

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Peter Riddell, Commissioner for Public Appointments

Public Chairs Forum – Diversity and Equality in public appointments - 06 June 2018

As Commissioner for Public Appointments, one of my main roles is as a champion of diversity. What does that mean? I don't appoint anyone myself to the boards of public bodies. That is done by, or on behalf, of ministers on the advice of panels chaired by civil servants alongside an independent member - and, depending on the nature of the appointment, the Chair of the public body itself. My function is as a regulator, to monitor whether appointments follow the Government's own Governance Code, to discuss competitions with departments, to adjudicate on complaints and to report annually on what has happened. On diversity, I am wary of just making fine-sounding public pleas for more appointments of women, ethnic minorities and the disabled - what is known as virtue signalling to use a horrible new term.

We don't need to spend time today discussing whether it is better to have more diverse boards and workforces. There is ample evidence that diversity helps ensure a more contented and more productive workforce - and the same applies at board level where there is evidence that diversity fosters robust governance. The boards of public bodies in particular should reflect in broad terms the population whom they serve. One lesson already from the Grenfell inquiry is that the public legitimacy of public sector bodies and boards can be at risk if they are not sufficiently diverse, and seen as such. I found it revealing a week ago when the Business Department published some of the explanations heard by the team behind the Hampton-Alexander review for not appointing women to private sector boards—'women don't want the hassle or pressure of sitting on a board'; 'all the good women have already been snapped up'; 'we already have a woman on the board', 'it's somebody else's turn; there aren't enough senior women in this sector'. The almost universal reaction to these quotations was derision and contempt.

Rather, we have now moved from the desirability of change to the more practical and harder phase - how to achieve greater diversity? The record on public appointments is better than many might suppose. The last published statistics-- which my team collects from departments and publishes each summer- covered 2016-17- and showed that good progress has already been made on women being appointed, but the record is much patchier on ethnic minorities, and very disappointing so far on those declaring a disability. More than 45 per cent of appointments and reappointments went to women in 2016-17, up from 34 per cent five years ago. That reflects a consistent drive from ministers, departments and from the Cabinet Office at the centre. As we have heard, in its Diversity Action Plan, the Government has set a target of 50 per cent for female appointments by 2022. That should be attainable provided there is sustained will and leadership.

In the same year of 2016-17, just over 9 per cent of appointments and reappointments were made to ethnic minority candidates. This compares with a 14 per cent share of the population- this also the government's target for 2022. Around 6 per cent of appointments and reappointments went to those declaring a disability. There are problems here of definition, of willingness to declare a disability. The Government has not set a disability

target. But both here and in relation to ethnic minorities, a lot more needs to be done if acceptable levels of appointment are to be achieved.

Up-to-date figures for the 2017-18 are currently being collated by my team and will be published over the summer months. These will cover a full year of the operation of the Government's Governance Code, as well as the disruption to the appointments process caused by last year's general election. I will be looking clearly to see if recent favourable trends for women have been maintained and in particular whether there is progress in the appointment of chairs- as opposed to board members- from target groups. The main focus is on gender, ethnic minorities and the disabled, but I also, in future, want to pay attention to the geographic, social and age balance.

During my two years as Commissioner I have been talking to under-represented groups, and attending events to try to understand their concerns, while last September and October I went round Whitehall to meet individual Permanent Secretaries to discuss the performance of their departments and possible ways forward. I am keen to continue these discussions, which have so far led to various conclusions:-

First, knowledge and understanding need to be improved. Many people, and not just from under-represented groups, do not understand about the range of public appointments or believe it is just for friends of ministers and what used to be called the good and the great. With nearly 2,000 appointments or reappointments a year that is clearly not true. However, the perception of exclusivity can, and does, deter people from applying.

Second, the process of appointment needs to be less off putting. A lot has already been done to reduce the biases in the application system in favour of conventional experience. In the past, overly demanding people and job specifications deterred people from applying. Removing such lists - seemingly almost designed for 55 to 65 year old professionals at the end of their conventional careers-- has helped to remove barriers to those with less traditional career backgrounds. It is also important that interview panels are more diverse. One or two women are now usually, but not always, on interview panels, but ethnic minority and disabled members are much rarer. Departments also need to make interviews less daunting for non-traditional candidates. The evidence is that the sifting and interview system does not work against female candidates who do better than men at each stage of the process, though, by contrast, ethnic minority candidates do less well in making it to the interview and appointment stages.

Third, communications and outreach. What is required is not just the repeated demonstration that appointments are made on a fair and equal basis on merit- and as Commissioner highlighting it when they do not- but an active policy to inform and reassure target groups. It is not nearly enough to put an advert on the Centre for Public Appointments website which is followed by a small minority. There are other places, notably via social media, where departments can advertise to reach out to a wider audience and public bodies themselves have ideas about how to promote their organisations as more diverse and to promote vacancies more widely. Departments need to build up networks among disadvantaged groups, as some already do, to identify potential candidates and to mentor and support them, particularly for what may be a series of applications..

The Government's Diversity Action Plan has many sensible proposals to develop networks to raise awareness and provide support, to work with chairs and boards on succession planning and to establish a group of mentors. One of my concerns has been that the disabled are not treated as a lower priority. I therefore warmly welcome the announcement that Lord Holmes of Richmond is to undertake the promised review into the barriers preventing disabled people taking up public appointments. I look forward to working with him on his review so we can identify practical steps.

The key is the drive and commitment shown not just by the public bodies represented here at the PCF meeting but also by departments. It was clear from my tour around Whitehall last autumn that there are big contrasts in involvement in public appointments. Four departments-- DCMS, Health, Justice and Business-- make, directly or indirectly, the majority of appointments, while some giants of Whitehall- the Treasury, the Foreign Office, DfID and Defence-- make very few appointments. Some departments also face the challenge of operating in sectors which have traditionally been dominated at senior levels by white men, though that obstacle can be surmounted by reaching out further, by offering shadowing and mentoring schemes to extend the pool of potential candidates and appointees.

The answer is that departments need to co-operate more-- working with, and via, the Cabinet Office's Centre for Public Appointments- to pool contacts and development networks with target groups, identifying, supporting and mentoring candidates on a cross-Whitehall basis.

The Civil Service leadership rightly prides itself on achieving greater diversity amongst civil servants via high profile events, networks and awards ceremonies- perhaps there is scope for the same to happen with public appointments. I intend to play my part by encouraging, sharing best practice, scrutinising processes via compliance visits, reporting on progress and speaking up publicly.

ends