

## Interview with the board member

### The one with the housing experience...

Sokhjinder Kler, a principal consultant at IDeA has recently been appointed Board Member at Yorkshire Housing Ltd, a very large housing association with over 10,000 units in management, five 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?

SK: I had been involved with voluntary work in the past and had really enjoyed it. Although on those occasions it was in a different field; a women's refuge and a children's charity. I was keen to get involved again, and was considering joining a PCT board, but then I left the Housing Corporation it seemed natural for my to consider joining the board of a housing association, so I approached the National Housing Federation for advice and assistance.

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

SK: I thought the whole process was particularly smooth and everyone was very helpful and supportive.

#### What was the recruitment process like?

SK: It was fairly straightforward; the National Housing Federation sent my biography to Yorkshire Housing Group. I was invited to a meeting with the chair and the chief executive. I did some homework before I went to the meeting. At the end of the meeting I decided that the association was right for me, and chair and the chief executive asked me to join the board and then it was a matter of the rest of the board agreeing to the appointment at the next board meeting.

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

SK: Being part of a team that assists the Group in realising the corporate vision, learning about the association and its business. And also working with a group of people with a wide range of expertise who also feel equally committed to making a difference to the development and delivery of social housing.

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

SK: I think it will assist me in consolidating my housing experience and help to develop my understanding of the other areas of the groups business such as the market rented side and the provision of housing to asylum seekers.

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

SK: It really is hard to say at this stage, it's too early but I would expect to devote about two to three days a month.

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

SK: It's a challenging and rewarding experience. It will be hard work juggling priorities, getting a good understanding of the group's business and making sure that I set aside time for its business. But it will be well worth the time and effort.

### **What Gill Baker, Governance & Member Services Officer at Yorkshire Housing Group says...**

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

GB: General business skills and specific skills related to the work of the board. As we are a group, the different boards within the Group manage different areas of business.

For the Group board important areas include

- finance
- measuring organisational performance
- knowledge of the Group's area, housing markets and regional issues
- entrepreneurial leadership
- regulatory awareness

We are also starting to look at personal competencies, as these help to ensure a Member contributes well to the Board, for example

- is able to work as part of a team
- is open to training and learning
- will prepare for and attend meetings regularly
- is enthusiastic and committed to the Group's work

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

GB: No, this is not essential. In fact someone from outside the housing environment may bring a fresh way of looking at issues. Many skills are transferable from other work areas. In addition part of the process of joining the board will be to help a new member understand the work of housing associations generally, and our group in particular.

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

GB: Probably up to six months. During this time a potential member will be gathering information about the organisation, meeting key staff, possibly observing a board meeting or attending a training session. If they wish to

proceed, they will need to submit a formal application which will be considered through the newly introduced Nominations Committee, and depending on the time of year, may need to be elected by shareholders at the annual general meeting. However if there is a vacancy and an applicant is suitable, it may take as little as two months.

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

GB: Commitment to the organisation and promotion of it to others. Preparing for meetings and contributing at meetings – applying their own specialist knowledge but also listening to the views of others. Working as part of a team and sharing responsibility for the decision taken by the board. Keeping themselves informed about housing and issues affecting the Group regionally and nationally.

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

GB: Meetings are every two months and last two to three hours, but there is travelling and preparation time to add. Members would also be expected to serve on another board or committee, and to join working groups from time to time. Papers are sent between meetings to keep members up to date, and there are training sessions to attend.

For a member who is not a chair of a board or committee an estimate is one and a half to two days per month.

### **How would you ‘sell’ the experience to someone thinking about becoming a Yorkshire Housing board member?**

GB: The training and development side of being a board member is useful for many people and will help careers and personal development. Members have the opportunity to use the skills they have in different ways, and to gain new skills and knowledge.

At the Yorkshire Housing Group there is a lot more going on than in many housing associations – as well as social housing, we have a market rent company, a charity which provides home improvement agency services and a partnership providing homes for asylum seekers through a Government contract.