

## Interview with the board member

### The one who's a doctor in real life...

Dr Nicola Byrne, a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in South London, has recently been appointed board member at The Single Homeless Project, a small specialist housing provider whose aim is to reduce homelessness in London, nine months after joining the Get on Board scheme.

We asked her why she wanted to become a voluntary board member, what the recruitment process was like and what her first impressions of her new role are.

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

NB: Housing problems often contribute to mental health problems, and vice versa. As a doctor it can be very frustrating not to be able to make much practical difference to social problems, despite the fact that they are so often major determinants of peoples' health and quality of life. Also, I often have patients whose hospital discharges are delayed because they have high support needs in the community and there are not enough supported accommodation places. They end up staying on the wards for longer than needed, which is often stressful and distressing for them, and also an inappropriate use of a badly needed hospital bed. A friend of mine works in housing and he suggested I apply for a board member position so I could get involved and make a practical contribution to this area, rather than just keep moaning about it!

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

NB: Very straight forward. You are asked what kind of time commitment you can make – evenings or weekends etc – and what distances you would be able to travel. You can also say what types of housing charities you might be particularly interested in, so for me I was looking for an organisation that had an interest in working with people with mental health support needs. I was sent information about two different housing charities to look at before I decided to put myself forward to the SHP.

### What was the recruitment process like?

NB: Fairly painless. I initially spent some time on tailoring my CV and completing an application form that asked basic questions such as why I was interested and what skills and experience I would bring. As I had no formal management experience and have never worked in the field of housing, I was unsure what would be needed, and whether my skills and experience would be relevant. It was therefore very useful to have meetings with Liz Rutherford, the director of SHP, followed by a meeting with the chair of the board, Jonathan Senkar, to discuss this. Both meetings were relaxed and informal, and gave me a flavour of what was required, and how I might be able to contribute to the organisation at board level. I then attended a board meeting as an observer, and had plenty of opportunity to ask questions etc, before deciding to commit to the post. Overall then, it was a gradual process over a few months so I had plenty of time to explore what was entailed and whether I was interested.

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

NB: I'm looking forward to gaining experience in strategic planning and management. Doctors are mostly quite inexperienced in management at an organisational level, and sitting across the table from accountants, lawyers, people from HR etc., is actually a new experience for me – I rarely come across these people in the NHS, let alone actually work with them! It's also interesting to come into contact with other board members who seem to come from quite diverse business and public sector backgrounds.

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

NB: I'm now at the stage where I've finished my professional training and I'm looking for a new challenge, so this is a good time for me to get involved. I hope in future to take the experience and skills I gain from this post back into the NHS, so I can develop my clinical work in a management direction.

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

NB: Actually so far it's required less time than I thought it would. Board meetings are only once every couple of months. Before each meeting I'm sent various reports to read in advance but this isn't an arduous task – it only takes an hour or so.

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

NB: If you are at all interested then do make enquiries! There are several stages to the process of getting onto a board and at no stage did I feel under pressure to pursue the process if I didn't want to. There is also plenty of opportunity to explore what joining the board will entail, and whether membership of any board is right for you, and right for that board.

## **What Liz Rutherford, Chief Executive at the Single Homeless Project says**

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

LR: The kinds of essential skills include the ability to contribute to strategic thinking and debate, to work collectively with other committee members to set the strategic aims and objectives of the organisation, to question and challenge where appropriate, and to demonstrate a commitment to equal opportunities and diversity. In addition we may target one of the following skills:

- legal knowledge
- financial knowledge
- knowledge of social housing
- knowledge of a particular community

- knowledge of a particular client group
- knowledge of the political world
- knowledge of supported housing
- knowledge of personnel issues
- knowledge of equal opportunity issues
- knowledge of legislation and regulation affecting the work of SHP
- knowledge of marketing and PR

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

LR: No.

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

LR: On average about four months. Once an application is received the process involves meeting with me to find out more about SHP, meeting the chair of the board for further briefing and interview, visiting a scheme and meeting service users and staff, and observing at a Board meeting

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

LR: Board members collectively take full responsibility and control of the charity, whilst delegating day to day responsibility to senior managers. They have to ensure that SHP pursues its charitable objectives as set out in its memorandum, complying with charity law, company law and other relevant legislation. Board members should contribute to the board's role in setting our strategic direction, defining overall policy, setting targets and monitoring performance. They also have to exercise oversight of the financial and general management of SHP, ensuring that resources are managed with due probity and dedicated exclusively to the organisation's charitable objectives. They also take responsibility for the recruitment and supervision of the chief executive and may be involved in the recruitment of other senior managers. They must, at all times, act in SHP's interests only, without regard to their own private interests.

Board members may also be asked to do other tasks including:

- Dealing with tenant complaint appeals
- Participating in staff grievance or disciplinary hearings
- Sitting on a board sub-committee or project working party
- Attending and participating in staff conferences
- Representing SHP at external meetings or functions
- Visiting SHP's schemes/services

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

LR: At a minimum board members are expected to read and scrutinise board papers and attend bi-monthly board meetings which last about two hours. In addition members may be asked to contribute further time, for example to sit

on an appeal panel or attend functions such as a scheme launch or staff conference. The chair and treasurer will on average spend two to three hours per month in addition to board meetings carrying out their specific responsibilities.

**How would you 'sell' the experience to someone thinking about becoming a SHP board member?**

LR: Firstly it's an opportunity to support an organisation whose mission and purpose you share. By working collectively with the board you will be able to make a difference to the lives of homeless and other excluded people in London. It's an opportunity to utilise your skills and experience in a different setting from where you work and to develop and learn new skills as a result. You will work as part of a diverse team with a shared purpose, with the added advantage of contributing to your personal and professional development, board meetings are not overly formal, we try to make them as interesting as possible, sometimes with external speakers and we try to ensure there are also informal opportunities for board members to meet and get to know each other and senior staff.