

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Participation in Public Life

Increasing diversity in government public appointments



December 2021

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) in 2019 highlighted key inequalities in diversity in government public appointments. These were an under-representation of women and people with disabilities. It also highlighted that there are significant and specific data gaps across all areas of public life. The Commission recommended actions to address these issues, and you can read our full policy recommendations here www.equalityni.org/Participation/Policy.

This short publication updates the evidence base of our 2019 recommendations, taking account of social and public policy developments since then.

Whilst recognising and welcoming the proactive steps taken by public authorities to promote equality across Section 75 grounds, it is clear that **key inequalities in government public appointments** still require actions to advance equality.

Recommendations for Government and Departments to increase diversity in government public appointments:

- Establish and promote support measures and targeted actions for people with disabilities.
- Implement an action plan to achieve gender equality in board and chair public appointments.
- Implement its strategic approach to public appointments policy and board effectiveness policy to address under-representation and support participation.
- Address identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy.



Recommended actions to public bodies to address the under-representation of persons with a disability:

- Promote the participation of disabled people;
- Develop supported work and boardroom initiatives to build experience, capacity and skills;
- Address physical, communication and other barriers to access, including covering the reasonable additional costs associated with the participation of a person with disabilities.

Recommended actions to public bodies to address the under-representation of women.

- Review the recruitment and selection process, to for example place a focus on the lived experience;
- Implement measures to assist the balance of family and working life. This includes via accessible, appropriate and affordable childcare and more carer friendly practices and policies.

Advancing equality in participation in public life

The Commission has consistently highlighted the importance of diversity in public life and the need for government and relevant departments to champion actions to increase the voice and influence of under-represented groups and secure equality in participation in public life.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about challenges and changes to many aspects of our lives, highlighting and exacerbating existing inequalities, and potentially creating new ones. In order to effectively address inequalities in areas such as health, education and employment, women and disabled people need to be fully involved in decision-making processes.

We call for action to engage with under-represented groups via: promotion and outreach to raise awareness of the benefits to individuals and society; and, helping to overcome actual or perceived personal barriers experienced by equality groups to participation in public life.

Further, whilst socio-economic disadvantage is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, it is clear that barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion.

DISABILITY

Establish and promote support measures, and targeted actions to increase the participation in public life of people with disabilities.

The Executive Office's 2016 *Public Appointments Guide* acknowledges the under-representation on public bodies of, amongst others, people with disabilities. Our 2018 *Statement* identified the under-representation of people with disabilities as a key inequality.



Of the 183 appointments made during 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018, 4% stated they had a disability*.

* NISRA. The Executive Office (2020) Public Appointments: Annual Report for Northern Ireland, 2017/18 22.4% of the population of NI aged 16-64 have a disability or a limiting long-term illness – Labour Force Survey, Disability and the Labour Market, Quarterly, January – March 2021 Table 2.33

Whilst 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland have a disability, appointments to public boards remains consistently low, between 1% in 2006 and 4% in 2018.

The Commission previously identified a range of specific barriers to participation in public life, including physical and other accessibility issues; lack of capacity-building; and wider support.

In order to tackle the under-representation of disabled people, we continue to recommend action to involve those with disabilities and their representative organisations to identify and implement specific measures to tackle the under-representation of disabled people.



Actions include:

- Encouraging stakeholders to promote the participation of disabled people;
- Developing supported work and boardroom initiatives to build experience, capacity and skills;
- Addressing physical, communication and other barriers to access, including covering the reasonable additional costs associated with the participation of a person with disabilities.

These align to the 2018 Lord Holmes Review recommendation that government use ‘multipliers, connectors and conduits to promote opportunities more widely’. The Review also recommended the establishment of a ‘mentoring programme to support talented disabled candidates.’

GENDER

Ensure implementation of an action plan to achieve the Executive's 2016 target for gender equality in board and chair public appointments.

Some of the targets agreed by the Executive in March 2016 for the appointment of women to public bodies have been missed. In 2018, the Commissioner for Public Appointments acknowledged that during this period the situation *'makes impossible the achievement of the equality targets within the set timeframe'*.



As at 31 March 2018, a total of 508 appointments were made, of which 38% female and 62% male.*

NISRA. TEO (2020) [Public Appointments: Annual Report for Northern Ireland, 2017/18](#)

Concerted action is therefore needed to catch up and to address the range of political; socio-economic; ideological and psychological barriers impacting on women's participation in public life at board and chair level.

Whilst the barriers are wide-ranging, including being part of the networks that gain access to

boards, we continue to recommend that government departments take action to address:

- recruitment and selection processes which may hamper greater diversity in public appointments.
- the availability of childcare.
- confidence of individuals.
- the greater under-representation of women in remunerated posts.

We urge the prompt implementation of a timetabled action plan setting out key milestones to deliver on the agreed targets for the appointment of women to public bodies.



ACTION PLAN

Implement its strategic approach to public appointments policy and board effectiveness policy to address under-representation and support participation, including to give effect to the 2014 recommendations of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland.

We note the Executive Office’s intention, in 2021, to develop a ‘Strategic Approach to Public Appointments Policy and Board Effectiveness in NI’

policy, and welcome the opportunity to contribute. It is essential that the development and delivery of the policy is underpinned by:

- Stakeholder involvement
- Mainstreaming
- Monitoring
- Data collection
- SMART, time-bound and resourced action plans
- Layered reporting and review.

The Commission would endorse actions to implement the 2014 recommendations of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland. These recommendations included, for example: using the Public Appointments Forum to address under-representation at an NICS, rather than departmental level; making board diversity public policy and setting measurable goals; and taking a centralised approach to raising awareness of public appointments.

We urge early publication and implementation of the cross-departmental strategic action plan with associated actions, targets and review mechanism.

Actions must seek to address not only under-representations and known barriers, but also to raise awareness of opportunities and their relevance to members of specific equality categories.

DATA

Address identified gaps in equality data across a number of areas of public policy.

There are substantial and specific data gaps across all areas of public life in relation to the participation of those from across the nine equality categories.



Monitoring information for applications received during 2017 - 2018: Gender: 82%; Age, ethnicity and disability: 80%*

* NISRA, TEO (2020) Public Appointments: Annual Report for Northern Ireland, 2017/18.

We call upon public authorities to ensure comprehensive monitoring, analysis and reporting of equality characteristics relating to public life.

We also call upon departments to take more extensive action to encourage candidates for public appointments to complete and return monitoring forms.

Further information

To view our 2019 policy recommendations visit
www.equalityni.org/Participation/Policy