



Increasing diversity in public appointments

Why diversity in public appointments matters

Around 100 appointments are made annually by or on behalf of Welsh Government ministers to the boards of over 54 public bodies. Disabled candidates and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic candidates are currently underrepresented on these boards.

The goal of the Welsh Government's strategy 'Reflecting Wales in Running Wales' (Welsh Government, 2020) is that the boards of public bodies reflect the communities they serve.

Recruitment should be seen as the long-term generation of a pipeline of talented individuals rather than as a one-off competition for a role.

This is important because public bodies have a significant influence on people's lives and should understand the issues affecting them. Diverse boards also maximise the available talent and help to avoid 'group think' (Sealy et al., 2009: 5).

System-wide issues

There is a risk that any programmes or initiatives to support underrepresented groups into public appointments imply that the candidate needs to change to fit the system, rather than the other way around. There are many people in Wales with disabilities and from ethnic minority backgrounds who are already 'board ready'. Addressing system-wide issues could greatly increase diversity in public appointments by:

- Increasing awareness of public bodies and their role in Welsh life.
- Working with boards to address their lack of confidence or unwillingness to discuss diversity issues.
- Improving the evidence on targeted approaches to increasing diversity in terms of race, disability and the intersection of different characteristics.



Role design

Job descriptions can affect who applies for positions. Language should be used carefully as some job advertisements can lead some candidates to feel that public appointments are 'not for them'.

A recognition of the experience required for board membership beyond just senior or board experience would widen the pool of applicants, enabling emerging leaders to gain experience. This means valuing those with lived experience of inequalities, experience of working with communities, and experience from a wide range of industries.

Requiring a CV can be a barrier for those who do not have 'traditional' work histories, such as those who have needed time off for caring responsibilities or health reasons.

It is also important to acknowledge that bias is in fact often explicit and ought to be named – as racism, or ableism, for instance – rather than 'excused' as unconscious.

Low remuneration can disproportionately affect underrepresented groups. However, the language and application process needs to be handled carefully to ensure people feel comfortable claiming allowances.

Flexible working conditions, such as the option of remote working and varying the timing and location of meetings, can make serving on boards more accessible.

Advertising and awareness-raising

Information events can publicise board positions, demystify the application process and encourage applicants from a range of backgrounds to apply. Events should avoid

reinforcing stereotypes about underrepresented groups.

Where roles are advertised is important. Recruitment campaigns can be targeted at specialist or community-orientated media.

Using informal networks to recruit can exclude underrepresented groups who are not part of those networks (Ogbonna, 2019). But targeting specialist diverse networks can have the opposite effect. There are specialist search agencies focused on increasing diversity at governance level, such as Inclusive Boards.

Being able to hear from leaders from different backgrounds can help increase applications from candidates from underrepresented groups. It is important that such role models also share the challenges they have experienced.



Training, mentoring, and coaching

Recruitment should be seen as the long-term generation of a pipeline of talented individuals rather than as a one-off competition for a role.

Free training programmes can help prospective candidates. Social Practice ENT's Beyond Suffrage programme involves a training programme to support women of colour to become trustees in the voluntary sector. Public bodies could also be required to offer board shadowing or observation opportunities to support potential candidates to become more 'board confident'.

Mentoring, coaching, and peer-to-peer support, such as that offered by 10 Years' Time's trustee

coaching programme, can help potential and 'near miss' candidates. Such programmes for those from underrepresented groups would formalise what is already happening informally for privileged groups.

Unconscious bias

Although unconscious bias is commonly addressed through training, this has only a weak effect on attitudes and, furthermore, there is a weak link between attitudes and behaviours (Atewologun et al., 2018; CIPD 2019).

Strategies to tackle unconscious bias at an individual level may not therefore be the most effective way to increase diversity on boards.



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Anonymising applications by removing personal details (such as name, personal interests and education) can help minimise bias, although this does not necessarily translate into increased representation (Rinne, 2018).

Interview techniques

Interview panels should operate in an open and 'generous' way (Dadas, 2018), such as by:

- Ensuring the interview panel is diverse and includes members from underrepresented groups.

- Offering interviewees a choice over interview formats while still ensuring that candidates are treated fairly.
- Providing questions ahead of time.
- Ensuring interviews are accessible by pro-actively contacting interviewees to offer adjustments.
- Improving perceptions of Disability Confident and ensuring that disabled candidates meeting essential criteria are always shortlisted under this scheme.

The selection process

Care should be taken to avoid the appointment of people who are like the panel members (in-group bias). Ways to achieve this could be for board appointments to be decided through a lottery (Carson and Lubensky, 2009) or for quotas to be set.

Boards should assess the extent to which they reflect the communities they serve and the skills, experiences and assets they are lacking.

For prospective disabled candidates, programmes should be based on a broad and inclusive understanding of disability and accessible to those with 'hidden disabilities', not only visible disabilities.

Organisations can sometimes be reluctant to provide feedback to unsuccessful candidates from underrepresented groups, for fear of being accused of discrimination. But it is vital that all candidates receive thorough and candid feedback to help them understand how they can improve for future applications.

Post-appointment support

Support should continue after a candidate is appointed to a board position, such as through

mentoring and training programmes. Changing the Chemistry runs regular sessions for new board members. Many still experience racism and ableism on boards and may experience imposter syndrome. There is a risk that board members from underrepresented groups are expected to represent that group, which is an unfair burden. Work should also be undertaken with existing board members to help foster an inclusive board culture.

Recommendations

To make the public appointments system in Wales more inclusive, underrepresented communities should help shape the redesign.

A suite of measures is recommended:

- Boards should assess the extent to which they reflect the communities they serve and the skills, experiences and assets they are lacking, and develop a succession plan.
- Board positions should be better remunerated and terms and conditions more flexible.
- Assess candidates on aspiration and vision, not only on previous work or board experience and education, to recognise a wider range of valuable experiences.
- Request anonymous applications, use a wider range of accessible interview formats, and have panellists who reflect the communities of the boards they serve and who are trained on equalities issues.
- Ensure Ministers have information on the current diversity of boards, so they can take this into account when making hiring decisions.
- Offer constructive and detailed feedback to all unsuccessful candidates and support 'near miss' candidates to reapply.

- Provide shadowing opportunities, connect candidates with role models from underrepresented groups and provide space to discuss setbacks.
- Provide mentoring for those new to public boards and for those already serving on boards.
- Support all board members to advocate for diversity and inclusion matters.

Sources

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Find out more

For the full reports see:

Taylor-Collins, E. and Park, M. (2020). [Supporting underrepresented groups into public appointments](#). Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy

Park, M., Price, J., and Taylor-Collins, E. (2020). [Increasing diversity in public appointments through recruitment](#). Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy

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