Gender diverse companies outperform industry norms by 25%.¹

^{1,3} www.marketsmedia.com/diverse-firms-outperform-research-shows/

² builtin.com/diversity-inclusion/diversity-in-the-workplace-statistics



- 80% of workers said inclusion was an important factor when choosing a job.²
- Ethnically diverse companies outperform industry norms by 35%.³
- The research referenced here mentions millennials and senior executives, so across all age groups diversity and inclusion matters.

But I'm a person! The bottom line is that we perform better when we can bring our whole self to work; this is reflected in our business results and impact. You could ask the group if they have any examples of this or share one yourself – perhaps a situation where having struggled with a problem you asked someone you wouldn't normally ask and they gave you a really interesting answer. Or a situation where you felt left out and shut down and moved away from the conversation, contrasted with a situation where you felt included and contributed as a result.

Human rights. Social justice.

A drive to support human rights and social justice has been an area of focus for many housing associations and is to a large part the foundation of the original social housing movement. Inclusion and belonging may therefore be more important in social housing than in some other industries.

We must also consider the moral argument that creating environments where people are able to bring their whole selves and consider those differing views and needs of others is the right thing to do.

It's 2023. Enough talk! Let's take action. Importantly, and in our sector in particular, there is a need to move on from the many conversations we have about diversity, and focus on action.

Slide 9 – 12: Definitions of diversity, equality, inclusion and belonging

People use the phrase EDI more and more frequently and yet it is often used when people mean predominantly diversity (and perhaps equality). This session refers to inclusion and belonging deliberately and the next few slides will help define the difference between each area.

Diversity asks who is in the room. This often inadvertently focuses solely on protected characteristics (2010 Act): age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion/belief, sex (gender) and sexual orientation. Diversity should also include diversity of thought, lived experiences, style, personality and behaviour.

Equality is about what the barriers to entry are; who wants to be in the room but can't get in? This is often partially addressed by legal structures that are designed to remove barriers, yet this is not enough.



Inclusion is about the created environment. Is everyone heard, respected and understood? It is perfectly possible to have a wide variety of people in the room, or to invite them in, but only a few people are listened to. A focus on diversity without considering inclusion might be referred to as tokenism.

Belonging may emerge from inclusion – when people feel valued through the connections they make and that they are able to be their authentic selves. A person might be invited in, and effort might be being made to create a welcoming environment, but if that person still feels a need to conform or change themselves to fit in then they do not yet belong.

The next five slides are different ways of getting the group to consider how their thinking is affected by who they are, the information they are given and their personal biases.

Before you move to the next slide ask people to imagine a grumpy older man then ask people to be ready to write down what they see immediately in the image on the next slide.

Slide 13 – Priming effect

It's likely that at least a good portion of the room will see a man with a moustache looking to the right in the image whilst some may see a young woman looking to the left. Priming can affect this.

We hold a strong belief that we can override bias and are not influenced by others.

- The misconception – you know when you are being influenced and how it's affecting your behaviour.
- The truth – you are unaware of how ideas formed in your subconscious influence your behaviour.



This is how people like Derren Brown can amaze us – even simple card tricks rely on this fact. The relevance in the boardroom is that we've all been primed to think of boardrooms and board members as looking and behaving in a certain way (just think of what the last board meeting you saw in a TV drama was like). We might also prime ourselves to think about new board members in a certain way that could influence our recruitment.

Slide 14 – Anaïs Nin

This quote is a great one to remind ourselves of on a regular basis. We think of ourselves as objective, yet we see through our own lens – even when we are trying not to. We can't help it. When there is disagreement or conflict in discussion it can be useful to return to this.



You will need to make sure you can play video and sound for the next slide.

Slide 15 – Challenging our bias

The video is a Guardian advert from 1987 and shows how we often make judgments about people and situations by relying on our stereotypical interpretations of people rather than seeing the whole picture. It is a good reminder of how even when we are trying our best we are more likely to read certain intentions into behaviours of people based on incomplete information. For example, seeing someone with a skinhead and a determined look on their face running quickly may create a fear response based on our biases and media stereotypes.



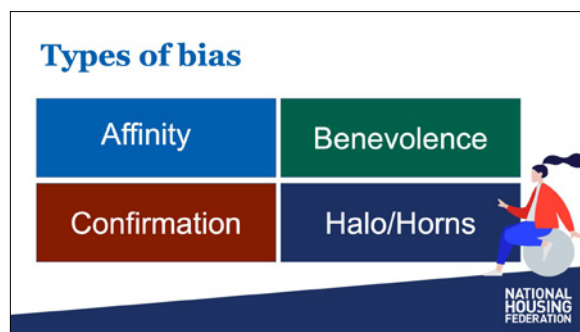
Once you have played the video⁴, you might ask questions along the lines of the following:

- How might this thinking be relevant to us as a board?
- What questions does it raise for you?
- What role does curiosity play?

Slide 16 – Types of bias

Many people have now had unconscious bias training, however members of your board may not, or may hold concerns about it. The fundamental thing to remember is that bias is critical to our brain function: we cannot avoid it. We are constantly bombarded by information and our brains can only process an incredibly limited amount, therefore we have to run algorithms to select what we will pay attention to and to quickly process information that feels familiar. This operates as bias.

What we can do is be aware of when this might be damaging to our decision making or have a negative impact on others. There are different ways in which bias can operate and around



150 specific biases have been defined. The four set out here are those most likely to appear in relation to the board.

Talk through each type and encourage a conversation about how this might influence behaviours at a board level.

In advance, think of an example of when you have been affected or influenced by each of these biases.

⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3bfO1rE7Yg

For example can you think of a time you have had to pick between two candidates and gone with your gut feel?

Affinity bias can occur when we prefer people who share similar qualities to ourselves.⁵

- This might mean we recruit those we feel are most like ourselves (consciously or otherwise) or that we pay more attention to the views of those who thinking or style is most like our own.

Confirmation bias can happen when we look for, or give greater weight to, evidence that confirms our views and experiences. This can lead to selective observation and us not seeing or valuing evidence that contradicts our beliefs.⁶

- This can happen when we are trying to decide if someone is not performing (we see only the negatives) or if we're trying to consider who to appoint and have a favoured candidate.

The halo effect can introduce bias into decision-making when you focus solely on one great feature about an individual and ignore everything else. The horns effect is when you do the same but for a negative quality.⁷

- This might cause us to form certain opinions about fellow board members or executive staff.

Benevolence bias occurs when our efforts to be kind result in us making decisions on other people's behalf that take away their choices. Put another way, benevolence bias is when we limit an individual's autonomy by presuming what's best for them.⁸

- We might see this in relation to how we work with associate board members or resident board members, for example, asking less of them than other board members.



⁵⁻⁷ Understanding different types of bias — Conscious inclusion
- Equality, diversity and inclusion - About (hee.nhs.uk)

⁸ Benevolence Bias – are you being cruel by being kind?
| LinkedIn

Part 2

The conversation: how can our board make a difference and become more inclusive?

— Explanation of slides 17 – 20

The next four slides are the core part of the conversation to get the group thinking about how they and the board as a whole can make a difference and become more inclusive. Depending on how much time you have and how many people you have in the room you might want to break the group into smaller groups to allow more contribution from each individual, then bring back ideas as a whole.

The way you split out these questions and the amount of conversation is completely at your discretion – experience suggests you will need more time than you think. Allow a return to the conversation at a later date if there is still more to say. Ensure someone is making a note of all key conversation points as they will contribute to your final vision.

Slide 17 – What would an inclusive board culture look like?

This can be very far-ranging. The nature of the suggestions may be a good indication of where the thinking of your fellow board members is and how great a change is needed and also desired.

Some questions you could ask are:

- What would it feel like?
- What would be different about our meetings?
- How might we be engaging with residents and stakeholders?
- What behaviours would we be observing?
- What tools would be using?

Ideas might include:

- A broad range of people involved in the room covering different demographics, protected characteristics, experience, styles and approaches, all with a coherent focus on vision and values.
- A variety of forms of engagement and different media for different types of conversation.
- Tools to include a broad range of voices.



- A deep sense of psychological safety.⁹
- Appraisals which both challenge and measure levels of belonging and inclusion.
- Clearly defined behaviours and follow up action if they are not adhered to.
- A strong sense of being driven by values.
- High challenge and high support: conflict is conducted in a healthy and generative way.
- Comfort with ambiguity and an ability to have the difficult conversations.
- Concerted engagement with stakeholders.
- Self-awareness and reflective processes at both individual and board level.

⁹ Psychological Safety – Amy C. Edmondson
(amycedmondson.com)

Slide 18 – How would we describe our culture now?

This is really down to you. The discussion could work particularly well if you think this through in advance. Two things to prepare might be to have your boards' diversity data to hand, and to gain the views of the executive ahead of time to set the scene.

The focus here should be on the board culture (specifically behaviours) but it is expected that this needs to link to the broader organisational culture.

If people are overly negative about your current position, a useful quote to consider is: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." – Maya Angelou.



Ask the board to think about:

- Meeting patterns
- Relationships
- Tools
- Recruitment
- Training
- Blind spots

Slide 19 – How can we become even closer to a really inclusive board?

Some questions you could ask are:

- How did I feel when I started?
- What have I seen work well elsewhere?
- What are we missing?
- What are the steps we need to take as a board?

Some simple ideas might include considering:

- How you create a listening space.
- What language you use (too much jargon or acronyms?)
- What you might look like as a group to stakeholders.



- How you interact with the wider organisation.
- How you recruit new members.
- What your induction and mentoring processes are (are you trying to make people cookie cutter board members once they are recruited?).
- When and where you hold meetings, and how accessible this is.

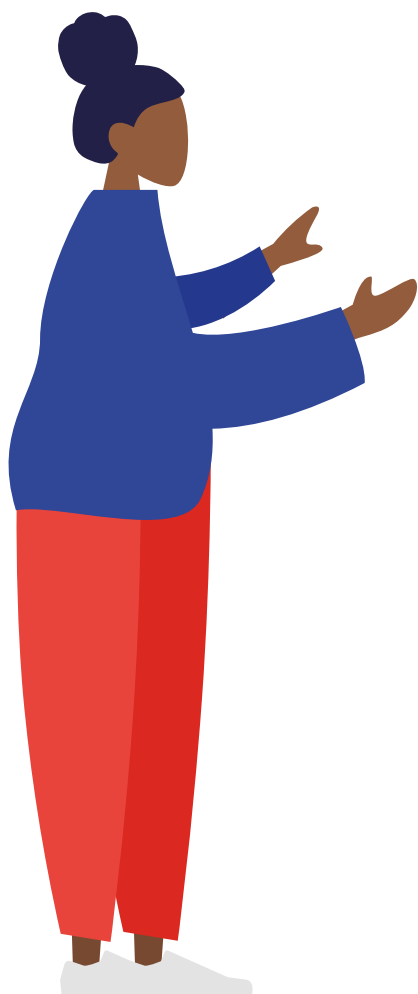
Slide 20 – What do we do next: how do we improve?

This element should be action-oriented and focused on actions for the board, not a list of tasks for the executive/governance team if you have one. Some suggestions for how to proceed with this section:

- Split actions between immediate and those for the longer term.
- Ask for individual commitments from each board member and agree to incorporate these into the appraisal process – for example, ‘I will act to hear all the voices in the room’.



- Choose to have regular space in future meetings to discuss how inclusive your interactions are and to monitor progress.
- Think about new meeting techniques. This might include how to make sure everyone is able to best stay present and engaged in a meeting, or some of the ideas from Time to Think by Nancy Kline.¹⁰



¹⁰ www.timetothink.com/

Equality, diversity and inclusion: law, regulation and governance

This section is a reminder of key terms and legislation to refer to, particularly if it's a while since you did your training.

Everyone should have the right to equal access to employment and be free of any direct or indirect discrimination, bullying or harassment. These principles are enshrined in the [Equality Act 2010](#). The Equality Act 2010 protects people from direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation in the workplaces and wider society. It replaces several pieces of legislation that previously covered discrimination (such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthening protections.

The Act provides protection for people discriminated against because they are perceived to have, or are associated with someone who has, a protected characteristic. There are nine protected characteristics: age, disability, ethnicity, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.

When it comes to the Act, bullying is not against the law, but harassment is. Harassment occurs when bullying or unwanted behaviour is related to one of the protected characteristics.

Positive action in relation to recruitment and promotion is allowed through the Equality Act. This means taking favourable action to enable or encourage persons who share a

protected characteristic to overcome or minimise disadvantage or participate in an activity. It is the deliberate introduction of measures to eliminate or reduce discrimination or its effects.

Public bodies may also complete Equality Impact Assessments as one way to comply with the Equality Act's Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). EIAs are assessments that public authorities often carry out prior to implementing policies, with a view to predicting their impact on equality.

There are also Equality Act Provisions that the government has decided not to take forward:

- public sector duty regarding socio-economic inequalities
- combined discrimination - dual characteristics

Regulation

Relevant standards for housing providers from the Regulator of Social Housing include the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard - 2017, which requires providers to treat tenants with fairness and respect and demonstrate they understand their diverse needs, including in relation to the equality strands.

The Regulator makes no provisions around EDI amongst the workforce of registered providers, though it does have its own Equality Objectives, under the PSED:

- Ensure that where equality and diversity concerns are raised through our enquiries process, they are considered in line with our statutory objectives.

- The Regulator will review its methods of communicating to ensure that it does so in an inclusive way.
- We will provide a supportive and inclusive working environment for all.

Governance

The NHF Code of Governance 2020 places much greater emphasis on EDI. It requires the board to take an active lead in committing to equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion in all of the organisation's activities as well as in its own composition. There are further requirements relating to selection of board members, and that the board composition comprises people with diverse backgrounds and attributes, as well as the board role in ensuring EDI is embedded throughout the organisation and relevant information is published. This includes the requirement to obtain regular assurance that the commitments are being delivered in practice.



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