



Glasgow and West of Scotland
Forum of Housing Associations

GWSF support panel – pilot commencing November 2023

Information for GWSF members

1 What is the panel and why have we set it up?

Sometimes a housing association can find itself facing difficulties and unforeseen challenges – of varying degrees and circumstances. GWSF's members are local, community based associations and we strongly believe that in most cases associations can, with the right support sought at the right time, manage their difficulties and go on to thrive.

That support can come in various forms, and GWSF is keen to ensure that peer support from the movement itself can be one form of support available to member associations when they need it. The support might be:

- Just an initial chat to discuss the situation – an objective outsider acting as a sounding board
- A series of mentoring-style discussions over a period of months, where there are perhaps more complex challenges which will take longer to resolve
- A potential co-option(s) to the committee/board, probably for a limited period, to offer expertise within the board
- Specific management support for a defined, short period (this may veer into the territory of specialist, paid support outwith the GWSF support service, and also we note EVH has a register of interim managers)

The panel is generally not intended to be a source of simply bolstering a committee/board whose numbers have reduced, but where this may be occurring as part of a wider problem within the association, short term support from the panel in this way may be appropriate.

Any mentoring-style support will be related to trying to address specific difficulties being experienced by the association in question and support them for a period to fully understand and resolve them, and so differs significantly from the more general mentoring available through GWSF's mentoring service.

The Scottish Housing Regulator is aware that we are setting up the support panel and who is on it. Where SHR is engaging with an association facing difficulties, it may suggest that the association considers contacting its membership body/bodies for potential support. But it is entirely up to an individual who has contacted the panel whether to advise SHR of this.

The panel will be run as a pilot exercise until the end of 2024 – and then reviewed.

2 Panel members as at November 2023

The panel will remain open for people to join at any time. Currently the following have volunteered:

- Jennifer Cairns, Director of Corporate Services, West of Scotland HA
- Gary Dalziel, Chief Executive, Elderpark HA
- John Hamilton, Chair, Barrhead HA (and GWSF Chair)
- Caroline Jardine, Director, Cernach HA
- Stewart Mackenzie, Chief Executive, Partick HA
- Clair Malpas, Chief Executive, Cassiltoun HA
- Kathleen McCutcheon, Chief Executive, Paisley HA
- Fiona Mills, Housing Director, Tollcross HA
- Jim Munro, Chief Executive, Shire HA
- Joyce Orr, Director, Pineview HA
- Linda Sichi, Deputy Chief Executive, Milnbank HA
- Julie Smillie, Director, Molendinar Park HA
- Tony Teasdale, Chief Executive, Shettleston HA

Each of these are experienced people and have a range of skills and knowledge across various functions in a housing association.

At this stage, most are senior staff. GWSF's Board is also hoping that, over time, some committee/board members will express interest in joining the panel, as there may be occasions where we're approached by a committee/board member who would prefer to talk with a peer, at least initially.

3 What happens when GWSF is approached for support?

Any member association, or individual committee/board or staff member, can approach GWSF, by contacting the Director (david.bookbinder@gwsf.org.uk) for an initial, confidential chat about the issue in question. The Director will explore the nature of the issue to try to build up as clear a picture as possible of the position, including whether the individual thinks that one or more significant regulatory standards may have been (or are in danger of being) breached.

It's possible that after this initial contact, the individual may not want to pursue things any further at that point in time, in which case there's no further action and the matter remains strictly confidential and not shared with any panel members.

If it is agreed that support from the panel may be appropriate, the Director will use his/her judgement to determine who may be the most suitable panel members to assist with the specific situation. This judgement will consider various factors, including their particular expertise, and whether any potential conflict could arise due to the support being needed by, for example, a neighbouring HA. The Director will approach what is likely to be a smaller number of panel members where someone is just wanting to get some initial advice/guidance or direct short term support, or a greater number of members if one or more co-options to committee/board are being sought.

Once a small selection of panel members have been approached, and confirmed their availability and that there are no conflicts of interest, these names will be provided to the individual committee/board or staff member to allow them to determine who they feel might be the most appropriate individual to engage with. It is recognised that for any support to be beneficial there requires to be a level of trust and alignment between both parties.

The Director will also ask for practical information such as (where a co-option is wanted) how often and on what day of the week committee/board meetings take place.

At any one time, some panel members may be available and some not, because of work or personal commitments, including where they may already be serving as a committee co-optee.

Any panel member who is contacted by the Director will treat the matter entirely confidentially. At this initial point of contact, a panel member who feels there is or could be any conflict of interest in relation to the association or individual in question will advise the Director and will not make him/herself available in that case.

4 Working with a panel member

Where an individual receives any kind of advice or support from a panel member, it is of course entirely up to the individual how they manage this. An early issue likely to be explored with the individual is whether they are acting with the knowledge of others within the association. A panel member is usually likely to encourage a committee member, for example, to inform the association's Chair that contact with GWSF is being made, but it is recognised that the circumstances in each case will be unique.

Panel members will use their experience and judgement to advise and support the individual as best they can. They are there to offer support, but at the same time to be realistic and honest: the role could be said to be one of a 'critical friend', and so sometimes it's possible that the panel member may be saying or suggesting something the individual is uncomfortable about hearing or recognising.

In a few cases, it may be appropriate for a panel member to advise the individual on what the position might be should the individual pursue a course of action which could amount to whistleblowing, or which could potentially be deemed to be a breach of the Code of Conduct.

The role of the panel member is not to resolve the issue but to work with the individual committee/board or staff member to support them to achieve the best possible outcome for the association. It will be up to the individual what they do with any advice/support provided.

5 Managing confidentiality

Confidentiality and trust are at the heart of making the panel a success. At their discretion, a panel member engaging with an individual may in some cases seek the view of one or more other panel members about the issues that have arisen and how best to address them, especially where there is some element of judgement required to ensure the best possible advice is provided. But the maintenance of confidentiality within the GWSF panel is of paramount importance.

GWSF itself will leave it to a panel member to decide what, if anything, they report back to GWSF about the contact with a member who has sought support. Obviously the GWSF Director will want to know the contact has been instigated and when it has come to an end.

As a membership body, GWSF would always hope to be able to learn lessons about how associations may have got into trouble and how they are managing things. The Forum gets feedback from associations through a variety of mechanisms and would not seek or expect detailed feedback from panel members about specific contact they have had.

6 Getting information about the panel out to committee/board members

Whilst GWSF will use events and conferences to promote the existence of the support panel, we do not have direct email contact with the 800-900 committee/board members in the Forum, so we are reliant on senior staff to disseminate information as widely as possible within their organisation (and including to other senior-level staff).