



PRESS NOTICE

23 September 2021

PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMISSIONER – ANNUAL REPORT 2020 – 2021 UNFINISHED BUSINESS ON GREATER DIVERSITY AND BETTER CANDIDATE CARE IN PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS SAYS PETER RIDDELL

Peter Riddell, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, published his annual report for 2020 – 21, the final report of his tenure.

The report contains information about his role in regulating appointments made by Ministers to the boards of public bodies in England and Wales under the [government's Governance Code](#).

The report shows that in 2020 - 21:

- 693 new appointments and 845 reappointments were made to the boards of [regulated public bodies](#), compared to 914 and 651 in the previous year
- 41.8% of new appointments were made to women, compared to 53.9% in 2019 – 20;
- 11.2% of new appointments were made to people from a minority ethnic background, compared with 14.0% in the previous year
- 11% of new appointees to chair roles were from minority ethnic backgrounds
- Figures on appointments made to people declaring disabilities ranges from 5% to 12% depending on the question asked of applicants, compared to 6% in the previous year (see notes)

Peter Riddell said:

“Clearly, COVID-19 has caused considerable disruption to usual recruitment patterns and the ability to undertake some outreach initiatives so broader conclusions from the diversity data this year need to be tentative in view of the pandemic. It is hoped that the figures will return

to pre-Covid levels next year but these trends will need to be watched closely by Departments.

“Public appointments matter – and my role as Commissioner has been to provide public assurance that appointments for these key roles are made fairly and openly, in line with the Code, and to act as a champion for diversity. No one leaves a post believing everything has been achieved and there remain various issues or works in progress which deserve attention:

“Firstly, diversity. On women and ethnic minority appointees there has been progress and the performance is better than in most other parts of the public sector as well as the private sector. But, as the latest Covid-disrupted figures indicate, there is no room for complacency, not least since the gains in diversity of board members have not yet been matched in the number of chairs. Moreover, the record on appointing people with disabilities remains inadequate and hopes raised by the 2018 report of Lord Holmes of Richmond into opening up public appointments to people with disabilities largely remain unfulfilled, despite some apparent progress over the past year (which needs to be interpreted very carefully).

“I view diversity in a broader sense of ensuring that public appointments go to the widest possible range of the population, taking account of geographical and social background, as well as a plurality of views. My 2021 Thematic Review into financial support for appointees highlighted the dangers of inconsistent and low pay, which could discourage talented people without existing financial means, such as those with pensions, from putting themselves forward. I have been concerned about how underrepresented groups are informed of the opportunities available and then helped to become strong candidates. There is a lot more to be done here.

“Secondly, candidate care. The Grimstone review in 2016 rightly highlighted the importance of treating candidates properly and, in particular, by ensuring that competitions are concluded in a timely manner. My 2019 thematic review showed that fewer than a half of competitions are completed within the three month ‘aspiration’ and my compliance visits have not found much improvement. Too often, timeliness is a low priority for ministers and special advisers. Each stage proceeds very slowly and appears inexplicable to candidates, especially those without Whitehall knowledge, and candidates are discouraged from

applying. The failure of a number of competitions, requiring re-runs, also suggests that the Government needs to intensify its efforts to broaden the pool of potential candidates.

“Finally, governance. The trickiest issue is the balance between the preferences of ministers and open competition. I often hear complaints about politicisation in an inherently political process in which ministers understandably want public bodies to be run by people who support, or at least sympathise with, their policies. But the very fact that these bodies are at arms-length from central government rather than part of departments implies the need for a degree of independence - whether in a regulator or advisory body or in, say, a cultural institution. So mutual restraint is required both by ministers and their advisers and by those running public bodies. In most cases, this has worked well but it is clearly under threat in more politically polarised times. This argues for reaffirming, and in some cases, strengthening the independent element in the appointments process, particularly for those bodies which scrutinise the actions and conduct of ministers and the executive. It is arguable that ministers should not have the exclusive say in the appointment of political and ethical regulators and that there should be an independent majority on interview panels and/or Commons committees should be more involved.

“This is matched by the need for greater transparency about appointments made by ministers, both those currently regulated and listed under the Order in Council, and the many unregulated (the latter often for good reasons of urgency or the short duration of the roles). The lack of clarity about the latter does not assist public confidence in the appointments process generally.

“This annual report marks the end of my tenure. I would like to welcome William Shawcross who takes over as Commissioner from 1 October and wish him every success in this fascinating and worthwhile role.”

Notes to Editors

1. Media enquiries about the work of the Commissioner for Public Appointments should go to Maggie O’Boyle on 07880 740627.
2. Peter Riddell was appointed as Commissioner for Public Appointments on 20 April 2016 for a five year term. The Commissioner for Public Appointments regulates the processes by which Ministers in the UK and Welsh Governments make appointments to the boards of national and regional public bodies.

3. Peter Riddell's term as Commissioner was extended by the government until September 2021 to allow for the appointment of his successor. William Shawcross has been announced as the government's preferred candidate following an open competition. He appeared before the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for pre-appointment scrutiny on 16 September and has been endorsed by that Committee.
4. The post of independent Commissioner for Public Appointments was created in 1995 following a report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Nolan.
5. The data used to compile this report are obtained from the government departments that run appointments processes for public appointments and declarations made by applicants.
6. A new question to measure disability was introduced in 2020, and departments have continued to use both the new and old question. This has produced two separate and distinct measurements for the number of people declaring a disability, which should not be averaged.
7. For more information about the work of the Commissioner go to: <http://publicappointmentscommissioner.independent.gov.uk>
8. You can follow the Commissioner for Public Appointments on twitter @publicapptscomm
9. You can also read Peter Riddell's blog: <https://publicappointmentscommissioner.independent.gov.uk/news-blog/>