



Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Board Diversity in *Housing Associations*

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01 Executive Summary

1

Attitudes towards board diversity from housing association executives are broadly positive, with 70% reporting that they always consider diversity, while 20% saying they do so often.

2

To this end, housing associations gather a wide range of demographic data on their boards. 100% collected ethnicity, disability and gender.

3

These supportive attitudes are broadly reflected in their internal structures, with two-thirds having DEI policies and/or goals and unconscious bias training.

4

Slightly fewer (63.3%) reported on their board diversity metrics regularly.

5

Implementing all of these is a recommendation of the report for the 1 in 3 associations not currently doing so.

6

Difficulty finding candidates was identified as the biggest barrier to board diversity by the associations during the recruitment process.

7

The report gives advice and guidance on improvements which can be made by associations to strengthen their recruitment processes, internal structures, and their use of external partners.

02 Introduction



Housing associations are independent, not-for-profit organisations primarily focused on delivering affordable housing to those on lower incomes or in need of additional support. Those who are served by housing associations are statistically likely to be under-represented at a senior level within organisational boards (National Housing Federation, 2020).

In acknowledgment of this, it follows that housing associations ought to be champions of DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) initiatives, to ensure that those being served by the housing associations are well-represented within them.



Not only do diverse boards provide a greater range of perspectives, based on more varied experiences, they can also better understand and meet the needs of their service-users in this context, leading to better organisational outcomes.

This report will explore whether the barriers to diversity outlined within Castle Peak Group's (2025) previous reports 'Progress Under Pressure' and 'Understanding and Addressing Barriers to Diversity in Third Sector Organisations' (limited access to diverse candidate pools, systemic biases in recruitment, cultural challenges, and

practical complications) also limit progress in housing associations. Through a specific and detailed focus on housing associations, this report provides highly targeted and relevant recommendations allowing them to align their governance with their users.

To gather the data, Castle Peak Group conducted a survey of individuals responsible for appointing housing association boards across the UK. The aim was to gain insight into their current diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies, the levels of representation on their boards, and how well they believe their governance reflects the communities they serve.

The findings below highlight the key trends, patterns, and insights that emerged from the survey. These results offer valuable context for understanding the broader state of DEI within third sector organisations and form the foundation for the Analysis and Recommendations sections of this report.

03 Findings

The following results are taken from a survey of senior executives from housing associations across the UK. Their size by employee number ranged from fewer than 10 to over 250, and encompassed associations based across England, Scotland and Wales.

The respective board sizes of these organisations range from 5 to 22. The average board size was 10.5 members, the modal range was 10 members, as was the median size of a board.

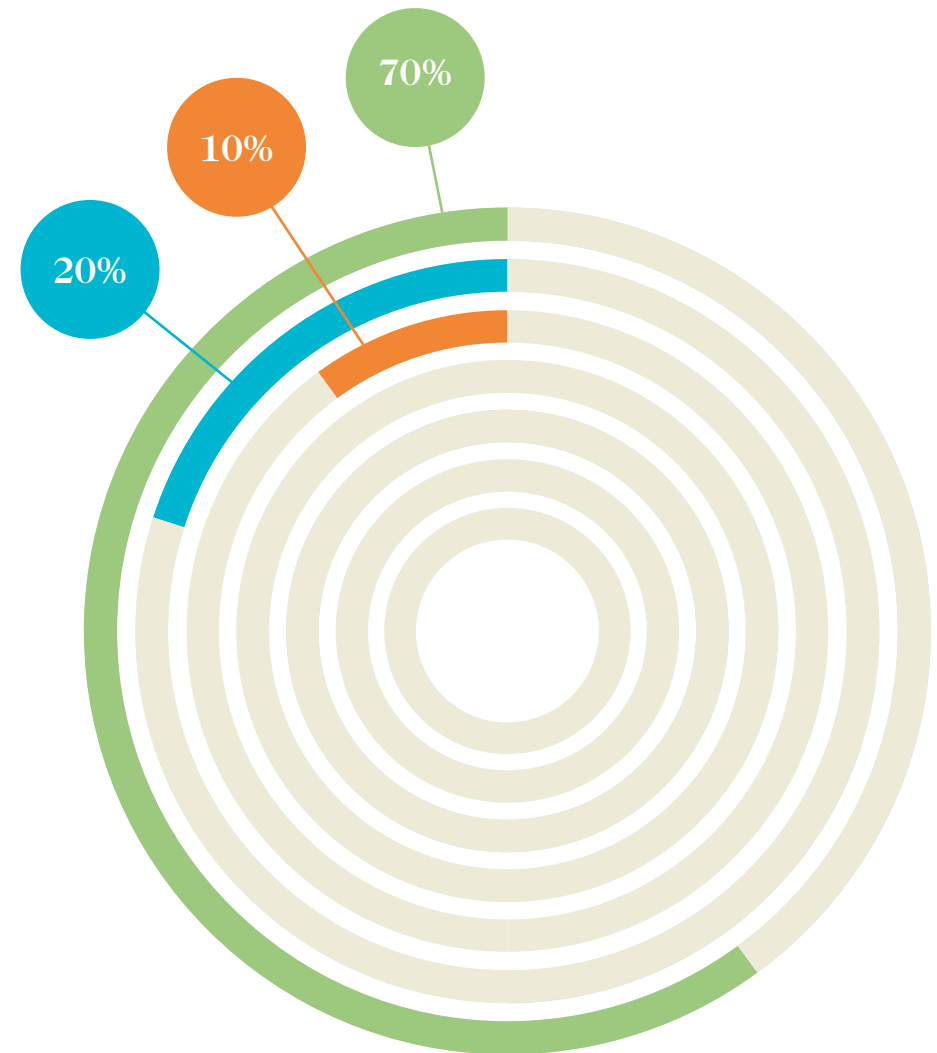


03 Findings

When appointing board members, how much consideration do you give to achieving a board that is diverse overall (regarding age, ethnicity, and gender)?

Almost all respondents indicated that they give at least some consideration to achieving board diversity when appointing new members. 70% reported that they always consider diversity, while 20% said they do so often. Only 10% said they “rarely” take diversity into account, and no respondent reported never doing so.

■ Always ■ Often ■ Rarely

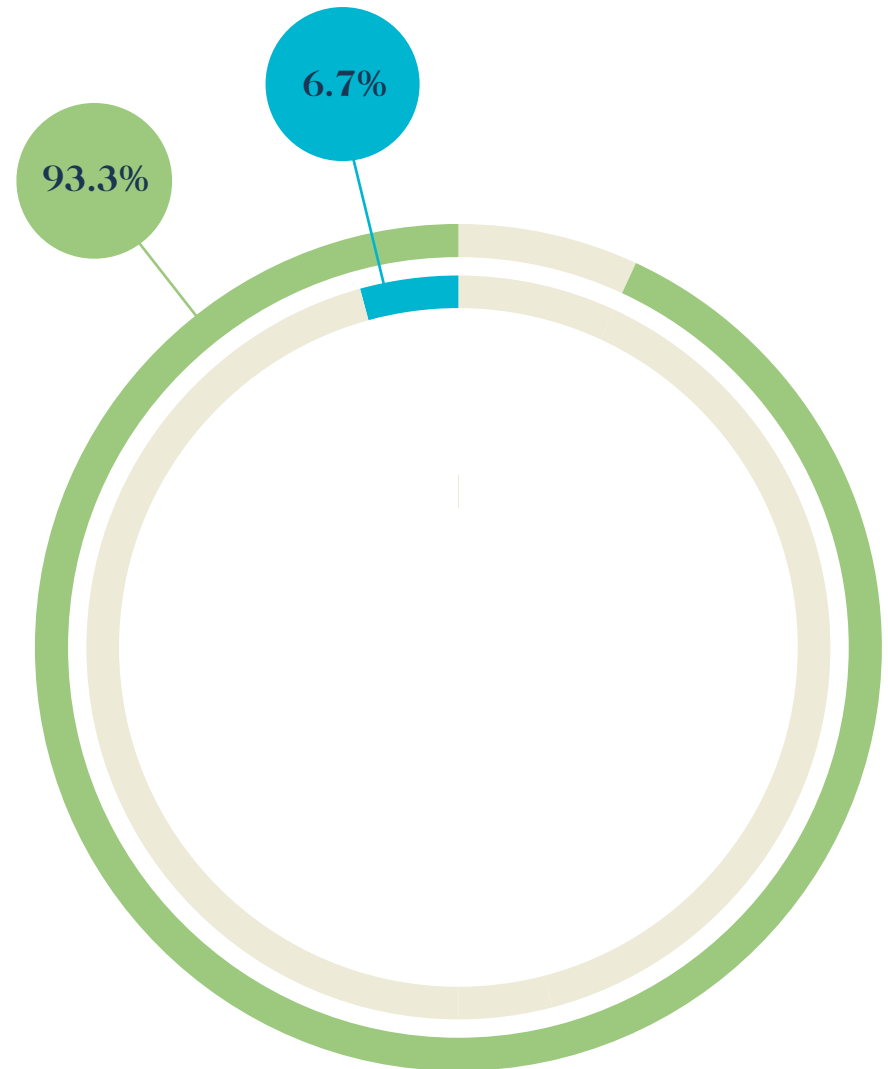


03 Findings

Does your association collect demographic data (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age) on board members?

As one would expect based on their stated commitment to diversity, over 9 in 10 (93.3%) of the respondents reported they regularly collect demographic data on their board members.

■ Yes ■ No



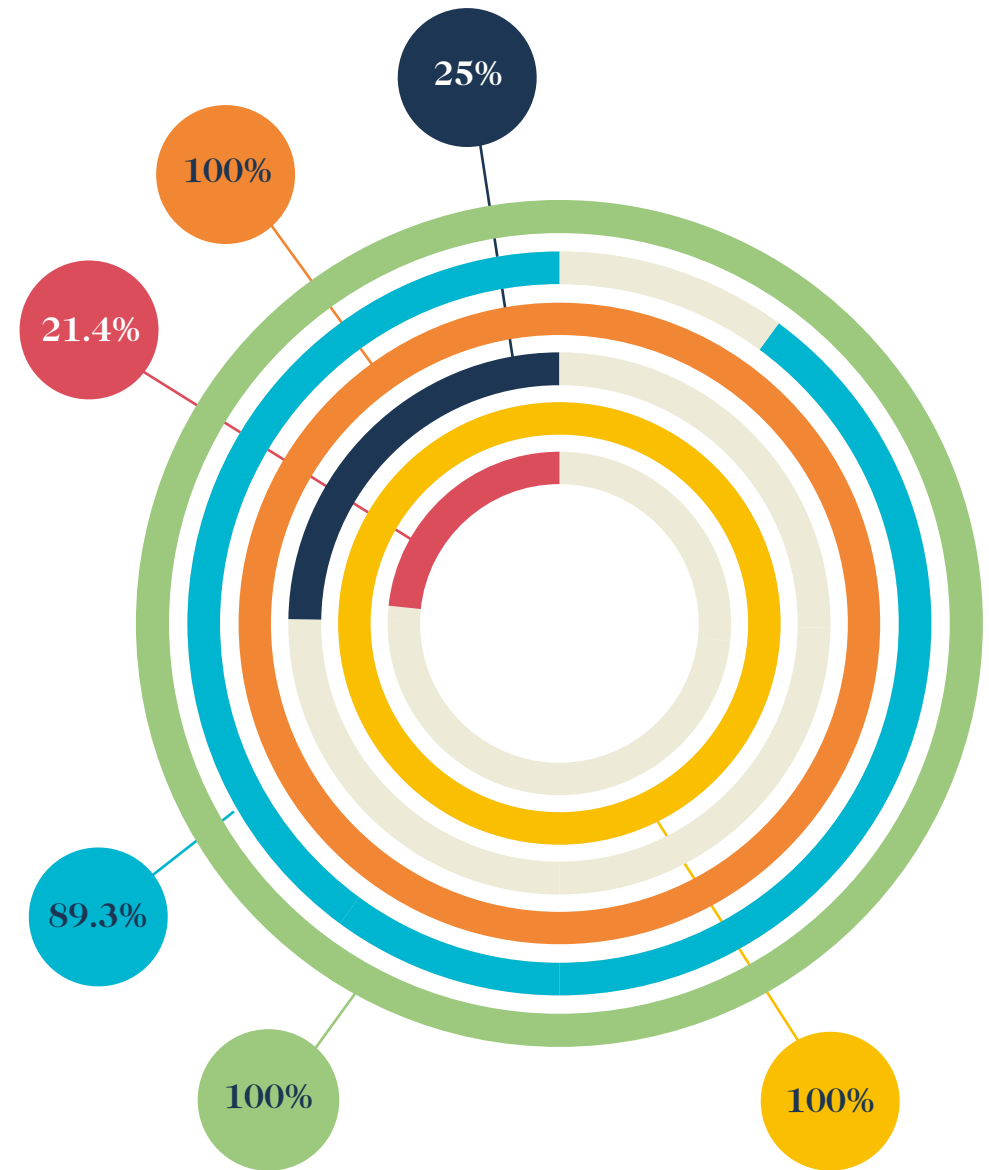
03 Findings

If yes, which demographic data do you collect?

The most collected demographic data were ethnicity, disability, and gender, each reported by 100% of respondents. Age was also widely collected, with 89.3% of respondents including it in their data gathering. Socio-economic background was recorded by 25% of respondents.

Sexual orientation and faith/religion were frequently cited by the 21.4% of those who included 'Other' in their selected responses.

■ Ethnicity ■ Age ■ Disability ■ Socio-economic background
■ Gender ■ Other (please specify)

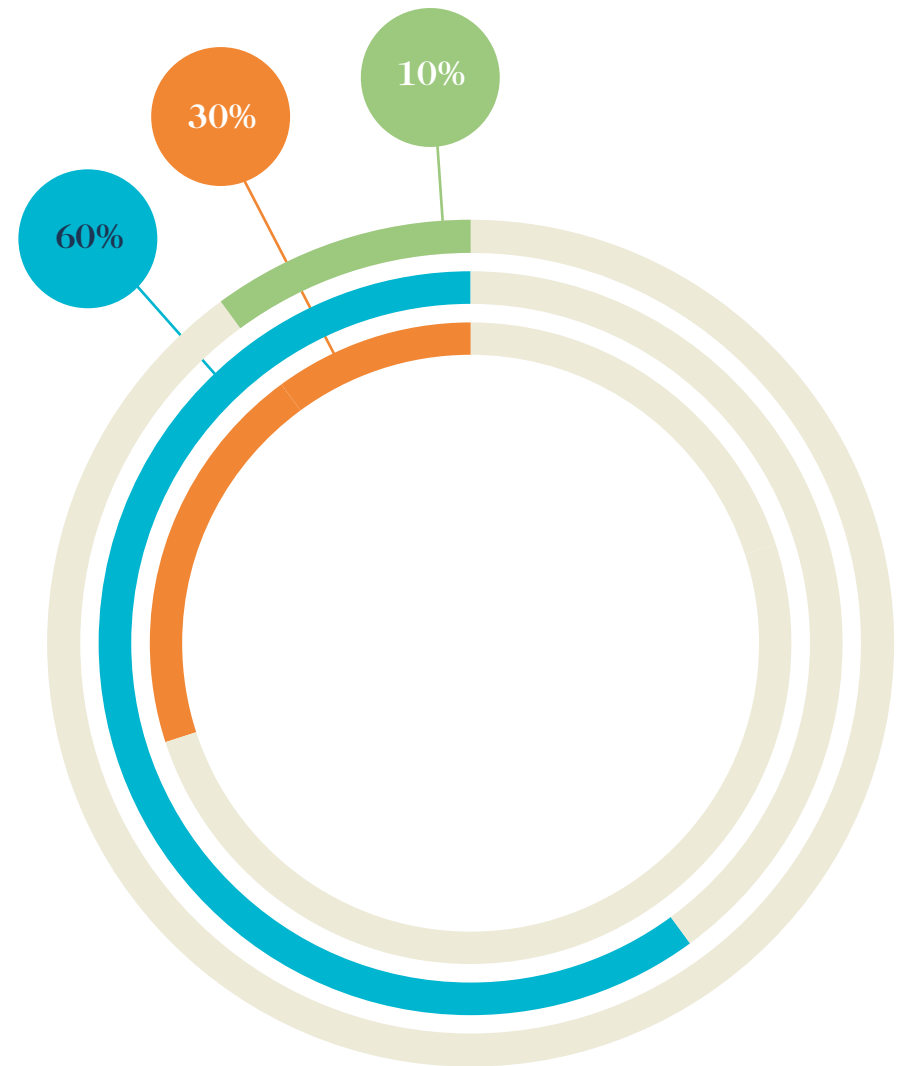


03 Findings

How far do you agree that your current board reflects the diversity of the communities your association serves?

While previous answers indicate a strong commitment to collecting diversity data, this commitment does not yet appear to have fully translated into having a significant impact on board confidence. 70% of respondents agree that the board reflects the diversity of the communities which they serve, however only 10% feel they do so strongly and 30% still disagreed. No respondents strongly disagreed.

That a significant majority perceive at least some level of alignment is encouraging. Nevertheless, the 30% who disagree points to an ongoing gap between intention and impact. This gap sets the context for the rest of the report, which explores why greater board-level representation has not yet been achieved, despite associations expressing a commitment to improvement and implementing monitoring processes.

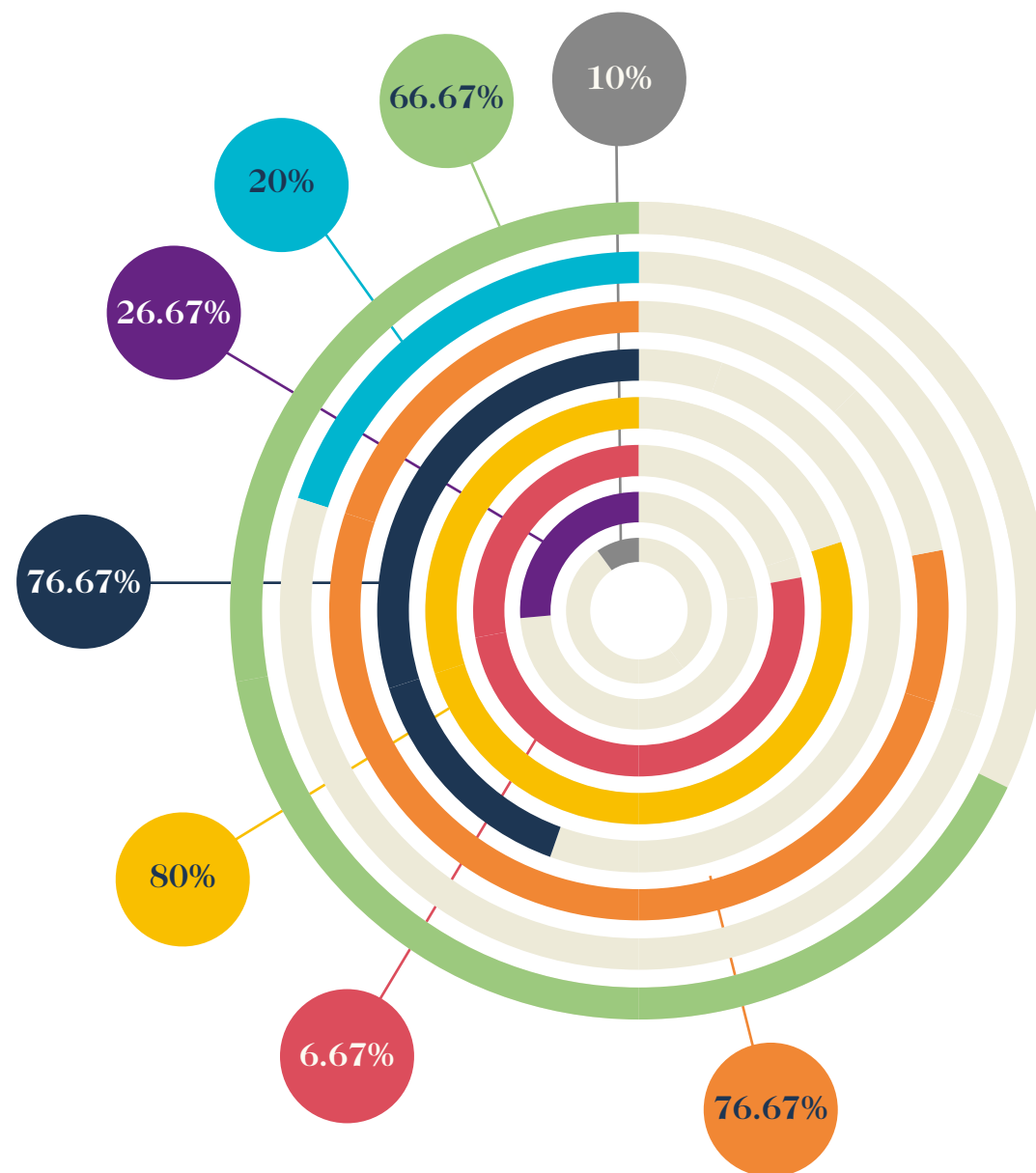


Strongly agree Agree Disagree

03 Findings

What methods do you use to recruit board members?

Housing associations use a broad range of methods to recruit board members. The most common approaches are advertising through the organisation's website (80%), open advertisements (76.67%), and social media outreach (76.67%). Executive search firms are fairly widely used, reported by 66.67% of housing associations. In contrast, word-of-mouth recruitment, while still common, is less prevalent at 46.67%. Nevertheless, almost half relying on word-of-mouth for recruitment is not ideal. Particularly when not complemented by more open or inclusive methods, word-of-mouth recruitment can limit the visibility of opportunities to those within established networks and restrict access to those not already 'in-the-know'. Other approaches, such as internal recruitment (20%) and community outreach (26.67%), are used less frequently.

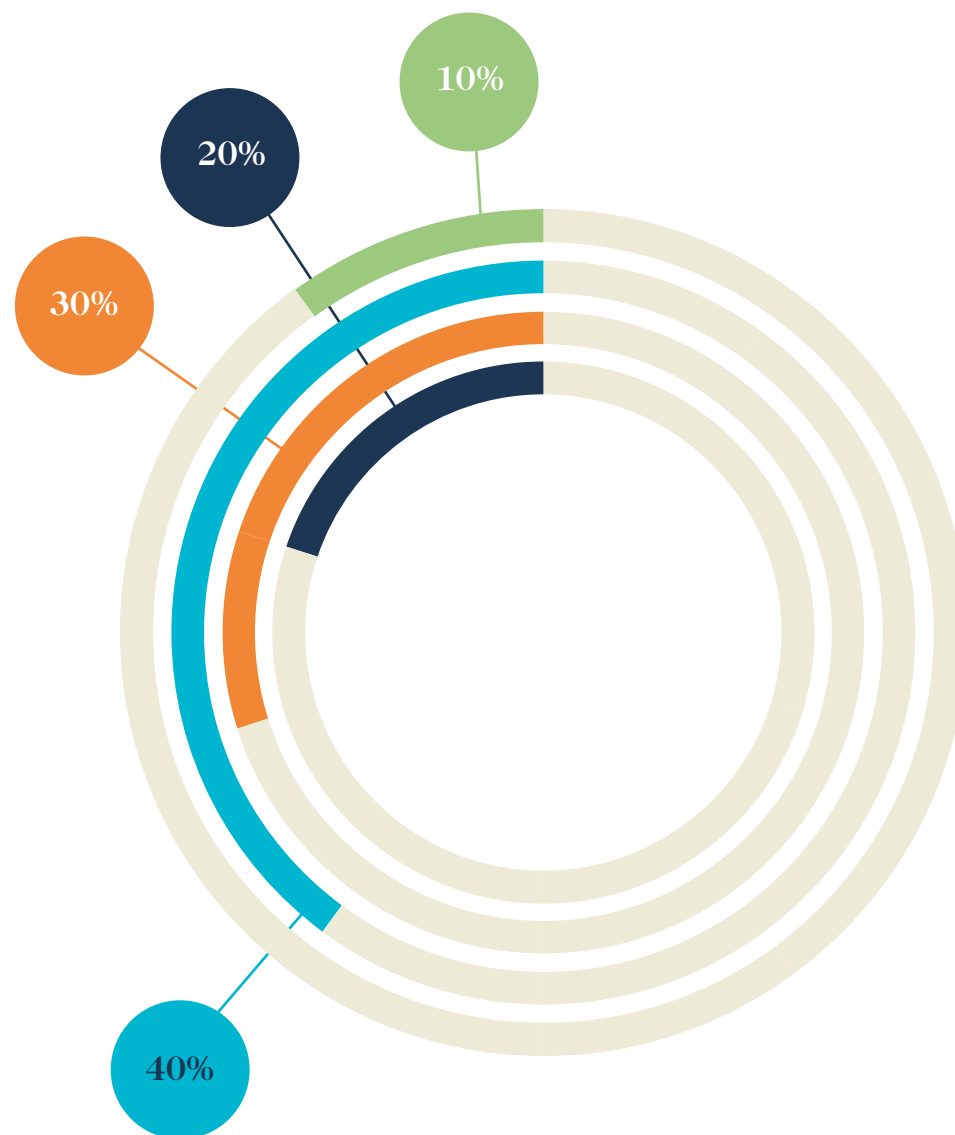


03 Findings

How often do you use targeted outreach to underrepresented groups during board recruitment?

These responses reveal that only 10% of housing associations consistently use targeted outreach to underrepresented groups as a standard part of their board recruitment process. A further 40% report doing so often. However, this means that just half of the organisations surveyed are regularly engaging in targeted recruitment. The remaining half either rarely (30%) or never (20%) use such approaches, demonstrating significant room for growth and improvement in proactive efforts to improve diversity.

Always Often Rarely Never

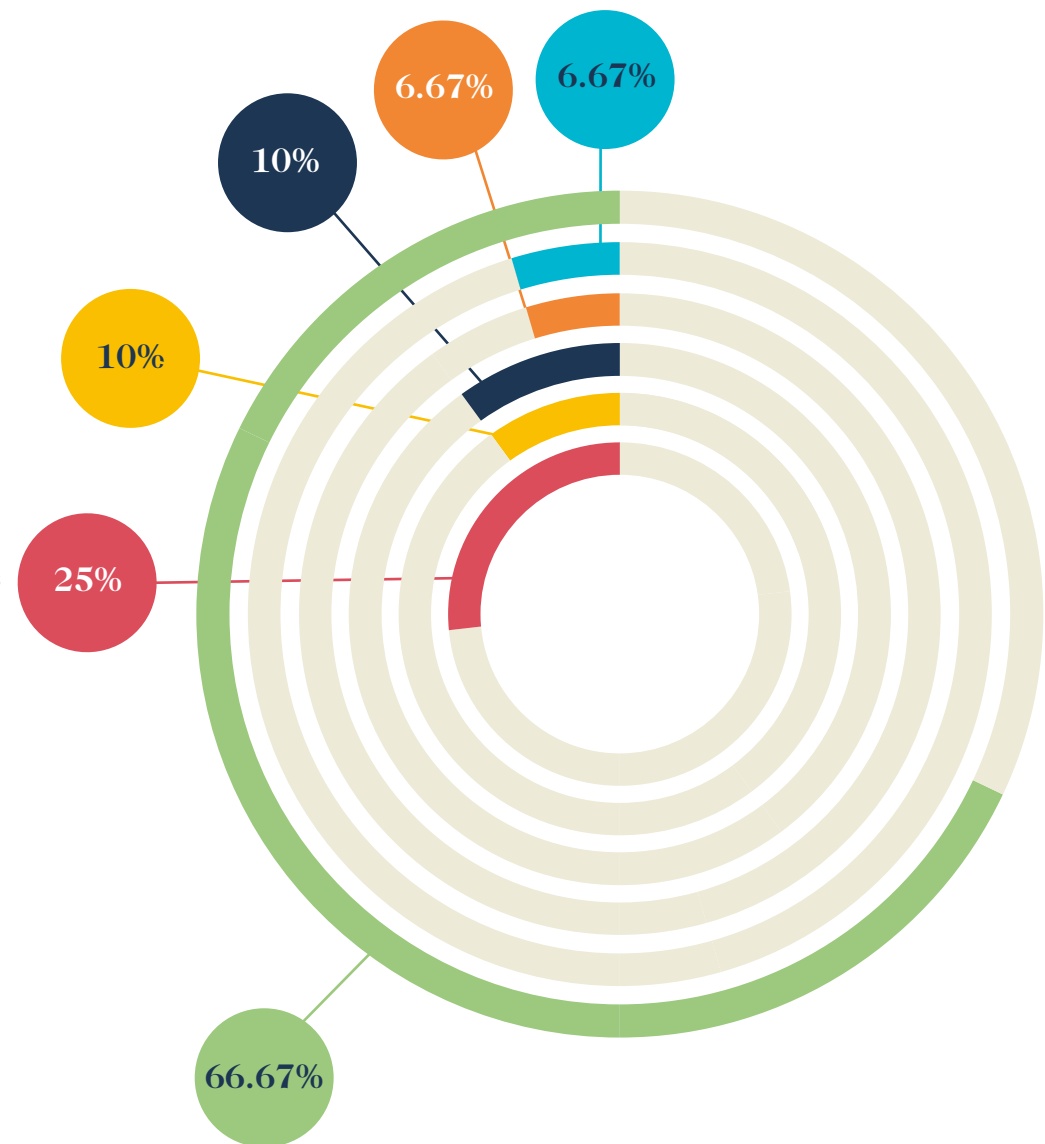


03 Findings

What are the main challenges your association faces in recruiting a diverse board?

By far the most commonly cited barrier to achieving a diverse board was a perceived lack of available candidates, reported by 66.67% of respondents. Other factors were mentioned far less frequently, including limited networks (10%), budget constraints (6.67%), and cultural resistance (6.67%). Only 25% pointed to recruitment practices themselves as a contributing factor.

These findings suggest that many organisations still view the challenge of board diversity as largely external, focusing on supply-side issues rather than reflecting on internal processes or structures that might be limiting access. The relatively low emphasis on recruitment practices indicates that there may be untapped opportunities to improve inclusivity.



03 Findings

Does your association provide training on unconscious bias or inclusive recruitment for those involved in board selection?

Two-thirds of respondents indicated that their association provides training on unconscious bias and inclusive recruitment. Whilst this is positive, it also represents an area where further progress could be made. If more associations provided training, it is likely institutionalised and unconscious biases which exist within the recruitment process would be diminished.

■ Yes ■ No



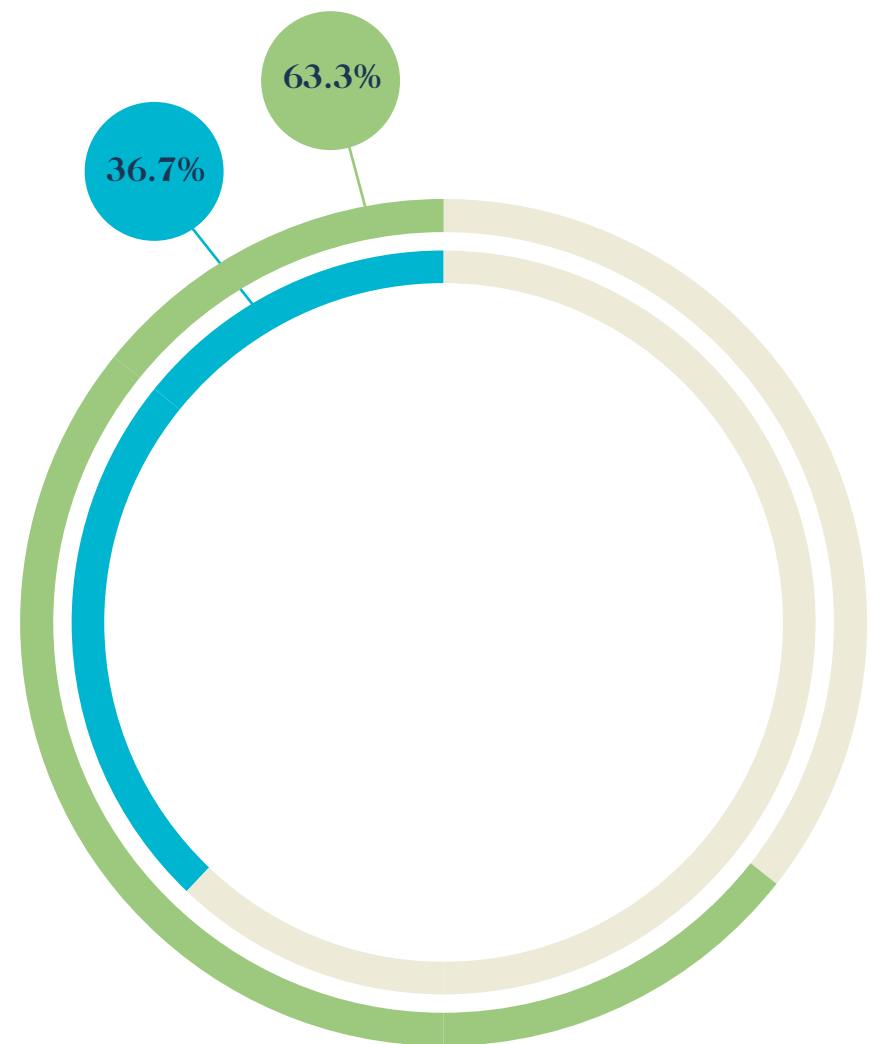
03 Findings

Does your association have a formal diversity policy or goals for board composition?

The number of associations which have a formal diversity policy and/or goals for board composition is very similar to the number who provide unconscious bias training; 63.3% of respondents have a policy and/or goals.

As with the training, it is positive to see almost two-thirds have a formalised policy and/or goals, but there remains significant space to improve and grow.

■ Yes ■ No

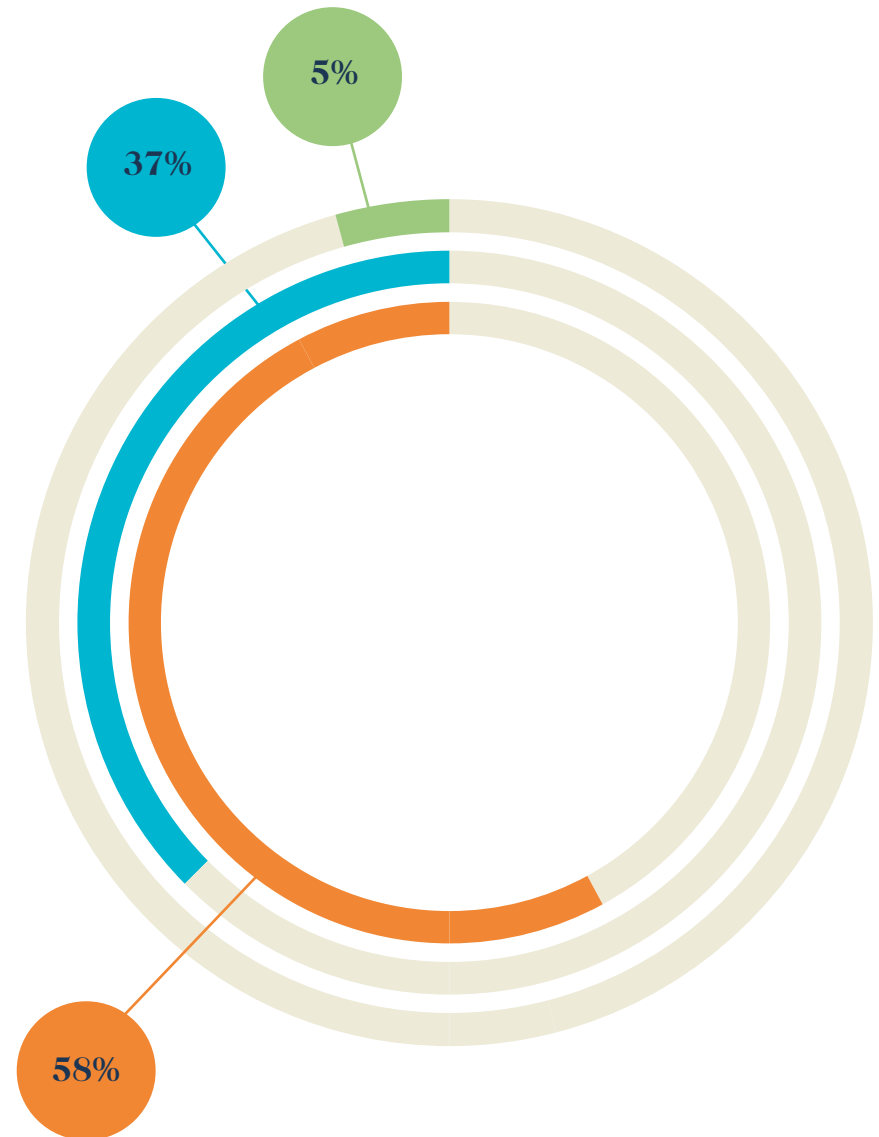


03 Findings

If yes, how effective are these policies in improving board diversity?

The effectiveness of these policies is mixed. Only 5% of respondents feel that their diversity policy and/or goals are Very Effective and more felt that their policy was 'Somewhat Effective' than 'Effective'. More positively, none thought their policies weren't effective at all.

Very effective Effective Somewhat effective



03 Findings

Do you regularly monitor and report on board diversity metrics?

Monitoring and regularly reporting on board diversity metrics is a key tool for helping organisations track their progress and self-assess the effectiveness of their recruitment strategies. Therefore, it's positive that around two-thirds of the respondents' associations do so. However, it also highlights that a significant minority of around one-third are not yet engaging in this practice, further indicating room for improvement sector-wide on top of the need for expanded training and formalised diversity policy goals.

■ Yes ■ No





04 Barriers and Recommendations

The final part of the survey invited respondents to give qualitative responses based on their own experiences.

Question 17: In your experience, how does board diversity impact your association's ability to achieve its mission?

The overall summary of responses to this question indicated that the majority valued DEI initiatives because it increased the diversity and quality of thought on their board. In particular, multiple respondents responded that those who had 'lived experience' in supported housing had a vital ability to locate and address 'blind spots'.

More broadly, others responded that they appreciated the 'richness' of contribution that an inclusive and varied board offers.

Question 18: What do you perceive as the key barriers preventing diversity on your association's board?

The vast majority of responses in this section stated that they had issues with finding suitable diverse candidates. Some went further to state that the desire to increase diversity exists, but the roles do not currently seem to be appealing to a diverse pool of candidates – potentially due to a lack of information or knowledge of what the role would involve.



Question 19: What specific actions do you believe could be taken to overcome these barriers?

Some of the regularly suggested actions included introducing training programmes on DEI, and mentorship for board members. Other actions that were suggested as helpful included more directed targeting of under-represented communities, and a generally wider recruitment drive, although some highlighted a concern for the cost implications of a wider push.

05 Analysis



The overall findings of the survey demonstrate a stated commitment to the value of diversity on the boards of housing associations.

This commitment is visible both in terms of attitudes – 70 % of respondents stated that they ‘Always’ consider achieving diversity when appointing board members, and no respondents said that they ‘Never’ do – and in terms of data, as 93.3% of housing associations collect demographic information about their board members.

The stated commitment is somewhat reflected in operational practices. 60% of respondents ‘Agreed’ that their board reflects the community that they serve, however only 10% ‘Strongly agreed’ and 30% disagreed. Similarly, there remains room for growth and improvement in recruitment processes; only 10% ‘Always’ use targeted outreach to underrepresented communities during the recruitment process and half of the responses said they ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ do so.

In comparison to the findings of Castle Peak Group’s research into board diversity on third sector organisational boards as a whole, housing associations are making stronger progress in their internal structures towards achieving better diversity and inclusivity. Two-thirds are providing training on avoiding unconscious bias during the recruitment process to their recruitment teams, and the same proportion are regularly reporting on their board diversity metrics. Slightly less than two-thirds, 63.3%, have a formal diversity policy and/or goals for board composition.

05 Analysis



However, this leaves around 1-in-3 boards with neither an established unconscious bias training nor a formal diversity policy and/or goals, and not reporting on their board diversity metrics. Recommendations for how to address this significant proportion of respondents are outlined in the next section of this report.

It is also worthwhile to consider the reasons the respondents gave as to why they couldn't all achieve the level of diversity they would ideally like. Two-thirds gave 'a lack of diverse candidates' as the

key reason behind a lack of board diversity. A possible cause of the difficulty they experience could be due to the range of recruitment methods used. The most common approaches – advertising on the organisation's website (80%), open advertisements (76.67%), and social media outreach (76.67%) – can tend to reach limited and often homogeneous audiences: typically, those already engaged with the sector. Word-of-mouth recruitment, used by 46.67% of organisations, can perpetuate cycles whereby those outside of pre-established favour established networks. Furthermore, the more proactive and community-based methods such as internal recruitment (20%) and community outreach (26.67%) are less frequently used, which represents a missed opportunity to engage individuals from underrepresented backgrounds.

Finally, in response to the qualitative questions that ended the survey, some respondents returned to the issue of being unable to find or attract diverse candidates. Some suggested that the requirements of the board roles were not fully understood by a wide range of potential applicants, or were not appealing to them, potentially dissuading them from applying. This issue is another that will be addressed in the recommendations section.



Word-of-mouth recruitment, used by 46.67% of organisations, can perpetuate cycles whereby those outside of pre-established favour established networks

06 Recommendations

Internal

A key opportunity to further achieve diversity within housing associations lies in strengthening internal governance structures, particularly for those who don't have DEI training, policies, goals or reporting as a regular feature in their operations.

Setting clear goals and/or implementing policies to ensure a minimum level of diversity on housing association boards would not only bring a wider range of perspectives to decision-making but would also enhance the organisation's ability to engage meaningfully with the communities it serves.

Introducing unconscious bias training more broadly across the sector is another important step. This ensures that, once outreach efforts succeed in attracting a high-quality and diverse pool of candidates, the selection process remains as fair and inclusive as possible.

In addition, regular reporting on diversity levels within organisations acts as a valuable accountability mechanism. By monitoring progress transparently, associations are better positioned to meet their diversity objectives and demonstrate a tangible commitment to change. It also will assist to measure the success of the training, policies and goals previously mentioned.

External

On the subject of external expertise, several respondents expressed support for engaging recruitment agencies with a strong commitment to diversity to help ensure boards more accurately reflect the communities they represent. However, concerns were raised about financial feasibility in the qualitative responses, with some citing

limited funding as a barrier to exploring alternative recruitment approaches.

That said, engaging executive search firms or diversity-focused recruitment agencies does not always need to be prohibitively costly. In particular, organisations based outside of London often offer more accessible pricing, aligning with the broader aim of making diversity efforts more achievable across the sector.

Recruitment Practices

By expanding their community outreach during the recruitment process, associations can hope to reach a more diverse pool of candidates who may not otherwise be exposed to board opportunities. Additionally, housing associations should invest in internal development pathways to encourage staff and volunteers from underrepresented backgrounds to consider leadership roles within the association.

They can also consider working with specialist executive recruitment agencies which prioritise diversity and inclusion. These agencies can provide access to diverse talent pools, particularly those based outside of London, where recruitment fees tend to be more affordable. Housing associations should also regularly review their recruitment materials for accessibility to ensure they are inclusive and free from jargon.

07 Concluding Remarks



Overall, this report shows some cause for optimism, and several areas for growth and improvement. A majority of associations show genuine commitment to increasing diversity at board level, and an understanding of the benefits it will bring them. In particular, there is a widespread desire for more individuals who have experience of living in supported housing to share their insight at board level to ensure 'blind spots' are not missed.

In light of this, many associations are already providing the necessary training, policies, goals and demographic reporting in place. However, a sizeable minority do not. This report serves as a call to action for them to appreciate that introducing these internal structures is not only feasible, but will be beneficial to the organisation.

Further, external support is affordable and available for the high number of organisations who are currently struggling to find diverse applicants for board roles in the form of executive search organisations.

The recommendations section of this report is drawn from suggestions from the senior executives surveyed, representing cause for optimism that with the right plan, resources and guidance, greater diversity is achievable for the future.

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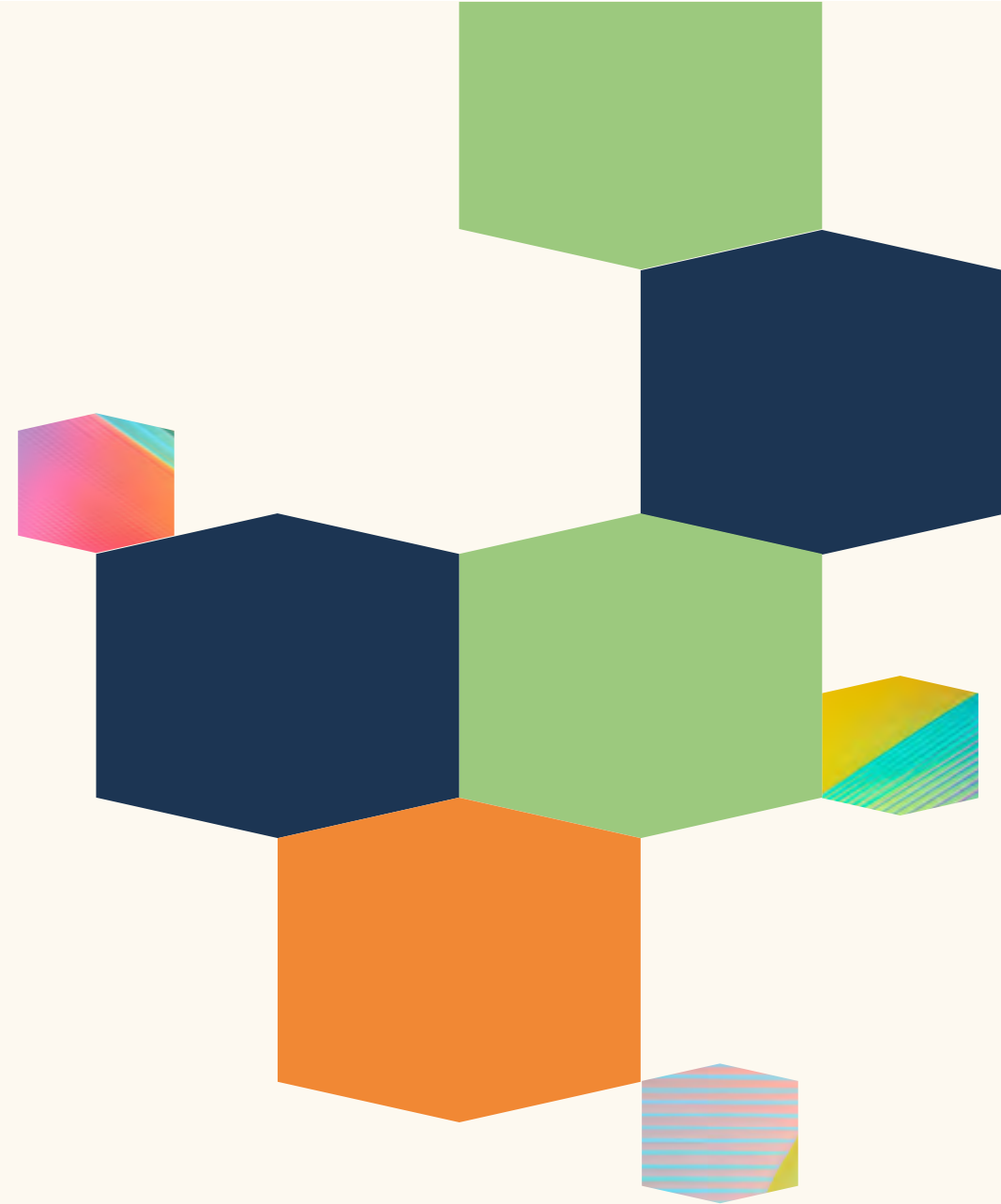
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