

# CPANI

The Commissioner  
for Public Appointments  
Northern Ireland

## GUIDANCE ON CARRYING OUT A SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES AUDIT ON A PUBLIC BOARD





# The Big Picture

**NI Executive – Programme for Government**



**Ministers**



**Sponsor  
Departments**



**Public Boards**



**Providing advice to NI  
Ministers and Departments**



**Governing Public Bodies**



**Public Policy and Public Services**



**Working together delivering the Programme for Government outcomes**



## Diversity on a public board

In practice, a diversity policy cannot accommodate virtually unlimited dimensions of difference between members of a society. Some dimensions of diversity inevitably will be given special attention due to legal requirement and contextual factors. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 lists the following categories which a public authority must have due regard to in promoting equality of opportunity: persons of different religious and political beliefs, race, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender, and disability.

The focus in recent years has moved towards achieving gender equality across our public boards.

It is the position of CPANI at this point that by attracting more women to apply for public appointments we can not only address the gender imbalance but by doing so we also open up the applicant pool to a wider range of experience. For example, women tend to be more represented in the third sector, have more caring responsibilities and be more likely to have taken a career break.

But despite the efforts in this area there is yet a way to go. The percentage of women in Chair positions remains low and it is likely representation of people with disabilities and ethnic minorities is also low.

The reason for encouraging more diversity in public life is to make sure that public life benefits from “talent in its broadest, most brilliant form, not just that of a tiny elite”. These are the words of Lord Holmes in the introduction to his review on opening up public appointments to disabled people<sup>1</sup>. His statement while referring particularly to people with disabilities, can be applied more widely across other underrepresented groups.

The search for talent for our public boards begins with the skills and attributes audit exercise. The audit provides a sponsor Department and a board with an opportunity to think more widely and in an innovative way about the talent needed on that particular board. Perhaps in some cases there may be scope for considering potential rather than extensive experience. This may open up access to younger people or individuals with ability who have been in areas of work that have limited opportunity to develop the more traditional type of board competencies. Timeframes for experience should be avoided where possible, in order not to exclude individuals who are just coming back into the workforce having been away, for example, because of caring responsibilities.

Inclusivity and fairness are important public values in themselves and most citizens would prefer to live in a society where these values hold strong. Additionally, the evidence shows that there are good governance and good business cases for increasing diversity on boards. The evidence shows that where board membership is drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and skills and where there is a strong representation of women then that board is likely to function at a higher level than one which lacks these attributes, and governance will be stronger. Simply put, a lack of diversity on a board is a weakness in the governance of that organisation. A high functioning public board committed to good governance will provide the leadership and direction necessary to ensure its public body delivers effective and quality public services.

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Holmes Review - Opening up public appointments to disabled people ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-lord-holmes-review](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-lord-holmes-review))

The objectives of diversity and good governance in our public boards align readily with a number of Programme for Government outcomes including high quality public services, a shared society that respects diversity and creating a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest in. The skills and attributes audit, the public appointment process and public boards are, therefore, located within this 'big picture' vision: development of Northern Ireland's reputation as a high functioning administration with a strong, sustainable economy and an equal society as set out in the New Decade, New Approach document.

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## Who should carry out the skills and attributes audit?



Q: For a Chair position?

A: The Sponsor Department.



Q: For a member position?

A: The Chair of the board working with the Sponsor Department

## Chair process

Where a new Chair is being appointed the main responsibility will fall to the sponsor Department. If the Chair is outgoing following two terms he or she may have an important contribution to make. Generally a skills and attributes audit for a Chair position will be led by the relevant Grade 5 of the Sponsor Department (responsible officer) along with other members of his/her team. The responsible officer should seek input from a range of relevant stakeholders, which may include the Minister, the Permanent Secretary, other senior Departmental officials, the outgoing Chair and if appropriate the CEO of the organisation (the latter is likely to have good insight into any specific challenges facing the organisation).

## Member process

For member appointments the sponsor Department working closely with the Chair of the public board will carry out the exercise. The Chair has a central role to play in a skills and attributes audit, being familiar with the day to day operations and the circumstances of the public body and its board. Outgoing members of a board who would be ineligible to reapply for the competition may also have insights into skills and attributes needed.

For member posts, it is unlikely that all of the skills and attributes will be possessed by all of the applicants. The sponsor department may wish to consider a range of options for improving diversity of the applicant pool. For example, in some Departments competition rounds are run with a menu of criteria from which applicants may choose. This approach can provide greater flexibility and attract a more diverse mix of applicants.

## When to conduct a skills and attributes audit for a public appointment

The Department can initiate the audit process for members by requesting the Chair to gather the information required in the audit checklist attached to this Guidance. Alternatively, Departmental officials might gather the information. The important point here is that the Chair is fully involved and there is good collaboration between the Department and the Chair (there may be circumstances where engagement with the Chair is not appropriate or available but these are likely to be exceptional). A skills and attributes audit should take place at the commencement of planning for a public appointments process. In ordinary circumstances this should take place 6-9 months before a vacancy arises.

The information gathered will include an assessment of current skills, a review of current and medium term challenges and opportunities facing the organisation and views on any gap in skills or new skills needed on the Board.

The collaborative process will enable the sponsor Department to draw up a final skills and attributes audit. This will form the basis for the selection criteria and the person profile for the post drawn up by the sponsor Department as an early part of the appointment procedure.

An audit should also be conducted or refreshed at the outset when the Department or Minister is considering whether to reappoint current members or a Chair to a public board. In the case of member appointments the Chair should be given adequate notice of the need to undertake a skills and attributes audit. (A Chair should be fully engaged in the process for appointing new board members and, where possible, should sit on the selection panel.)

With either Chair or members appointments the public appointments team (where one exists) may be involved in providing support and advice to the sponsor Division and the Chair.

It is good practice for a Chair to keep the skills needs of the board under regular review and the subject should be discussed on record on at least an annual basis with the relevant official in the sponsor Department.

## Chair leadership skills and attributes

A key role for a Chair is to provide leadership often in a complex and rapidly changing environment. The responsible officer drawing up the Chair profile should have a good understanding of what is required for outstanding modern leadership - a mixture of 'soft skills and attributes' along with the more traditional ones for example finance and strategic thinking. A successful leader will likely need to be adaptable, be resilient, have a vision and strong values. He or she will have a collaborative approach to bringing a diverse board together and helping the organisation work with others to deliver shared outcomes. He or she will likely be people-centred leading by example, taking care of the team thereby providing empathetic, compassionate leadership. Optimism is also an important trait in helping to increase productivity; strong principles and a moral compass are needed; courage, innovative thinking and open communication are all characteristics to look for in a leader.

## Member skills and attributes

The ability to challenge as well as support positively, independence of thought along with the ability to build collaborative relationships, an ability to think strategically and across organisations towards shared outcomes, a strong desire to strengthen and improve our public services, an understanding of resource and policy considerations, valued based leadership, financial, public accounting experience – these are some of the attributes and skills which are needed for public board members. There may also be statutory selection criteria which have to be included.

## Contents and structure of audit report

A checklist for a skills and attributes audit report is attached to this Guidance. Much of the information to be gathered for the introductory parts of the audit report is the information already required for the initial public appointment Ministerial submission. Most of the information required should already be included in the Departmental Business Plan, the Public Body's Business Plan and other relevant sources such as the governing legislation or Memorandum and Articles of Association. Under this Guidance the skills and attributes audit is carried out before the initial substantive submission goes to the Minister on commencing a new public appointment or reappointment process.



## Use of the skills and attributes audit

The skills and attributes audit report should be used to inform the initial and the final public appointment Ministerial submissions on a new appointment round or reappointment process and the consequent decision making.

It should form the exclusive basis for drawing up the selection criteria to be used for selecting and appointing new non-executives to the board and the role profile and the person specification set out in the candidate information booklet.



# Checklist of headings/ areas of information required

## Title of Board

### Skills and Attributes Audit Report - date

- Establishment and purpose of the board and organisation.
- Line of accountability of board.
- Power to appoint.
- Brief description of board i.e. Chair and number of members, number of times it meets.
- Reason for skills and attributes audit e.g. new appointments required/reappointments (in this document skills to be read as skills/experience/perspectives).
- Public body's commitment to PfG outcome(s); key partnerships for delivery.
- Current demands: summary of current key projects/issues/challenges for the board specifically and the public body more widely.
- Future demands: summary of the future key projects / issues/challenges for the organisation; board specifically and the public body more widely.
- For board members: The Chair and sponsor Department to collaborate to compile a skills and attributes assessment of the current board members. This will involve consulting with members both to confirm their skills and attributes and to take their view on any gaps and the needs of the board going forward. The assessment should take account of the current and future demands on the organisation and identify any loss of skills or attributes, any gaps and any new skills or attributes that may be needed. Any legislative requirement to have particular skills or attributes on the board should be noted.
- The resulting collaborative assessment enables the sponsor Department to draw up the final skills audit.
- Final skills audit: The responsible officer identifies the skills and attribute needs of the board taking account of the collaborative assessment, the current and future demands on the organisation and any views expressed by the Minister. The audit report will consider whether the right mix of skills and attributes exists on the board, whether similar experience to that of the outgoing members/Chair is required, whether there are skills gaps or whether it is time to identify new areas of expertise; whether there is scope to look for potential rather than extensive experience; whether the challenges facing the organisation require

## Checklist of headings/ areas of information required

particular attributes such as relationship building, knowledge of governance, a collaborative attitude, a particularly strong focus on value based leadership; an understanding of how to improve productivity through trust and empowerment and so on.

- Where the skills and attributes audit relates to the role of the Chair the responsible officer will carry out the audit from the outset using the process described with input from an outgoing Chair invited where appropriate. The skills and attributes sought should reflect an understanding of modern leadership.
- The skills and attributes audit should accompany the initial submission to the Minister. This is to allow the Minister to agree that the criteria will address the skills and attributes required on the board.



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