

## Interview with the board member

### The one who's an IT whiz...

Jaskaran Singh, a senior software engineer for the Message Pad Ltd, a company that provides call centre and messaging services has recently joined the south area committee of East Midlands housing association, a large housing association that operates in the East Midlands and works in partnership with over 30 local authorities.

We asked him why he became interested in a committee role within a housing association, what the recruitment process was like and what his first impressions of his new role are.

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### What inspired you to apply for a voluntary board member position?

JS: Working in the private sector predominantly in the IT industry where the day to day goals of providing organisations and enterprises with means of achieving greater profit margins can often detract one from looking at social issues such as housing which I believe is core to the well being of society. I have always wanted to do something outside of my current profession that would make a difference at grass roots level and give me the opportunity to contribute something to local communities.

I explored various options and in the end a friend of mine who works in housing suggested I apply for board membership as a way to make a practical difference in this arena.

### How did you find the Get on Board process?

JS: The whole process was extremely simple and straightforward. From the point I signed up with my details I was continually kept informed about possible opportunities and housing associations that were interested in having someone like me on their committee or board.

### What was the recruitment process like?

JS: The recruitment process was again very straightforward. Initially I was asked to complete an application form with my personal details, interests and reasons for wanting to join a committee or board. I was then invited to a meeting with the chair and chief executive at the end of which I decided that this was the right opportunity for me.

### What aspects of your new role are you particularly looking forward to?

JS: The opportunity to work with and learn from people with a wide range of skills and expertise in social housing who are equally committed to providing a valuable service to local communities.

### **How do you think this new role will benefit you and your development?**

JS: This opportunity will help me grow as an individual and help me understand issues both at a business and community level that are outside of my current professional responsibilities. It also allows me to broaden my skill, which will allow me to make a beneficial contribution to the committee.

### **How much time do you think you'll devote to the role?**

JS: Personally I think that attending meetings once every quarter and keeping myself updated with all of the issues being raised via the documentation provided by the association is no extra pressure on my time. I am quite happy to take time out, outside work, for such activities when I can.

### **What advice would you give other volunteers who may be considering joining the board/committee of a housing association?**

JS: This will probably be a challenging but rewarding experience if you are genuinely interested in such opportunities. There is no pressure to pursue the process if this is something that you find you do not wish to do and there will be plenty of time and resources to gain a good understanding of the industry and business. Definitely worth a try if you are interested in voluntary work!

## **What Marlene Pearson, assistant company secretary at East Midlands Housing Association says:**

### **What type of skills do you usually look for in a committee member?**

MP: We try to have a balance of skills on an area committee, which can include an understanding of residents' needs and concerns, general business skills, finance, community relations, property development, IT, etc. Local knowledge on area committees is also valuable. We also have resident representatives and local authority representatives.

### **What is the difference between committee members and board members?**

MP: Our area committees are responsible for monitoring the operational issues and service provision within their area. They receive reports covering housing management, maintenance and development. All relevant policies are considered by the area committees before presentation to the board for approval. Area committees also provide a local perspective to the Association's business. Board members take a more strategic view of the organisation. They uphold the values, objectives and policies of the Association and are collectively responsible for directing the successful operation of East Midlands Housing Association in accordance of the Association's rules, legal, funders' and Housing Corporation's requirements.

We do have board members on the area committees so that they have knowledge of what is happening within their areas and can feed back to the area committees on strategic issues.

### **Do they need to have a housing background?**

MP: We do value having committee members with a housing background but we would not want all of them to have the same background. Again, a balance of skills is more beneficial for the Association.

### **How long does it usually take to appoint a committee member?**

MP: It varies but we try to be as efficient as possible. A prospective new member is asked to complete an application form and a declaration of interest form. When these are received and if they have the necessary skills which we have identified as lacking on a committee, then a meeting is arranged between the prospective new committee member, the chairman of the area committee and the group chief executive. This meeting is a two-way process and allows all parties to assess whether it will be suitable. Our board then has to formally appoint a new committee member, but if a committee meeting is scheduled before the board meeting the new member will be invited to attend as an observer.

The main difficulty we have found is in recruiting new members in the first place.

### **What are the key responsibilities of a committee member?**

1. To operational areas within agreed policies and procedures.
2. To consider areas for service improvements for the Association's customers.
3. To advise the board of management of any significant variances to agreed parameters.
4. To consider the wider aspects of the Association's activities, receiving reports on policy issues and, using local perspective, make recommendations to the Board of Management.

### **What sort of time involvement are we talking about?**

MP: There are four quarterly meetings per annum. Members are expected to have read all the papers relating to the meetings. Occasionally members may be asked to sit on an appeal panel to hear a resident's complaint. Members are also invited to official openings or start on site of specific schemes in their areas. There are also training events arranged throughout the year.

### **How would you 'sell' the experience to someone thinking about joining East Midlands Housing Association's sub-committees?**

MP: To be a member of a EMH committee is a very worthwhile activity and they can make a difference. It gives people an opportunity to put something back into the community by helping to house those who are not able to afford to purchase or rent a property on the open market.