

**‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 27 Feb 2018  
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**A fairer society won’t be created by more monochrome boards**

Good governance has been a much discussed area over the past few years, particularly on the back of some highly publicised examples of bad practice. Although it is a privilege to serve on a board, many people view membership with a degree of caution.

At the core, it is board members who are responsible for the good governance, strategy and direction of travel of organisations, many of which are essential building blocks of our society.

Every time applications for board memberships appear, I am asked “What sort of people should be on the Board? Could I do it?” My encouragement to apply isn’t helped by the public image that an average board member is “white, male and stale!”

Although female board membership has improved, it is still a long way from the 50% where demographics would suggest it be. It also remains true that there are few disabled representatives or those below the age of thirty or from ethnic minorities.

Diversity is a key driver of productivity and can increase understanding. Monochrome boards which are, or should be, a driver for growth and change in our society, miss out on the different perspectives and skills which a more diverse representation would bring. Boards need to be able to draw on a range of people’s experiences, which reflect the lives of all those in the communities which they serve.

A pro-active, conscious focus on encouraging all under-represented groups to apply for boards, challenging stereotypes and removing barriers to participation, will give the best opportunity of achieving the result of a more diverse, representative, and more effective, board. The Education Authority (EA) is a key public body which is currently tackling this issue, and one which, coincidentally, is currently on the look-out for new school governors. The Equality Commission has been supportive of the EA in its search for a wider range of candidates from diverse backgrounds. The Authority would particularly like to see more applications from people between the age of 18 and 35, for example.

In addition, over the past decade, representation of people with a disability on public boards has remained in low single figures. This situation presents a challenge, as all public bodies in Northern Ireland have a duty to encourage participation in public life by disabled people under the Disability Discrimination Act. They also have a responsibility under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act to ensure they are providing equality of opportunity for disabled people. In addition, under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities the U.K. Government has

committed to 'promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encourage their participation in public affairs'.

So it should come as no surprise that we at the Commission have been promoting the idea of applying for board membership to people with disabilities.

We need leadership from those best placed to make a difference. People with power to make appointments to boards should take steps to encourage people with disabilities to apply - and make sure that they anticipate any reasonable adjustments that might be needed and implement them. And also, if you have a disability, why not consider going forward for a place on a public board yourself, and make your voice heard.