



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

The Right Stuff –

Improving Housing Association Governance in Wales



Regulatory Board for Wales
Progress Review of Housing Association Governance in Wales
March 2018

Supplement Report

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1 - Terms of Reference for the Regulatory Board's Governance Progress Review

The 2017 review aims to:

- identify the current state of play of governance within the housing association sector in Wales
- identify what progress has been made in taking forward the recommendations set out in the 2013 Sector Study¹ and achieving the step-change identified as required by that study
- inform the review of the Community Housing Cymru Code of Governance for housing associations in Wales
- inform the governance offer being developed by Community Housing Cymru
- explore the attitudes and behaviours that support good/excellent governance
- identify positive practice/case studies within the housing sector in Wales
- prompt discussion across the sector in relation to good/excellent governance, how standards of governance might be improved and what support will be needed in order to achieve this

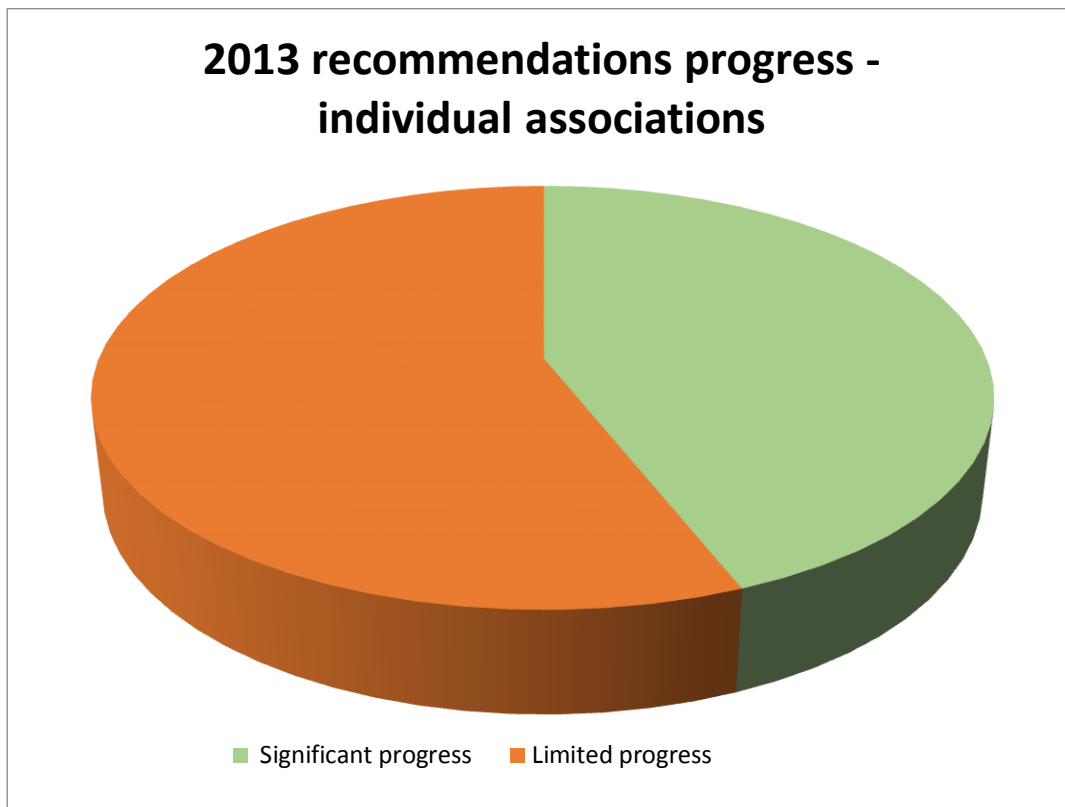
2. Progress on recommendations from 2013 Governance Review

The 2013 review had 25 recommendations, most of which applied to individual housing associations and a smaller number to the sector as a whole.

2.1 Recommendations directed at housing associations

Progress has been assessed based on surveys and workshops carried out as part of the review, discussions at the steering group, input from the governance officers' network and from Regulation Managers.

Rather than look at each recommendation separately, we have grouped the recommendations into nine clusters with a brief indication of the focus of the recommendations contained in each cluster. Where all or a significant number of associations have made reasonable progress on a cluster, these are shown as green. Amber indicates those clusters where some, but not as many associations as the Regulatory Board for Wales would have like to have seen, have made limited progress. No clusters are shown in red because progress across on all clusters is more than partial.



Green

Code of Guidance

- compliance with CHC Code of Governance
- governance improvement plan in place

Roles and Functioning of the Board

- core governance documents in place
- board members selected on basis of competencies
- public reporting on governance

Board Size and Composition

- skills matrix
- role descriptions and person specifications for board members
- monitoring and action on board diversity

Board Culture

- learning culture
- facilitation of connections with other organisations
- meaningful board involvement in business plan and risk
- seek external views of board performance

Amber

Role and work of the Chair

- comprehensive chair appraisal process leading to action

Board Recruitment and Renewal

- fixed terms of office for board members
- board members in place beyond that term
- board succession plan
- managed board renewal

Putting the Citizen First

- explore how accountability to resident best delivered
- demonstration of values and accountability to stakeholders
- residents effectively engaged at strategic level

Living Public Sector Values

- strategy on public sector values
- information about board and board membership on website
- board members attend resident meetings

Meeting Future Challenges

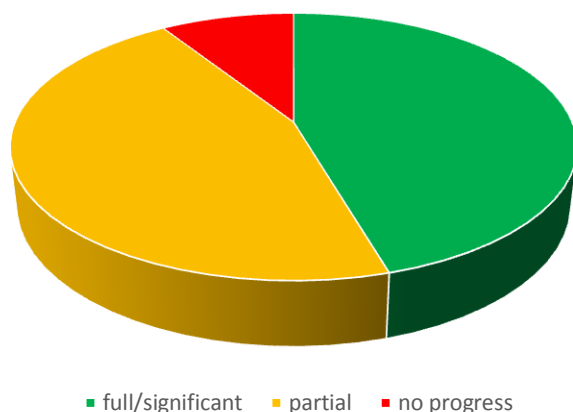
- commitment to improving financial capacity of Board
- use of tenant profiling information

2.2 Progress on 2013 recommendations to the Sector

The table below provides a commentary in relation to the sector-wide recommendations made in the 2013 study, giving a view as to whether each recommendation has been acted upon fully, significantly, partially or not at all. This table has been informed by discussions at the steering group, workshops and responses to the surveys carried out as part of this review.

Green denotes full or significant progress, amber denotes partial progress and red no progress.

Progress on 2013 recommendations for the sector



Recommendation	Progress	Comments
Code of Governance for the sector	Full	Code introduced 2014
Encouragement for associations to use competency based board recruitment	Significant	Competency based frameworks are in general use. Many of these are heavily skills focussed and need to be revisited to place greater focus on behaviours, culture and leadership
Consideration of how Large Scale Voluntary Transfer model might be changed after initial years	Partial	Some action taken at sector-wide level and some by individual LSVTs. However, some particular governance challenges remain. This will be impacted by reclassification legislation.
Consideration of engagement structures, particularly for chairs	Partial	CHC currently reviewing governance support package
Investment in a talent pool of non-executives	Partial	Come on Board has potential but needs further development. Some other positive initiatives e.g. Women Lead the Board
Consultation on board member remuneration	Full	Housing associations now free to decide whether to remunerate board members
Connect board members and disseminate good practice/ learning	Partial	Some progress through CHC and other networks and training opportunities
Host/fund major conference on governance, social purpose and commercialism in social housing	Significant	Incorporated into CHC annual governance conference
Clarity on which body provides thought leadership in governance	No progress	No action to set up such a body or incorporate responsibility within an existing group
Guidance on how boards	Significant	Risk has much higher profile than in 2013 –

Recommendation	Progress	Comments
sharpen ownership of high level risks and determine risk appetite		ongoing focus required
The sector builds/owns its own inclusive and diverse vision of good governance, and works purposefully to implement it	Partial	Partially addressed by 2014 introduction of Code of Governance.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Regulatory Board for Wales: Governance Progress Report Literature review, January 2018

1 Background

In 2017, the Regulatory Board for Wales requested that work on housing association governance be undertaken to assess progress made since the Sector Study published in 2013². The report that is a result of this work, 'The Right Stuff', was launched at the CHC Governance conference in March 2018 and is now available on the Welsh Government website.

At an early stage in its work, the steering group that oversaw the work on governance asked that a brief literature review be undertaken focused on governance in other sectors and including countries beyond the UK. The steering group considered that it would be useful to make the literature review available to the sector to support discussion about governance issues by housing associations.

2 The scope of the literature review

The literature review did not attempt to cover the territory covered by the comprehensive review undertaken as part of the 2013 sector study, rather it looked at:

- definitions of governance
- principles/guidance around excellence in governance and practical support mechanisms for implementation
- lessons learnt from regulation
- examples of positive practice

Literature was accessed from the education, health, sports, corporate, public and not-for-profit/voluntary sectors and from Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Australia, USA and South Africa.

The information provided in sections 4-7 demonstrates a range of approaches to defining governance and to identifying the components/elements of governance. None are provided as 'the answer', but as context for deliberation by associations.

3 Introductory remarks

Currently, there is significant focus on, and activity around, governance with much talk of the need for change, whether that be reform of corporate governance, improving diversity on boards, the production of revised Codes in various sectors, or the impact of the Grenfell fire on board action on risk and assurance. There is also evidence that the reality of governance reform does not always match the rhetoric. The Westminster Government's proposals for reform of corporate governance provide an example here. In

² <http://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/130912-sector-study-governance-housing-associations-registered-wales-literature-review-en.pdf>

addition, governance is contested territory. For example, there have been calls for charity governance to adopt a more commercial approach, while there are also significant criticisms of the current corporate governance model in relation to its effectiveness and outcomes achieved.

There is a clear sense that, in order to be fit for the challenges of the future, governance arrangements and behaviours will need to develop/change, but questions remain as to what direction that change might take, as well as caution in some places about any degree of change which is more than incremental. The development of a revised Code of Governance by Community Housing Cymru, which draws significantly on the Charity Governance Code, is a welcome development and will support housing associations across Wales in their thinking about good governance. We hope that the following information will also provide a stimulus for discussion within associations.

4 Definitions of governance

Academi Wales Good Governance Guide for NHS Boards

'A system of accountability to citizens, service users, stakeholders and the wider community, within which healthcare organisations work, take decisions and lead their people to achieve their objectives.'

- BoardSource (quoted in Chelliah, Boersma and Klettner, 2016)

Not-for-profit governance: *'the board's legal authority to exercise power and authority over an organisation on behalf of the community it serves.'*

Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership/Good Governance Institute - Good Governance Handbook

Talks about the purpose of governance rather than a definition; *'governance should deliver a focus on vision, strategy, leadership, assurance, probity and stewardship.'*

International framework: good governance in the public sector

'Governance comprises the arrangements (political, economic, social, environmental, legal, and administrative structures and processes, and other arrangements), put in place to ensure that the intended outcomes for stakeholders are defined and achieved.'

King IV report

'Corporate governance is defined as the exercise of ethical and effective leadership by the governing body towards the achievement of the following governance outcomes:

- *Ethical culture*
- *Good performance*
- *Effective control*

- Legitimacy

'Ethical and effective leadership should complement and reinforce each other.'

'Ethical leadership is exemplified by integrity, competence, responsibility, accountability, fairness and transparency. It involves the anticipation and prevention or otherwise amelioration, of the negative consequences of the organisation's activities and outputs on the economy, society and the environment and the capitals that it uses and effects.'

'Effective leadership is results-driven. It is about achieving strategic objectives and positive outcomes. Effective leadership includes, but goes beyond, an internal focus on effective and efficient execution.'

OECD, Ad-hoc Taskforce on Corporate Governance, 1999.

Definition of corporate governance:

'...the full set of relationships among a company's management, its board, its shareholders and other stakeholders. It provides the structure through which the objectives of the company are set, and the means of attaining those objectives and monitoring performance determined.'

Sports Wales governance and leadership framework

'Governance is not the management of day-to-day operations – it is the framework of strategy, risk management, controls and processes. It also relates to the organisation's leadership in terms of culture, values and integrity.'

'In a well-governed organisation, these elements underpin everything the organisation does and how it does it.'

'Governance emphasises the systems, policies, procedures and regulations. Leadership focuses on behaviours, values, ethics and morals.'

World Bank

Governance is:

'the exercise of authority through formal and informal traditions and institutions for the common good.'

5 Principles/guidance around excellence in governance and practical support mechanisms for implementation

Charity Code of Governance

Recently revised, the Code contains seven principles:

- Organisational purpose
- Leadership
- Integrity
- Decision-making, risk and control
- Board effectiveness
- Diversity
- Openness and accountability

For each principle, the rationale and key outcomes are described, along with recommended practice for larger and smaller charities.

Code of Good Governance for Colleges in Wales

Seven elements of good governance (Code includes consideration of each element and links to further resources and examples of good practice):

- Strategy and leadership
- Collectively accountable
- Financial strategy and audit
- Teaching and learning
- Responsiveness
- Equality and diversity
- Effective governance

Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership/Good Governance Institute

Nine principles of governance (good governance handbook considers why each of the principles is important, also sets out guidance on behaviours/key roles and systems):

- Entity
- Accountability: The 'controlling mind'
- Stakeholders
- Governance and management
- The board and constructive challenge
- Delegation and reservation
- Openness and transparency
- Board supports
- Knowing the organisation and the market

International framework: good governance in the public sector

Achieving good governance in the public sector requires:

- Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law
- Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

And effective arrangements for:

- Defining outcomes⁶ in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits
- Determining the interventions necessary to optimize the achievement of the intended outcomes
- Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it
- Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management
- Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability

Guidance is provided for each of these elements.

King IV

Sets out 19 principles (see pages 40-41

[http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iodsa.co.za/resource/resmgr/king_iv/King_IV_Report/loDS A King IV Report - WebVe.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iodsa.co.za/resource/resmgr/king_iv/King_IV_Report/loDS_A_King_IV_Report_-_WebVe.pdf)) grouped into five areas

- Leadership, ethics and corporate citizenship
- Strategy, performance and reporting
- Governing structures and delegation
- Governance functional areas
- Stakeholder relationships

For each principle, a series of recommended practices are set out.

Nolan principles of public life

Defined by the Committee for Standards in Public Life in 1995, seen as applicable to anyone who is elected or appointed to public office:

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership

Some Codes of Governance (eg WCVA) specifically note that the Nolan principles are applicable to virtually all organisations, are recognised as expected good practice and are complementary to the principles included in the Code.

Sports Wales governance and leadership framework

Seven principles of governance (for each principle, minimum expectations, other considerations, success factors, effective behaviours, ineffective behaviours and thinking points set out):

- Integrity – acting as guardians of the sport, recreation, activity or area
- Defining and evaluating the role of your board
- Setting mission, vision and purpose
- Objectivity: balanced, inclusive and skilled board
- Standards, systems and controls
- Accountability and transparency
- Understanding and engaging with the sporting landscape

Sport England Code for Sports Governance

Five principles of good governance (requirements and guidance set out for each)

- Structure - Organisations shall have a clear and appropriate governance structure, led by a Board which is collectively responsible for the long-term success of the organisation and exclusively vested with the power to lead it. The Board shall be properly constituted, and shall operate effectively.
- People - Organisations shall recruit and engage people with appropriate diversity, independence, skills, experience and knowledge to take effective decisions that further the organisation's goals
- Communication - Organisations shall be transparent and accountable, engaging effectively with stakeholders and nurturing internal democracy.
- Standards and conduct - Organisations shall uphold high standards of integrity, and engage in regular and effective evaluation to drive continuous improvement.
- Policies and processes - Organisations shall comply with all applicable laws and regulations, undertake responsible financial strategic planning, and have appropriate controls and risk management procedures.

UK Corporate Governance Code

Sets out principles in five areas – leadership, effectiveness, accountability, remuneration and relations with stakeholders. For each principle, supporting principles and code provisions are provided.

Wales Council for Voluntary Action: governance health-check

Based around six principles:

- Understanding the board's role
- Ensuring delivery of the organisation's purpose
- Working effectively as individuals and as a collective board
- Exercising effective control
- Behaving with integrity
- Being open and accountable

the health-check identifies a series of questions relating to each principle, with suggested evidence. It relates to the 2012 Code for the Third Sector in Wales. As the WCVA has been a partner to the development of the revised Charity Code of Governance, it might be expected that the health-check will be amended.

Welsh Government citizen-centred governance principles

1. Putting the citizen first - Putting the citizen at the heart of everything and focusing on their needs and experiences; making the organisation's purpose the delivery of a high quality service
2. Knowing who does what and why - Making sure that everyone involved in the delivery chain understands each other's roles and responsibilities and how together they can deliver the best possible outcomes
3. Engaging with others - working in constructive partnerships to deliver the best outcome for the citizen
4. Living public sector values - being a value-driven organisation, rooted in Nolan principles and high standards of public life and behaviour, including openness, customer service standards, diversity and engaged leadership
5. Fostering innovative delivery - being creative and innovative in the delivery of public services - working from evidence, and taking managed risks to achieve better outcomes
6. Being a learning organisation - always learning and always improving service delivery
7. Achieving value for money - looking after taxpayers' resources properly, and using them carefully to deliver high quality, efficient services

Practical support mechanisms for implementation

These include training, networks, provision of practice examples/case studies, peer support, use of external consultancy and the role of trade/membership organisations in driving improvement.

6 Lessons learnt from regulation

Wales Audit Office

A Wales Audit Office report on the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales identified ambiguities and governance weaknesses. These weaknesses were also relevant to other Welsh Government arms-length agencies, particularly in relation to accountability arrangements.

A Wales Audit Office discussion paper on the governance challenges provided by indirectly provided publicly funded services identified examples of governance failures involving ineffective oversight and monitoring, a lack of transparency, inappropriate conduct and poorly managed conflicts of interest. The root causes of these were considered to be:

- insufficient consideration of arrangements for oversight and the appropriate balance between autonomy and intervention
- a lack of clarity around how governance arrangements should operate in practice, contributing to reduced transparency and diluted public accountability; and
- the absence of a consistent and shared understanding of, and commitment to, standards of ethics and conduct to be observed by all those involved in public service delivery

A governance review of Betsi Cadwallader University Health Board in 2013 made a range of recommendations including improving working relationships between board and senior management, risk management and assurance, the way board meetings were planned and run, supporting the capacity of independent board members and ensuring access by board members to relevant and timely information. It was also identified that the board would need support and additional capacity to make the required changes. A follow-up report in 2014 noted that progress had been made but that a number of fundamental challenges remained which required ongoing attention.

Housing associations

The English housing regulator, the Homes and Communities Agency, has published a series of publications aimed primarily at Boards and executives of housing associations and other similar organisations, in the hope that they will enable them to learn from mistakes and setbacks of others, and avoid encountering similar fates.

The fourth volume was published in June 2015. The publication was funded by a large English Housing Association and written by a consultant using materials provided by the Homes and Communities Agency.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/436052/With_the_Benefit_of_Hindsight_FINAL.pdf

Whilst the examples used are English, the issues raised and lessons learned echo experience in Wales.

This publication highlights ten precepts to Boards, not necessarily in order of importance, which may be a useful checklist in considering how best to apply the lessons of our problem cases to their own situations:

(1) Drive out unnecessary complexity: The more complicated things become, the greater their chances of going wrong. Complex funding packages, activities, group structures, staffing arrangements, all carry and compound their own risks. Life is unavoidably complicated, but the virtue of deep simplicity, at least as an organising principle, lies behind most successful organisations.

(2) Understand the risks that could be fatal: sample engineering components are routinely tested to destruction before they can be used; every drug on the market has a lethal dose established. And so it should be with business plans and financial assumptions. Just how much strain would it take to spell the end for this organisation? How would we spot it coming and what could we do to fend off disaster in a hurry? Stress testing is here to stay, and Boards may as well have some fun with gloom and doom scenario planning.

(3) Always have a Plan B: Most things will go wrong sooner or later, given half a chance. Following on from the 'what ifs?' of stress testing, it's important to have credible and oven-ready plans for the day the bond market collapses just ahead of an issue, a main contractor goes under, a new computer system just doesn't work, the property market takes a sudden nosedive, or a covenant is carelessly breached in the run-up to Christmas. This thinking also applies, incidentally, to the organisations which may be involved in the rescue of their failing brethren, the question here usually being some

variation on “How can we lay our hands on £5m of unencumbered liquid funds by Friday afternoon?”

(4) Be ambitious, but keep perspective: Low aspirations are disappointing – in the face of a housing crisis, of course every organisation should deploy its assets for maximum social result. But the ‘bridge too far’ scenario is all too common – the time when ego outstrips competence and capacity by a substantial margin. Without party-pooing, Boards need to be the inbuilt reality check for the vision and drive of the executive.

(5) Focus on the skills and competence of Board members: Because without a high-performing Board, no organisation can get by for very long. Good governance demands creativity and strategic vision, not to mention a robust ‘grip’ of the core business areas. With smaller boards, getting the right team in place is now mission critical, and demands a rigorous approach so to do.

(6) Create the conditions for effective challenge: A highly skilled Board is a good start, but not always enough. The right behaviours and a well-designed governance cycle also need to be in place. And behind that a Board culture which allows and enables dissent, challenge and debate. In many of our cases, a Board which had been readier to challenge may have been able to head off the crises long before they became catastrophes. Arguably, if some of the Boards concerned had been prepared for the ultimate challenge and duty – dispensing with the services of executives who had become a liability at some earlier stage – the organisations would not have featured in this volume at all. *With the Benefit of Hindsight*

(7) Engage positively with the regulators: They may not always be 100% right, but they have the valuable perspective of experience, not to mention a range of statutory powers and responsibilities. Organisations that are open with regulators, seek to understand their concerns, and are prepared to regard them as partners for getting out of a pickle, are more likely to bounce back quickly from any setback.

(8) Keep an iron grip on performance and compliance: The strategy and vision may be fine, but without the firm hand of the Board on the key business drivers, they count for little. Of course Boards should not allow themselves to become operationally embroiled. But they do need to know that, in their name, the cash is there to pay the bills, rents are being collected, tenants are being well served, gas boilers are being serviced, and that all conditions of loans and grants are being met. And when things do go off track – as they must from time to time – that issues can be identified and dealt with swiftly and robustly. In a complex modern business, there is a myriad of important compliance areas, and each one needs regular attention and oversight, within an overall integrated framework of business assurance.

(9) Empower and value the Audit Committee: There is a lot more to business assurance than the work of the Audit Committee. In terms of governance though, that committee is the immune system of the organisation, and should generally be the point of first alert for a possible failure of control. In some organisations, the audit work is seen as the unglamorous province of box-tickers and procedure enthusiasts, and such preconceptions must be dispelled. Like the Board, an Audit Committee needs a strategic view, the right skills among its members, and the autonomy and ‘clout’ to be taken seriously.

(10) **Never forget the tenants:** Last but far from least, tenants and other customers are not prominent in these volumes, and yet they of all stakeholders have the greatest interest. Their homes, their services and the identity of their landlord may be at stake; by the time things go wrong, there is often little opportunity for their voices to be heard. The core tenet of upholding the tenant interest often falls thus upon board members, regulators and advisors, whose duty is to the current and future generations of tenants, as well as to taxpayers and the wider sector.

7 Examples of positive practice

The 2003 McKinsey publication *Dynamic Boards* identifies that a high-performing board plays three distinct roles:

- The board must shape the direction for the non-profit through its mission, strategy, and key policies
- The board needs to ensure that the leadership, resources, and finances in place are commensurate with the vision
- The board must monitor performance and ensure prompt corrective action when needed

In addition, a high performing board responds dynamically to the environment, and sustains a commitment to the enabling practices that make a board effective.

Guidance on a generative governance model from BoardSource notes that it can lead to higher-level thinking, more engaging and effective board meetings, and a stronger organisation. Generative governance requires board members to analyse and discuss issues from a macro lens. This requires preparing for board meetings and asking different — and better — questions – moving to critical thinking around the board table.

Research on conflict and tension in the boardroom concluded:

‘There is a clear distinction between conflict and tension. Tension is an important part of the board discussion, while conflict should be handled outside the boardroom.’

‘Tension is seen as a positive and necessary force for any effective board, while conflict is disruptive and detrimental. When conflicts do occur they can fundamentally alter the dynamics of the board in ways from which it can prove difficult to recover.’

‘A good board is one with managed tension, while a dysfunctional board allows unresolved tension to fester and escalate into conflict situations.’

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations is developing a governance toolkit building on its existing governance handbook (it does not currently have a Code of Governance) and has established a working group to support its development.

A thematic inquiry of self-assessment by the Scottish Housing Regulator found that those associations that had self-assessed against the governance and financial management regulatory standards said that the process has helped them improve their governance.

Swansea University's leadership model includes three values (we are professional, we work together, we care), three leadership values (the same three values with different supporting detail) and a professional leadership framework which includes skilling and professional development. Guidance on what 'we will do' and 'we will not do' is provided for each leadership value.

The Welsh Government task and finish group report on school governance highlighted the value of award schemes for governing bodies, citing the Quality Mark Bronze Award and recommending that all governing bodies should be working towards this standard (and Silver and Gold as they develop further).

Research undertaken in Australia on not-for-profit governance challenges the concept of best practice in governance altogether (Chelliah, Boersma and Klettner, 2016). It concluded that generic best practice governance standards for the not-for-profit sector should not be pursued; not-for-profit organisations should be able to choose how to model their governance frameworks according to different circumstances.

'Best practice governance in the NFP sector should not take the shape of broadly defined standards, formulated by organisations or regulatory bodies, but should instead be given form in an analytical tool that assists in identifying the contextual factors influencing the organisation, and contributes to the adoption of fitting governance responses.'

This is similar to conclusions of a review of corporate governance arrangements in housing associations in Northern Ireland which drew on the work of Chris Cornforth and his concept of paradox. *'This approach suggests that rather than there being a single prescription or route map to good governance, there are competing conceptions of what good looks like, informed by conflicting underlying principles (for example between conformance and performance, and between partnership and accountability)'*

The researchers concluded:

'...we see that governance requires consistent adaptation to change in the operating environment; ... that there will be paradoxical positions adopted reflecting differences in combine values, and ... that these two factors may combine to produce varied responses to governance reforms such as board member payment.'

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