



# Diversity in our boardrooms: who cares?



Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 have laid inequalities in our society bare. But the housing sector needs to do more to increase its own diversity, writes **Shruti Bhargava** of Unity Homes & Enterprise.

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Inequalities in our society have been laid bare for all to see, through the Black Lives Matter movement and the disproportionate toll of COVID-19 on BAME people. Many in the housing sector have put out statements of support, but are they actually doing anything to change things?

In February I presented a session at the National Housing Federation board members' Conference, 'Why I No Longer Want to Talk About the Business Case for Diversity'. The attendance was disappointing, reflecting the leadership and value the sector gives to diversity. This was not helped by an emphasis in plenary sessions on 'diversity of thought', the latest argument used as an excuse to put race diversity on the backburner – an irony demonstrated recently by the health secretary Matt Hancock when he used the phrase to argue that it was OK that there are no black members of cabinet.

In the session, I discussed issues such as our failure to look at our prejudices and biases and how they are designed into how

we make decisions, including the myths and exclusionary recruitment practices which block and discriminate. The way we deflect to 'development programmes' without questioning why we think those who can't break through are less able. Why we delegate responsibility to 'experts' instead of leading and, at the very least, steering strongly.

I used a clip from the film *Hidden Figures* to illustrate how our systems, structures and conventions are failing us. In it, the lead character is forced to use a distant bathroom for 'coloureds'. Her boss is oblivious, wonders where she is disappearing to, and berates her. She tells him, her anger and frustration rightly spilling out. He listens, understands for the first time, and responds by breaking the signs for 'whites only' and 'coloureds'. The lesson is clear: if you have power and position, you can listen, learn, dismantle discriminatory structures and show leadership through actions.

The problem is we are

reluctant to talk about race and structural racism, which often leads us to put race equality at the bottom of our priorities. We tend not to address both representation and inclusion. Too often we gatekeep power by arguing participation through consultation is sufficient, or by focusing on ticking diversity boxes rather than actively working to hear diverse voices in the boardroom.

The lived experiences of BAME people bring a richness of perspective and real 'diversity of thought' to boards – not least people who have diversified careers because they've constantly been blocked, overlooked, and discriminated against. (Really, how many mediocre white men at the top of our structures have had that experience, and just how narrow is their thinking as a result?)

We're so obsessed with behaving and thinking like corporate robots that our boardrooms often lack the human qualities of those who have faced hardships,

personal challenges, disabilities and chronic illness, and the understanding that comes with those experiences. These different skills and personal insights into institutional practices could do so much to shape how we do better for all our tenants.

Despite all of this, only 61 housing associations thought it important to examine the diversity of their Boards in last year's Inside Housing survey. Why is it that we have to have a business case to justify any steps we take to address all this?

My audience at the NHF session – at least half of whom were people of colour or from BAME housing associations – recognised what I was saying. The others genuinely wanted to do something concrete to change things. But I was preaching to the converted. I watched with dismay as the doors were opened at the end of my session, and a flood of white faces (who had probably signed up to bland platitudes and diversity statements) poured into the room for the next session.

It truly does seem that unless you have lived experience of racism, discrimination, and inequalities, they don't matter. Please prove us wrong.

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